

ETIENNE GILSON

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In the Collège de France there is a lecture room whose seats descend in rows to a desk on which a podium is flanked by two green shaded lamps. There at the beginning of this century Henri Bergson lectured in the evening to the elite of Paris. This room was chosen as the site of a posthumous tribute to Etienne Gilson, Catholic philosopher, medieval historian, member of the French Academy. Participants were to make remarks of no more than ten minutes duration. I myself spoke on Gilson as an English stylist. I was followed by a man with a gleam in his eye. There is no more terrible sight than an intellectual gripping the podium with a large manuscript before him, his body English a protest against any time limitation on his remarks.. This fellow droned on and on as hostility grew and finally shouts of anger and annoyance were heard. To no effect. In a similar situation, Gilson had a band strike up the Marseillaise, thus ending the proceedings.

It was fitting that the scholarly class should have been represented in its comic and slightly mad form on this occasion, if only as contrast to the way in which Etienne Gilson (1884-1978) combined vast scholarship with an earthy bonhomie and punctilious erudition with self-effacement. He

was one of the most learned men of his times but he never lost the common touch. No one would have had to remind him of the brevity of mortal man's attention span.

Gilson was a quintessential Frenchman whose research almost predictably began with Descartes. The Father of Modern Philosophy prided himself with having put away the Scholastic training he had received from the Jesuits at La Flèche, wiped the slate of his mind clean and started from ground zero. Gilson noticed that this was far from being the case. Indeed, he found Descartes to be all but unintelligible apart from the Scholasticism he professed to have abandoned. Thus began Gilson's scholarly interest in the Middle Ages.

It is difficult to imagine what medieval studies and our understanding of the thought of the Schoolmen would have been if Gilson had not brought his enormous energy, talent and verve to the Middle Ages.

His first contribution to the field was to refute the notion that Scholasticism was a monolith to which a series of thinkers subscribed. Taken one at a time, medieval authors revealed their diversity. There were, Gilson argued, medieval philosophies, in the plural -- he wrote books on many of the great figures. He demonstrated by his work that the Middle Ages can be ignored by the historian only at his peril.

It had become received opinion that for about a thousand years of human history not much happened by way of philosophy. This strange myth

still has many in its grip -- as Regine Pernoud constantly reminds us -- but after Gilson ignorance of medieval philosophy is culpable. In responding to this received opinion, Gilson drew attention to the unstated presuppositions of contemporary philosophy which set the face of modern thinkers against their medieval counterparts.

One of the assumptions of much modern thought is that the serious use of the mind must lead to the abandonment of religious faith. In most cases, this is an unexamined prejudice. Well, the thinkers of the Middle Ages assumed that the serious use of the mind would lend support to the faith. Moreover, revealed truth provided intimations of philosophical truths undreamt of by pagans. Gilson became a champion of what he called Christian Philosophy -- the thinking that goes on within the ambience of the faith and is supported by, indeed inspired, by it. His Gifford Lectures, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* are an eloquent statement of this position.

Gilson's academic career began at Lille but after World War I, during which he was taken prisoner, he moved to the Sorbonne. Early on he wrote a summary work of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Le thomisme (The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas)*, a work whose subsequent editions would provide the trajectory of Gilson's own philosophical development. Gilson first visited America in 1926 and was welcomed and feted at Harvard and Virginia. But it was the founding of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies at Toronto in 1929 that was to

make Gilson's impact on North America wide and deep. From then on, his academic year would be divided between France and Canada. The Institute gave him the opportunity, thanks to the Basilian Fathers, to turn his own scholarly practices into a program.

The purpose of the Institute, he said, is to produce people who can read the Divine Comedy intelligently. That sounds like a *mot*, but it is a veritable summa of wisdom. The work of Dante is the fruit of the 13th century, and all those that had gone before, and fully to appreciate it requires and understanding of its antecedents.

It is the mark of the truly original scholar that he comes to lament the company he is forced to keep. The pursuit of truth, painstaking research, the years of patient reading, are meant to open the mind to wisdom and to enable the wise man to communicate with the simple. The dark side of academe is that it is a guild whose skills and techniques can be taught to almost anyone with minimal talent and their ultimate point easily lost sight of. Hence the contrast between the pedant determined to speak for half an hour in tribute of a man who would have guffawed at the spectacle. Gilson was a wise man whose late works are aimed generally at the intelligent, not the learned.

Gilson came to have negative thoughts about the Thomistic tradition as well as about many of his contemporary Thomists. In an exchange of letters with Henri DeLubac, edited after Gilson's death by the

cardinal, Gilson is prompted to side with DeLubac against those, like Pius XII, who had misgivings about the Jesuit's doctrine of the supernatural.

Similarly, in the posthumously published correspondence with Jacques Maritain, the editor includes a letter Gilson wrote to Father Armand Maurer in which he says that only after half a century did he understand the difference between Maritain and himself. Gilson saw himself as "ascertaining the authentic meaning of St. Thomas's doctrine, which only history can do; during all that time, he [Maritain] was considering himself a true disciple of St. Thomas because he was *continuing* his thought."

This is a contrast, not a conflict, and can serve as an epitaph to the two great French students of Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson.