Aquinas’s Interpretation of Denys’s Apophaticism: Its Consequences for Theological Aesthetics
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It has been forty years since the second edition of Umberto Eco’s book *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* appeared, and since that time the discipline of theological aesthetics has achieved recognized stature as a distinct specialization in theological study. Theological aesthetics’ rise to prominence coincided with the collapse of neo-Thomistic hegemony in mid-20th century Catholic theology, but several of the seminal thinkers in Christian theological aesthetics relied on interpretations of Aquinas’s commentary on *The Divine Names* that subsequent Aquinas scholars have judged incorrect. In his *Glory of the Lord*, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar veers away from earlier Thomistic interpretations of Aquinas’s relationship to the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, such as that of Etienne Gilson, by asserting that Aquinas’s metaphysical distinction between *esse* and *essentia* is a mere clarification of an existing Christian Neoplatonic ontology. Asserting a fundamental continuity between the cataphatic and apophatic ontologies of Denys and Aquinas, Balthasar notes that “for the most part [Thomas’s] discussion is dependent on material presented to him by tradition.” Although Jean-Luc Marion offers a different interpretation of Aquinas’s ontology than that of Balthasar’s “Heideggerian Thomism” (to use the description of Fergus Kerr), in his more recent work Marion too has drawn a genealogical link between Aquinas’s exposition of the divine *esse* and a God without being who subsists beyond the realm of onto-theology. Such a theological move allows Marion to place Thomas within the orbit of Dionysian-saturated theological aesthetics that Marion had explicated earlier in his book *The Idol and the Distance*, and from which he had excluded Thomas in his later *God without Being*.

While these theological attempts to surmount neo-Thomism’s earlier overemphasis on Aquinas’s differences from the patristic Neoplatonic tradition were valuable, more recent scholarship has challenged the claim that Denys’s ontology can be credibly translated into the language of analogy that Aquinas employs without a loss of Denys’s original meaning. By the early 1960s Vladimir Lossky had already charged Western theologians such as Aquinas with underestimating the radical quality of Denys’s apophaticism, writing that Denys’s God cannot be understood in ontological categories, unlike Aquinas’s deity. Eberhard Jüngel followed suit with a critical assessment of Denys’s radical apophaticism in *God and the Mystery of the World*, holding that Denys’s views undermined the positive content of divine revelation. In his book *The Darkness of God*, Denys Turner also argued against an interpretation of Denys that understood Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism as a corrective to the analogies employed by cataphatic theology, in the manner of 20th-century dialectical theology. Instead Turner argues that Denys is not merely using negative propositions to qualify human knowledge of God via the language of analogy; rather, Denys intends to subvert propositional language itself, and thereby move beyond the language of form and icon currently employed by contemporary Christian theological aesthetics.

These more recent interpretations of Denys are convincing, and they open the door to a more balanced and nuanced interpretation of the Denys-Thomas relationship
that respects Thomas’s debt to Denys while acknowledging the major differences in their respective understandings of God. The challenges that this recent Dionysian scholarship poses to theological aesthetics, however, have not been adequately explicated by theologians, insofar as the radical apophaticism that Denys advocates undermines recent attempts to make aesthetics a foundational, or even the foundational, category for Christian theology. Given this apophatic challenge, theologians can understand the ambiguous relationship that Aquinas has to transcendental beauty as a partial function of his ambiguous relationship to Denys’s writings. Understood correctly, the Dionysiac corpus provides no support for making beauty a foundational ontological category in theology, and Thomas’s exposition of beauty—conceptually distinct from the transcendental properties of being yet linked to the good in reality—exemplifies Thomas’s humility in simultaneously realizing the value and the limitations of beauty in its relationship to the Godhead.