

# Etienne Gilson

## Formation and Accomplishment

RICHARD J. FAFARA

*The Adler-Aquinas Institute*



## THE ETIENNE GILSON LECTURE

Each academic year the Institute has invited a senior medievalist to give the annual Etienne Gilson Lecture, established in honour of the Institute's founder, and the remarkable range of his activities as historian, philosopher, and critic. Among the distinguished contributors to the series are fellows of the Institute, past and present, Leonard E. Boyle, Jocelyn Hillgarth, Edouard Jauneau, James K. McConica, Joseph Owens, James P. Reilly, and Brian Stock, as well as scholars from Canada, Europe, and the United States, including Marcia Colish, William J. Courtenay, Giles Constable, Paul Dutton, Jacqueline Hamesse, Donald Logan, Karl F. Morrison, Timothy Noone, John D. North, Francis Oakley, Kenneth Schmitz, and John Wippel. Nine of the lectures have been republished in *The Gilson Lectures on Thomas Aquinas*, ed. James P. Reilly (PIMS, 2008), and complimentary copies of individual lectures currently in print are available on request from the Department of Publications. Please consult the Institute website.

RICHARD J. FAFARA earned a BA in Classical Languages from Seton Hall University and an MA and PhD in philosophy from the University of Toronto where he attended Etienne Gilson's public lectures. He studied Cartesian philosophy under Professor Ferdinand Alquié at the Sorbonne and held a post-doctoral fellowship at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, where he focused on seventeenth century Polish philosophy. He has taught at the University of New Brunswick at Saint John, the University of Saskatchewan, George Washington University, George Mason University, and Northern Virginia Community College. His publications include *The Malebranche Moment: Selections from the Letters of Etienne Gilson and Henri Gouhier (1920–1936)* (2007), articles on various seventeenth century philosophers and contemporary Thomists, and translations of Polish philosophers. He is currently a Fellow of the Adler-Aquinas Institute.

THE ETIENNE GILSON SERIES 36

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PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE OF MEDIAEVAL STUDIES

In memory of Msgr Joseph J. Przedziecki  
who introduced me to Gilson's thought

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MANUFACTURED IN CANADA

Sixty years ago, Gilson's outstanding pupil and colleague Dr Anton Pegis published *A Gilson Reader*. Understandably, Professor Pegis expressed trepidation in attempting to reduce a person of Gilson's stature to a single volume. Gilson's wide variety of interests and astonishing body of academic works (at the time 648 titles, including thirty-five books) underscored the difficulty Pegis faced. As he observed, "If it has taken Etienne Gilson so many books to say what he had to say and to discuss what interested him, how can anyone present him in a book?"<sup>1</sup> Although Gilson had already reached the age of seventy-three when Dr Pegis's volume was published, he lived another twenty-one years, during which he remained intellectually active and published even more books, articles, and reviews.<sup>2</sup> One can therefore appreciate my predicament in attempting to capture Gilson in a single lecture. To achieve at least a modicum of success, I shall focus primarily on the formative influences on Gilson, especially on his methodology, and sketch a few of the enduring accomplishments which flow from it.

Born in Paris on a Friday the thirteenth in June 1884, Etienne Henry Gilson was educated by Christian Brothers at the parish school of Ste-Clotilde (1890–1895); at an excellent Catholic secondary school, the Petit séminaire de Notre-Dame-des-Champs (1895–1902)<sup>3</sup>; and at the Lycée Henri-IV for one year, where he first

1 *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the Writings of Etienne Gilson*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York, 1957), 7.

2 See Margaret McGrath, *Etienne Gilson: A Bibliography/Une bibliographie*, Etienne Gilson Series [hereafter EGS] 3 (Toronto, 1982).

3 Frédéric Lefèvre, *Une heure avec Étienne Gilson* (Paris, 1925), 64–65. The Petit séminaire de Notre-Dame-des-Champs, situated at 19 rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, was closed in 1904 as a result of the anti-congregationist laws.

encountered Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, the philosopher and historian of philosophy, who was lecturing on David Hume and transitioning into sociology.<sup>4</sup> After completing one year of military service, Gilson attended the Sorbonne (1904–1907) and the nearby Collège de France, where he heard the lectures of Henri Bergson. Much later, Gilson would recall Bergson’s lectures as the highlight of his life.<sup>5</sup>

As a young student, Gilson confessed that he “was already plagued with the incurable metaphysical disease” he called *chosisme* or “thingism” – that is, “crass realism,” or thinking about things and not ideas. For Gilson, the hard solidity of the world would always be an article of sanity. His initial reading and rereading of Descartes’s *Meditations* and Léon Brunschvicg’s *Introduction to the Life of the Spirit* resulted in his understanding very little of them and being struck by the amazing arbitrariness he found in them. Fortunately,

- 4 Lévy-Bruhl lectured without notes. Unfortunately, nothing of his course on Hume (or of his lectures on Locke, Berkeley, Kant, and Schopenhauer) remains. The key points of his course on Descartes are known to us only because of Gilson. See Etienne Gilson, “Le Descartes de L. Lévy-Bruhl,” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* 147 (1957): 432–451; “Mon ami Lévy-Bruhl, philosophe, sociologue, analyste des mentalités,” *Les nouvelles littéraires*, 18 March 1939, 1. See also Jean Cazeneuve, *Lucien Lévy-Bruhl*, trans. Peter Rivière (New York, 1972), ix–xii. Lévy-Bruhl’s course on Descartes in 1905–1906 displayed to Gilson an unforgettable method at work and inspired him to undertake a thesis on Descartes. See Etienne Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris, 1930; reprint, 1951), 175 n1, 282–283 n1.
- 5 Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, EGS 6 (Toronto, 1984), 18. See Etienne Gilson, “Souvenir de Bergson,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 64, no. 2 (1959): 129. Gilson attended two of Bergson’s series of lectures in 1904–1905: “Cette année-là, il avait choisi pour sujet du grand cours (l’autre étant un commentaire des *Premiers Principes* de Spenser) *L’effort intellectuel*. Quinze leçons sur ce seul sujet. [...] Pendant une heure Bergson pensait en nous, pour chacun de nous et en quelque sorte à notre place, nous donnant ainsi l’illusion de participer à son intellectualité transcendante. Pour dire plus simplement les choses, pendant une heure, nous avions l’illusion d’être aussi intelligents que lui.” (Etienne Gilson, “Bergson,” Radio diffusion française, 24 January 1966; transcription by Jacqueline [Gilson], 2 [Gilson Archives, Toronto]).

Blaise Pascal, an author whom Gilson loved, wrote “not about notions or ‘ideas’ like Descartes but about real objects, things, actually existing beings,” and indicated a direction in philosophy much richer than the rationalism and positivism so prevalent at the Sorbonne. This allowed Gilson to avoid despairing of philosophy. So he “gave up the dream of a life devoted to the study and teaching of the humanities and went to study philosophy at the Faculty of Letters in the University of Paris.”<sup>6</sup>

Immediately after passing the *agrégation* in philosophy in 1907, Gilson began his doctoral work. For his introduction to scholasticism and St Thomas Aquinas, Gilson remained forever indebted to his Jewish thesis director Professor Lévy-Bruhl. The doctoral student affectionately described his director as “the least medieval man” he had ever known, an “heir to the pure rationalism of the Enlightenment,” and “an enemy of all religion and metaphysics,” a man who not only felt, along with Auguste Comte, that it is not worth the trouble to refute metaphysics rather than just let it fall into disuse, but who also thought that among so many dead, “none is more irrevocably dead than medieval scholasticism, pronounced dead by universal consent.”<sup>7</sup> But Gilson also recognized Lévy-Bruhl as a “great and honest man” and a “sociologist of note, [...] a man of an almost uncanny intelligence, with a surprising gift of seeing facts in an impar-

6 Etienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York, 1962), 17–18. In discussing the “tradition cartésienne et française, soucieuse de s’enfermer dans la pensée beaucoup plutôt que de se répandre dans les choses et préférant à la métaphysique une sorte de métapsychologie,” Gilson added: “Pour ma part, j’ai besoin de plus d’objet. [...] [J]e avoue que [...] lorsqu’on m’enferme dans la pensée, j’ai toujours peur de ne plus pouvoir en sortir” (Lefèvre, *Une heure avec Étienne Gilson*, 67). For Gilson’s appreciation of Pascal, see Richard Fafara, “Gilson and Pascal,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 3 (2014): 25–49.

7 Etienne Gilson, *Discours prononcés dans la séance publique tenue par l’Académie française pour la réception de M. Étienne Gilson, le jeudi 29 mai 1947* (Paris, 1947), 1 (reprinted as “Réception de M. Étienne Gilson à l’Académie française,” *Une semaine dans le monde*, 31 May 1947, 7); Paul Guth, “Rencontre avec Gilson,” *Le littéraire*, 28 December 1946, 3.

tial, cold, and objective light, just as they were.”<sup>8</sup> For Gilson, understanding any philosophy would always mean presenting it as he had seen Professor Lévy-Bruhl approach Hume, beginning and ending with clarity, with profundity as an addition.<sup>9</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, “who never opened one of the works of St Thomas Aquinas and never intended to,” recommended that for his major and minor doctoral theses Gilson “study the vocabulary and, eventually, the matter borrowed from scholasticism by Descartes.”<sup>10</sup>

8 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 27; *God and Philosophy*, Powell Lectures on Philosophy at Indiana University (New Haven, 1941), xiii.

9 Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, xiii; “Mon ami Lévy-Bruhl,” 1. An admirer of Lévy-Bruhl’s brilliant originality in sociology – his method, as well as the goals he aimed at – Gilson preferred the fine and penetrating analyses of Lévy-Bruhl to those of Durkheim: “[L]es systématisations outrancières de Durkheim appartiendront depuis longtemps à l’archéologie de la sociologie, alors que les analyses si fines et si pénétrantes de L. Lévy-Bruhl seront encore une source inépuisable d’information et de réflexion pour les chercheurs” (“Mon ami Lévy-Bruhl,” 1). Lévy-Bruhl tried to get as close to social reality as possible, knowing full well that this reality presents more difficulties as regards scientific research than the physical world and requires long, methodical, and collective effort: see his *La morale et la science des moeurs* (Paris, 1903), 68. Gilson considered this work an “almost incredible book” (Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 11) and agreed that it definitively demonstrated that a thorough analysis of human thought arrives at a specifically mystical and “pre-logical” element, particularly observable in so-called “primitive” people. But Gilson took issue with its exceeding the bounds of sociological method by insinuating that such an element is a stage of human thought to be surpassed, one that should not continue to exist in modern thought. It may be that what differentiates “primitive” people is a use of the mystical that is more considerable than ours and different from it; it may be that pre-logical mysticism has as vital and conatural a function in civilized thought as its logical function. Hence, the philosophical and metaphysical problem of the legitimacy of mystical thought remains intact. See “Lettre de M. Gilson,” *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 23, no. 1 (1923): 46–48. Gilson encapsulated Lévy-Bruhl in these terms: “Dans un pays où beaucoup font bien, nul n’a jamais fait mieux” (Gilson, “Mon ami Lévy-Bruhl,” 1).

10 Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, xiii. Lévy-Bruhl’s suggesting this thesis topic to gratify Gilson, who he knew was a Catholic, supports “the perfect testimony of Charles Péguy on ‘that kind of great liberality, generosity of



During the nine long years of working on his doctorate, Gilson acquired the essentials of palaeography so that he could read medieval manuscripts properly.<sup>11</sup> Under Lévy-Bruhl, he learned how to place philosophical texts in their proper historical context and not to impose a theory upon a text to which it was foreign. He also learned that rigorous demonstration is sometimes possible in the history of philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Bergson taught him how to frame a philosophical question, not to stop at prefabricated historical and philosophical opinions, and to go directly to the real.<sup>13</sup>

As for Bergson, Gilson identified the secret of his style as consisting in a precision that controls what is being spoken and that tightly joins his language to his thought. There was never any doubt about either Bergson's thought or its object. He never masked with a neologism the absence of an idea. His philosophical thought was as objective and concrete as scientific thought. The intense satisfaction Gilson derived from Bergson's language resulted not from the thought he communicated to his listeners, but from its objects. In Bergson, Gilson recognized another infected with *chosisme*: Bergson

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mind and even heart which philosophy had in the teaching of our master' (Lévy-Bruhl)" (Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 87–88). See Charles Péguy, "Un nouveau théologien: M. Ferdinand Laudit," in *Oeuvres en prose, 1909–1914*, ed. Marcel Péguy (Paris, 1957), 989.

11 Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto, 1984), 55.

12 Lefèvre, *Une heure avec Étienne Gilson*, 64–65, 67; Gilson, "Le Descartes de L. Lévy-Bruhl," 446.

13 "Pendant une heure nous avons écouté cette voix égale, dont les variations les plus significatives étaient moins de ton que d'intensité soumis à ce charme étrange dont Platon dit qu'il agissait déjà sur les auditeurs de Socrate. Je crois savoir ce que c'était. Ce charme agit lorsqu'on n'entend pas des phrases, des mots, ni une partie, mais, directement, une pensée. [...] Le bergsonisme n'est pas une philosophie déductive, à la manière des idéalismes; elle est faite de tentatives répétées pour pénétrer plus avant dans l'épaisseur du réel, au delà de la physiologie, de la biologie, de la psychologie, de la sociologie, et de la théologie même" (Gilson, "Bergson," 2–3). Gilson regarded Bergson as an Aristotelian who taught him to be a metaphysical realist. See Etienne Gilson, "Compagnons de route," in *Étienne Gilson: Philosophe de la chrétienté* (Paris, 1949), 277, 279, 283; *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York, 1965), 114–115.

spoke not about ideas but about things. For Gilson, Bergson's greatest lesson was summarized in his simple statement: "Generalities are not philosophical." This principle guided Gilson's entire life of thought.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Gilson found in Bergson an approach to the history of philosophy that attempted a more profound understanding of the formulas in which the thought of a philosopher expresses itself, to arrive at the simple movement which produces them, penetrates them, and confers on them an indivisible unity. Gilson heeded Bergson's warning to remake constantly one's historical concepts so that they are supple enough to adhere more exactly to the historical reality they are meant to express.

Gilson characterized his early method, fashioned after those of Lévy-Bruhl (positivist in approach, after the ideal of the scientific method) and Bergson (concrete and appreciating a substantive unity), as capable of reaching new and certain results. Those results revolutionized Cartesian studies, liberating them from the frequently employed but sterile method of commentary, which set philosophy and the history of philosophy in opposition. Gilson removed from Descartes's thought the abstraction of "Cartesianism," encrusted with the positivistic and idealistic interpretations that were current at the beginning of the twentieth century, by making Descartes's thought actual and situating it in the historical context in which it was formulated. Gilson closely examined the courses and textbooks used by Descartes at the Jesuit college of La Flèche, the Thomism of his Jesuit professors, the Augustinianism of his friends, the new mathematics and physics, and theological controversies such as the question of grace. Gilson's technique included not only exegesis of Descartes's texts but also exposition of their original, unique, and generative intuition, as well as material borrowed from medieval thinkers. It grasped Descartes's thought as a whole. This superb historical and doctrinal reconstruction of Descartes's thought enabled Gilson to show that the authentic history of medieval thought includes that which it influenced, just as the history of modern thought includes its sources.

14 Etienne Gilson, "Bergson, le privilège de l'intelligence," *Nouvelles littéraires*, 11 May 1967, 3, 13.

With his groundbreaking research, Gilson authoritatively established that Descartes's idea of God, and his idea of human beings as creatures made in God's image with a spiritual and immortal soul, have their source not in the philosophical treatises of the Greeks but in the works of the medieval scholastics.<sup>15</sup>

As Gilson's doctoral work drew to a close, he experienced uneasiness and intellectual dismay at the "impoverishment metaphysics had suffered at the hands of Descartes" and "the casual way in which Descartes retained conclusions without going to the trouble of establishing them."<sup>16</sup> Gilson's principal doctoral thesis, *Liberty in Descartes and Theology*,<sup>17</sup> concluded that "Descartes had vainly tried to solve, by means of his own famous method, philosophical problems whose only correct position and solution were inseparable from the method of St Thomas Aquinas."<sup>18</sup> From then on, interpreting St Thomas's thought would occupy Gilson's research, thought, and writing. Likewise, Gilson's contribution to Cartesian scholarship never ceased. In addition to his major thesis and the meticulous historical research of his complementary minor thesis, *Index scolastico-cartésien*, re-edited and published after his death with a brilliant "Postface" that he developed little by little over the course

15 "Le but de M. Gilson n'est pas de faire une étude de l'influence de la Scolastique sur Descartes, mais de rassembler les marques qui permettront de mesurer exactement cette influence" (Maurice DeWulf, review of *Index scolastico-cartésien* by Etienne Gilson, *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 20, no. 78 [1913]: 246); Gilson's defence of his theses, published as "Thèse de M. É. Gilson, agrégé de philosophie," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 21 (supplement of July 1913): 19–32; Gilson, "Le moyen âge et le naturalisme antique," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 7 (1932): 5–6. For Gilson's concurring with Bergson, who maintained that there is an original intuition from which every philosophy flows, see Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres*, ed. André Robinet (Paris, 1984), 1345–1365, and Gilson's edition of Descartes's *Discours*, 352.

16 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 88.

17 Etienne Gilson, *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie: Grande thèse pour le doctorat présentée à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Paris* (Paris, 1923; 2nd ed. 1982).

18 Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, xiii–xiv; *The Philosopher and Theology*, 87–88.

of his long life,<sup>19</sup> Gilson's remarkable articles on the medieval influences on Cartesian thought,<sup>20</sup> along with his incomparable edition of Descartes's *Discourse on Method* with its four hundred pages of Gilson's "personal reflections" on Descartes's one hundred pages of text,<sup>21</sup> remain the indispensable background against which Descartes's achievement must be both understood and assessed by contemporary scholars.<sup>22</sup>

As an apprentice philosopher, Gilson undertook his university studies with one reservation. He did not expect from them "any revelation as to what he should think and believe":

This had already been settled in his mind; what he wanted was to probe his own thinking and go to the root of his faith [...] in the midst of indifferent or hostile surroundings. [...] To grow, if

19 Etienne Gilson, *Index scolastico-cartésien: Petite thèse pour le doctorat présentée à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Paris* (Paris, 1912), published definitively in 1913, and later in an unauthorized edition by B. Franklin (New York, 1964). Because he wanted to collect additional texts, Gilson postponed publishing an updated version, which was eventually published by Vrin in 1979, a few months after he died. Incensed by Franklin's availing itself of American copyright laws to reprint the work against his express wishes, Gilson wondered in the foreword to the posthumous edition whether he had violated any law by surviving his work by more than fifty years or whether he was merely the victim of greed. He concludes with words from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "He slays Polydorus and takes the gold by force. To what dost thou not drive the hearts of men, O accursed hunger for gold." See William Shea, review of *Index scolastico-cartésien* by Etienne Gilson, *Isis* 72, no. 1 (1981): 141.

20 Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien*.

21 Not without humour, Gilson expressed embarrassment that he earned more from Descartes's "bestseller" than the author himself, who refused any payment for it. See Etienne Gilson, *La société de masse et sa culture* (Paris, 1967), 103.

22 "To date, the most substantial works on the intellectual relations between Descartes and his predecessors have been Etienne Gilson's masterful studies" (Roger Ariew, *Descartes among the Scholastics* [Leiden, 2011], 71).

possible, in order to survive – this was henceforth his goal and he had to reach it alone, under his own responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

One can detect the beginning of what would become a lifelong project that gradually took form as he studied others who were seeking an understanding of their faith. One also can understand Gilson's comment about indifferent or hostile surroundings, given the French anti-Catholicism of the Third Republic: the stated goal of Jules Ferry, the minister of education, of reconstituting society "without God and king"; the disestablishment of the Catholic church in 1905; the French government's seizure of Catholic church buildings; and the closing of the Catholic theological faculties in Aix, Bordeaux, Lyons, Paris, and Rouen.<sup>24</sup>

Lévy-Bruhl also had taught Gilson how to distinguish good sociology from bad, and how to appreciate the contributions of scholars with whom he almost totally disagreed.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Gilson utterly rejected Émile Durkheim's hostility to philosophy, but respected the man as a scholar and sociologist who submitted to truths such as he found them. In his effort to establish "a positive science of sociological facts, including even philosophy and ethics," Durkheim moved not from theory to reality, but from social practice to theory. He conceived social facts as *things* that share "in the objective solidity of

23 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 21.

24 Alan Vincelette, *Recent Catholic Philosophy: The Twentieth Century* (Milwaukee, 2011), 44–45.

25 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 235. When Gilson asked what he thought of Bergson's *L'évolution créatrice*, Lévy-Bruhl replied: "Jamais Bergson n'a rien écrit d'aussi admirable, et ce n'est pas peu dire. Remarquez bien qu'il n'y a pas un mot de vrai dans tout son livre, mais c'est simplement merveilleux" (Gilson, "Mon ami Lévy-Bruhl," 1). Before he submitted his doctoral theses to Lévy-Bruhl, Gilson, in his first published article ("Sur le positivisme absolu," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 68 [1909]: 63–65), criticized the Parisian philosopher Abel Rey. Lévy-Bruhl graciously published the article in the review he edited, while letting Gilson know he thought his position was out of date. See Etienne Gilson, "In Quest of Species," in *Three Quests in Philosophy*, ed. Armand Maurer (Toronto, 2008), 33–34. See also Armand Maurer, "Etienne Gilson, Critic of Positivism," *The Thomist*, 71, no. 2 (2007): 199–220.

whatever is given as an entity independent of an observer [and that can impose] a *constraint* on the member of any human society.”<sup>26</sup> Durkheim had lost his Jewish religion, but Gilson saw no reason why the Old Testament book of Leviticus with its precepts and interdictions could not inspire a sociology founded in reality, provided it did not pose as a product of pure speculative reason. Gilson took every course that Durkheim offered.<sup>27</sup>

Virtually all of Gilson’s professors – Durkheim (sociology), Brunschvicg (general philosophy), Lévy-Bruhl (modern philosophy), Victor Delbos (philosophy), and Frédéric Rauh (ethics) – and his entire university education were secular. Gilson’s professors strove to be “pure philosophers.” They all sought to keep their philosophizing free from all metaphysics and any religious influence, but that did not preclude Gilson’s becoming friends with them or defending the institution in which they taught. Gilson had a most cordial relationship with Professor Delbos,<sup>28</sup> and shared a deep love of music

26 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 25; Etienne Gilson, Thomas Langan, and Armand A. Maurer, *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present* (New York, 1966), 283–284.

27 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 25–27; Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 19. Claude Lévi-Strauss declared that “the success of the Jewish minority in Human Science depended on the absolute novelty of these subjects and on the consequent lack of already very well-established university dynasties; with all this [...] the particular existential situation of its founders was able to constitute sociology and ethnology as new knowledge that sprang from the inevitable reflection that each of them was led to express about their origin from a *milieu*, from a tradition, ‘primitive’ in its irrational dependence from religious rituals, with which they had to break in order to be admitted into the ‘civilized’ world of science, but they couldn’t do without depending on it in their own inner conscience of themselves” (Maria Averoldi, “Lucien Lévy-Bruhl or an Inherent Ambiguity,” *Caderno de Pesquisa* [São Luís] 19, no. 3 [2012]: 23–24 n4, [www.periodicos-eletronicos.ufma.br/index.php/cadernosdepesquisa/article/view/1146/2587](http://www.periodicos-eletronicos.ufma.br/index.php/cadernosdepesquisa/article/view/1146/2587), accessed 15 March 2017).

28 For details on this relationship, and on Delbos secretly being a Catholic despite nothing in his writings and teaching that would permit one to affirm it, see Richard J. Fafara, “Étienne Gilson’s Early Study of Nicolas Malebranche,” *The Modern Schoolman* 74, no. 3 (1997): 180–181, 202 n101.

with Lévy-Bruhl.<sup>29</sup> Nor did Gilson and his fellow students differentiate their professors on the basis of their religious backgrounds:

Nothing distinguished our masters from one another in the free exercise of reason. [...] Our masters may well have told us *how*, in their opinion, we should think, but not one of them ever presumed to tell us *what* we should think. No authoritarian regime, no established church, would have so scrupulously respected our intellectual freedom. [...] The much abused Sorbonne instilled in us [...] an absolute respect for the truth.”<sup>30</sup>

The “scientific” sociologists within the department of philosophy at the Sorbonne taught Gilson how to integrate classical learning and rational judgement, thereby enlarging the perspective on whatever he examined. They also limited Gilson’s philosophical development in two ways. The exaggerated authority the sociologists attributed to the rational interpretation of data led them to deny the importance of research techniques. Durkheim, for example, instead of becoming involved in fieldwork, would accept data without much concern for how it had been gathered. This resulted in the sociologists lagging behind their colleagues in disciplines such as

29 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 22. Gilson learned harmony in Tours so that he could not merely love music, but also understand it (*ibid.*, 44). The young Lévy-Bruhl, a pianist, wavered between pursuing a university career and becoming an orchestra conductor. He decided on the former, but he always went to concerts with a score under his arm. See D. Merlié, “Lévy-Bruhl et Durkheim,” *Revue philosophique* 4, no. 179 (1989): 493. Gilson “thought that he had listened to music more in his life than he had read philosophy” (Armand Maurer, “The Legacy of Etienne Gilson,” in *One Hundred Years of Thomism, Aeterni Patris and Afterwards: A Symposium*, ed. Victor B. Brezik [Houston, 1981], 40).

30 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 30, 40, 41. Gilson categorically denied experiencing either the “sociological terror so vividly described by Charles Péguy, of which Durkheim would have been the Robespierre” and the Bergsonian lambs the victims, or the “fear of all that which pertains to thinking,” with which Péguy taxed the New Sorbonne of the first years of the twentieth century (*ibid.*, 21–24; Gilson, “Souvenir de Bergson,” 131–132).

historical linguistics and textual criticism. Secondly, the sociologists denied metaphysics as a valid path to truth.<sup>31</sup> Only in Bergson did Gilson find a first-rate philosopher convincingly arguing that even after the neo-Kantian critiques and the positivism of Comte one does not have to yield to materialism in ontology, to associationism in psychology, or to determinism in morals. The classical problems of metaphysics, said to be insoluble, Bergson showed to be inexhaustible. Gilson regarded Bergson as a philosophical genius and a great metaphysician who resembled Aristotle in his love of empirical knowledge, who routed positivism “by a philosophical spirit more positive than its own,” and “who gave back to French philosophy [...] a feeling for the concrete and reminded us that no matter how legitimate the desire for clarity, it does not justify us emptying all things of their mystery.”<sup>32</sup>

Gilson’s first university teaching appointment at the University of Lille was interrupted by the First World War when he was mobilized and fought at the Verdun front. Captured in February 1916, Sergeant Gilson spent two years as a German prisoner of war. During these years he studied St Bonaventure, lectured on Bergson, published an article on aesthetic judgements, learned to play tennis, directed an orchestra of men from the camp, perfected his English and German,

31 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 22. See Etienne Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique* (Paris, 2013), 50–51.

32 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 113, 117; “The Glory of Bergson,” *Thought* 22, no. 87 (December 1947): 583. Gilson considered Bergson as wisdom incarnate and remained for the rest of his life indebted to “the greatest philosopher France has known since Descartes” (“The Glory of Bergson,” 581). See also Etienne Gilson, “On Behalf of the Handmaid,” in *Theology of Renewal*, ed. L.K. Shook (Montreal, 1968), 1: 240–241. For the provocative proposal that Gilson’s Catholicism enabled him to relate to the complex and subtle medieval sense of the concrete as “luminously dense” because of its including the sensible, individual, personal, ontological, symbolic, and incarnational (embodied spirituality), and opening up rational discourse to the fully human and divine, see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *What Has Clio to Do with Athena? Etienne Gilson, Historian and Philosopher*, EGS 10 (Toronto, 1987), 11–13.



and became fluent in Russian. Gilson had the gift of languages. Besides Aristotle and Virgil, he read the original texts of Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky. The charm of his precise, limpid, elegant, and distinctive French (and English) prose consistently reflected impeccable scholarship, a sense of humour, slight doses of French irony, and serious Catholicism. Gilson also possessed the gift of eloquence, captivating audiences with his brilliance, flamboyance, clarity, and just the right tone to keep them alert and enable them to digest high-quality intellectual nourishment.

After the war, Gilson returned to Lille. In addition to regular university courses, he gave public lectures on St Thomas Aquinas modelled after Lévy-Bruhl's manner of presenting Hume's philosophy at the Sorbonne – so simple that a novice could capture it completely in taking notes, and so profound that a professor always learned something new whenever returning to those notes.<sup>33</sup> Gilson's discovery of the high quality of the medieval thought that preceded Descartes, especially the thought of Thomas Aquinas, gained the respect of scholars in France and abroad and became the recurring dominant chord of much of what Gilson said or wrote during the next twenty years. His lectures on St Thomas given at Lille appeared in 1919 as a 174-page volume entitled *Le thomisme*.<sup>34</sup> This would be the first of six editions that recorded the lifelong evolution of Gilson's understanding of Aquinas. By its final edition of 1965 it had grown to 478 pages.

In 1918, Gilson became part of the French mission to reopen the University of Strasbourg as a French university, which included erasing its German past and turning it into a showpiece for French culture. The Faculty of Letters retained aspects of the German seminar: it continued to be organized not around disciplines, but around "institutes" and *centres d'études* designed to encourage innovative research and interdisciplinary exchange. Gilson's colleagues at Strasbourg included the economic and social historians Lucien Febvre,

33 Gilson, "Mon ami Lévy-Bruhl," 1.

34 Etienne Gilson, *Le thomisme: Introduction au système de Thomas d'Aquin* (Strasbourg, 1919).

head of the Centre for Modern Studies, and Marc Bloch, head of the Centre for Medieval Studies.<sup>35</sup> Both had been formally trained for their careers and were devoted to searching the past for keys to understanding man's current situation. Gilson had received no such comparable technical training as an historian, but his frequent interactions with Febvre and especially Bloch, who was familiar with the methods of medieval history, provided him with an invaluable vicarious training as a medievalist. Alone and with his students, Bloch made a point of attending Gilson's seminars, and publicly and privately questioned his evidence for his interpretative statements. As a result, Gilson began to look at medieval studies in a multidisciplinary manner and in a much wider context, not restricted by the doctrinaire methodologies of Durkheim or Lévy-Bruhl or by his own readings of Aquinas and others. Gilson even began to envision an institute where all medieval studies could be researched and taught in an integrated fashion, providing insights into humanity and civilization.<sup>36</sup>

For just over a decade (1921–1932), Gilson held appointments at the Sorbonne in the history of medieval philosophy, and at the *École pratique des hautes études* as director of medieval theologies and philosophies. His genius consisted in breaking the traditional approach to the Middle Ages, which studied the period from the perspective of French rationalism, the Renaissance, or Thomism. Gilson's secular university education and teaching career in France facilitated his personal and revolutionary approach to medieval studies, which shared none of the prejudices or virtues of scholars and teachers then active in the field, most of them Catholic priests who

35 See Susan W. Friedman, *Marc Bloch, Sociology and Geography: Encountering Changing Disciplines* (Cambridge, 2004), 93–109.

36 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 93–95. See Lucien Febvre, "Marc Bloch et Strasbourg," in *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris, 1965), 391–397; "Marc Bloch," in *Architects and Craftsmen in History: Festschrift für Abbot Payson Usher* (Tübingen, 1956), 75–84. Years later, when Bloch mounted a campaign to be elected to the Collège de France, he sought and received the support of Gilson, his former Strasbourg colleague. See Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 208–209; Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (New York, 1989), 174–186.

had been educated in scholasticism in Catholic institutions. Gilson studied the Middle Ages from within its own awareness. He went beyond the sources and placed himself in the position of one medieval writer after another to see each one in his own time as he saw himself – to interpret each author’s work such as the author himself and his contemporaries understood it, and not to judge it according to categories or systems that were foreign to them. Gilson wished to revive these thinkers as real people with their own culture, personality, knowledge, ignorance, religious life, traditions, and innovations, an understanding of whom casts essential light on the origins of modern philosophy.

At the Sorbonne, Gilson taught authoritatively on ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy, whereas at the *École pratique*, with his students as peers, he focused on analyzing a small number of texts using both traditional and new technologies and methods.<sup>37</sup> Gilson did not follow the historians who found only theology and no philosophy in the medieval doctrinal systems, or who interpreted St Thomas as the only philosopher in the thirteenth century, or who discovered only a single philosophy called “scholasticism,” consisting fundamentally of the philosophy of Aristotle. Gilson did find philosophy in the Middle Ages, but he could not imagine that St Anselm, St Thomas, St Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham all taught the same philosophy. His study of the philosophy of St Bonaventure, for example, showed that his notions of being, cause, intellect, and natural knowledge differed fundamentally from those of Aquinas.<sup>38</sup> Gilson’s in-depth study of other thinkers established the

37 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 103–104. Created in 1868, the *École pratique des hautes études* was designed to train research scholars and scientists through basic and applied research in its seminars and laboratories, as was the practice in Germany at the time. It fostered a direct relationship between master and disciple.

38 Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St Bonaventure*, trans. Iltyd Trethowan and Frank Sheed (London, 1940; reprint, Paterson, NJ, 1965). Gilson defined scholasticism as “[t]he use made of reason within faith and for it, but finally assuming the shape of a science” (Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 193; see also 92–94, 177–178). For a brief overview of the ideological interpretations of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century

irreducible diversity of the medieval doctrinal systems and contributed in a decisive way to reconstituting a pluralistic Middle Ages.

Gilson discovered at least three main schools of medieval thought: Augustine's metaphysical method grounded in personal introspection, Duns Scotus's metaphysical universe of essences, and Thomas Aquinas's universe, which added to essences the dimension of existence. When deciding which school best reconciled Greek thought and Christianity in a philosophical manner, Gilson deemed Aquinas's reconciliation unparalleled. For Gilson, St Thomas provided insight into the entire medieval period, for one could not pretend to interpret Thomism by separating it from other very different medieval philosophies of which it was the synthesis and to which it was often opposed. Gilson also came to understand theology and philosophy as not mutually exclusive notions, and concluded that the medieval doctrinal systems were in fact theologies. As he pointed out, a conclusion drawn from faith cannot belong in philosophy, but that is not to say that a purely rational conclusion cannot belong in theology.<sup>39</sup>

Following his methodology that concepts must be measured by reality, Gilson used history to test his notion of a religious use of reason. In his masterpiece, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*,<sup>40</sup> Gilson

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neo-Thomism which were challenged by Gilson's interpretation of St Thomas's thought, see Francesca Aran Murphy, "Gilson and Chenu: The Structure of the *Summa* and the Shape of Dominican Life," *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 997 (May 2004): 290–303.

39 Lefèvre, *Une heure avec Étienne Gilson*, 69; Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 86–105.

40 Although Gilson delivered the Gifford Lectures in English, they were published in French as *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1932; 2nd revised ed. 1944) and contain Gilson's invaluable unabridged notes, plus an extensive bibliographical note on "the history of the notion of Christian philosophy," which were not included in the subsequent English version (*The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A.H.C. Downes [New York, 1934]). Gilson's provocative work was hailed immediately as a work that defies summary because it so masterfully and concisely considers the whole realm of philosophical thought: "It is of no use to try and describe such a book as this; all one can do is to recommend it" (E.L. Mascall's review, *Theology* 32 [1936]: 241). Chenu considered it to be "le plus bel

argued that historically a decisive transformation of Greek philosophy occurred at the hands of medieval Christian theologians, and their theologies revealed themselves as the seedbed of authentically philosophical notions which were subsequently incorporated into the religiously neutral systems of modern Western philosophers.<sup>41</sup> These notions included the existence of a unique God whose essence and existence are identical – the infinite, simple, and supremely free creator of the universe – as an all-powerful efficient cause, and the existence of man as a substantial composite of soul and body, free, and made in God’s image. Gilson always maintained that “true philosophy, taken absolutely and in itself, owes all its truth to its rationality and to nothing other than its rationality.” But he did not think that this precluded “a Christian exercise of reason.” Gilson called the concrete historical situation of Christians engaging in philosophy “Christian philosophy.” He described it generically as “every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders of reason and faith formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable aid to reason.”<sup>42</sup> According to Gilson, it can be shown

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ouvrage de Gilson” (M.-D. Chenu, “L’interprète de saint Thomas d’Aquin,” in *Étienne Gilson et nous: La philosophie et son histoire*, ed. Monique Couratier [Paris, 1980], 45).

- 41 Gilson considered St Thomas the father of modern philosophy because he recognized the autonomy of philosophy: “[C]omme historiens de la philosophie, nous devons voir dans cette oeuvre [Aquinas’s] le premier système de vérités purement rationnelles qu’ait engendré la spéculation occidentale et l’une des origines directes de la philosophie moderne” (Etienne Gilson, “La signification historique du thomisme,” in *Études de philosophie médiévale* [Strasbourg, 1921], 124).
- 42 Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, 12, 37, 40. From the outset, Gilson admitted that the question of Christian philosophy cannot be decided solely on historical grounds: “[I]t is necessary to go beyond the level of empiricism” (Etienne Gilson, “La notion de philosophie chrétienne,” *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, 31, no. 2 [1931]: 43). The issue is philosophical, and even theological, as much as it is historical, for the diverse historical perspectives in which Christian philosophy does or does not emerge depend upon, and are generated by, differing conceptions of philosophy. See Denis J.M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science*

as a matter of history that by being Christian, philosophy became more rational – hence his abiding reluctance to isolate philosophy from Christianity.<sup>43</sup> He never denied that this could be done, but thought the responsibility for it rests on the shoulders of the thinker engaged in it, and that such philosophy risks losing rational benefits by not being guided by a theology.<sup>44</sup>

While impressive historical scholars such as Marc Bloch may have been studying medieval men through investigations of plough-

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(Washington, DC, 1997), 31–41. Gilson cited Maritain’s discussion and works for the doctrinal solution to the problem of Christian philosophy; see Gilson, *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, 439 n80. For Gilson’s growth in understanding Christian philosophy, see Armand Maurer’s excellent “Translator’s Introduction,” in Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy* (Toronto, 1993), xiv–xx. For Gilson’s paradigm of the interrelation of faith and reason proving to be the most satisfactory theologically because of its being modelled on the “Calcedonian” interrelation of divine and human natures in Christ, see Aidan Nichols, *Conversation of Faith and Reason: Modern Catholic Thought from Hermes to Benedict XVI* (Chicago, 2009), 129, 198–211.

- 43 Since Gilson did not invent order to better understand texts, throughout his career he presented St Thomas’s thought by adhering to the theological order as found in the *Summa theologiae* (descending from God to creatures). Later, Gilson realized that while “[w]ithout faith the literal meaning of the texts may be understood, the deep meaning of a thought entirely devoted to the service of the faith will never be understood. In short, the understanding of a Christian philosophy requires from its interpreter a genuinely Christian approach. Hence the failure of most attempts to treat it as a non-Christian philosophy” (Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 210).
- 44 Etienne Gilson, “Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism,” in *A Gilson Reader*, 165–166; *The Philosopher and Theology*, 210–211. Gilson viewed attempts of the neo-Thomists, driven primarily by a desire for a rational apologetic, to “separate” out a natural *philosophia aristotelico-thomistica* from St Thomas’s thought as generous but clumsy and ineffective, since apologetics based on such a philosophy have convinced no one. They join their adversary on his own terrain by denying Christian rationality and adopting the model of modern rationality, which excludes all that cannot be drawn from it. See Serge-Thomas Bonino, “Historiographie de l’école thomiste: Le cas Gilson,” in *Saint Thomas au XXe siècle: Actes du colloque du centenaire de la “Revue thomiste” (1893–1992)*, Toulouse, 25–28 mars 1993, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino (Paris, 1994), 308–309.

ing, irrigation methods, and harness making, Gilson's explorations at the *École pratique* of a wide variety of medieval personages recognized the need to go beyond the method of his masters at the Sorbonne for interpreting modern philosophers, and to expand and refine his methodology to be able to analyze medieval theologians in terms of their theological and even spiritual context. Only such analyses could provide textual interpretations or explanations that made sense, since their theologies were nothing but the very movement of their minds and love as they sought truth about God in Scripture and in the study of His creatures.<sup>45</sup>

Gilson's curiosity of mind and his taste for "things" explain his profound appreciation of the importance of documents, for it is only through a text that one has access to the views of a particular figure in history. Any author is precisely the author of *a text*. Other information about the author (society, cultural milieu, social and political factors, the intended audience, etc.) are relevant only to the extent that they shed light on the text. Key to the method that Gilson promoted throughout his career was to "read, reread, reflect on the text, [...] learn the author's technical terminology, [...] characteristic style and vocabulary," and understand that "no historian's treatise, no translation however carefully made," keeps faith with an author's thought, nothing except the author's "own text in the very languages in which he wrote it."<sup>46</sup>

Gilson employed a variety of historiographical techniques, as evidenced by the three general types of books and articles he authored: studies of individual thinkers, general histories, and philosophical

45 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 212. For Gilson's prodigious scholarly output at the *École pratique* during this period, see Callistus James Edie, "The Writings of Etienne Gilson Chronologically Arranged," in *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson* (Toronto, 1959), 19–34.

46 Etienne Gilson, "Conseils de lecture," in *Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1925), 16 (reprinted as *Saint Thomas moraliste* [Paris, 1974], 21; translated in Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 123). Gilson followed his own advice: "Nous avons écrit toutes ces pages avec le texte de saint Thomas sous les yeux; c'est bien à lui que nous avons toujours laissé la parole" ("Préface de la troisième édition," in *Le thomisme* [Paris, 1947], 526).

works. First, his superior intellectual acuity and sympathy for the individuals he studied enabled him to become a penetrating exegete of medieval texts and to present the philosophies of individual thinkers such as Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Descartes, along with the principal factors which influenced each of them.<sup>47</sup>

Second, Gilson's histories of philosophy focused more on the filiations of various ideas and doctrinal genealogies, the origin and development of new ideas, and their development or neglect in subsequent schools of thought. Lucien Febvre described the 782-page, revised second edition of Gilson's *La philosophie au moyen âge*<sup>48</sup> "from the outside" as "a chronological film of medieval philosophy since its first contact with Greek philosophy in the second century to the end of the fourteenth century with the dawn of a new age." From the "inside,"

47 In his unpublished letters to Gilson (Gilson Archives, Toronto), Bergson praised his works: "Il faut que je vous dise avec quel intérêt je viens de lire *La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard* [Paris, 1934; reprint, 1969]. C'est une étude singulièrement pénétrante et profonde. Vous avez pris, un à un, les divers aspects d'une grande âme mystique, et vous les avez soumis à l'analyse, en suivant d'aussi près que possible les textes, mais en les interprétant comme seul un vrai psychologue peut les interpréter. On ne sait vraiment ce qu'il faut admirer de plus, l'érudition dont le livre témoigne et qui fait que nous nous transportons avec vous dans le passé, ou de la pénétration psychologique qui fait de vos descriptions et de vos analyses quelque chose de si vivant et si actuel devant cet effort" (letter of 21 September 1934). As for Gilson's *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1929; revised and expanded ed., 1943), Bergson recognized Gilson's ability to get at the simple movement or intuition that generates a philosophy: "J'admire votre connaissance extraordinairement complète, véritablement exhaustive du sujet et de tout ce qui y touche; mais ce que j'admire encore davantage, c'est que vous avez pu, en dépit de ces complications, nous donner de l'ensemble une vision simple. Il me semble que l'essence même de la pensée de Saint Augustin se dégage aux yeux du lecteur, je veux dire une conception telle de la philosophie et de la religion qu'elles ne paraissent ni le distinguer ni le confondre, n'étant en quelque sorte que deux vues prises du départ par nous sur quelque chose d'invisible. Tous mes compliments pour ce beau livre" (letter of 3 January 1930).

48 Etienne Gilson, *La philosophie au moyen âge, des origines patristiques à la fin du XIVe siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1944).



Febvre found there “from beginning to end a coherence of thought, a security that comes from experience, an attentive vigilance, and something strong, solid, and firm” that is the equivalent of Gilson’s signature. Febvre also saw “something ingenious, personal, and active which animates everything.” He noted the colloquial and direct remarks interspersed in Gilson critiques and expositions – “Pay attention here!”, “Don’t think that,” “A difficult problem indeed! Not to be solved easily...” – and “always that great clarity that comes not from arbitrary simplifications, but from an absolute mastery of the subjects.” Febvre recognized this work as “one of a great professor who excels at teaching and is not content to present what is known, or even to read and reread texts and gladly extract the most characteristic precepts.” Gilson “intuitively knows how sometimes to go it alone, sometimes accompanied by his disciples, to the exact area of the research so as to accomplish the work needed there, to animate young teams with his curiosity, to provoke new studies, the publication of texts, and fruitful links and connections.”<sup>49</sup> Gilson retained an amazing interest in new avenues of research until almost the end of his life.

49 “Étienne Gilson, lui s’est attaché avant tout à dérouler sous les yeux du lecteur le film chronologique de la philosophie médiévale depuis son premier contact avec la philosophie grecque au IIe siècle de notre ère, ‘dès qu’il y eut des convertis de culture grecque,’ jusqu’à cette fin du XIVe siècle qui voit se lever l’aurore de temps nouveaux. [...] Ceci, quant à l’extérieur. S’agissant de l’intérieur, [...] [o]n y goûtera d’un bout à l’autre cette cohérence de pensée, cette sûreté d’expérience, cette vigilance d’attention, ce quelque chose de fort, de solide et de ferme, qui équivaut à une signature. Ce quelque chose d’ingénieux aussi, de personnel et d’actif qui vivifie tout. Les critiques, les exposés sont coupés de remarques familières et d’interventions directes: ‘Attendez ici! N’allez pas croire que...’ – Ou bien: ‘Problème ardu! Ne résolvons pas par la facilité...’ – Et toujours cette grande clarté, qui vient pas de simplifications arbitraires, mais d’une maîtrise plénière des sujets. Le livre d’un grand professeur, et qui enseigne excellemment; mais il ne se contente pas, certes, d’exposer ce qui est acquis, ni même d’avoir lu et relu tous les textes et d’en avoir extrait avec bonheur les préceptes les plus caractéristiques; il sait de sa personne, se porter, tantôt seul, tantôt accompagné de ses disciples, à la pointe même de la recherche pour y accomplir les travaux nécessaires, animer de sa curiosité les équipes de jeunes, provoquer les études nouvelles, les publications de texte, les rapprochements féconds” (Lucien Febvre, “Histoire des idées, histoire des sociétés: Une question de climat,”

The third and “more typically Gilsonian” category of Gilson’s writings, such as *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* and *Being and Some Philosophers*,<sup>50</sup> is philosophical in nature. In these works Gilson analyzes the history of philosophy to arrive at a philosophical under-

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*Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 1, no. 2 [1946]: 158–159). Febvre rightly underscored the strong pedagogical character of Gilson’s method, for he intended his histories of medieval philosophy and his editions of *Thomism* “to provide teachers and advanced students with the first technical information they need in order to conduct their courses or to start their own research work” (Etienne Gilson, “Foreword,” in *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* [New York, 1955]; *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence K. Shook and Armand Maurer [Toronto, 2002], xiii–xiv). Gilson’s brief asides and digressions are legend in their intellectual fecundity. For instance, his appendix to his *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard* called attention to Guillaume de Saint-Thierry and gave rise to most of the editions and studies of that author. In modern philosophy, Gilson’s question on Malebranche’s notion of the *idée efficace* that he raised during Henri Gouhier’s thesis defense has generated considerable attention ever since. See Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny, “Actualité de la pensée d’Étienne Gilson, Collège de France: 28–29 Mai 1979,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 22, no. 88 (1979): 432; Etienne Gilson and Henri Gouhier, *The Malebranche Moment: Selections from the Letters of Étienne Gilson & Henri Gouhier (1920–1936)*, ed. and trans. Richard J. Fafara, *Marquette Studies in Philosophy* 48 (Milwaukee, 2007), 56 n76. For a firsthand account of Gilson’s teaching and activities from one of his distinguished students, who shared fourteen years with him at Toronto, see Edward A. Synan, “Gilson Remembered,” in *The Catholic Writer: Papers Presented at a Conference Sponsored by the Wethersfield Institute, New York City, Sept. 29–30, 1989*, ed. Ralph McInerny (San Francisco, 1991), 2: 49–63. D’Alverny found that French and American student perceptions of Gilson differed – “Les étudiants et américains avaient apparemment des goûts plus austères. [...] Notre jovial professeur des Hautes Études et du Collège de France paraissait transformé en docteur de l’Église.” – while recognizing a variety of possible causes for a more sombre Gilson: personal tribulations, age, and the aspects of Gilson’s thought much more emphasized in North America (namely, Christian philosophy, Thomas Aquinas, and education). See d’Alverny, “Nécrologie: Étienne Gilson (1884–1978),” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 22, no. 88 (1979), 428; Guth, “Rencontre avec Gilson,” 1, 3.

50 Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York, 1937; reprint with new pagination, San Francisco, 1999); *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. corrected and enlarged (Toronto, 1952).

standing of that discipline. Gilson describes his method in these works as a kind of intellectual experimentation on the philosophical data provided by history. It examines the premises laid down by philosophers to see what flows from them, either in that particular philosophy or in subsequent philosophies. As Gilson noted, one is always free to choose one's principles, but one must be ready to face their consequences to the bitter end. Gilson showed how philosophers across the centuries have mistakenly given in to reforming the philosophy of their times by using the method and structure of another science, such as theology, psychology, mathematics, physics, or sociology, resulting ultimately in skepticism and the undermining of philosophical truth. But Gilson concluded on a positive note: because man is by nature a metaphysical animal who seeks the truth of reality, philosophy will always bury its undertakers. As for a sound approach to metaphysics, Gilson advocated one based on the intellectual intuition of being, the recognition stemming from a sensio-intellectual experience of things that there is something real existing outside of us.<sup>51</sup>

Concerned about vehicles in which to publish research, Gilson spearheaded the creation not only of series of books such as *Études médiévales* and *Études musulmanes*, but also of journals. In 1925, at the *Salle de manuscrits* of the Bibliotheque nationale in Paris, Gilson fortuitously met the erudite and creative Dominican priest Gabriel Théry. Almost immediately, they developed a plan for a periodical devoted to the history of medieval thought that would include editions of texts. Joseph Vrin agreed to be the publisher, and the first volume of the *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* appeared in 1926.<sup>52</sup> It was in the *Archives* that Gilson published most

51 See Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 243, 246, 251–257 (in the 1999 edition) and Armand A. Maurer, “Gilson’s Use of History in Philosophy,” in *Thomistic Papers V*, ed. Thomas A. Russman (Houston, 1990), 25–48, with Appendix by Etienne Gilson, “Remarks on Experience in Metaphysics” (translation of “Remarques sur l’expérience en métaphysique,” in *Actes du XIe Congrès international de philosophie: Bruxelles 20–26 août 1953* [Amsterdam and Louvain, 1953], 4: 5–10).

52 Etienne Gilson, “In Memoriam R.P. Gabriel Théry, O.P. (1891–1959),” *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 26 (1959): 7–8.

of his historical studies.<sup>53</sup> Special mention should be made of Gilson's studies of the Arabic philosophers translated into Latin, whom he wanted to understand and interpret as they could have been seen in the thirteenth century. In an early article in the *Archives* on Avicenna, Gilson added an edition of the Latin version of al-Fārābī's difficult text *De intellectu*, together with a French translation.<sup>54</sup> Gilson collaborated with an illustrious colleague, Louis Massignon, who compared the text with the original Arabic and commented on it. Realizing Arabic philosophy's importance in the development of medieval philosophy, Gilson even considered learning Arabic, but probably gave up on the idea because Massignon characterized that language as one of unfathomable richness, and susceptible to multiple interpretations.<sup>55</sup> That same enthusiasm and spirit of understanding likewise guided Gilson's impetus for studying medieval Jewish philosophy, which he never ceased to encourage.

Many years after the fact, Gilson loved recounting the story of Massignon's defence in 1922 of his four-volume doctoral thesis, which focused on the Persian mystic, writer, and teacher of Sufism al-Hallaj. Gilson served as a member of the jury along with another professor of philosophy, a famous sociologist who was not at all familiar with Muslim mysticism. After a while, the sociologist leaned over to Gilson and whispered, "Gilson, you read the thesis; can you suggest a subject for comment?" Gilson opened the thesis and let the professor look at a few pages on the "rope trick" of the fakirs. When it was the sociologist's turn to ask questions, he began by asking the doctoral candidate if he believed the rope trick. Massignon swiftly

53 Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny and M. Dominique Chenu, "In Memoriam Étienne Gilson," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 45 (1978): i–iv.

54 Etienne Gilson, "Les sources gréco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 4 (1929): 5–149. See Etienne Gilson, "L'étude des philosophes arabes et son rôle dans l'interprétation de la scolastique," in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy* (Harvard University, 13–17 September 1926), ed. Edgar S. Brightman (New York, 1927), 592–596.

55 D'Alverny, "Nécrologie: Étienne Gilson," 427.

assessed the situation, and fixing a piercing stare at the sociologist, replied, "Yes, of course." That put an end to any further questioning by that examiner.<sup>56</sup>

In 1926 – Gilson's *annus mirabilis* according to his masterful biographer Laurence Shook – Gilson visited North America for the first time. After dominating a national philosophical congress held in Canada and an international one at Harvard, he was welcomed as a professor for two summer courses at the University of Virginia, followed by a semester teaching at Harvard.<sup>57</sup> If one agrees to the impossible and extends the year 1926 by a month, Gilson's wondrous year would include his three-day stay in Toronto in January of 1927. There he spoke at St Michael's College and met an impressive group of Thomist scholars that included Fathers Henry Carr and Edmund J. McCorkell, their Basilian colleagues, and Father Gerald Phelan. Father Shook characterized the three days of living in community at St Michael's as reminding Gilson of his happy years as a student at Notre-Dame-des-Champs and, no doubt, as giving him the idea that

56 Ibid. In 1926, Massignon, director of Islamic studies at the Sorbonne, was appointed to the chair of Muslim sociology and sociography at the Collège de France. He became a pioneer of Catholic-Muslim mutual understanding, an area which Gilson supported. In 1959, Gilson attended a conference in Cologne on Arabic and medieval Latin philosophy which "was extraordinarily good; an example of perfect intellectual cooperation between Moslems and Catholics. Two or three Egyptian scholars put all the rest of us to shame by their intellectual culture. I cannot find the slightest difference between such men and ourselves. I mean to say, between 'Moslem philosophers' and the 'Christian philosophers' we wish to be. The point where we part company is quite clear, but we can go a long way together; in fact, we have in common the whole *De Deo uno*" (letter to Anton Pegis, 15 September 1959, cited in Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 347).

57 According to Paul Weiss, who arrived at Harvard as a student in 1927, logicians controlled the philosophy department. Weiss recalled discussing with C.I. Lewis whether 1 plus 1 would ever not equal 2. Weiss cited Gilson's teaching as having "inspired a passion for thoroughness." "All the rest at Harvard," said Weiss, "was so much hot air" (Paul Weiss, "Lost in Thought: Alone with Others," in *The Philosophy of Paul Weiss*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn [Chicago, 1995], 8–10).

the college could serve as a favourable setting for the institute he had dreamed of since teaching at Strasbourg.<sup>58</sup>

While a visiting professor at Harvard in the fall of 1927, Gilson accepted a second invitation from the Basilian Fathers to return to Toronto in November to lecture and to discuss the possibility of creating an institute of medieval studies. In October, he wrote to his wife, Thérèse, expressing concern about the lectures which he had not yet written: “If I don’t produce something worthwhile, they are not the kind of people who won’t notice it.”<sup>59</sup> The series of lectures went well, as did discussions about the nature and administration of the proposed institute within the structure of the University of Toronto. As soon as Gilson “grasped the spirit of St Michael’s,” he declared: “This is the spot! The institute will be here or nowhere.” Gilson’s central and dominant idea for the project used the history of medieval thought as the key to the history of the Middle Ages. The vast medieval *Summae* on theology and philosophy contain not only religious beliefs and philosophical ideas, but also moral convictions, scientific knowledge, and political programmes – “the very heart of medieval civilization.” But, as Gilson emphasized, “there exists no scientific establishment in the whole world, expressly devoted to the study of medieval thought and doctrine. [...] [R]esearch has not yet been organized to meet the exigencies of modern historical methods.”<sup>60</sup>

Gilson envisioned his “model laboratory of the history of medieval civilization” as employing the method he used in Paris at the *École pratique*. It would consist of a library; mandatory courses in medieval Latin, palaeography, and historical sources; research seminars in medieval philosophy, theology, the history of positive sciences, and political and social doctrines; the study of Jewish and Arabic thought; the influence exerted by medieval systems on art, lit-

58 Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 167–168.

59 Letter to Thérèse, 27 October 1927, cited in Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 175–176.

60 Etienne Gilson, “St Michael’s Establishes Institute of Mediaeval Studies,” *The University of Toronto Monthly* 28, no. 3 (December 1927): 119.

erature, and politics; and a collaborative methodology emphasizing texts and documents.<sup>61</sup>

Gilson returned to Harvard in 1928 for his last regular semester as a visiting professor and made a third trip to Toronto to further shape the new institute. Its initial key staff would be: Father Carr, president; Gilson, director of studies; and Father Phelan, librarian. The Institute of Mediaeval Studies formally opened the morning of 29 September 1929.<sup>62</sup> Under Gilson's direction, and insistence on understanding ideas in their historical context, the Institute became the finest interdisciplinary centre anywhere for research on the Middle Ages. The Institute's impressive cadre of professors has included scholars such as Peter Brieger, Sheila Campbell, George B. Flahiff, Astrik L. Gabriel, and Gerhard B. Ladner (art and architecture); Martin Dimnik, James K. Farge, Jocelyn Hillgarth, James K. McConica, J. Ambrose Raftis, Michael M. Sheehan, and Brian Stock (history); John Brückmann, Terence McLaughlin, and J. Joseph Ryan (law); Ashley Amos, Edmund Colledge, Alexander Denomy, Ann M. Hutchison, Frances Nims, and Laurence K. Shook (literature); Arnold Angenandt, Vincent L. Kennedy, and Roger Reynolds (liturgy); Leonard Boyle, Virginia Brown, and J. Reginald O'Donnell (palaeography); Etienne Gilson, Édouard Jeuneau, Jacques Maritain, Armand Maurer, Léon Noël, Joseph Owens, Anton C. Pegis, John Quinn, Gerald B. Phelan, Edward Synan, and James Weisheipl (philosophy); and Marie-Dominique Chenu, Ignatius Eschmann, Nikolaus Häring, and Walter Principe (theology).<sup>63</sup> As one expert

61 Ibid., 120–121. See *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses, 1927–28* (Melun: Imprimerie administrative, 1928), 31.

62 Gilson furnished an entertaining explanation of the spelling of the Institute's name: "L'orthographe *mediaeval* avec un *ae*, est une affectation pour agacer les voisins yankees, ils préfèrent *medieval*! Vous aussi il me semble" (Etienne Gilson, letter of 24 October 1966 to Del Noce, in *Mon cher collègue et ami: Lettres d'Étienne Gilson à Augusto Del Noce (1964–1969)*, ed. Massimo Borghesi [Paris, 2011], 87).

63 For a complete list of Institute fellows and teachers as of 1989, see *Jubilee 1989: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Foundation 1929 – Papal Charter 1939*, ed. Martin Dimnik, Phyllis E. Pobst, Charles Hilken, and Linda C. Deneusuk (Toronto, 1989), 28–33.

observed, “Toronto is the place where God sends all the good medievalists when they die, and where he sends most of the best medievalists long before they die.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1932, when he was appointed the first holder of the chair of the history of medieval philosophy at the Collège de France, Gilson resigned from the Sorbonne<sup>65</sup> and the École pratique, but chose to remain as director of studies in Toronto. In 1947, he was elected to a seat in the French Senate<sup>66</sup> and was honoured with the highest distinction attainable by a French scholar: membership in the Académie française. After years of “commuting” between the Latin Quarter and the New World (more than fifty transatlantic crossings), Gilson resigned from his chair at the Collège de France in 1951 and devoted the remainder of his active career to directing the Institute in Toronto until 1971, when he was eighty-seven years old.

Not surprisingly, Gilson’s later lectures and books develop and deepen the signature themes of his earlier works – Thomism, Christian philosophy, and the exposition of medieval figures. But given Gilson’s voracious intellectual appetite, we also find much that is new

64 Carl T. Berkhout, “Medieval Research Centers in North America,” in *Medieval Studies in North America: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Francis G. Gentry and Christopher Kleinheinz (Kalamazoo, 1982), 105.

65 “La Sorbonne, au fond, est une faculté de théologie athée et c’est pourquoi vous [Guittou] et moi nous ne pouvons pas y vivre; ou bien, nous sommes obligés d’y faire de l’histoire pure ou bien, si nous voulons être nous-mêmes, on nous appelle ‘prosélytes’, parce que nous ne jouons pas le jeu. Moi j’ai pris conscience de plus en plus que j’ai été au fond, non pas tant un philosophe qu’un théologien, c’est pourquoi j’ai quitté la Sorbonne: si vous saviez maintenant comme je suis libre, je n’ai plus à me contrefaire” (Jean Guittou, “14 mai 1959, conversation avec Étienne Gilson,” in *Journa de ma vie*, vol. 2: *Avenir du présent 1958–1971* [Paris, 1976], 410).

66 Gilson’s senatorial interventions concentrated basically on the aftermath of the war and on social problems: creating new jobs within the government, improving the situation of the victims of war, ameliorating the status of deportees and prisoners of the Resistance, changing the administration of assistance for the elderly, and revising excessive pensions. See “Gilson, Etienne,” Sénat [de France], [www.senat.fr/senateur-4eme-republique/gilson\\_etienne053or4.html](http://www.senat.fr/senateur-4eme-republique/gilson_etienne053or4.html), accessed 14 March 2017.



in other areas: in *aesthetics*, his A.W. Mellon Lectures on painting, his subsequent further reflections on art and beauty discussing architecture, statuary, painting, music, poetry, theatre, and dance, as well as a study on the condition of the arts as industrialized in mass culture;<sup>67</sup> in *contemporary science*, his critical philosophical reflections on positivism, or scientism, in linguistics and in nature, and on evolution with its explanation of living beings that excludes final causality;<sup>68</sup> in *the history of philosophy*, his mature and definitive interpretation of key figures in modern philosophy,<sup>69</sup> along with a distinctive treatment of contemporary French and Italian philosophy;<sup>70</sup> in *literature*, incomparable studies of Dante, Heloise and Abelard, and other couples such as Petrarch and Laura, Richard Wagner and Mathilde, and Auguste Comte and Clotilde de Vaux, which illustrate the relationship and conflict between inspiration and possession, between the muse and the lover;<sup>71</sup> and in *autobiography*, Gilson's fascinating, controversial, intellectual, and spiritual memoir.<sup>72</sup>

67 Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, Bollingen Series 36.4 (New York, 1957); *The Arts of the Beautiful; Forms and Substances in the Arts*, trans. Salvator Attanaseo (New York, 1966); *La société de masse et sa culture*.

68 Etienne Gilson, *Linguistics and Philosophy: An Essay on the Philosophical Constants of Language*, trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame, 1988); *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution*, trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame, 1984).

69 Etienne Gilson and Thomas Langan, *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant* (New York, 1963). Although this collaborative volume makes no mention of who authored which chapters, "[t]he following were written by Langan: Montaigne, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes (ethics section), Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, Cambridge Platonists, Newton, Berkeley, Hume, D'Alembert, Diderot, Lessing, Herder, Kant. Gilson wrote all the rest" (letter of Armand Maurer to Richard Fafara, 27 November 1998).

70 Gilson, Langan, and Maurer, *Recent Philosophy*, 171–408.

71 Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Moore (London, 1948; Gloucester, MA, 1968), also published as *Dante and Philosophy* (New York, 1963); *Dante et Béatrice: Études dantesques* (Paris, 1974); *Heloise and Abelard*, trans. L.K. Shook (Chicago, 1951); *The Choir of Muses*, trans. Maisie Ward (New York, 1953).

72 Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, which he undertook at the request of the Académie française. In shorter formats, one can add to the list: politics (*The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo*

Gilson exhibited a hard-nosed, realistic appraisal of his own work. He considered it “open” and destined to be surpassed by future scholarship.<sup>73</sup> As he observed in the last edition of *Thomism*:

Grown old, the historian must at least have learned to be humble about his own opinions and to be considerate to those of others. There is a “law of closed-mindedness.” Because of the profundity of Aquinas’s thought, we shall perhaps never fully penetrate the mind of so great a genius as Thomas Aquinas.<sup>74</sup>

And in his *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, he observed that while no historian can be so naïve as to confuse his own conclusions with historical truth itself, he himself cannot help stating it as he sees it. But one should not worry:

The progress of historical research and interpretation will finally put everything in its proper perspective, no honest effort will have been lost and, since truth is one, there is nothing to lose and everything to gain in striving to respect it in all its orders and under all its aspects.<sup>75</sup>

Although subsequent scholarship has challenged and corrected some of the contours and narratives of Gilson’s contribution, much of his work has admirably stood the test of time.<sup>76</sup>

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XIII, ed. Etienne Gilson [New York, 1954]) and education (Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique*).

73 “Je ne m’illusionne pas sur ce que nous savons du moyen âge. Dans vingt ans, nos neveux en connaîtront un autre, beaucoup plus vrai” (letter of Gilson to Father Gabriel Astrik, 10 May 1947, University of Notre Dame Archives). My thanks to Dr Florian Michel for this reference.

74 “Vieilli, l’historien doit du moins avoir appris la modestie pour sa pensée et l’indulgence pour celle des autres. Il y a une ‘loi des consciences closes.’ Celle d’un aussi vaste génie que saint Thomas d’Aquin ne se lessera peut-être jamais vraiment pénétrer” (Etienne Gilson, *Le thomisme: Introduction à la philosophie de saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 6th ed. [Paris, 1965], 7).

75 Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 543.

76 See, for example, Marcia L. Colish, *Remapping Scholasticism*, EGS 21 (Toronto, 2000); William Courtenay, *Changing Approaches to Fourteenth-*

In concluding, I would like to highlight elements of Gilson's thought which illustrate Bergson's observation that when two or more independent insights cross, a new philosophy is born.<sup>77</sup> Gilson may have considered himself primarily a historian of philosophy whose main goal was to interpret correctly the imperfectly understood medieval tradition of Christian thought, especially the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas; nonetheless, his execution of that mission revealed in Gilson the historian Gilson the philosopher, who created an original philosophical synthesis within the history of philosophy.<sup>78</sup>

Gilson's synthesis consists of three interrelated convictions. First is the notion of Christian philosophy, which Gilson found as an observable reality in history. This notion fits quite comfortably into our current postmodern era that seeks to go beyond the modern presumption of Descartes to purge his mind of social and historical influences. Gilson's own doctoral work showed the futility of Descartes's attempt. The contemporary era of postmodern pluralism allows one to choose freely the starting points on which one's thinking is based. In the case of Christian philosophy, one's upbringing and habituation in Christian culture can allow for a theology to shape a philosophy, provided that it does not, as Gilson argued, enter into the fabric of the philosophy itself. Consequently, Christian philosophy certainly can stand alone before the court of reason as one type of philosophy in a postmodern age.<sup>79</sup>

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*Century Thought*, EGS 29 (Toronto, 2007); Timothy B. Noone, *Of Angels and Men: Sketches from High Medieval Epistemology*, EGS 34 (Toronto, 2010).

77 Gilson, "Compagnons de route," 281.

78 See Frederick D. Wilhelmson, "Foreword," in Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco, 2012), 7–21. Gilson did not begin his life's work as a historian or as a historian of philosophy who then continued as a philosopher, but as "a man who forced himself to think about his humanity," and did so from the beginning of his career. See Henri Gouhier, "Étienne Gilson historien et philosophe," in *Études sur l'histoire des idées en France depuis le XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1980), 161–162, 165–166.

79 "Some of us choose to philosophize about science, others about art, others still, as did [William] James and Bergson, about moral and religious

The second is Gilson's contention that the modern problem of knowledge is superfluous to the authentic thought of St Thomas, and could be shown to be contradictory by destroying the epistemological realism it attempts to defend. In defining the spirit of medieval philosophy, Gilson determined that all of the great medieval epistemologies were realisms because they were nourished on Christian motives. If the work of creation were not intelligible, what could we possibly know of its author? Whereas man may have stood at the centre of the medieval world, that world had an existence of its own: it was something that could be known by man yet not created by him.<sup>80</sup>

Gilson took up the modern philosophical problem of knowledge in his third edition of *Thomism*, and did so with the recognition that this was a very risky undertaking. Centuries filled with new systems or new positions on ancient problems, centuries throughout which

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experience. These ways of philosophizing are all good, useful, and open to Christians. Why should those who profess the Christian faith and its doctrines see themselves excluded from philosophy simply because they prefer to philosophize about what they believe?" (Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 198). Observing that no philosopher is ever a mind free of all historicity, but exists in a certain cultural milieu historically situated in space and time, Gouhier viewed Gilson as raising a question pertaining to the essence of philosophy in accordance with the human condition: "Il y a toujours un point de départ non philosophique de la philosophie. Les [...] livres de Étienne Gilson soulèvent donc une question qui intéresse l'essence même de la philosophie selon la condition humaine. Il y a, en effet, bien d'autres formes de *fides* que la foi chrétienne, à commencer par la foi en homme ou la foi en son progrès. [...] *Fides quaerens intellectum*, ne serait-ce pas la loi de toute métaphysique et pas seulement de celle qui est chrétienne?" (Henri Gouhier, "Étienne Gilson et la vitalité de l'esprit," *Ecclésia* 134 [May 1960]: 49).

80 Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, 229, 243–245. The medieval thinkers learned from Genesis that the world is God's work, not man's. If man is to know anything of its nature, which is outside of himself, he must submit and conform himself to it, rather than follow Kant and regard nature as nothing more than the result of laws of the human mind. Man then becomes the creator and has no way of rising above himself: "Legislator of a world to which his own mind has given birth, he is henceforth the prisoner of his own work, and he will never escape from it any more" (ibid., 246).

Thomism appears in a refracted light by trying to find in St Thomas answers to questions formulated after him, lead imperceptibly to a modification of the problem he tackled, and bend texts in the sense required to adapt them to new questions, sometimes compromising the equilibrium of his thought. Gilson was asking of St Thomas: what would have been his formulation of the problem of knowledge if, through an internal development of its own proper principles, Thomism had found itself confronted with this problem?<sup>81</sup>

The “critical,” epistemological problem emerged historically from the idealistic approach to knowledge advocated by philosophers such as Descartes and Kant, by Gilson’s teacher Léon Brunschvicg, by neo-Thomists such as Cardinal Mercier and his followers at the Catholic University of Louvain, and by the transcendental Thomism of Joseph Maréchal. Affected perhaps by a siege mentality and a desire to be philosophically respectable in the secular world, many Thomists wished to accept the challenge of “modern” thought by adopting a Cartesian or Kantian point of departure. They start in doubt as Descartes proposed, or subject human knowledge to a critique by suspending our spontaneous convictions about actually knowing in our immediate experience a real world of existing things, which eventually leads to affirming the reality of the external world.<sup>82</sup> Cardinal Mercier, for instance, begins with the inner passivity in sen-

81 Etienne Gilson, *Le thomisme* (Paris, 1927), 227.

82 The disagreement with Thomists as to whether we know only a similitude or representation of things or things themselves was the beginning of a debate that preoccupied Gilson in the 1930s. Father Phelan, who was trained at Louvain, encouraged Gilson to respond strongly to those taking issue with his third edition of *Le thomisme*. Gilson’s response took the form of two collections of articles: *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists*, trans. Philip Trower (San Francisco, 2011) and *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*. Gilson never altered his position in all of the subsequent editions of *Le thomisme*. See Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, 170–171, 187–188, 196–197. The attempt to combine “Kant’s critical philosophy with the transcendental realism and theism of Aquinas [...] known as ‘Trancendentalism Thomism,’ though widespread in its influence among theologians, was never taken very seriously by philosophers” (John J. Haldane, “Thomism,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig [New York, 1998], 384).

sation and then, by a principle of causality, posits the external reality of the objects of sensation.<sup>83</sup>

Gilson, however, argued that as soon as contact with the world, with really existing things, is severed, and one starts philosophizing from thought alone, one can never reunite with the world, despite the best of realist intentions. One can never cross the epistemological bridge from cognitional to real existence. Instead, Gilson defended a “methodological realism,” in which sensible objects are given to us in thought as not dependent upon thought. We immediately grasp both the reality (the existence) and the nature of an object. Gilson argued that sensation brings with it an irresistible awareness that what it presents is something really existing outside of the mind. Sensible experience penetrated by the intellect provides us with evident certitude of the reality of the external world.<sup>84</sup>

In the wake of Descartes, modernity mired itself in idealism because it misunderstood the nature of knowing. Modernity cannot approach things in themselves, nor understand how they can be epistemologically prior to thoughts and words. What modernity finds incomprehensible is that the thing signified can be epistemologically prior to a sign, and so it claims that language precedes thought in the development of human knowledge. While it is undeniable that thought is handed down from generation to generation, a thing itself is not changed by our thought about it. Rather, language, as well as hermeneutics, is checked by thought for its correctness, and thought is checked by things.<sup>85</sup> Accusations that Gilson’s realism is “naive” seem to be misplaced, since the doctrine

83 Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 38–44.

84 For “Gilson’s insistence upon the sensory origin and basis of human knowing” as found in the earliest editions of *Thomism*, see Schmitz, *What Has Clio to Do with Athena?*, 8.

85 Joseph Owens, “Aristotle and Aquinas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge, 1993), 56–57; Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 77, 128–129; *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 63–79.

as found in St Thomas and Aristotle is an inquiry into human cognition that is both profound and penetrating. If Joseph Owens is correct (and I think he is), methodological realism remains “valid today for understanding our own contemporary world, as well as for understanding any other world or any other philosophy. [...] [It is] surprisingly up-to-date.”<sup>86</sup>

Gilson’s insistence that in knowing things “we encounter the being of concrete substances whose sensible qualities affect our senses” laid the groundwork for the third component of his synthesis, namely, the metaphysical act of existence, or *esse*, which constitutes the very heart of reality for St Thomas.<sup>87</sup> This conviction is of a piece with Gilson’s Christian philosophy and his methodological realism. For Gilson, history shows that working as a theologian, with the name of God as “I AM WHO AM” from the book of Exodus, allowed St Thomas to fashion a metaphysics in which God’s act of pure existence is his essence, from which all that exists receives its

86 Owens, “Aristotle and Aquinas,” 57. While mindful of the ups and downs of Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy in history, Owens acknowledged the need for further work on St Thomas’s theory of knowledge: “The basic epistemological question, namely how things external to cognition can be thoroughly identical with the knower in the actuality of cognition, still calls for careful study” (Joseph Owens, “Neo-Thomism and Christian Philosophy,” in *Thomistic Papers VI*, ed. John F.X. Knasas [Houston, 1994], 50). In a similar vein, Gilson contended that further work would be needed in Thomistic metaphysics, which in the future will depend on the existence or absence of theologians with training in the hard sciences. St Thomas’s metaphysics could no longer take its starting point from the Aristotelian or Thomistic world and had to start from current understandings of physics. See Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 232; Stanley L. Jaki, “Gilson and Science,” in *Saints, Sovereigns, and Scholars: Studies in Honor of Frederic D. Wilhelmsen*, ed. R.A. Herrera, James J. Lehrberger, and M.E. Bradford (New York, 1993), 42–43.

87 Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 205–206. See Desmond J. FitzGerald, “Etienne Gilson: From Historian to Philosopher,” in *Thomistic Papers II*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy and Jack C. Maler (Houston, 1986), 29–58.

sustenance.<sup>88</sup> It also enabled him to develop an epistemology in which, by knowing that which exists, we come to know that which is the effect of Him who simply is existence *per se*. Because they maintain the existence and autonomy of a natural order, Gilson regarded St Thomas's metaphysics of creation and epistemological realism as

- 88 Some recent participants in the old, yet ongoing debate on Christian philosophy charge Gilson with blurring the line between philosophy and theology, and thus undermining the very cornerstone of Thomas Aquinas's intellectual project. They interpret Gilson as suggesting that Aquinas's supposedly philosophical insights were really drawn from Biblical revelation and were thus based on faith, making it impossible for Thomistic philosophy to address itself to non-Christians and pushing it into something akin to fideism. See, for example, Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC, 2006), ix. "One can raise the question of whether a kind of fideistic methodology has entered into Gilson's later thinking, since he seems to make the natural, philosophical specification of the human intelligence directly dependent upon the objects we know by the light of faith" (Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* [Washington, DC, 2009], 131; see 129–132). Gilson admitted that Aquinas's philosophical insights could be reached by reason alone, but he denied that historically this was the case. Nor did Gilson think faith and reason are opposed in principle, or that reason achieving a philosophical insight within the mind being illuminated by faith entails a compromise of reason's integrity. See D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Cambridge, 2013), 290–292, 299–302. Gilson commented on this accusation: "Le phénomène le plus extraordinaire que je connaisse en ce sens est *Doctor Communis* [an Italian philosophical review]. [...] Quand je leur cite du saint Thomas sur la foi, ils m'accusent de fidéisme. Non! Mais de 'pencher dangereusement vers le fidéisme'" (Henri de Lubac and Etienne Gilson, *Lettres de M. Étienne Gilson adressées au P. Henri de Lubac* [Paris, 1986], 54). Gilson also underscored an aspect of the current paradoxical situation: "[T]he proofs for the existence of God that St Thomas wanted to be simple and elementary have become "a 'mystery' for our time." Disagreement exists even among Thomists as to their meaning and value, and anyone today following Saint Thomas's position that very few can understand the proofs for the existence of God "is suspected of fideism or semi-fideism" (Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence K. Shook and Armand Maurer, EGS 24 [Toronto, 2002], 75).



making ultimate philosophical sense. Such an order allows for natural capacities in creatures that are more philosophically respectable than divine assistance, which escapes reason's grasp. And since the act of existence is the deepest layer of reality as well as the supreme attribute of the divinity, in its light we can continue to hold as true whatever is true in other philosophies, without exception, and to learn truths about God, nature, and man, which we can hold in no other way.<sup>89</sup> Gilson considered Aquinas's existential metaphysics the most profound and deepest interpretation of the notion of being that any philosophy has ever proposed.

Any one of the three components of Gilson's original synthesis – (1) a philosophical realism and (2) an existential metaphysics of being (*esse*) as (3) embedded in the bosom of Christian theology – would have sufficed to make Gilson a pre-eminent figure in twentieth-century thought.<sup>90</sup> Placing Gilson's philosophical achievement within the larger context of establishing a world-renowned interdisciplinary institute and successfully providing medieval philosophy with a scientific and institutional status unquestionably justifies his designation as an unparalleled giant in the field of medieval studies,

89 Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, 138–141; *The Philosopher and Theology*, 234. Despite the centrality of the notion of existence in Aquinas, many of his celebrated commentators missed its importance in his thought, as did Gilson himself for many decades. Gilson hesitatingly developed his interpretation of St Thomas's notion of being in his lectures on *God and Philosophy*, presented it in the fifth edition of *Thomism*, and brilliantly expanded it in *Being and Some Philosophers*.

90 "Gilson, historien, occupe une place importante dans l'histoire de la philosophie, puisque ceux qui font cette histoire ne peuvent ignorer ses recherches et ses interprétations. Gilson, philosophe, mérite un chapitre dans celle de la pensée contemporaine, si les modes du jour ne sont pas un principe de sélection" (Henri Gouhier, "Discours de réception à l'Académie française, séance du jeudi 22 novembre 1979," *La documentation catholique* 77 [20 April 1980]: 372). "La fécondité de l'oeuvre de Gilson, en dépit de travaux récents qui en ont fait vieillir certaines thèses, demeure intacts en ce que les questions philosophiques essentielles qu'il a posées restent les nôtres" (Vincent Carraud, *L'invention du moi* [Paris, 2010], 2).

a first-rate historian of philosophy, and an exceptional thinker whose wide range of original work constitutes an enduring contribution to philosophy.<sup>91</sup>

91 Gilson has been characterized as one of three “great philosophers” of the twentieth century – the other two being Jacques Maritain and Henri Bergson (according to Adler as reported to Gary Dunn; see Peter Redpath, “A Tribute to Mortimer J. Adler,” <https://greatbooksblog.wordpress.com/2010/01/02/a-tribute-to-mortimer-j-adler-by-peter-redpath/>, accessed 4 January 2018) – “the most striking single figure in Catholic thought in the last century” (Wilhelmson, “Foreword,” in *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 7), “possibly the greatest Christian philosopher since Thomas Aquinas” (Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Religion: A Primer* [Pinckney, MI, 2004], 27), and as a historian/philosopher whose work “received a wider recognition in non-Catholic academic circles than the work of any other 20th-century Catholic intellectual” (Jaki, “Introduction,” in Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 11).

## **PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE OF MEDIAEVAL STUDIES**

The most formidable and venerable of our institutions have their source in an idea, often fragile but possessed of a single visionary gleam. Founded in 1929, the Institute of Mediaeval Studies was the work of Etienne Gilson from the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, of Henry Carr, CSB and Edmund J. McCorkell, CSB from St Michael's College, and of Gerald B. Phelan, a graduate of the University of Louvain. Their vision was philosophical and philological: an institution devoted to the foundations of western culture could only be founded on a profound care for its primary sources, material and textual. Over the years, these forces would animate the creation of its academic programmes, which proved as rigorous in discipline as they were imaginative in their interdisciplinarity, a library equal in authority and range, and, in time, an independent scholarly press. This tripartite structure would come to lay the groundwork for the study of the Middle Ages in North America, and the Institute, honored with pontifical status in 1939, would become a model for centres in medieval studies worldwide. In its ninth decade, the Institute continues to flourish. Its programme of postdoctoral fellowships and its Diploma in Manuscript Studies, which receive support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation of New York, have proven critical to the training of young scholars; the library's extensive collections in paleography and diplomatics, liturgy and law, philosophy and theology have served students and scholars around the globe; and its vigorous publishing programme, rich in critical texts and studies, has grown to encompass innovative scholarship across several fields.

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Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies  
59 Queen's Park Crescent East  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2C4, Canada

[www.pims.ca](http://www.pims.ca)



Etienne Gilson  
lecturing in  
Brennan Hall, 1972.  
Photograph:  
Viktor Kolář