

Reviews

ETIENNE GILSON, by Laurence K. Shook (The Etienne Gilson Series 6).
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In 1939 Gilson warned the editors of the new journal of the Pontifical Institute, *Mediaeval Studies*, that "research scholars should be writing books, not reviewing them". He thought that most reviewing was a waste of time; what is important is not what is said about an author, only that his name be spelt correctly. It was stern advice, and if it is not followed here, it is because the name of Father Shook (correctly spelt, one hopes), a former president of that institute, may be the 'Open Sesame' to almost a century of Catholic intellectual history, 1884–1978.

It was Gilson's own contention, against Maritain, that one should "try to understand ideas through men... in order to judge in a way that unites... Pure ideas, taken in their abstract rigour, are generally irreconcilable" (p. 194). He has been well served by a biographer who has sifted from a mound of books, papers and letters a fine residue, catching the philosopher in the act of philosophizing rather than in a system of thought. The making of that philosopher was in the unlikely matrix of the rationalist Sorbonne, listening to Bergson and Durkheim and finding through Lévy-Bruhl a rich survival of the Middle Ages in Cartesianism. In 1913 he was already offering a public course on 'The System of Thomas Aquinas' at Lille. Later he would regard it as a misreading of Thomas to find there a system to answer contemporary systems. He then refused to identify himself with the neo-scholastics, seeing himself rather as a historian of thought and thinkers. Certainly Thomas had first place among those thinkers, but he was to find in Bonaventure the most complete mystical synthesis, a philosophical translation of the spirit of Francis; in Augustine an itinerary of the soul to God, a metaphysics of conversion, a rhetoric of digression; in Bernard a theorist and analyst of divine love. In consequence Gilson sometimes appeared to be an intellectual chameleon, although he complained that he could not live in the air of Duns Scotus and, despite the sincerity of his own long labour, saw the study of his fundamental positions in which they issued as "a slow meandering book" (p. 281). With Luther too, while he was sympathetic to the man's personal psychology, he was out of sympathy with what he regarded as anti-intellectual theology.

Inevitably the sympathetic historian of medieval thought in much, if not all, of its diversity becomes in time a thinker, part of the continuing history of thought. Against the separation of philosophy and theology in the Louvain school, Gilson made his distinctive appeal for the recognition of a Christian philosophy in which revealed truth had been a stimulus to reflection, a Christian exercise of reason not divorced from faith, with its own history from patristic times and a metaphysics that gave precise expression to Moses' experience of God at the burning bush. Gilson's particular contribution to that history was well expressed in what he considered his best book, *L'être et l'essence* (1948; partial English version, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 1949). There he

maintained that the act of being was only to be grasped in judgment and not capable of conceptualization. His later years saw him extending his ontological inquiries into the domain of art. In his Washington Mellon Lectures, published as *Painting and Reality* (1957), he frankly admitted that Thomas had little to offer by way of an aesthetic. What Maritain had derived from John of St. Thomas, the *recta ratio factibilium*, never escaped the order of knowing. Gilson, by contrast, seated the activity of the artist in a *habitus operativus cum recta ratione*: an intuition cannot be creative in the order of material beings because it has no hands.

A biography covering ninety-four years touches on many sides of the man besides the Christian philosopher and the development of his thought. Some readers will cherish, as the reviewer did, the friendly references to Dominicans. The young Gilson admires the Lenten preaching of Père Sertillanges and then catches him out in his footnoting of Aquinas, a lapse humbly admitted. In 1926 when Gilson launched the *Archives* he acknowledges it was the brainchild of his collaborator, Père Théry, a man "overflowing with projects... unable to remain silent about anything striking him as right" (p. 138). The collaboration continued despite that not unfamiliar Dominican syndrome of sudden and unexplained absences. In 1927 Père Roland-Gosselin took issue with *Le thomisme*, and Gilson argued the immediacy of human cognition against what he considered an un-thomistic knowing by representation, but friendships at Le Saulchoir continued and strengthened. From 1929 Gilson began to promote his idea of Christian philosophy through *La vie intellectuelle*; later, in the reaction against Action Française, he contributed to Père Bernadot's *Sept*, criticizing the state's secular education policy, writing in the interest of Action Catholique and reviewing with enthusiasm Chesterton's *St. Thomas Aquinas*. But the name that constantly recurs is that of Père Chenu, a friend who had readily recognized the enrichment that faith might offer to philosophizing. When Chenu's study of the theological programme of the Dominican house of formation, Le Saulchoir, was placed on the Index in 1942, Gilson was soon active on his behalf, arguing the author's orthodoxy at Rome. The response of the future Paul VI was not encouraging: "Le propre de l'autorité, c'est de ne pas se justifier".

There are other facets displaying a wider and often unexpected aspect of the man: Gilson clashing with traditionalists over the music of Debussy; responding sympathetically to Loisy; organising relief to Russia after the revolution; carrying his thomist gospel to Aberdeen for the Gifford lectures and discovering a true theologian in Karl Barth; being moved to tears by the discourses of Heidegger; using his Russian, learnt as a prisoner of war, to secure agreement in the drafting of the U.N. Charter; framing the constitution of U.N.E.S.C.O.; celebrating the death of idealism and warming to the existentialism of Marcel; defending the free schools in the French Assembly; commending to Canadian Liberals the Marxists' efforts to extend political liberty into the economic and social spheres, while still condemning oppression of the individual; criticizing the self-interest of the great powers and favouring a policy of French neutralism and non-alignment through the pages of *Le Monde*; sharing Pope John's private anxieties over the 'martyrdom' of clerical celibacy; welcoming Pope Paul's openness to theological pluralism in the generally uncongenial climate of the post-conciliar Church.

Thomas Merton said he owed to Gilson the gift of the Kingdom of Heaven. Among the many mansions there, Father Shook has laid claim on one of ample proportions for his subject. Reviewers may have to be content with standing-room in the Purgatory of time-wasters.

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