

THE WHOLE IN THE FRAGMENT: THE VOCATIONS OF PHILOSOPHER AND POET FOR THE SALVATION OF THE WORLD¹

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“The surprise that parts bring with them qua *nonessential* (or *extraessential*) accords with the kind of resource out of which they pour, for all actuality is perfect in sharing itself liberally, and so in ‘letting itself’ be enriched by the novelty of what it perfects by this self-sharing.”



1. TEN THOUSAND PLACES

The Second Vatican Council envisioned the role of the baptized laity both as belonging squarely within and as having its own

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distinctive scope in contributing to the Church's universal mission to "make whole." While the eucharistic sacrifice consummately realizes the communion with God for which the world is meant and which has already been accomplished in Christ, the laity takes part in this realization at once by representatively co-offering in the liturgy the share of the world for which they are responsible² and by upholding in everyday life the integrity of the world as world, where this integrity is understood as open to and perfected by grace.³ That is, the lay vocation consists in shepherding the naturalness of nature, which it does best by receiving Christ anew in the wholeness of each created thing and in forming things so that they become most *themselves* in assimilation to Christ. According to *Lumen gentium*, "It pertains to [the lay faithful] in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer."⁴ Among the many ways in which the laity achieve this—agriculture, homemaking, artifice, statecraft, etc.—the tasks of the philosopher and poet are exemplary. In what follows, I reflect on the lay contribution to the world-saving that Christ has entrusted to his Church by considering what lies at the heart of the philosopher's calling. I take as a guiding light a word from Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, which Josef Pieper reflects upon in his work *The Philosophical Act*: "The reason why the philosopher

2. *Lumen gentium*, 34: "To those whom [Christ Jesus] intimately joins to his life and mission he also gives a share in his priestly office, to offer spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of man. . . . And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God" (in *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1: *The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 2004], 391).

3. According to John Paul II, "The lay faithful are called to restore to creation all its original value. . . . Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well" (*Christifideles laici*, 14–15).

4. *Lumen gentium*, 31. The writings of David L. Schindler offer a copious witness to the distinctive form of the laity's noninvasive leavening of the secular. See, *inter alia*, "Toward a Culture of Life: The Eucharist, the 'Restoration' of Creation, and the 'Worldly' Task of the Laity in Liberal Societies," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 679–90.

may be likened to the poet is that both are concerned with the marvelous, the *mirandum*.⁵⁵ After addressing how response to the wondrous characterizes the philosopher's guardianship of created being, I will touch on how he shares this duty with the poet, and will suggest why these offices rightly belong together.

2. WHERE THE DANCE IS

"The end is where we start from."⁵⁶ The crowning of philosophy is nothing less than a universal affirmation, a yes-and-amen to everything that is, that takes place primarily in a simple act of hospitable presence to the world as gifted with itself and secondarily in the utterances inspired by and faithfully begotten of this beholding. Josef Pieper at one point quotes Friedrich Nietzsche approvingly in defense of this view: "If it be granted that we say Yea to

5. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture; Including The Philosophical Act [= Leisure]*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 82, quoting Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* 1.3. The larger context of Thomas's statement is as follows: "Further, [Aristotle] points out that perplexity and wonder arise from ignorance. For when we see certain obvious effects whose cause we do not know, we wonder about their cause. And since wonder was the motive which led men to philosophy, it is evident that the philosopher is, in a sense, a philo-myth, i.e., a lover of myth [*aliquiliter philomythes, idest amator fabulae*], as is characteristic of the poets. Hence the first men to deal with the principles of things in a mythical way, such as Perseus and certain others who were the seven sages, were called the theologizing poets. Now the reason why the philosopher is compared to the poet is that both are concerned with wonders. For the myths with which the poets deal are composed of wonders, and the philosophers themselves were moved to philosophize as a result of wonder. And since wonder stems from ignorance, they were obviously moved to philosophize in order to escape from ignorance."

As is clear from this passage, the primary sense of wonder discussed here is as a deficient understanding of a glimpsed cause that moves one to investigate, ultimately for the sake of contemplating the full truth of that which initially perplexes. Throughout the present essay I will take for granted that wonder is not merely overcome or left behind but indeed increased to the utmost in the act of intellectual union with the thing known. Aquinas follows Aristotle's naming of the philosopher as φιλόμυθος in *Metaphysics* 982b19, an insight that is highly illuminating for the argument I wish to make in what follows, as it suggests that contemplative attention to action in its manifold appearance, even as this action is enshrined in narrative, belongs to the mission of conceiving and expressing the truth of reality.

6. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," section V, in *Four Quartets* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1971).

a single moment, then in so doing we have said Yea not only to ourselves, but to all existence.”⁷ Because this total “yes” arises in a dramatic decision that engages the philosopher’s entire freedom, it must assume within itself and be enfolded in not only the moment of contemplative celebration but even his lifelong, quotidian practice of dying. Though it costs everything, such affirmation is not merely a heroic overcoming of the vanity of a world that does not speak from itself, as Nietzsche would have it; it is not first a defiant “no” against nothingness. Instead, the philosopher is so disposed to a perfect “yes” because his intellect has always already been in kinship with the indivisible and purely communicated plenitude of common being, and so he has been “yessed” into the answer he is meant to return from himself—a consent he offers at once on behalf of and together with everything else. His only work, itself almost nothing, is to second the ever-prior affirmation of which he and all he beholds are the patient beneficiaries. He is freed to do so because everything first comes to itself, and so presents itself to others, “for free.” Carried along in concert with being’s own graceful arrival from within creatures, “the highest form of knowledge comes to man like a gift—the sudden illumination, a stroke of genius, true contemplation; it comes effortlessly and without trouble.”⁸

In that it is opened into being from the beginning, the mind is beyond the definition and complexity of anything finite in advance of the person’s bodily experience. Reason’s anterior transcendence of every substance into this still-point is, however, what prepares the way for the person’s recapitulatory discovery of reality in temporal encounters. For being is simply perfect by giving its perfection away without reservation or interval to be the actuality of all things, spotlessly expressing and infallibly achieving by this surrender God’s liberal “yessing” of each into its own self-realizing completeness.⁹ The mind’s fundamental

7. Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press), 27, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht*, book 4, no. 1032.

8. *Leisure*, 34.

9. The “yes” spoken in being as given is God’s willing the good of his creature, where he lets his own goodness, the best good he could offer, be the common end shared by all together. See, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [= *ST*] I, q. 44, a. 4.

rapport with being, then, is all at once its presence to that perfection which most intimately abides in and most thoroughly pervades each thing that is, that endowment which lends each thing its own concentrated infinity.¹⁰ Thus, the very foundation of the philosophical act is reason's availability to all of reality not only beyond but *in* its every figure and feature. Reason is therefore intact by being naturally interior to things outside it, in keeping with the descent of being's own ungrudging donation as God's "proper effect," and so is altogether in touch with being in the giftedness of substances. By virtue of its ecstasy into the whole of common *esse*, which unifies all that is because it does not itself subsist, spirit realizes the universal approval to which it is called only by meeting and remaining with the plurality of beings, doing so as each unfolds and displays its single, essentially configured reception of being's simplicity across the sweep of its diversified becoming.¹¹ This also means that reason transcends everything finite from the beginning in such a way that it is ordered, *by virtue of this transcendence*, to the dramatic task of receiving finite wholes *in their wholeness*, including all their parts. By exceeding any sum of things, the mind can take in an individual substance's bounded, membered integrity as a manifestation of its nature, and thus can also know where that thing fits among the many. That is, spirit's natural transcendence of every limit is not opposed to or compromised by holism, but, as Hegel saw, both makes holistic knowledge possible in the first place and indeed comes to rest in such "comprehension." This vantage is, then, inclusive *both* of the individual in its absoluteness and of the

10. D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 18: "We do not 'begin' our reasoning from a position outside of things, and gradually by degrees make our way toward them. Instead, conceived ecstatically, reason is already, from the beginning, at the destination of this path: it begins its activity already from within the beings it encounters, and, indeed, as profoundly intimate with beings as it is possible to be. As Aquinas famously observes, being is what is innermost (*magis intimum*) in things [Aquinas, *ST* 1.81], and it is just this that first falls into the intellect when we know anything at all." Much of the account of knowing in this first section recapitulates points in the introductory chapter of *The Catholicity of Reason*, "Reason as Catholic."

11. Each substance does this in concert with everything else, since "all created causes have one common effect which is *being*, although each one has its peculiar effect whereby they are differentiated" (Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia Dei* 7.2).

manifold in its relative appearances, *both* of reality simply and of the real thing that displays itself *hic et nunc*. It is a grasp that never bypasses but instead renders timelessly definitive the perspectives that come with being situated. For, to return to the line from Nietzsche invoked above, the mind's native fidelity to being's gifting-ness and given-awayness to the concrete ultimately signifies not just that the moment *can* be an occasion for affirming all, but that it is *only* through the moment, or through the contemplation of one or several creatures before him, that the philosopher utters his catholic "yes" to the world as world.¹²

The intellect's whole-embracing transcendence, then, does not leave it aloof but is at one and the same time its *relativity* to other particular things beyond it, whether above or below, and indeed its orientation to enter into communion with those things presently.¹³ Here we come to a major decision: this does not mean that the mind so includes the otherness of the thing known within itself that the relation between the knower and the thing is totally enclosed within the knower's self-relating consciousness. To the contrary, *by having received being*—which is its very communication of perfection—reason is turned toward the world in such a way that it perpetually awaits and welcomes the world's radical novelty from itself. For—and this is our chief point—to comprehend another singular as a real whole, which is to know it at all, is at the same time to know that its whole reality transcends one's comprehension of it. At first glance this may hardly sound controversial in an age still fascinated with contemptuously flaunting the limits of reason. But does it not violate the principle, dear to perennial philosophy, that knowledge means an intimacy, even a union, between knower and known, so much so that, as Aristotle puts it, the thinker and

12. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," section II, in *Four Quartets*: "To be conscious is not to be in time / But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden, / The moment in the arbour where the rain beat, / The moment in the draughty church at smokefall / Be remembered; involved with past and future. / Only through time time is conquered."

13. I say "enter into communion," but the intellect's connaturality with the heart of the thing at once means the prior presence of the thing *to and in* the knower in an offering that is already sheerly given and yet given to be actively taken up in the coactive "coupling" (Plato, *Republic* 490b) of truth.

that which is thought are one in being in the act of thinking?¹⁴ Far from it. The mind exercises its transcendence perfectly by so encompassing the wholeness of another through its appearance that it owns that thing's perfect transcendence of it. This does not mean that knowing ceases to be of wholes, but that what is *immanent* to knowing is precisely the known whole *as beyond* the mind's keeping. Mind so surpasses even the other's difference from itself that it can know that it is surpassed by this difference, even and especially when the other conveys its own heart without hesitation. It is not the deficiency, then, but the excellence of reason that brings to light this excess, which belongs to the thing known as a participant in universal being whose essential determinations along with their material articulation bear and show forth the infinite richness of the gift of *esse* that it has really received in full.¹⁵ The more exhaustive the mind's intimacy and identification with the known, the more the knower recognizes the thing's inexhaustibility, its weighty character as a marvel.¹⁶ To sum up our progress so far with a principle that will run through the remainder of this essay in various forms: *transcendence of the whole is for the sake of perfect communion with the whole as transcendent to oneself*. Wonder is itself the most perfect mode of communion; the philosopher is by nature a communicant.

3. SECOND THINGS

A basic theological and metaphysical question has emerged that we might pose as follows: on what grounds could "all" be increased by "some"?

14. Aristotle, *De anima* 407a.

15. As I argue further below, it is not enough to say that the whole's unplumbable abundance is mediated through its appearance, unless we add that the very manner of this "ancillary" mediation is itself a mark of said abundance.

16. According to Pieper, "St. Thomas does not hold the thesis that neither God nor things are knowable. On the contrary, they are so utterly knowable that we can never come to the end of our endeavor to know them. It is precisely their knowability that is inexhaustible" (Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 160).

We can shed further light on this mystery by direct reflection on the finite whole itself that reason knows, attending especially to its standing relative to its parts. We dwell on this relationship both because it captures *in nuce* the paradox we ponder throughout and because contemplation of this relationship lies at the center of the philosophical task itself. The substance is, of course, the classical case of a whole superior to the sum of its parts. It is a testimony to the importance of this principle of the irreducible whole that it remains a commonplace even in the face of the collapse of each thing into the interaction among its components that conditions all thinking in our modern milieu. The substantial whole transcends its parts indeed, but in such a way that it integrates them all by turning them to itself as their end. This is at once the substance's ordering of its every part into cooperation with all the others, wherein each can be most fully what it is. By serving together the halcyon's prospering in their responsibility for one another, his discriminating eye, his inerantly fluent wing, his fire-catching plumage, his delicate talon, and his piercing bill are each the more articulated in themselves. This mutual coordination of parts in which they commonly relate to the one substance is all for the sake of the whole kingfisher's enactment and definitive perfecting of its own being. This means that the whole brings parts together in a way that elevates each of them by at once depending on them for its own self-standing. In this way, the substance is more than its parts by *letting its parts be more than itself* according to their own mode, which could be characterized as a "secondary" excess. The one relates to itself through the manyness within it, but does so only insofar as the one upholds this manyness within it as beyond it.¹⁷

This paradox does not amount to an endorsement of mechanism, to which it might seem to be allied at first glance, for the beyondness of the part only makes sense in light of the whole from which it emerges and to which it returns. Because mechanistic thinking precisely forgets the primary transcendence of

17. To clarify, I am primarily reflecting here on complex, material parts, though what is said here would be relevant for consideration of other kinds of accidents. It is of course the case that some body parts, like the heart, are always necessary for an organism to exist at all. Even as such parts cannot themselves exist independent of the complete composite, it is as if they are given to bear the full being and meaning of the whole. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1035b20.

the whole, it cannot even regard parts as excessive, since on this conception they are relative to nothing more fundamental than themselves. Instead, it can only treat the parts as unintegrated “odds and ends,” the aggregate of which can be constructively classified as a thing for convenience’s sake, and thus forestalls spirit’s desire to rest in affirmation of the plentiful unity of what it knows. A genuine ontology of creation can instead acknowledge in the splendid interplay among contoured parts-in-community the flowering goodness of “to-be.” That is, it can regard the whole as neither fixed behind nor assembled from the parts, but as all at once “emptied out” (without decreasing its reserves in the least) so that its fullness is only returned or mediated to it by the parts, to which it is immanent, abiding as themselves.

In setting its parts free to be more than itself by its pervasive presence across an affirmative difference, the unified whole recapitulates the exemplary gift-character of *esse*, which is that blessing which always already opens the *ens* from within toward its good in its accidents and operations.¹⁸ For just as being, lacking no perfection in itself, has subsistence (and so is given back to itself) in that to which it is given, so too is the dignity of the substance exhibited and, as Ferdinand Ulrich says, “co-affirmed” in the secondary excess of that most superficial dimension that we are tempted to treat as disposable, often enough in a spirit of self-protective contempt.¹⁹ In their preciousness and ephemerality, divisible parts representatively display and co-perfect an

18. *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1: “Regarded in its primal actuality, a thing simply exists; and regarded in its complete actuality, it is good simply—in such sort that even in its primal actuality, it is in some sort good, and even in its complete actuality, it in some sort has being.” See also *ST I*, q. 105, a. 5: “All things created would seem, in a way, to be purposeless, if they lacked an operation proper to them; since the purpose of everything is its operation. For the less perfect is always for the sake of the more perfect: and consequently as the matter is for the sake of the form, so the form which is the first act, is for the sake of its operation, which is the second act; and thus *operation is the end of the creature*” (emphasis added).

19. Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being* [= *HA*], trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 155: “The whole is co-affirmed and mediated in the many acts. It is precisely in this mediation that the essence is taken seriously as concretely existing, so that its externalization in the non-necessity of the appearance ‘presents’ the proof of its being sublated in the concrete *subsistere* of the super-essential act of being!”

affluence deeper than themselves, the upsurging ground of the existing whole. But they do so by significantly carrying in themselves the actuality that infuses them, so that they *return* to this ground not first by disappearing back into it but by contributively testifying to the depth's primacy in the mode of remaining "outside." A person's gesture or defining deed can flash with the exuberance of his received being only by exercising this to-be with a style that is altogether original and necessarily unanticipable even with respect to the individual who performs it.²⁰ The surprise that parts bring with them qua *nonessential* (or *extraessential*) accords with the kind of resource out of which they pour, for all actuality is perfect in sharing itself liberally, and so in "letting itself" be enriched by the novelty of what it perfects by this self-sharing.²¹ Embellishment need not be a redundant accessory, much less a disguise, and the weight and worth the phenomena's indirectly telling symbolism has of its own discloses that the bottomless innerness it adorns is unreservedly prodigal. For the good "superfluity" of the fragment in which alone the whole is found bears witness that the overfullness of the whole in which it is grounded is a *receptive* generosity, which holds analogously for act at every level, first of all that of nonsubsistent *esse* as freely Godsent.²² It is this epiphany of being's emptied and permanently open sufficiency in the whole's unenvying expropriation into the outermost and least, which is where the first gift's bounty springs

20. It is certainly not the case that the part is more because it is what first makes the whole actual, nor even that it is so because it has something extra it has not received from the whole—except for its "not." That is, the part both has all it has received in a mode that is constitutively different from that of the whole and is lesser than the whole with a structure whose realized particularities (which always involve a "renunciation" of alternative ways of being itself) are not simply determined ahead of time by that plenitude which abidingly encompasses every possible expression of itself in its parts.

21. Being as love, Ulrich accordingly says, "because it affirms itself in an absolute way [i.e., has its own generosity mediated to it in being communicated by God toward the good of its recipient], is also *able to take the finite infinitely seriously*" (*HA*, 484, emphasis original).

22. Act means a fullness from which nothing is missing that grants all that it supports to make an "addition" to it from within itself. This "increase" is necessary only because the *pleroma* possesses itself in an other-gathering communicatedness. This is one attempt to define what Ulrich means by his expression *Seinsfruchtbarkeit*, ontological fecundity.

up anew from below as the firstfruit of its recipient and subject,²³ that Ulrich refers to when he says, “in the *bonum*, being opens up its very heart.”²⁴

Importantly, this subordinate transcendence of the parts over the whole is at once the medium through which the substance makes contact with other wholes that are beyond it—or, that is, transcends itself toward the world. Moreover, as in the actor lost in his role or the spectator’s face rapt in attention to the performance, the more radically immanent the whole is to its parts, and therefore the more complete its vulnerably extroverted presence to other things as they appear in *their* parts, the more it takes possession of and is at rest in its own prior wholeness (*reditio in seipsum*). To draw on William Desmond’s vocabulary, each thing in its “selving” is an open whole, which, always already having received itself from God and inwardly co-implicated with everything that is, perfects itself foremost by perfecting and being perfected by others. Above all, it is by way of the gratuitous moreness of parts that the substance communicates itself and therefore its own hyperdeterminacy to the intellect and will of the person who perceives the thing’s bodily performance.²⁵ So it

23. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences* 3.6.2.2: “‘To-be’ is in the thing, and is the act of the existing thing that results from the principles of the essence [*ex principiis rei*], just as ‘to shine’ is the act of the luminous thing.” As form and matter are together the principles of the real thing, being, given absolutely by God from above and from within, at once “results” from the essence that receives it in and through the concrescence of its principles in the accidental appearance and operations where the created substance secondarily co-effects God’s act of creating with every other over the duration of its existing.

24. *HA*, 151. Ulrich returns to the way in which being is generously mediated to itself through the substance’s generous self-mediation through its accidents shortly thereafter (*ibid.*, 164): “What the heart of the good unveiled to us, however, was the kenosis and sublation—that is, the self-affirmation of the substantial ground in, through, and with the accidents—in which the substance is co-affirmed, since being never comes to itself through the essence in a ‘single step.’ Thus what becomes evident in the *bonum* in an original sense is the mediating dimension of the externalization and interiorization of the concrete substance. As concrete substance, it has always already blossomed forth in its appearance, as a finite being ‘there’ amid beings. It shows itself as a self-sustaining reality, as appetible.” It is in the accidents that the substance presents itself as wholly worthy of fruition by the person who experiences it.

25. “By virtue of the *bonum*, the substance is open to the ‘other,’ whom or which it goes out to meet [*entgegenwartend*]; in other words, the substance is a

is *because* the kestrel's wings and talons and other features have an irreducible grandeur of their own—shown forth above all when they coalesce in the “achieve” realized in his signature *agere*, whether afloat or midplunge—that they can stir the “heart in hiding” to the irreducible grandeur of the raptor himself. Only if the bird is *more* than thinking on him can thinking on him be a resting place for the seer. Indeed, the whole is co-affirmed in the extreme, so to speak, when it brims over itself afresh through the parts that are its brimming over into the personal gaze.²⁶ The human knower who learns through this appearance is, in the very act of attaining the wholeness of another creature—the falcon, say—at once sent back beyond both his own knowing and the ground of the known thing to linger with the latter's aspectual self-showing, where his delight gives the bird back to itself. The image, as the locus of communion between the beautiful and its beholder, sustains the transcendence of each over the other upon which it depends for its production. Wondering at the unforeseeable “bonus” of the symbolic fragment given to the senses spares us from the presumption of reducing the whole it imparts to our thinking of it, and so frees up the total exchange in which contemplation consists, wherein spirit holds the reality of another in releasingly affirming it. Happily, the human person carries this out simply by assenting to his own natural constitution.²⁷

self-giving, self-preserving reality able to be sought (*appetibile-bonum*). In the *bonum* itself, the moment of the entity's *being present* displays itself, which as *bonum* is a *diffusivum sui*” (ibid., 153).

26. Each substance is mediated to itself at once through the abiding outstanding of the appearance by which it is mediated to others and through another's reception of this mediated self-communication.

27. There is always a danger, of course, that we will fail, whether through inattention or concupiscence, to let the numerous accidents enrapture us over to the unified substance to which they attest, for instance by confusing the beauty of another's appearance for the beauty of the person. Lyric poetry, exemplarily in Solomon's Song of Songs, reminds us, however, that the lover does not stop in rising across parts to the whole person, but descends again to dwell with the beauty of the whole beloved as represented and really given in the perfection of his or her features (synecdoche). This patience before parts can be sustained even to the point of praising these with comparisons to lesser things that stress their (and therein the beloved's) incomparability:

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand. . . .

4. GENERATIVE UNITY

The paradox of parts beyond the whole can be clarified further in the relationship between a community and its participants. We are right to think of community as really one, even as it is not a substance in the primary sense, the interior unity of which arises from its own telic organizing principle of actuality. For a community similarly integrates its members into a character that corresponds to and an activity that aspires after the common good

His arms are rounded gold,
 set with jewels.
 His body is ivory work,
 encrusted with sapphires.
 His legs are alabaster columns,
 set upon bases of gold.
 His appearance is like Lebanon,
 choice as the cedars.
 His speech is most sweet,
 and he is altogether desirable. (Sg 5:10, 14–16)

How graceful are your feet in sandals,
 O queenly maiden!
 Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
 the work of a master hand.
 Your navel is a rounded bowl
 that never lacks mixed wine.
 Your belly is a heap of wheat,
 encircled with lilies.
 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 twins of a gazelle.
 Your neck is like an ivory tower.
 Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,
 by the gate of Bath-rab'bim.
 Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon,
 overlooking Damascus.
 Your head crowns you like Carmel,
 and your flowing locks are like purple;
 a king is held captive in the tresses. (Sg 7:1–5)

The inner depths of the beloved are unveiled in her loving, but the God-inspired poet shows how this self-gift is already “anticipatorily signified” by the love-like structure of her unity’s fruitful multiplication in the lucid opacity of corporeal appearance. In turn, this appearance’s unconquerable thingliness—“a tower of Lebanon”—only accents the (inhabitable) mystery of the person it really imparts. I am alluding here to John Paul II’s statement in *Veritatis splendor* that “the person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator” (48).

it has as its defining end. But the community is itself a whole always through the interrelation of its participants, each of whom has a story and a destiny that exceeds any community to which he belongs, and exceeds it *infinitely*. Each whole within a communal whole, as a person who is *capax universi* and God-related, is more than (even as he becomes himself within) the togetherness that includes him. Hence the community is complete in itself by being open *from within* to those who transcend it.

Holding this by no means suggests that we should accept holism to a point and then luxuriate in interruption and disintegration (corruption). Instead, this mutual transcendence of participants over one another and over the community to which they belong is both founded upon and, paradoxically, the very condition for social unity. The overarching whole interdepends upon this ancillary excess, even as the originality of the participant only comes fully to light from within it. We recognize our fellow members as more than their relation to ourselves, as related to more than ourselves—to other persons, other communities, God. Hence the need for the renunciation, sometimes painful, of being “all things” *in every way* to those we love. The neighbor is more than his relation to me, but this is due finally to his everlasting significance in himself before God, and so his abundance is why my encounter with him in the setting of our community can be endlessly more meaningful than the occasion and time we share together. It is only possible for each of us to give himself and receive the other in an exchange that itself surpasses mere proximity insofar as we each secondarily exceed our communion with one another. Living our coordinated relativity to one another as a mutual affirmation also more vividly defines the “incommunicable” goodness of my self-standing, which is itself formed in and for belonging to you, to us. Once more, however, only from within the bestowal from above of a prior bond that already relates us to one another can we recognize and exercise the irreducibility of one another to this bond.²⁸

28. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “*Communio*—A Program,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 153–69, at 155: “Those who are in ‘communion,’ therefore, do not enter into such a social relationship solely on their own initiative, each of his own private accord, determining its scope by the stipulations they make when they establish it. They are already in it from the start, already mutually dependent a priori, as a matter of course,

Looking back from this vantage, it comes to light that substantial oneness, co-affirmed in the communion among the plurality of a single thing's accidents, is a vestige of—because meant for—the love between persons.²⁹ The common love for a good undiminished by multiplication is, as it were, the unifying spirit that suprahypostatically organizes persons into mutual belonging to and service of one another, and the *interactuality* that is both ground and fruit of their interactivity. As nature is the love-like principle that holds parts together and individuates them in their desirous coresponsibility for the well-being of the whole, so the spirit that joins participants in love for a single shareable good unto the substantial perfection of each is a consummation promised in and made possible by the possession of a nature. Indeed, we might risk saying that persons are not only more transcendent of *but also more dependent upon* the good community than accidents are transcendent of and dependent upon the substance. The contribution to a substance by a part would thus be a prefiguration of (as of course presupposed by) the richer contribution played by a participant to the richer whole of the community and its shared spirit of unity.³⁰ At the same time, insofar as the community by which one is circumscribed enables one to surpass oneself toward the good, one's parts are more perfectly in fellowship with one another, defined in themselves, and expressive of one's wholeness by virtue of this inclusion with other persons. Likewise, the community's oneness is surpassingly taken hold of the more excessive the parts of its members are for the goodness that participation in this communion fosters

not only to live together and contrive to get on with one another in the same domain, but also to carry out a common activity. The very fact of the common bond involves a title to work in common, prior to any freedom in its accomplishment.”

29. For this reason, we can say that we are gratuitously lifted into contemplation because the things that elicit our wonder are lovingly given to themselves in such a manner that they are lovingly given over to the parts wherein they lovingly give themselves away, which they do principally to us when we know them in love.

30. It would perhaps be even better to say that the distinct ways in which substance and community are each the primary expression of what it means for creatures to be one represents a happy polarity whose uncloseably tensive interplay magnifies, across ever-greater difference, the tripersonal unity of divine substance.

in them.³¹ We affirm the abundance of part and participant from within communion, and, in turn, this affirmation of transcendence deepens the intimacy from which it continually lives. The social whole's mediation to itself through the members it supports beyond itself expresses the very figure of actuality as love.

All this speaks to the philosophical experience of the *mirandum*. Even if what we contemplate is less than a person, contemplation is always analogously interpersonal, and, further, man always knows the world from beyond it only as one among the world's community-like economy of creatures. His appreciation of a fellow being's dignified transcendence of him and everything also mediates that most universal good in relation to which both the knower and known have their worthy integrity: the personal mystery of God. Pieper, in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, ponders how the known thing's reality rests upon God's anterior knowledge of it and how the finite knower cannot know a thing as God does.³² To be sure, the nature to which the intellect conforms, so that its word of understanding is in act one and the same as the thing known, is itself one and the same as the causal idea that God has of this kind of thing. Thus human thinking participates secondarily in God's own creative knowledge in the mode of responsive recapitulation.³³ But to contemplate the creature within this participation is to catch sight of the abyss, unfathomable to us, of God's knowing the creature into being, and therein of the identity of its archetype

31. In other words, part and participant not only resemble one another but each increases the other above all when both are at their best. This is to say that being is oriented to persons fulfilled in communion, and to *human* togetherness via matter; "the end of generation as a whole is the human soul, to which matter tends as its ultimate form" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.22). This is, incidentally, why we more fully elucidate the relationships among metaphysical principles when we refer to them, with Ulrich, in personal terms.

32. Josef Pieper, "The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray, SJ, and Daniel O'Connor (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 43–71.

33. This claim goes beyond what Pieper is willing to say in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, but it seems to be an implication of the radical intimacy with both the thing known and with God entailed in the act of knowing.

with God himself.³⁴ Even so, the difference between God's and man's knowing means that the intelligibility of an actual thing's essence is a communication, and thus a veritable medium of communion, between man and God.³⁵ Yet it can only be such an intermediary of this fellowship insofar as God in knowing the creature lets its reality be something *other* than his knowing of it. The creature's magnification of God, its return to God of the divine goodness that the creature performs in doing its own goodness to the full, redounds also to the creature's glory. It can only communicate the abyss of God, then, by having its own abyssal character as penultimate, as participant, as recipient. Likewise, man honors God's gift of himself in creatures by staying with the figure they present. This is akin to the way that same thing's plural appearance, as the *means* by which one comes to grasp its form and unity, remains positively original in its material exteriority—to the point of being itself, though the least real dimension of the thing, still richer than the mind's conceiving. If everything in the sacramental cosmos makes present a reality within and above it (its whole nature, creaturehood simply, and first and foremost God), each can only truly represent it if its particularity is unprecedented by that which it mediates, even as that for which it stands is the reason why it has its own nonderivable self-standing at all.³⁶ This is, finally,

34. Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 63: "We can never properly grasp this correspondence between the original pattern in God and the created copy, in which formally and primarily the truth of things consists. It is quite impossible, for us, as spectators, so to speak, to contemplate the emergence of things from 'the eye of God.'"

35. As Josef Pieper says elsewhere, "The lucidity which from the creative knowledge of the divine *Logos* flows into things, together with their very being—yes, even *as* their very being—this lucidity alone makes all things knowable for the human mind" (*The Truth of All Things*, 53, in *Living the Truth*, trans. Lothar Krauth [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989]).

36. Though I am speaking here of the individual, this principle is already expressed in the reality of the many essences in relation to being. As Balthasar reminds us, the real distinction, when seen as open to God's magnificence via the ontological difference between *esse commune* and *entia*, sustains our wonder before the fact that "a divine abundance of Being should explicate itself precisely in beetles and butterflies and not also in entirely different, unpredictably various, forms and figures" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 621).

why each person can be “all things to all” precisely in remaining determinately oneself.

5. PLAYING THE PART

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*.³⁷

The task of the philosopher is to think the unity of being where it appears, in singulars, and to be true to this unity by abiding with and rejoicing in the dependent transcendence of each recipient of being. He does so by acknowledging the moreness of a thing present in and expressed by the moreness of its appearance. To be taken with the superfluous dance of the parts within and beyond the whole is the beginning of contemplation, whose pious safeguarding of the show and shine of things expresses why perfect knowledge is convertible with perfect wonder. This light burden of presence to an ordinary portion of the world is world-saving already in that it allows the philosopher to name the world as a God-related whole to which the members it comprises, integrates, and orders into communion are irreducible, as indelibly extraordinary. Only by so naming does philosophy's discursivity remain true to the gratuitous act of *intellectus* from and toward which it flows in measure with being's own radiantly enrapturing diffusion in and through the self-displaying real. Metaphysics is thus the elaboration of a simple act of thanksgiving, so that all its labor is to preserve our common openness to the grateful experience of things *in* their departing fragility and littleness.

However, even though philosophy attends to and names the realization of being's unity in concrete and dramatic co-perfecting of excessively lovable things by remaining in the gracious play between being and beings (as given anew in the gracious play between ground and appearance that is one of its fruits), the philosopher's mode of naming, as most universal, cannot capture the excesses of embodied action as such. Hegel

37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 38 (emphasis original).

tells us that “the True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development.”³⁸ Hegel’s working out of this principle does much to retrieve in modernity the philosopher’s rightful aspiration to think *everything*. He characteristically insists that we lose the whole unless we also attend to its every determination and manifestation. But because he does not fully account for the mutual priority of higher and lower, and out of his one-sided overconcern for a holism without hyperbole, Hegel finally loses hold of appearance, against the bent of his own desire to find a place for all. In response to this total rationalism, we can perhaps risk saying that the fruitful and mutually affirming interactivity of whole and part, where each depends differently upon the other, cannot itself be absorbed into a greater whole, and therefore remains an ever-open communing. Without taking away the smallest part of philosophy’s stature, poetry can serve to rescue reason from the fixations of a self-undermining hubris closed to mystery because its presentation strives to press language to rest in the particular.³⁹

38. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 11, §20.

39. Philosophers from St. Thomas to Hegel reflect on how every word is universal. The endeavor of poetry to name that which is too intimate to be named also has its perils, as poetry is susceptible to the temptation to submerge itself in the inarticulate, and thus needs philosophy’s breadth to be true to itself. Besides Gerard Manley Hopkins, no English-language poet meditates more explicitly on the wondrousness of the appearing part than Wallace Stevens, but he often flirts with the rejection of any holism whatsoever. Take, for instance, “The Course of a Particular”:

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
 Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
 It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

The leaves cry . . . One holds off and merely hears the cry.
 It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
 And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
 And being part is an exertion that declines:
 One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
 Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
 It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

Aristotle speaks of poetry as more philosophical than history, for the reason that poetry's depiction of the contingent more fully communicates the *katholou*, concerned as it is with what could fittingly happen given the order of reality rather than merely with what did happen in fact.⁴⁰ Even so, he also tells us that poetry, especially in the form of drama, portrays the real by imitating a single complete action.⁴¹ In other words, poetry only shows forth the universal as enacted in an unexpected and unrepeatable event; and indeed it is only for the sake of this definite representation that it also imitates agents. This action, the plot, includes a pattern of subordinate deeds that make it intelligible, but even in this larger pattern the poet limits the flux of experience to the most pregnant incidents and details in service of the one thing necessary.⁴² That is, the noblest poem

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
 Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
 Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

In a Nietzschean vein, Stevens thinks that to valorize the part we need to sever it from its enfoldment in every greater integrity—"the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves"—and thus from both its intelligibility for us and its rootedness in God's mind—"until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all." In this instance, at least, his commendable effort undermines its own impulse. Rereading Stevens with the primacy of the whole in mind can be supremely edifying, however, as soon as we acknowledge that his desire to let surfaces be themselves can only be fully satisfied in a symbolic ontology.

40. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b5.

41. *Ibid.*, 1450b. While Aristotle is concerned in this account mainly with narrative and dramatic poetry, what he says can be extended to include lyric poetry's intense delimitation of internal and external events.

42. *Ibid.*, 1451a30, rendered in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1463, as follows: "The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole." For an exposition of Aristotelian mimesis, see Thomas Pruffer, "Providence and Imitation: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Aristotle's *Poetics*," reprinted in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 46, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2019): 742–53. The gist of Pruffer's essay also harmonizes nicely with the argument of our present piece. Take the following representative lines, which speak to the goodness of the "secondary": "The imitated action is heightened and sharpened by the imitation into being more truly itself than it would be if it were not imitated and thus made available for contemplation in and through the transforming

aspires to mediate all truth, but its imitating does this by bringing the marvelous into focus rather than the merely trivial.⁴³ (This calls to mind Aristotle's principle that man's boundless desire to know is already expressed in and necessarily passes through the pleasure we take in our senses, especially seeing.)⁴⁴

At the same time, if the *mythos* is the poem's most important element, as its embodied argument, it is nevertheless the case that the pursuit of conveying this concretely significant action will lead the poet to shape his several characters more perfectly in view of this end, and this in their respective deeds, in the thoughts they express in the context of the event, and further in the very diction with which they phrase these thoughts (in a particular tongue), the last of which, in the hands of a masterful artist, will manifest an aptness that resists even explanation. The priority of the overarching event, then, requires determined figures who abound each with an originality beyond the story in order for them together to be integral, coprovidential participants in its realization, for the plot both brings them together and is the fruit of their (sometimes oppositional) interactivity.⁴⁵ It is in the partial becoming of these unique characters, which the story makes possible, that human nature itself is laid bare. That is, not only does the poem itself give reality back to itself through taking up in its portrayal an intensely original portion of it, but its own relatively holistic limits liberate from within secondary excesses that can epitomize the poem's whole meaning even in standing on their own. Likewise, in the density of a well-wrought lyric, each uttered image and every "carnal word" (Péguy)—even, within the meter of a line, every syllable—accrues by its fittingness an indispensability that lends to the work's inner

imitation" (751); "The signifier is transparent in relation to the signified, but reflection can bring to the fore and discriminate the proper characteristics of the signifier, the structure it has in its own right" (753).

43. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a5, 1460a13ff. Surprise is ingredient in the dramatic plot, for example in the tragic *peripeteia* that surprises above all by its irresistible rightness, and in the purifying experience of this overturning in the *anagnorisis*.

44. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980a.

45. Dwight Lindley helped me to see the relevance of this point for this essay, and I present it here in conversation with and as an indebted complement to his own ongoing work on the meaning expressed in poetic form itself.

communion while being secondarily more than the context in which it alone makes sense.⁴⁶

If it is only through all these graphic, literal differentiations that the poem suitably communicates the universal, we must add, recalling our larger argument, that it does so out of obedience to reality's structure, for being's unbroken infinity is properly received by man only where it is "finitized" in the incomparable *bonum* of the eventful operations. The once-for-allness of the poem-ensheltered line, which is productive of a multitude of appreciations by "remaining outside," recapitulates of itself being's fruitfulness in appearances, through which being shows forth its resemblance to God's own delight over the plethora he has made. Mimetically aggrandizing the enduring dignity of surfaces, the poem thus relays to its hearer the same contemplative experience on which philosophy abidingly dwells, doing so in such a way that its own gestalt can scarcely be removed from and by no means absorbed back into the truth it obliquely embodies. This is why we can hold that praise born before the wondrous is the most fundamental *archē* of poetry.⁴⁷

46. The following minor florilegium may illustrate the point: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and / count myself a king of infinite space—were it not / that I have had dreams" (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, lines 253–56); "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in / reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, / how express and admirable in action, how like / an angel in apprehension, how like a god! the / beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and / yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?" (ibid., act 2, scene 2, lines 303–08); "O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous. / Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beast's" (William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 2, scene 4, lines 264–67); "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated / man is no more but such a poor, bare, / forked animal as thou art" (ibid., act 3, scene 4, lines 106–08).

47. Dante's *Paradiso* exemplifies both in its form and its content how praise is the very atmosphere in which the poet speaks. If this doxological character of the poem comes to expression in upholding the transcendence of both part and participant, such upholding is thematic in the very drama *Paradiso* presents. For each of the blessed with whom the pilgrim speaks figurizes a way of being holy in relation to God that serves the pilgrim's mystagogical initiation into the beatific vision, and does so beyond personifying a virtue or spiritual state. The "lesson" he or she imparts (always impossible to identify univocally) remains inseparable from, and indeed flows out of, his or her perfect singularity within the sphere of mission to which he or she belongs. This is brought home in the manifestation of the celestial rose in the empyrean in *Paradiso*, Canto XXX, which sums up the whole of heaven's glory and thus the universe

Beholdenness to the poem's out-standing determinacy schools us in the patience needed for our conceiving to begin from, return to, and prevail throughout as beholding (the soul beside itself, and *therefore* most self-recollected, in its senses).

Philosophy preserves the transcendence of the parts through gratefully pondering the whole as generative, and poetry preserves the transcendence of the whole through gratefully portraying the part as representative. The philosopher shows how his own mission to comprehend is duly open to the overbrimming bonus of corporeal things by acknowledging that poetry offers something more in its own mode of affirmation than philosophy can, a truth he first safeguards through the metaphysical justification of the part. And yet he acknowledges poetry's relative moreness best by *enjoying* it as in its own way unsurpassable.⁴⁸

itself, as the nonexhaustive catalogue of the blessed, which St. Bernard introduces, inflects this glory in ways that cannot be schematized or isolated from the narrative of each of their lives.

48. I would add here that Plato does more than almost anyone to reconcile the age-old *agon* between the philosophers and the poets. The Socrates who seems to reject the poets as imitators of images in *Republic*, book 10, and therefore as distorters of the truth, is himself the image of one who best imitates the good, and, through Plato's singing craft, inspires us to imitate his pursuit of truth. This Socrates himself practices poetry, both in his frequent mythopoesis and in the lyrics of the *Phaedrus* (his "palinode") and the *Phaedo* (where he is both inspired to write hymns to Apollo and lifts up his swan song). Ironically enough, the form of Plato's dialogues constantly challenges any philosophical mode that would close itself off to the material and temporal. As Sir Philip Sidney put it in his "The Defense of Poesy" (line 69ff):

And truly even Plato whosoever well considers, shall find that in the body of his work though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin as it were and beauty depended most of poetry. For all stands upon dialogues; wherein he feigns many honest burgesses of Athens to speak of such matters that, if they had been set on the rack, they would never have confessed them; besides his poetical describing the circumstances of their meetings, as the well-ordering of a banquet, the delicacy of a walk, with interlacing mere tales, as Gyges' Ring and others, which who knows not to be flowers of poetry did never walk into Apollo's garden.

Moreover, Socrates's singularity is diminished neither when he mediates the good nor when he stands as representative of the entire *polis*. In the *Apology* he takes kingly responsibility for the whole of Athens by having nothing of his own, as we see him, veiled under the aspect of the sacred beggar come

6. ALL FLESH⁴⁹

If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more representable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor 12:19–26)

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change. . .⁵⁰

Philosophy and poetry in their distinct modes of wonder, which preserve the subprimacy of the part as bearer of the whole beyond the whole, signal the path for the other forms of the lay

to his home, half-jokingly asking at his condemnation for a meal before the assembly of legislators (pretenders like the suitors in Ithaca), where he presents his poverty as his defense. It is this availability that allowed him to enact philosophical kingship through his fidelity in provoking any among the youth of Athens to a joy-giving contemplation of the good by means of the disorienting conversion of mind, elicited in conversation, through which they learn to read appearances as images (*Phaedrus* 249c). But this universal stewardship does not render Socrates any more faceless than Achilles, to whom Socrates compares himself as he braves his death (*Apology* 28c–d). Just as Homer's Achilles bears the god-forged shield whose emblem represents every sphere of reality with human life at its center onto the battlefield in which his distinctive figure will be permanently defined in a consummately glorious deed the gods themselves have conspired to bring about, so Socrates's representation of the whole is what crystallizes him in all his definitive particularity, down to his snub nose, as a model of holiness who can outlast age after age in human memory.

49. *Dominum et vivificantem*, 50: "The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is 'flesh': the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The 'first-born of all creation,' becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also 'flesh'—and in this reality with all 'flesh,' with the whole of creation."

50. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty."

vocation in their own stewardship of the world. A kingdom becomes tyrannical or a state totalitarian in the measure that it pretends that the reality of those legitimately under its auspices—the local Church, the city, and the family itself—can be exhausted by its governance, whereas its authority can only be exercised well with, and is indeed defined by, reverent openness to and service of the transpolitical highest good of those within it, singly and together. Similarly, while it is right to critique modern science as it is conventionally theorized and practiced for methodologically abstracting constituent elements from the integrity of an organism, ecosystem, or indeed the universe as sourced by God, this is of a piece with its failure to dwell on the saturated exorbitance of that which it studies (i.e., the lesser) beyond classification.

Moreover, the very attention to the *mirandum* that characterizes the philosopher and the poet adumbrates from below how the unity of the Church, which contains the whole universe as the communion between God and the world, can free the penultimate integrity of the laity to play its own crucial part in her characteristic activity without being dissolved therein. Of course, this transcendence of the secular relative to the Church within whom it is embraced is more basically rooted in the mystery of the hypostatic union, whose perfection presupposes and is prefigured by the natural principles that guide sage and bard alike. For in his assumed humanity the second person of the Trinity encapsulates the full measure of the world's self-standing originality before its Creator, an originality that itself always speaks to the supremacy of God's giving.⁵¹ Furthermore, the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth at the heart of creation and the overfullness of his saving act universally includes within it all mankind in such a way that, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the sacramental Church, all who are indwelt by and conformed to Christ through deifying incorporation into his Body's communion dependently recapitulate and contribute to his all-sufficing mission to reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:20). "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I fill up [ἀνταναπληρῶ] what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). Each is

51. Nicholas J. Healy Jr., "The World as Gift," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 395–406.

given to share in this filling up of that atoning work that Christ has already done all the way through, however, in a manner that perfects his own distinctiveness, so that every glory in the *communio sanctorum* is a novel “rendition”⁵² that is both indispensable for and irreducible to the *totus Christus*, apart from whom this soul could never be blessedly abundant. The Church is gathered up in the Spirit into an innumerably diverse second externalization of her Lord, as the branches to whom the life-giving vine in giving his life away has savingly entrusted his fecundity, so that, as Jesus prays, “my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full [πληρωθῆ]” (Jn 15:11).⁵³ “The ultimate mystery of the *pleroma*, then, is that Christ’s capital fullness actualizing *itself* in his body is indistinguishable from the same capital fullness letting itself be actualized as the body’s plenitude through its members’ own activity.”⁵⁴ This bond between head and members that liberates their mutual, asymmetrical transcendence of one another is the exemplary cause of the relationship between the ecclesial institution and the secular realm, the world as world, that is interior to the mystical Church.

These tiers of relationships are all enfolded within and modeled upon the trinitarian difference revealed in the lowly flesh and works of Christ. From eternity, the actuality of the divine life is communicated so perfectly that, in (and for) the communion God is, each person transcends the others as himself fully God. The unoriginated Father always has his ever-moreness in letting his firstborn be ever-more before himself, which the Son for his part owns in his co-spiration of the Spirit who, himself ever-more, “searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10), as the abyssal witness to the wondrous unfathomability of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father in their pervasive mutual indwelling, wherein nothing is held back and nothing unknown. Since the triune God gives

52. The rendition (from *reditio*, that which is given back) adds to its *paradigma* by “exceptionally repeating” the *nonpareil* in accord with the first’s own fontality.

53. The mercy of salvation thus carries out the meaning of created act as love by overperfecting its figure in the *connubium* of finite persons with God in his assumed humanity.

54. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 5: *Man Is Created*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 412.

his own interactivity away in finite being as generously receptive *similitudo divinae bonitatis*,⁵⁵ at every level of creation the moreness of the lesser in dependence upon and intimacy with the higher—whether of secondary causes relative to the one primary, of beings to common being, of manifold essence to simple act of existence, of pluralized body to organizing form, of partial operations to entire substance, of art to nature, or of the word to history—imitates, in its own order and manner, the Son’s glorious glorification of the Father from whom he receives everything by timelessly “coming after”—that is, by *not* receiving Fatherhood (or arrogating it to himself). The same Word personally enacts a flawless interpretation of these metaphysical pairs—the last shall be first; the least shall be the greatest—when he obediently takes up worldly being as the fitting medium of our salvation and of the revelation of the paternal goodness.⁵⁶ For this reason, good poetry and good philosophy implicitly overcome Arianism already in their mere practice of dignifying care for the inferior. By the thanksgiving sacrifice that defines her, theology thus regally vindicates the offices and maternally augments the agency of her handmaids, lending them thereby an inexchangeable role that participates in her very queenship from below. For the endlessly fruitful coprimacy of the only begotten, *as divinely second*, is the anciently new original redoubled, with a difference, in all that beseeches our wonder. □

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55. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 22.2 ad 2.

56. Revealing the full altitude and gravitas of divine charity by becoming nothing but external parts in his death as man (if it be permitted to say so), the Son concurrently elucidates how all the principles mentioned here are conditions for and ordered to that which his redeeming act fulfills: the partnering *reditio* from the side of the created dependent, in whose ascending filial initiative God’s reckless goodness is superfluously reaffirmed.

Consider here the words with which Balthasar closes his *Theo-drama*: “What does God gain from the world? An additional gift, given by the Son to the Father, and by the Spirit to both. It is a gift because, through the distinct operations of each of the three Persons, the world acquires an inward share in the divine exchange of life; as a result the world is able to take the divine things it has received from God, together with the gift of being created, and return them to God as a divine gift” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998], 521).