

Quid Sit Postmodernismus?

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Early in his career Maritain wrote a book whose title haunted him through the remainder of that career: *Antimoderne*.¹ This was actually quite an interesting book, but the rhetoric of its title proved more than sufficient to defeat its message. More than half a century later, Brooke Williams posed the question in terms of *Jacques Maritain: Antimodern or Ultramodern?*, demonstrating that Maritain himself considered himself, in his own terms, the latter rather than the former.² But what does all this mean?

Contemporary philosophy considers itself not modern but postmodern, at least in what concerns the essential questions of ontology and epistemology, which is to say, in what concerns philosophy itself as transcending "fads and fashions," in what concerns whatever is perennial. What I would like to explore in this paper is the extent to which Maritain's "antimodernity" and "ultramodernity" meet the requirements of postmodernism in philosophy, and how postmodernism might be seen to relate to the Latin sources on which Maritain consistently drew.

I. WHICH LATIN SOURCES?

We face a problem concerning the sources right at the outset, and it is one on which each of us must make up our minds. When it comes to the understanding of St. Thomas Aquinas, is it to be allowed that there are even to be such a thing as sources other than the writings of Thomas himself? And if it is a question of philosophy in the writings of Aquinas, how serious are we to take St. Thomas' own injunction that authority is the weakest form of philosophical argument?

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Revue des Jeunes, 1922).

² Brooke Williams, *Jacques Maritain: Antimodern or Ultramodern?* (New York: Elsevier, 1976).

1.1. AQUINAS' TEXTS AS BOUNDARY: THE GILSONIAN MODEL FOR AN AUTHENTIC THOMISM

The first of the two questions just posed is so extreme as to call into question the very possibility of a doctrinal tradition stemming from St. Thomas. You all recall the saying of Leibniz which serves as the best summary or maxim for the spirit of classical modern philosophy: "Monads have no windows." Monad was Leibniz's term for what Aristotle called rather substance. Each monad, of course, is alive (there are no inorganic monads); but the germane point is that each monad is enclosed in its own universe of representations and has no way beyond them.

My attention was first directed to this quintessentially Cartesian and solipsistic approach to St. Thomas by none other than Étienne Gilson himself, through a correspondence of some dozen or so letters we exchanged between 1968 and his death in 1978. Gilson himself, of course, did not call his approach Cartesian or Leibnizian, and would probably have been repelled by the suggestion. Yet his blindness on this point reveals him to be more modern than he realized, a point that will be germane to the upshot of our discussion.

To be fair to Gilson on this point, I would have to say that he adopted his approach not so much as a philosopher, but as an historian, and indeed one need not have personally met the two men, as I was fortunate enough to have done, in order to realize from reading them that in Maritain and Gilson we confront not only two great minds, but also two temperaments showing a constant bent or preference, the one for doctrine and philosophical development as such, the other for concrete textual expressions and circumstantially unique boundaries that enable us to place an idea not only in time but in culture as realized in the individual author of a given text. There is no question but that both men had philosophical minds of an exceptional caliber; but there is also no doubt that, within that philosophical bent, caution of historical scholarship characterized Gilson as typically as speculative daring characterized Maritain.

What safer route can there be to the thinking of a dead author than his very own words? This was the point that most struck Gilson. The nineteenth century revival of the study of St. Thomas Aquinas by Leo XIII translated into a concern in Gilson's mind to demonstrate the thought of Thomas Aquinas by using his actual vocabulary as a criterion of purity. Such practice would exclude from consideration work of later Latins who departed from that vocabulary, never mind that such departure would be perforce, inasmuch as there could be no way to apply philosophical principles to new questions (and new emphases on old questions) generated within their own social and cultural contexts *except* by sometimes an evolution and sometimes a creation of new vocabulary. In our

correspondence, Gilson put it this way (letter of 10 July 1974): "I myself, who have lived in the familiarity of St. Thomas Aquinas, have not continued reading [John of St. Thomas] when I realized that he was not using the same language as that of our common master."

If our sole or even dominant concern is historical purity so far as that can be attained, it is hard to fault this approach. But if this attitude of linguistic limitation is adopted rather as a philosophical principle of interpretive methodology in its own right, we are on the road to a hermeneutic *cul de sac*, or perhaps I should say a hermetic hermeneutic. The Thomists of Gilson's school—and Maritain's own language of an "intuition of being," though I think it can be defended, is not without fault on this point—have applied to the matter of interpreting Aquinas a method in effect Cartesian: there is but a single optic, discovered only in our day, which allows for a correct reading of the Aquinian corpus. Viewed through this optic, each of the commentators of the period of Classical Thomism³—Capreolus (c.1380-1444), Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1468-1534), Ferrariensis (c.1474-1528), Francisco Vitoria (1492/3-1546), Dominic Soto (1494-1560), Melchior Cano (1509-1560), Domingo Bañez (1528-1604), and John Poinset (1589-1644)—appears (or is claimed to appear) to be an unreliable interpreter, either because the commentator fails to stress to the modern reader's satisfaction the centrality of *esse* as became the fashion of the Thomistic revival (limited exception on this point is made for Bañez), or because, as has been said, the commentator, in dealing with problems beyond the purview of Aquinas' focal concerns in any given text, perforce introduces terminology not to be found in the master and therefore suspect.

In a letter of 28 August 1968, Gilson wrote to me in this regard that "A thomist' of whatever brand should find it superfluous to develop a question which Thomas was content to pass over with a few words," because

it is very difficult to develop such a question with any certitude of doing so along the very line he himself would have followed, had he developed it. If we develop it in the wrong way, we engage his doctrine in some no thoroughfare [dead-end], instead of keeping it on the threshold his own thought has refused to cross, and which, to him, was still an assured truth.⁴

³ I have explained the designation "Classical Thomism" in an article titled "Metaphysics, Modern Thought, and 'Thomism'" written for *Notes et Documents* (Rome), which, unfortunately, was published from uncorrected proofs, but provides nonetheless a sound outline of what is at issue.

⁴ In 1940, Mortimer J. Adler published a volume he proposed to be the first in a series of "Problems for Thomists," namely, *The Problem of Species* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940). He followed this book with an article, "Solution of the Problem of Species," *The Thomist* 3 (April), 279-379, in turn followed by two further discussions, "The Hierarchy of Essences," *The Review of Metaphysics* VI (September), 3-30 and "The Philosophers Give All the Answers

Gerald McCool, in writing his study *From Unity to Pluralism. The Internal Evolution of Thomism*,⁵ had no access, as far as I know, to this correspondence. He did not have to. The attitude in question permeates the writings of the Gilsonian school. The fine line between a historical principle of methodological

and Establish None," in *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (New York: Holt, 1967), Chap. 4. In all of this, Maritain was an intimate participant, both through his "Foreword" to the original publication, his defense of the work against hostile reviewers titled "Solution of the Problem of Species," *The Thomist* 3 (April), 279-379, and through correspondence with Adler on the question of species which I was able to read during my tenure (1969-1974) as a Senior Research Fellow at Adler's Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago. Through my own study under Raymond J. Nogar, author of *The Wisdom of Evolution* (Garden City: New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963) and later work with him—John Deely and Raymond Nogar, *The Problem of Evolution* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1973)—I had myself become interested in the question of species in the context of Aristotelian and Thomistic natural philosophy, and had occasion to address the problem at length in a work which had the full benefit of Maritain's and Adler's earlier reflections on the problem, "The Philosophical Dimensions of the Origin of Species," *The Thomist* 33 (January and April 1969), Part I, 75-149, Part II, 251-342.

In a series of letters—beginning with mine of October 21, 1969, sending my article to Gilson, followed by his two-page reply of November 3, my seven-page sequel of November 7, and five more pages from Gilson dated November 14—Gilson and I discussed various aspects of the problematic. In his last letter of the series, toward the end, Gilson returned to what seems always to have been his central point (*italics added*): What is to you the main issue of your paper is one on which I have no definite opinion at all. *I mean: I do not know what St. Thomas would say were he living in our times.*"

Later Gilson, in a series of three lectures delivered at Toronto (1972), put his own hand to the question which, for him, Shook, in his biography, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 387, tells us "turned out to be particularly intractable." Indeed it is, but, given his manner of reliance on the medieval text, the intractability would have to prove terminal. And so it did. He wrote to Armand Maurer, in a letter dated August 20, 1971 (cited in Shook, *ibid.*): "I have suffered 'aches and pains' reading and rereading Adler and Deely on the subject. . . . What they say is irrelevant to the authentic thought of St. Thomas."

When I first read these lines the year the Shook biography appeared, I still had not grasped the "Aquinas' texts as boundary" concept under which Gilson constantly labored in philosophy, and remember feeling both somewhat hurt and glad that I had not turned over to Shook my full correspondence with Gilson, since already my experience with the "Gilsonians" as such had led me to distrust their attitude toward the work of Poinsoot ("John of St. Thomas"), and the context for refuting their prejudices, which I intended to create through the publication of the *Tractatus de Signis* and related works, did not yet exist.

Now that I better understand the genius and the methodological limits of Gilson's approach, his dismissal of Adler's and my work in the area, which was as much a dismissal of Maritain himself, appears in its proper perspective and can be regretted without any need for disappointment. It is simply a fact that, for Gilson, there could be no "problems for Thomists" in the sense Adler proposed and Maritain pursued.

⁵ Gerald McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism. The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992).

purity and a philosophical principle of textual interpretation McCool crosses roughshod in his analysis of "The End of the Neo-Thomistic Movement:"

St. Thomas' great contribution is his metaphysics of the act of existence which no other scholastic, including the great Thomistic commentators, really understood.

Therefore Cajetan, Bañez, and John of St. Thomas had all lost their grip on St. Thomas' own philosophy. . . . the authentic philosophy and theology of the Angelic Doctor has not been transmitted to modern Thomists in the systematic philosophy and theology of his great commentators, and it could never be found there. *Although Gilson never said so explicitly, according to his criteria, the Thomism of The Degrees of Knowledge is not authentic Thomism. The true philosophy and theology of the Angelic Doctor can be found only by the individual historian and the philosopher who bypasses the commentators and approaches St. Thomas directly in the texts of his own theological works. Therefore there is no such thing as a Thomist movement. There is no such thing as the authentic transmission of St. Thomas' thought through a 'doctrinal tradition.'* . . . *The only true Thomists are the individual philosophers who discover him for themselves in the original sources of this thought and then become his disciples. The Thomists can have only one master, St. Thomas himself, and, as philosophers, they have yet to find a better one. . . .*⁶

If I needed an interpretant to assure me of what seemed to me years ago the dubious implication of Gilson's letters, McCool has provided it. I doubt that McCool has thought through the implications of his assessment, for it means that, as far as there is a question of understanding St. Thomas, reading McCool is perforce as much a waste of time as reading Cajetan or Maritain or, for that matter, Gilson. There can be no teachers in the world of authentic Thomism, only the individual philosopher, bypassing all commentators, who approaches the texts of St. Thomas directly. Never mind that there are also other individuals who have undertaken the task of mastering these texts. They must be disregarded completely—and so, for consistency, must the individual interpreter himself by all other would-be interpreters. A community of inquirers is ruled out from the start and in principle. That there has been a historical handful before us who had developed an intimate acquaintance with the complete range of Aquinas' writings and made this acquaintance a common reference point, along with reason itself, in the evaluation of theoretical issues in philosophy is to count for nothing. In the universe of authentic Thomism so conceived, there is only the text of Aquinas and the individual reading that text for himself or herself, that is

⁶ Gerald McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism*, 226-7, italics added.

⁷ "Why don't we quietly enjoy truth as we see it in the light of the authentic texts of Thomas Aquinas? I detest controversy," is how Gilson put it to me in a letter of 14 January 1973.

all. Every man his own Thomist, so to speak. A monad without windows; that is to say, a quintessentially modern interpreter.⁷

Of course this model becomes, at a certain point, preposterous. But no less so than was the original modern presumption of Descartes to shrive his mind of all influence from society and history an illusion (a transcendental one at that, inasmuch as it contained within itself the clues of previous—by definition historical—influences, as Gilson was to demonstrate in his doctoral work published in 1913). When we speak of postmodernism, we are confronting here the *type* of presupposition that is being abandoned.

Moreover, in dealing with the literature of the Gilsonian school, we will find this over and over again: methodological principles, faultless in themselves *ad hoc*, elevated to the status of hermeneutic principles. Let me mention the main one. McCool mentions “the Thomistic philosophy which had come into being in the seventeenth-century” (where did he do his 14th, 15th and 16th century history?), practitioners of which “had extracted their ‘theses’ from *both* St. Thomas’ theological works *and* his commentaries on Aristotle.” By contrast, Gilson restricted “the historical sources of St. Thomas’ philosophy to the Angelic Doctor’s theological works” and “to the descending theological order in its exposition,” and “he held firmly to both practices in his exposition of medieval Christian philosophy.”⁸

Again, Gilson’s practice is methodologically faultless *ad hoc*. But as an exceptionless hermeneutic principle it is equally indefensible. For in fact the so-called “schools” in question hardly came into being in the 17th century. In the case of Maritain’s sources, the 17th century commentator in question was the successor at Alcalá to Dominic Soto after a hundred years, and Soto himself as a graduate student had come to Alcalá fresh from the University of Paris where Thomas himself had been professor less than three centuries earlier. The history of the early generations of “authentic Thomists”—no monads they—is much more tangled than the Gilsonians would give us to understand, for reasons I cannot discuss here but go over in the forthcoming book, *New Beginnings*. If the commentators of the period of classical Thomism drew *both on* the theological works of St. Thomas *and* on his commentaries on Aristotle, it was hardly because of their “error” in equating “the philosophy of St. Thomas with the philosophy of Aristotle,” as McCool reiterates,⁹ but rather because, being men of the period, they fully understood that philosophy, even “Christian philosophy” (a complex term concerning which Maritain came to have his

⁸ Gerald McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism. The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (n. 5 above), 170.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

reservations, as Korn points out),¹⁰ could not be "identified with the speculative element contained within medieval theology itself."¹¹

Being men of the period, themselves involved in the enterprise, Thomas's Latin commentators better understood than McCool or Gilson the literary genres proper to the expression of the thought of the times. And if they drew on the commentaries of Aquinas on Aristotle in interpreting the thought of Aquinas as well as on the theological writings, it was because they knew full well that the commentaries explained Aristotle no less *ad mentem commentatoris* than *ad literam textus commentati*. No doubt the thought of Aquinas is purest in his theological writings. But that does not mean that a purity of thought proper to him is absent in his commentaries on Aristotle; it is only more subtly expressed at worst. Being near contemporaries, it was not as difficult for the early Thomistic authors to differentiate expressions proper to the two genres as it is for us today after centuries of desuetude have separated us from all the Latin sources in question. As a methodological tool for gaining a first approximation of the thought proper to Aquinas in his own right, the approach of Gilson is faultless. As a principle of philosophical hermeneutics ruling out the text of the commentaries once and for all in the understanding of Aquinas' thought, the approach is indefensible.

1.2. AQUINAS' TEXTS AS CENTRE: THE MARITAINIAN MODEL FOR AN AUTHENTIC THOMISM

Maritain, it is true, relied from the first on an author anathema to the *ad hoc* hermeneutic principles of Gilson. He told us so himself, both early¹² and late.¹³ McCool constantly refers to "the Thomism of Cajetan and John of St. Thomas on which Maritain depended," as though the two were on equal footing in the

¹⁰ "Pour parler de la philosophie considérée en son état existentiel qui est celui de la raison en régime chrétien, Jacques Maritain a souvent employé le terme de 'philosophie chrétienne.' Si aujourd'hui il propose de la désigner par un autre mot, c'est d'abord parce que le nom de philosophie chrétienne évoque trop l'idée d'une philosophie non pas libre, mais liée par on ne sait quelles convenances d'ordre confessionnelle. Il y a cependant une raison plus profonde pour changer le vocabulaire sur ce point. C'est que le terme de 'philosophie chrétienne' risque de masquer aux yeux de notre esprit que nous avons affaire ici, non plus à la philosophie prise comme simplement telle, mais à la philosophie parvenue à sa pleine maturité, à la *philosophie comme plénièrement telle*. Dans le fond, ce qui est en jeu ici est bien plus qu'un changement de vocabulaire." (Ernst R. Korn, the pen name of Heinz R. Schmitz, one of Maritain's three literary executors, in his "Préface" to Maritain's 1973 work, *Approches sans Entraves*).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹² Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Revue des Jeunes, 1922).

¹³ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne; an Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 149.

thought of Maritain. But they were not. Cajetan Maritain knew and respected; but Poinsoot was the principal source of his epistemology, and for a very good reason.

If we look to St. Thomas for the theory of knowledge, we do not find a finished, in the sense of integrated, theory, although we find indeed all the basics: an irreducible variety of nature, power, act, and product, all essential to the understanding of the subjectivity of the knower in its possibility as a finite knower. But how these pieces fit together is not settled in Aquinas, and it is useless to pretend otherwise. In the texts of Aquinas himself there are loose ends that need to be tied up, and this is no less true whether we approach his texts with the help of others familiar with its turnings or "on our own" *à la* the monads of authentic Gilsonian Thomism reduced to its extreme in McCool's book.

In this context it is ironic to find one of Gilson's principal disciples, in a work sponsored by Gilson himself, criticizing Occam on the ground that he has "no signs or likenesses whose whole function is to lead to a knowledge of something else, and which are not themselves direct objects of knowledge."¹⁴ The irony is heightened by Gilson's own identification of Occam's notion of concepts as "natural signs" as "the only difficulty there is in understanding Ockham,"¹⁵ a difficulty compounded by the almost exceptionless use of these notions under the designation "formal sign" by the contemporary Thomists determined, alongside Gilson and Maritain, to vanquish idealism from the philosophical arena (e.g., Simon, Wild, Veatch, Adler).

For neither are signs in the requisite sense found unequivocally in the work of Aquinas himself. Only one thinker in the long history of these questions actually undertook to systematize the multi-faceted writings of Aquinas himself on this particular point and reduce them to a thematic unity, and he did so not *in vacuo*, but precisely as a respectful student of those before him who had studied Aquinas as well as of the texts of Aquinas himself, and also as a rational animal confronted with data of experience in the light of which the texts of anyone, Aquinas included, need above all to be evaluated if it is to be a question of philosophy.

That thinker was John Poinsoot, a man of Portuguese education and birth principally introduced to Aquinas as a graduate student at Louvain by a Spanish Dominican, and thereafter devoted to the exposition and rationalization of

¹⁴ Armand Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1962), 285, being Volume II of a projected 4-volume *History of Philosophy* under the general editorship of Étienne Gilson.

¹⁵ Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), 491.

Thomistic thought for the remainder of his life. To this thinker Jacques Maritain turned principally for illumination in reading the texts of Aquinas on the subject of knowledge and epistemology generally. And what illumination he found!

Many and devoted as the students of Maritain are, there are few who have viewed his work in the light principally of his Latin sources. Those few who have done that have uniformly recognized, whether with chagrin or interest, that Maritain's epistemological theorizing follows step-by-step in the footsteps of John Poinset as an interpreter of Aquinas on the subject of knowledge, in particular as regards the necessary product of the activity of finite knowing in order to achieve correlation with an object as terminus of that activity, namely, the production of a concept in the most generic sense as including, over and above the level of bare sensation prescissively considered as such, *phantasiari* and *intelligere*, or, as we would be inclined today to say, perception, imagination, and understanding.

One of the earliest theoretical confrontations between Gilson and Maritain came precisely in this area of knowledge and its relation to objects. In this debate neither of the two ever really gave ground. Maritain summarized his own point of view in the section of *The Degrees of Knowledge* titled "Critical Realism."¹⁶ This summary was preceded in that work by a most remarkable statement,¹⁷ wherein Maritain qualified his commitment to a philosophy "ordered to a knowledge of things" by dismissing the "unreasonable prejudices" which led those under their sway to proceed "as if a philosophy of being could not also be a philosophy of mind" ("comme si une philosophie de l'être ne pouvait être aussi une philosophie de l'esprit"). Later¹⁸ he would say further that "looking at things" is "not as simple as might appear" ("ce qui n'est pas si commode que ça"); but this was because his model for an authentic Thomism took seriously not only the texts themselves of Aquinas—all of them, and not just the theological writings—but equally, and, in the end, especially, reason and experience itself as hermeneutic principles in the light of which all texts, including those of Aquinas, must be read and through which alone we are assured of contact with our contemporaries and historical situation vis-à-vis being itself.

Neither historical principles of methodological purity nor hermeneutical principles of textual exegesis separately or combined define the boundaries of Maritain's model for an authentic Thomism as "the only philosophy that claims to face the universality of the extramental real without at the same stroke

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. from the 4th French ed. under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Scribner's), 71 ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 137/203.

¹⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, 66.

pretending to absorb all knowing into itself."¹⁹ How stark does his model contrast with that we have seen McCool derive from Gilson:²⁰

Given a chance to reveal its own nature, Thomistic philosophy exhibits the gait and demeanor characteristic of all philosophy; a demeanor and gait fully at liberty to confront the real. *The philosopher swears fidelity to no person, nor any school—not even, if he is a Thomist, to the letter of St. Thomas and every article of his teaching. He is sorely in need of teachers and of a tradition, but in order for them to teach him to think when he looks at things* (which is not as simple as all that), and not, as is the case with the theologian, so that he can assume the whole of this tradition into his thought. *Once this tradition has instructed him, he is free of it and makes use of it for his own work. In this sense, he is alone in the face of being; for his task is to think over that which is.*

1.3. WHICH MODEL?

We see in the end how different are the models of Thomism implicit in the work of Gilson and explicit in the work of Maritain. The Gilsonian Thomist is alone before the texts of Aquinas. The Maritainian Thomist confronts the texts of Aquinas in the company of all those before him—they are not all that many—who have similarly undertaken to view these texts in their totality, and not simply *to use them* here and there. The Thomist in Maritain's view is from the first a member of a community of inquirers, virtual and open-ended in time; and he is not only a part of that community, he is also an individual thinker with his own experiences and insights to render in the service of truth and humanity. As such, he is alone only before being, the adequate object of understanding considered as such, which it is his responsibility to articulate according to his best lights and interests as these relate to the truth about things. St. Thomas is a first among equals, but still himself a thinker before being.

Perhaps in the end the choice is no more than the choice between a historian's philosopher and a philosopher's philosopher, between taking responsibility for a thought in the past or for the future of thought so far as the future depends on us.²¹ There is room for both, and both are necessary, but for any individual, at least at any given time, one or other must predominate.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 137. Italics added.

²¹ "Your friend Jacques Maritain has left us in possession of a very remarkable book of nearly 600 pages, *Approches sans Entraves*. I regret very much not to have read it in its entirety thirty years ago. It would have made me understand the true nature of his attitude towards Thomas Aquinas, as well as the true nature of what he considered my historicism. . . . There is at least one thing I can say: during my whole life, I have misunderstood his true intention. "If you come to Paris next spring, and if I am still in Paris, please reserve me the

2. WHICH INSIGHTS?

The end of modernity is no tragedy for a Maritainian. Indeed, it is a relief. The coils of modernity oppressed Maritain from the moment he discovered Thomism. A philosophy of being thrives ill in a milieu which conceives of consciousness itself as a closed whole providing its own objects under the provocation of a stimulus unknowable in principle and in itself. All of his energies as a philosopher, practically speaking, Maritain devoted to bringing down the edifice of modern idealism, to demonstrating the illegitimacy of Descartes' patrimony. For him, as for Gilson, it seemed that the best and only way to achieve this was through a vindication of realism, a way he found in the end "not as simple as all that," and for good reason, as Heidegger best pointed out.²²

He had not yet realized, I think, at least not as fully as the overthrow of modernity in philosophy requires, the reality of experience in its own right as the medium through which things are revealed in the first place and finally, only sometimes, known.²³ In this regard, it is necessary to go beyond Maritain, in the

pleasure of a luncheon with you at the Relai de Sèvres. . . I hope you will then have read the book of Jacques and tell me if you have always understood him better than I have. I trust you did, for I did not understand him at all. He was right in reproaching me with sticking to history when it was a question of understanding the true meaning of Thomism. I still cannot think differently; but I quite agree that, till now, the great Thomists have always felt free to interpret it in their own ways. Including Poinsot!" — letter of 4 January 1974.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (7th ed.; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963), trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), paginated to the German in the margins. "As compared with realism, *idealism*, no matter how contrary and untenable it may be in its results, has an advantage in principle, provided that it does not misunderstand itself as 'psychological' idealism. If idealism emphasizes that Being and Reality are only 'in the consciousness', this expresses an understanding of the fact that Being cannot be explained through entities. But as long as idealism fails to clarify what this very understanding of Being means ontologically, or how this understanding is possible, or that it belongs to Dasein's state of Being, the Interpretation of Reality which idealism constructs is an empty one. . . ."

"If what the term 'idealism' says, amounts to the understanding that Being can never be explained by entities but is already that which is 'transcendental' for every entity, then idealism affords the only correct possibility for a philosophical problematic. If so, Aristotle was no less an idealist than Kant." Nor was Aquinas! See Vincent Guagliardo, "Being-as-First-Known in Poinsot," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 68.3 (Summer 1994), 363-393.

²³ John Deely, "Philosophy and Experience," in *ACPQ* LXVI.3 (Summer, 1992), 299-319. But, see also Brooke Williams, *Jacques Maritain: Antimodern or Ultramodern?* (New York: Elsevier, 1976); Brooke Williams, "The Historian as Observer," in *Semiotics 1982*, ed. John Deely and Jonathan Evans (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 13-25; Brooke Williams, "History as A Semiotic Anomaly," in *Semiotics 1983*, ed. Jonathan Evans

direction indicated by his own sources, the epistemological theory of St. Thomas as thematized in the work of John of St. Thomas, John Poinsoot.

2.1. THE MEANING OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is a concept in search of a definition. There is no hurry. Definitions are unavoidable, and tend to take care of themselves over time. One of the defining elements of postmodernism that has already made itself unmistakable, however, is the idea that the work of philosophy must proceed through a study of history in order to achieve its best results, and this aspect of postmodernism is most congenial to the followers of Gilson and Maritain alike, albeit in different ways. It is ironic that while it was Gilson who established the analogy according to which history provides for the philosopher what the laboratory provides for the scientist, namely, the arena in which the consequences of ideas are played out,²⁴ he left it to Maritain to verify the application of this analogy to the understanding of the texts of Aquinas himself through a judicious consultation with the commentators as well.²⁵

and John Deely (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 409-419; Brooke Williams, "Foreword" (Collingwood in Relation to Semiotic) to Russell 1984: vii-xx; Brooke Williams, "What Has History To Do with Semiotic?," *Semiotica* 54.1/2, 267-333; preprinted in revised monograph form with index and historically layered bibliography under the title *History and Semiotic* (Victoria College of the University of Toronto: Toronto Semiotic Circle Number 4, Summer 1985); Brooke Williams, "Challenging Signs at the Crossroads," prefatory essay to Thomas A. Sebeok, *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (Sources in Semiotics IV; uncorrected reprint edition of 1976 original; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), xv-xlii; Brooke Williams, "History in Relation to Semiotic," reprint with modest revisions of 1983 above in Deely, Williams, and Kruse 1986: 217-223; Brooke Williams, "Introducing Semiotic to Historians," paper presented in the first AHA History and Semiotics session, at the One Hundred Second Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, DC, 27-30 December 1987; available on microfilm or in xerographic form as part of the *Proceedings of the American Historical Association, 1987*, reference #10485 (University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI); Brooke Williams, "Historiography as a Current Event," in *Semiotics 1987*, ed. John Deely (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 479-486; Brooke Williams, "Opening Dialogue between the Discipline of History and Semiotics," in *The Semiotic Web: 1987*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok and Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), 821-834; Brooke Williams and William Pencak, Special Issue on History, *Semiotica* 83.3/4, and William Pencak, *History. Signing In* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

²⁴ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

²⁵ "... Brentano, Husserl, and others *ejusdem farinae*, mean nothing to me. I say nothing of Poinsoot because I do not know him well enough. All I can say is that I feel perfectly satisfied with Aristotle and Thomas and I can find no continuous thread that goes from them to

What Maritain did alone and as a pioneer in this regard I think is soon to become a staple of the curriculum in philosophical studies, namely, to view the early modern development—the influence of Descartes and Locke—not teleologically with regard to the mainstream growth of classical modern philosophy but contextually both in retrospect and in prospect: in retrospect with an eye to what of Latin developments modern philosophy obliterated in the area of epistemology especially, and in prospect of our current situation as finally become aware of the ubiquity of signs as the means whereby and medium wherein alone knowledge of whatever sort is acquired, developed, and communicated.

2.2. CYCLOPEAN THOMISM

No one among the Thomists save only Maritain's principal teacher on these points went as far as Maritain in understanding the semiotic nature of knowledge and the consequent priority of relation over substance in the constitution of objects of experience as such. Experience is not of things first of all but of objects which are only partially and not in all aspects things. Hence being as experienced, what Aquinas called *ens ut primum cognitum* or the *ens quod primum in intellectu cadit*, is not first of all real being only but being as objective, that is, as Thomas himself makes quite clear once one has been clued to the problem,²⁶ being as an irreducible admixture of mind-dependent and mind-independent relations constituting at their intersections the objects of everyday life, such as judges and policemen, doctors and teachers, classmates and strangers, etc. It is true that within this experience of an objective world there is a privileged moment when it is realized that not all objects reduce to our experience of them, and that, consequently, objects reveal to us not only themselves and their sign-linkages to other objects, but an act of existence which is exercised on the side of things in themselves in their contrast with objects as reducible to experience. This intuition of being, if we want to use Maritain's expression for it, is of the first importance for metaphysics, and is of a piece with understanding as a mode of consciousness distinctive of the human among

Cajetan and on, till the epistemology of our contemporaries. Nor do I experience any need to connect them in any way. I simply have no philosophical use for what is not plain realism and empirical method of Aristotle. I am not writing in order to convince others, but to achieve a clear awareness of what I think. I am not too successful even in doing that, and I very much admire the friends who, like Jacques Maritain and yourself, are trying to convert the Gentiles; but that kind of work is not for me." — letter from Gilson of 18 April 1973.

²⁶ See Aquinas, *De Veritate* q. 1, art. 1 *corpus*, glossed in John Deely, *The Human Use of Signs* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994) Part IV.

animals. But it is a mistake to see in metaphysics, as the neo-Thomists were wont to do, nothing more than the explication of this notion. For alongside it, and of a piece with it, there is *also* given the notion of a non-being essential to the existence even of things not in their own being but in their being for us as experienced or known in the first place.

Maritain knew this, though it was only late in his life that he began to realize its importance for the contemporary situation and, I would say, what would become its centrality for the emergence of postmodernism. "Once one has become conscious of non-being and of its formidable role in reality," he wrote,²⁷ one begins to see that "the paths of non-being are as difficult as those of being," and require of Thomism that it "open onto the avenues of non-being windows as large as those open onto the avenues of being." In making those remarks, Maritain was developing *ex professo* a seminar on the problem of human freedom and evil in the universe. He criticized his masters in this regard²⁸—naming Bañez, Poinso, and the Carmelites of Salamanca (harking back to the time of *Antimoderne*)—not for being "rigid" but for being "'Cyclopean' Thomists because they had their eyes fixed solely on the perspective of being."

But Maritain himself had been guilty of the Cyclopean approach, along with Gilson and the Gilsonians, to such an extent that he himself had missed an early and probably best opportunity to get beyond the rigid opposition of realism to idealism by transcending the modern problematic from the outset. Maritain prided himself from the first in being *antimoderne*. What too few of his readers realized and what he himself was not always successful in clarifying is that this did not constitute a call for a return to an early perspective already established and finished, say, in the texts of St. Thomas himself, still less in those of the great commentators. The problem was not to go backwards but forwards, to get beyond modernity, and for this outcome the strategy he shared in common with Gilson of vindicating realism was not adequate.

Modernity had mired itself in idealism because it had misunderstood the nature of knowing and of concepts as the means of knowing. Realism cannot address this question directly, because to address it directly requires the adoption of a perspective which is prior to the positions of realism and idealism alike and defines their prior possibility *as* positions that can be adopted in the first place. Being as first known—*ens ut primum cognitum seu quod primum cadit in intellectu*—provides a principle according to which the requirements of

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Dieu et la permission du mal* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963) English trans. by Joseph Evans, *God and the Permission of Evil* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), 32. Three seminars given in Toulouse (May 1962). Page references in the present essay are to the Evans trans.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

experience can be sorted out, but it puts us in touch not only with real being but with real being wrapped up with nonbeing through objectivity and the being of experience as the milieu within which alone objects, including those which are also things, exist as known.

2.3. BEFORE REALISM AND IDEALISM

In his own analysis of the problem of thing and object,²⁹ true to the Cyclopean concern of Thomism to vindicate the mind's capacity to grasp within objects being exercised independently of the knowing, Maritain concentrated on the fundamental Thomistic point that external sense, prescissively distinguished from internal sense and understanding, makes no use of concepts and images but places us in a direct predicamental or categorial relation with the material substances of the environment not, indeed, as substances, but as existing here and now through their action upon the senses. When it came to the concept itself, however, carefully as he studied the texts of St. Thomas and perused the tying up of textual loose ends by John of St. Thomas,³⁰ and though he achieved a profundity of analysis in the area of knowing unmatched by any other among the Thomists of modern times, Maritain yet missed a point in his masters that pointed a way directly beyond the problematic of modernity and established at a stroke a postmodern situation for a philosophy of being and knowledge. This was the point made by Poinot in opening his *Tractatus de Signis*,³¹ the point

²⁹ For example, in Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, 90ff.

³⁰ Aquinas had qualified in passing in a number of contexts but never thematized the point that the classical definition of sign from Augustine is too narrow to cover the function of concepts as *aliquid stans pro alio*, a point that would be taken up fiercely by later Parisian doctors. In commenting on these various contexts spanning the professorial career of Aquinas—c.1254-1256: the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Book IV, dist. 1, q. 1, quaestiuic. 2; c.1256-1259: the *Disputed Questions on Truth*, q. 4. art. 1 ad 7, q. 9. art. 4 ad 4 and ad 5; c.1269-1272: the *Questions at Random*, q. 4, art. 17; c.1266-1273/4: the *Summa theologiae* III, q. 60, art. 4 ad 1—and synthesizing their import, Poinot is able to conclude only that "in sententia S. Thomae probabilius est signum formale esse vere et proprie signum, atque adeo univoce cum instrumentali" (*Tractatus de Signis*, Book II, Question 1, "Utrum sit univoce et bona divisio signi in formale et instrumentale," 225/11-14), nicely illustrating Maritain's observation, in his "Preface" to the translation by Yves R. Simon *et al.*, *The Material Logic of John of St. Thomas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), vi, that "Men like Cajetan and John of St. Thomas set such an example of exacting respect for the genuine thought of Aquinas that their guidance is a most effective protection against the risk of ignoring the historical evolution of problems."

³¹ John Poinot, *Tractatus de Signis. The Semiotic of John Poinot*, ed. John Deely, in consultation with Ralph A. Powell (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), 181/1-14.

most central to the analyses to come and, at the same time, most presuppositioned by the analyses of relation that preceded that treatise: “loquimur hic de relatione secundum esse . . . quia loquimur de signo in communi, prout includit tam signum naturale quam ad placitum, in quo involvitur etiam signum quod est aliquid rationis . . . iuxta doctrinam D. Thomae l. p. q. 28. art. 1. . . . quod solum in his, quae sunt ad aliquid, invenitur aliqua relatio realis et aliqua rationis. . . .”³²

³² “Primo arguitur loco illo D. Thomae satis noto, sed difficili, l. p. q. 28. art. 1., ubi dicit, quod solum in his, quae sunt ad aliquid,veniuntur aliqua secundum rem et aliqua secundum rationem. Quae verba multis difficilia visa sunt. Nam vel loquitur D. Thomas de relatione praedicamentali vel de relatione, prout abstrahit a reali et rationis. Si primo modo, falsum est in relatione praedicamentali inveniri relationes rationis, vel falso diximus ad relationem praedicamentalem requiri, quod sit realis. Si secundo modo, verum est in relatione sic abstracta utramque reperiri, scilicet realem et rationis, sed falsum est hoc solum reperiri in relatione. Nam etiam in substantia potest aliquid fecte concipi, quod dicitur substantia rationis, sicut chimæra, hirrocervus et similia, et in quantitate spatium imaginarium et similia in aliis generibus. Ergo non in sola relatione invenitur aliquid rationis. Et auget difficultatem responsio Caietani ibidem, quod relatio peculiariter hoc habet, quod esse in ratione non est conditio diminuens, sed est vera relatio illa, quae est rationis; constat enim, quod si esset vera relatio, vere faceret referre subiectum et non fecte, atque adeo neque per apprehensionem, sed realiter.

“Haec difficultas occasionem praebuit multis sinistre intelligendi Divum Thomam aut minus bene philosophandi de relatione. <Quidam> enim existimant relationem realem partiri in duos conceptus, scilicet in conceptum accidentis, quem vocant in, et respectum, quem vocant ad; et primum esse realem, secundum rationis vel abstrahere a reali et rationis. <Alii [notably Suarez in his *Disputationes Metaphysicae* disp.47, sect. 3, par. 5]> existimant solum voluisse D. Thomam significare, quod potest aliquid excogitari per rationem ad instar relationis praedicamentalis. <Alii> denique, quod loquitur de relatione, ut abstrahit a reali et rationis.

“Sed <primi> veram realitatem in praedicamento relationis, si id, quod est proprium talis praedicamenti, scilicet respectus et ratio ad, non realizatur. <Secundi>¹⁵ non dicunt aliquid peculiare relationis, ut S. Thomas ponit, quia etiam possunt aliqua entia rationis formari ad similitudinem aliorum generum, v. g. ad instar substantiae et quantitatis etc.

“Quare <tertia> expositio quantum ad unum verissima est, scilicet quod D. Thomas loquitur de relatione in tota sua latitudine, ut abstrahit a reali et rationis. Neque enim dixit S. Doctor, quod in praedicamento Ad aliquidveniuntur aliqua secundum rationem, sed absolute dixit ‘in his, quae sunt ad aliquid’, ut significaret se non loqui de relatione, ut determinate est genus, sed absolute secundum se. Quod deberent aliqui attendere, qui minus sollicitè legunt S. Doctorem. Itaque loquitur Divus Thomas de relatione sub formalissimo conceptu ad et significat, quod ex illa parte, qua consideratur ad terminum, et positive se habet et non est determinate realis forma, sed permittit, quod sit ens reale vel rationis; licet ad praedicamentale et fundatum reale sit. Et ita non voluit D. Thomas significare, quae relatio sit realis vel quae rationis, sed ex qua parte habet relatio, quod possit esse realis vel rationis, scilicet ex parte, qua est ad terminum; licet enim ibi realitatem habere possit, non tamen inde. Quod expressit S. Doctor in 1. ad Annibaldum dist. 26. q. 2. art. 1. dicens, ‘quod relatio potest dupliciter considerari, uno modo quantum ad id, ad quod dicitur, ex quo rationem relationis habet, et quantum ad hoc non habet, quod ponat aliquid, quamvis etiam ex hoc non habeat, quod nihil sit; sunt enim quidam respectus, qui sunt aliquid secundum rem, quidam vero, qui nihil. Alio modo quantum ad id, in quo est, et sic quando habet eam in subiecto, realiter inest’. Sic D. Thomas.

When you come to think of it, this is actually a rather dramatic point. John of St. Thomas is tracing the basic insight of his doctrine of signs as accounting for the origins and structure of experience as irreducible to subjective being, whether physical or psychical, to Aquinas' treatment of the Trinity as a community of persons, through the interpretation of the notoriously difficult text in his *Summa Theologiae* wherein St. Thomas says that the Persons of the Trinity are able to subsist as purely relative beings because of what is unique to relation among all the modes of physical being, namely, that it exists suprasubjectively according to a rationale—the rationale of “being toward”—which is indifferent to the fact of being exercised independently of being cognized or known.

In other words, every physical being which exists either in itself or in another exists subjectively and must, as such, exist whether or not it is known to exist by some finite mind, that is to say, whether or not it exists objectively as well as

“Quomodo autem hoc sit peculiare in relatione et in aliis generibus non inveniatur, dicimus ex eo esse, quia in aliis generibus ratio propria et formalissima eorum non potest positive intelligi, nisi entitative etiam intelligatur, quia positiva eorum ratio est ad se tantum et absoluta, et ideo non intelligitur positive nisi etiam entitative, quod enim est ad se, entitas est. Sola relatio habet esse ens et ad ens, et pro ea parte, qua se habet ad ens, positive se habet, nec tamen inde habet entitatem realem. Sed aliunde relationi provenit realitas, scilicet a fundamento, aliunde positiva ratio ad, scilicet ex termino, ex quo non habet esse ens, sed ad ens, licet illud ad vere reale sit, quando fundatum est. Quod ergo aliquid possit considerari positive, etiamsi non entitative realiter, proprium relationis est. Et hoc solum voluit dicere Caietanus cit. loco, cum dixit relationem rationis esse veram relationem, non veritate entitatis et formae informantis, sed veritate obiectivae et positivae tendentiae ad terminum. Neque Caietanus dixit, quod in relatione praedicamentali ipsum ad est aliquid rationis; expresse enim dicit, quod vere realizatur.

“Quando vero <instatur,> quod etiam alia genera possunt hoc modo dici aliquid rationis, sicut substantia rationis erit chimaera, quantitas rationis spatium imaginarium, et sic de aliis: Respondetur, quod, ut supra dictum est [in] Praeambulo Primo art. 1., non dicitur ens rationis illud, ad cuius instar formatur; formatur enim ens rationis ad instar entis realis, sed dicitur ens rationis illud non reale, quod ad instar realis entis concipitur. Non datur ergo substantia rationis nec quantitas rationis, quia licet aliquid non ens concipiatur ad instar substantiae, v. g. chimaera, et aliquid ad instar quantitatis, v. g. spatium imaginarium, non tamen ipsa substantia vel aliqua substantiae ratio concipitur per rationem et formatur in esse ad instar alterius entis realis. Et ideo illa negatio seu non ens chimaerae, et illud non ens spatii imaginarii dicitur ens rationis. Sed hoc est ens rationis, quod vocatur negatio, non autem erit substantia rationis, cum non ipsa substantia ut ens rationis ad instar alicuius realis concipiatur, sed negationes seu non entia ad instar substantiae et quantitatis. At vero in relativis non solum aliquid non ens concipitur ad instar relationis, sed etiam ipsa relatio ex parte respectus ad, cum non existit in re, concipitur seu formatur ad instar relationis realis, et sic est, quod formatur in esse, et non solum id, ad cuius instar formatur, et ratione huius datur relatio rationis, non substantia rationis” (*Treatise on Signs*, Second Preamble, Article 2, from the “Resolution of Counter-Arguments,” 93/16-96/36).

physically. But relation, in order to be what it is, exists not subjectively but as a suprasubjective nexus or mode, and for this it *makes no difference* whether *the relation* obtains physically as well as objectively or only in the community of knowledge. In either case—whether it exists only as known or physically as well as objectively—it exists in exactly the same way: suprasubjectively. By contrast, substance and accidents exist subjectively only when they are not pure objects of apprehension. Indeed, purely as objects apprehended, they are not subjective existents but relative objects *patterned after* what are not relative, namely, physically existent substances with their accidents, which, Poincot points out, is precisely why there are mind-dependent relations but not mind-dependent substances or mind-dependent accidents other than relations.³³

In other words, as *isolated* in this or that respect, physical being is determinately subjective; but in whatever respect reality enjoys *communion*, in that respect it is determinately *intersubjective* and as such can be maintained in cognition alone, in physical being alone, or in physical being and in cognition alike. Hence in the case of the Trinity, Aquinas argues, a diversity of Persons subsistent as *relations* is consistent with the unity of God as pure existence subsistent in itself, *ipsum esse subsistens*; hence too, “Comme particularité de

³³ Poincot, *Tractatus de Signis*, Second Preamble, Article 2, “Quid requiratur, ut aliqua relatio sit praedicamentalis,” 96/1-36: “When one insists that, as a matter of fact, other kinds of being too can in this way be said to be something mind-dependent—as a mind-dependent substance will be a chimera, a mind-dependent quantity an imaginary space, and so on for the other categories: *The response* is that, as was explained in our First Preamble on mind-dependent being [57/26-30], that on whose pattern a mind-dependent being is formed is not called mind-dependent; for mind-dependent being is formed on the pattern of mind-independent being, but that unreal being which is conceived on the pattern of a mind-independent being is called a mind-dependent being. There is not therefore mind-dependent substance nor mind-dependent quantity, because even though some non-being may be conceived on the pattern of a substance—for example, the chimera—and some on the pattern of quantity—for example, imaginary space—yet neither substance itself nor any rationale of subjectivity is conceived by the understanding and formed in being on the pattern of some *other* mind-independent being. And for this reason that negation or chimerical non-being and that non-being of an imaginary space will be said to be a mind-dependent being. But this [i.e., any unreal object whatever conceived as being a subject or a subjective modification of being] is the mind-dependent being which is called negation, yet it will not be a mind-dependent substance, because substance itself is not conceived as a mind-dependent being patterned after some mind-independent being—rather, negations or non-beings are conceived on the pattern of substance and quantity. But in the case of relatives, indeed, not only is there some non-being conceived on the pattern of relation, but also the very relation conceived on the part of the respect toward, while it does not exist in the mind-independent order, is conceived or formed on the pattern of a mind-independent relation, and so that which is formed in being, and not only that after whose pattern it is formed, is a relation, and by reason of this there are in fact mind-dependent relations, but not mind-dependent substances.”

la doctrine de Jean de Saint-Thomas, il faut noter encore qu'il place le constitutif formel de la deité dans l'intellection actuelle de Dieu par lui-même."³⁴

In the case of the *doctrina signorum*, the application of Aquinas' point about the being proper and unique to relation as a mode of being is much humbler and, philosophically, quite independent of the theological doctrine that the interior life of God consists in a communion of three persons.

By all accounts, Poinso points out, signs are *relative* beings whose whole existence consists in the presentation within awareness of what they themselves are not, *aliquid stans pro alio*. To function in this way the sign in its proper being must consist, precisely and in every case, in a relation uniting a cognitive being to an object known *on the basis of* some sign vehicle. What makes a sign formal or instrumental simply depends on the sign vehicle: if it is a psychological state, an idea or image, the sign is a formal sign; if the sign vehicle is a material object of any sort, a mark, sound or movement, the sign is an instrumental sign. But whether the sign be formal or instrumental (this traditional terminology is not without its problems³⁵) is subordinate to the fact that, as a sign, the being whereby it exists is not the subjective being of its vehicle (psychological or material, as the case may be) but the intersubjective being of a relation irreducibly triadic.³⁶

Many centuries later, Peirce would resume this point under a clearer terminology: every sign, in order to function as a sign, requires an object and an interpretant, and hence consists in a triadic relation. But the point itself, that the *doctrina signorum* has for its subject matter a unified object of investigation in the being of relation as indifferent to provenating from nature or mind, debated intensely among the Latins in the forgotten centuries separating Aquinas from Descartes, is found thematically established in Poinso, and established precisely on the basis of a careful reading, reflection upon, and taking together of the principal texts of Aquinas on the matter of signs and relations.³⁷

³⁴ Santiago Ramirez, "Jean de Saint Thomas," *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* (Paris: Letouzey, 1924) vol. 8, 803-808.

³⁵ See John Deely, "How Does Semiosis Effect Renvoi?," the Thomas A. Sebeck Fellowship Inaugural Lecture delivered October 22, 1993, at the 18th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, forthcoming as a journal article in *The American Journal of Semiotics* and as a monograph publication through the SSA Secretariat.

³⁶ *Tractatus de Signis*, Book I, Question 3, "Utrum sit eadem relatio signi ad signatum et potentiam," 154/28-30: "unica relatione signi attingitur signatum et potentia, et haec est propria et formalis ratio signi."

³⁷ For the first time, a definitive resolution is effected in the *Tractatus de Signis* of Poinso of "the possibility," originally suggested by Augustine, "of resolving . . . the ancient dichotomy between the inferential relations linking natural signs to the things of which they are signs and relations of equivalence linking linguistic terms to the concept(s) on the basis of which some

2.4. THING AND OBJECT

The problem of thing and object takes on a quite different visage once it is realized that the objects of experience in their constitution as objects are networks of sign relations, connecting not only common with proper sensibles and concepts with their objects, but objects with one another in a four-dimensional net or web whose lattice is precisely the relations through the intersection of which objects are constituted as experienced and known.

Let me give you a simple example. If I had come before this audience wearing a high-necked black cape, with my hair dyed black and slicked back, perhaps adding for good measure two long incisors, each of you would think at once of Dracula, a creature who, some think, does not exist. A perceived pattern is what constitutes an object of experience, not an existing thing. Our experience consists in the building up of a structure or network of cognitive and cathectic relations which constitute an objective world. This world partially includes aspects of the physical environment, to be sure, but it includes such elements according to its own plan and without reducing to them. If we consider the environment to be the world of things, then the objective world is constructed according to a quite different plan, and divisions in the one world vary relatively independently of divisions in the other world. Moreover, each world extends beyond the other's boundaries: not all things are known to us, and not all objects known to us are things.

Think of a kind of geodesic sphere the interior of which as well as its surface

thing 'is'—singly or plurally—designated," Umberto Eco, Roberto Lambertini, Costantino Marmo, Andrea Tabarroni, "Latratuſ Canis: or The Dogs' Barking," *Frontiers in Semiotics*, ed. John Deely, Brooke Williams and Felicia Kruse (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 65.

"The conclusion," Poinſot explains (1632: 270/38-271/12), "derives from that distinguished doctrine in Cajetan's *Commentary on the Summa theologica*, I, q. 1, art. 3, that the differences of things *as things* are quite other than the differences of things *as objects* and in the being of an object; and things that differ in kind or more than in kind in the one line, can differ in the other line not at all or not in the same way. And so, seeing that the rationale of a sign pertains to the rationale of the knowable [the line of thing as object], because it substitutes for the object, it will well be the case that in the rationale of object a mind-independent natural sign and a stipulated mind-dependent sign are univocal signs; just as a mind-independent being and a mind-dependent being assume one rationale in their being as object, since indeed they terminate the same power, namely, the power of understanding, and can be attained by the same habit, namely, by Metaphysics, or at least specify two univocally coincident sciences, as for example, Logic and Physics. Therefore in the being of an object specifying, stipulated and natural signs coincide univocally.

"So too a cognitive power is truly and univocally moved and led to a thing signified by means of a stipulated sign and by means of a natural sign."

consists of a series of intersecting lines. Each intersection is an object, each line a relationship. Lines radiate outward from the center to the surface of the sphere, and lines extend also crosswise, intersecting the radii at the center of which each of us stands. The radii lines represent relations between ideas and objects, the intersecting lines represent relations between objects, and the intersections themselves the objects. Thus, the objective world is the sphere of an individual's experiences built up out of relationships, and the internal constitution of this sphere is precisely that of a web the various intersections of whose strands present to us the objects according to the meaning of which we lead our lives. At the center of such a three-dimensional spider's web, by maintaining and elaborating it, we live our lives.

The physical environment impinges upon our bodies, and according to their intrinsic constitution we respond to those impingements. Of most of the impingements we are sublimely oblivious; of a small subset we become aware. All the impingements establish relationships between us and the physical surroundings, but only the impingements of which we have an awareness transform the physical surroundings insofar into objective surroundings.

Take the simple case of the classical "external senses": the eye objectifies only colors, the ear only sounds, the tongue only flavors, the nose only odors, the touch only textures and temperatures. All five have in common that they reveal the surrounding environment only insofar as it here and now acts upon our organs of sense. That is to say, all five have in common that they reveal things of the environment not according to the subjective constitution of those things as such, but according as that subjective constitution is here and now affecting our own subjective constitution as organisms. In other words, all five senses have in common that they reveal things not as they are independently but partially as they are bodies here and now in interaction with our bodies, an "interested intersubjectivity," as we might say. We may regard the cognitive relations whereby each sense aspectually objectifies the body or bodies immediately acting upon it as basic radii in the construction of the geodesic sphere of experience, which guarantee that the sphere will always include objectively elements of the physical surroundings as such, and so will remain at its surface always a virtual intersection or interface between nature and culture, no matter how elaborate the sphere subsequently becomes on the ideal side of its construction.³⁸

However, radii connecting eye with colors, ear with sounds, taste buds

³⁸ This is the point of the difficult analyses of Book III, Questions 1 and 2 of Poinset's *Tractatus de Signis*. See the discussion in Michael Raposa, "Poinset on the Semiotics of Awareness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 68.3, 395-408.

with flavors, nose with odors, and touch with textures and temperatures are far from the whole story of sensation. Along with colors are conveyed shapes, movements and positions, as also along with touch. Hearing too directionalizes and localizes its stimuli, as does smell and, to a much lesser degree, taste. Thus, between the direct objects of the external sense, right from the start, a series of lateral relations are also given, relations which depend on the direct or proper objects, to be sure, but which are given simultaneously with those objects and as giving to those objects an incipient or nascent objective contour and structure: the color is not only a color, but a color with certain contours and a relative position, whether moving or at rest. In other words, the radii relations at this primitive level already present to the sense organs something that the sense organ itself is not, namely, its object, and so are sign relations; but, besides, the proper objects are involved in relations which further convey what they themselves are not, such as shapes, movements, positions, and the like, and so are themselves sign-vehicles right from the start. Already you see the beginning structure of the interior of the sphere take form: radii relations forming objects at the surface of the sphere, and between these objects other relations which further structure the objects themselves and interrelate them. The relations between the objective elements give rise to further objectification: the sound is not only heard, it is heard from behind me and as moving away, etc. Both the radii relations and the relations interconnecting them are, thus, sign relations.

Memory, imagination, and estimation of interest build upon these sensory elements, both by adding new radii and further intersections. Thus the sensory strands of the sphere are further woven into a *perceptual* network of ever more complex objects and objectifications, in which not only here and now physical environmental influences are at work, but objective influences from the past as well, and subjective influences from the needs and interests of the organism, both as arising here and now and entering into the objective world through the same cognitive and affective relational network by which the objective world exists in the first place, and as filtering what from the past is brought to bear on the here and now structure of objectivity.

Thus far the three-dimensional web of experience exists as tied to the biological type of the organism experiencing. Each species lives in its own species-specific objective world or (as von Uexküll termed it) *Umwelt*. This is also true of the human animal: its objective world is a biological *Umwelt* first of all, populated by objects that don't exist in the physical environment as such and objects that, while aspectually manifested indeed physically, exist otherwise in the *Umwelt* than they do in the physical environment as such.

But the human animal becomes aware of what the other animals do not,

namely, the relational strands which constitute the web and structure the objects, and can now begin to play with those strands in their own right, as Maritain singularly observed, especially in his sustained reflections on the sign.³⁹ At that moment, language in the species-specifically human sense is born, only later to be exapted into the communication system we call speech.⁴⁰ At that moment also the strict proportion between biological heritage and objective world is transcended, and the possibility of reconstruction of the Umwelt along radically alternative lines of objectification opens up—such as “the environment as it appears through the eye of a fly.” It is in this way, for example, that legal systems are devised, distributing, say, property, not along biological lines of species territoriality, but according to an abstract plan of objective boundaries imposed upon the physical environment as identified with this or that of its features—for example, the Mississippi River as separating Iowa from Illinois for a certain stretch. The way is also opened to science, in the sense of an investigation into the subjective dimension of physical objects according to their intrinsic constitution. Maritain’s intuition of being belongs to this realization of contrast between objective world and physical environment, wherein the intellect “in its most perfect function,” as Maritain remarks,⁴¹ “seizes upon existence exercised by things.”⁴²

Thus, the sphere of human experience, unlike a purely perceptual objective world, does not remain completely closed unto itself but is able both to be restructured from within and to draw within itself, through the radii of sensations-intellectually-elaborated, increasingly remote and alien parts of

³⁹ Jacques Maritain, “Sign and Symbol,” trans. Mary Morris for the *Journal of the Warburg Institute* (1937-1938), 1-11; “Signe et Symbole,” *Revue Thomiste* XLIV (April 1938), 299-330; “Le Langage et la Theorie du Signe,” Annexe au Chapitre II of *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle* (nouvelle edition revue et augmentee; Paris: Alsatia), 113-124, and “Language and the Theory of Sign,” originally published as Chapter V of the anthology *Language: An Enquiry into Its Meaning and Function* edited by Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper & Bros.), 86-101, is reprinted with the addition of a full technical apparatus explicitly connecting the essay to Maritain’s work on semiotic begun in 1937 and to the text of John Poinso, *Tractatus de Signis* (1632) on which Maritain centrally drew, in John Deely et al., *Frontiers in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 51-62, to which reprint page references are keyed.

⁴⁰ Cf. Thomas Sebeok, “A Origem da Linguagem,” trans. by Fernando Clara for *Semiótica e Linguística Portuguesa e Românica. Homenagem a José Gonçalo Herculano de Carvalho*, ed. Jürgen Schmidt-Radefeldt (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag), 3-9, and “Language: How Primary a Modeling System?,” in *Semiotics 1987*, ed. John Deely (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 15-27.

⁴¹ Jacques Maritain, “On Human Knowledge,” *Thought* XXIV.93 (June), 232.

⁴² Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, English version by Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), 15-19.

the physical universe itself made objects of understanding and indirect experience. Questions can also be raised from within about being in its totality, its ultimate causes and first principles.⁴³

Inasmuch as all our knowledge is tied to sensation and, through sensations, to the physical environment in *its* own being here and now acting upon and containing our bodies as parts of itself, things now appear as those particular and particularly fundamental objects or aspects of objects which do not reduce to our experience of them but have a constitution of their own—a *subjective* constitution, that is—prior to and relatively independent of their objective being. The being of objects as such is thoroughly relational, but the being of objects as things has a physical, subjective constitution which is what it is independently of the experience of it.

One of the particularly penetrating analyses Poinot makes is based upon St. Thomas's division of purely objective being, *ens rationis*, into relations which are patterned after predicamental relations and relations which are patterned after physical individuals ("substances") and subjective characteristics of such individuals ("accidents"), which relations, since, *as* purely objective *relations* they *are not* what their patterns *are*, are called "negations"⁴⁴ The patterns of relations which weave sensory elements into objects and objective structures, thus, can be both physical and objective or only objective, without the difference in the two cases being always or even readily apparent. This relational structure of cognitional being as such explains the prevalence of error in human experience, all right, but also the possibility of truth, since objective relations according to their intrinsic structure can perfectly duplicate or *coincide and correspond with* physical relations, as well as diverge from them in constituting structures of objectivity which have no reality apart from human experience.

The refinements on the notion of causality that the relative constitution of objects requires for intelligibility is one of the greatest achievements of the later Latin Thomistic authors. Although it is impossible to expound it here in a

⁴³ "The fact that the Being-question stands out initially against the horizon of totality despite the fact that we never comprehend the totality in an actual way . . . has been designated by St. Thomas in . . . the 'contraction' of being into the predicaments . . ." John Deely, "Finitude, negativity, and Transcendence: The Problematic of Metaphysical Knowledge" *Philosophy Today* XI.3/4 (Fall, 1967), 185.

⁴⁴ That objective relations which are and are not patterned after physical relations as such exhaustively divide the order of mind-dependent being according to Aquinas is set forth by Poinot in the First Preamble to his *Treatise on Signs*, Article 1, "Quid Sit Ens Rationis in Communi et Quotuplex," notably 53/8-45 and 54/29-55/6; that in particular negations are themselves relations in what they have of actual cognitive existence is further explained in the same place at 56/35-57/17, 57/18-28, and also in the Second Preamble "On Relation," Article 2, esp. 96/1-36.

form sufficiently brief to the available time, I can at least refer you to a schematic historical treatment⁴⁵ of the division of both final and formal cause into intrinsic and extrinsic, and of the latter into ideal (or "exemplary") and objective (or "specificative"), and an extended theoretical treatment of how signs work that addresses the issue of the last and most fundamental of these distinctions—extrinsic formal causality as specificative—in depth.⁴⁶

What I do want to do here is raise in passing the matter of *esse intentionale*, which plays so large a role in the analyses of Maritain and in some of my own earlier work⁴⁷ which relied heavily on Maritain, including the publicly unresolved dispute I had over this issue with Mortimer Adler.⁴⁸ Gilson alerted me in a letter of August 28, 1968, to his suspicion that the "bare fact" that St. Thomas never "made any extensive use of it" (i.e., the notion of *esse intentionale*) suggests "that the modern importance attached to that notion, reinforced by the wish to humor idealist Husserl, betrays the presence of a stream of thought foreign to the genuine doctrine of Thomas Aquinas." That was just a little before I began work on Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis*. Since Maritain had drawn his epistemology especially from Poinso, and since Poinso was also the one on whom Gilson principally pinned responsibility for placing *esse intentionale* at the center of noetic, one would expect to find this notion as a dominant theme in Poinso's presentation of the doctrine of signs and especially of the concept

⁴⁵ John Deely, "Semiotics and Biosemiotics: Are Sign-Science and Life-Science Coextensive?," in *Biosemiotics. The Semiotic Web 1991*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992).

⁴⁶ John Deely, *The Human Use of Signs* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

⁴⁷ John Deely, *The Tradition via Heidegger. An Essay on the Meaning of Being in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

⁴⁸ My own last word on this dispute is in note 43, p. 272, of the "Editor's Introduction: A Morning and Evening Star" to the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 68.3 (Summer, 1994). For the background, see John Deely, Review of Mortimer J. Adler's *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, in *The Thomist* 32 (July 1968), 436-439; "The Immateriality of the Intentional as Such," *The New Scholasticism* XLII.3 (Spring 1968), 293-306; "The Ontological Status of Intentionality," *The New Scholasticism* XLVI (1972), 220-223; "The Two Approaches to Language," *The Thomist* 39.4 (October 1974), 856-907, and "Reference to the Non-Existent," *The Thomist* 39.2 (April 1975), 253-308. Of this last essay Gilson wrote me (18 April 1973): "I have been looking from afar to your 'Reference to the Nonexistent' while I was trying to recover from a bout of sciatica, a disease that little favors metaphysical speculation. Finally I braced myself up and read it with the feeling of fear and admiration I usually experience when I feel dragged by powerful hands out of my natural element, the Thomism of Thomas Aquinas"—but this last, unfortunately, meant only *the theological texts as such* of St. Thomas, a rather limited horizon in the end, for, as Gilson commented in a 1957 letter to Gerald B. Phelan (cited in Laurence Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 338): "We are too far now from Thomas to make people accept him as he was."

as a formal sign. This expectation is not realized. Instead, one finds that, in Poinset's *Tractatus*, relation in the very sense that eluded even Maritain⁴⁹ holds the center stage throughout. *Esse intentionale*, far from being the predominant notion, appears rather as a secondary phenomenon the possibility of which is itself explained rather by the peculiar indifference of relation as such to its subjective provenance or ground than postulated as a fundamental datum in its own right.

The "doctrine that would be common to Aquinas and Poinset," which Gilson believed "one cannot present to readers" through a doctrine of intentional being regarded as primary,⁵⁰ turned out to be instead, as I explained above, the doctrine of relation as a suprasubjective mode indifferent to the subjective ground of its realization. So I have come to think, on quite other grounds, that Gilson's suspicions of the doctrine of *esse intentionale* as regards its fundamentality for Thomistic thought had a good point to deliver. And it is ironic that it should have been Poinset, contemned by Gilson, but Maritain's principal teacher beside St. Thomas himself, who taught me the true substance of what Gilson had only suspected.

2.5. HISTORICAL LINKAGES

In a certain way, I think it is not too much to say that the Latin era, understood in its true dimensions and extending, in what concerns Thomism, from Thomas to John of St. Thomas, concludes on one of the very points with which the postmodern era begins, the centrality of relation to the understanding of experience and knowledge. Charles Peirce stands in this regard in a position analogous to the position occupied by Augustine as last of the Western Fathers and first of the medievals. Peirce, with his doctrine of signs consisting in irreducibly triadic relations as a new foundation and beginning for the philosophical enterprise as a whole, is at once the last of the moderns and first of the postmoderns. For what I see in postmodernism, before all else, is the possibility of a philosophical response to the shortcomings of the modern paradigm, a response which at once remedies those shortcomings and retrieves for philosophy its lost history in the context of—and as supremely relevant to—the postmodern period which all agree we are entering without much

⁴⁹ See John Deely, "Semiotic in the Thought of Jacques Maritain," *Recherches Sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 6.2 (1986), 112-142.

⁵⁰ "I never agreed with Jacques Maritain on that point," Gilson wrote me (10 July 1974), following up on his earlier avowal (18 April 1973) that "I am not even sure there is a 'doctrine' of intentionality in Thomas Aquinas. To him, intentionality is of the essence of intellectual knowledge, and even of knowledge in general."

agreement on how it is to be defined. This lost history is the period from Occam—or even Aquinas, really—to Descartes,⁵¹ when the first florescence of semiotic consciousness occurred in the Iberian peninsula, involving not only Poincaré but such other distinguished Thomistic authors as Soto and Araújo, predecessors to Poincaré's synthesis.⁵² In the approach of these thinkers is found the adumbration of a way to deal with Heidegger's original and abiding central concern with the unity of being prior to its division into categories, as with Peirce's central concern with the nature of semeiosis. In a word, among these Thomistic authors, as neglected today as for the three centuries of modernity (but perhaps not for so much longer⁵³), is found the anticipation of central themes of postmodernity.

No doubt my way of viewing the situation amounts to a retrieve in the Heideggerian sense of the very term "postmodernism." Against the fashionable literary/sophistic attempt to eviscerate rational discourse in philosophy and label the results "postmodern," the argument here is to make sense of the term by juxtaposing it philosophically—not ideologically—to the internal dimensions of the classical modern paradigm, to establish a philosophical sense of the term "postmodernism" defined historically and used to link contemporary requirements of speculative understanding to late Latin themes omitted from the repertoire of analytic tools developed by modernity. Following the example of Maritain, and building on his model of an authentic Thomism, we see thus how the insight into *esse* uniquely achieved in the metaphysics of St. Thomas is only one beginning of the Thomistic story, and far from the whole of it. There are other insights unique to Aquinas not reducible to this one, and not trivial alongside it. There is a community of inquirers familiar with Aquinas' texts from whom there is much to be learned, and the determined attempt to dismiss them heralded most recently in McCool's book is a misguided transformation of useful heuristic historical tools into obstacles on the path of inquiry. That Thomism can be, in Maritain's sense, a *living* philosophy requires that it be concerned with the past not in its unchangeable aspect, but rather with the past in its eminently changeable aspect, namely, our intellectual perception of it, and concerned with how that perception affects present and

⁵¹ See John Deely, "What Happened to Philosophy between Aquinas and Descartes?" *The Thomist* 58.4 (1994), 543-568.

⁵² Mauricio Beuchot, "La doctrina tomista clásica sobre el signo: Domingo de Soto, Francisco de Araújo y Juan de Santo Tomás," *Crítica* XII.36 (México, diciembre 1980), 39-60.

⁵³ See Jorge Gracia, "Hispanic Philosophy: Its Beginning and Golden Age," *The Review of Metaphysics* 46 (March 1993), 475-502; John Deely, *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), and "What Happened to Philosophy between Aquinas and Descartes?" (n. 51 above).

future thought. Such a reshaping of our perception in particular of the modern past and its relations to Latinity as bearing on the future course of contemporary thought should be counted as among the ultimate portents of the work of Jacques Maritain and his model for an authentic Thomism.

CONCLUSION

The title of my presentation was carefully chosen. It is not "Quid est 'Postmodernism'?", a bastardized conflation of Latin indicative and English jargon. It is a purely Latin construction in the subjunctive mood, "Quid sit postmodernismus?," designed to express some wonder as to what might be possible in the wake of modernity: What might postmodernism turn out to be? What are its possibilities?

I think it might become the very era in philosophy Maritain worked the hardest to introduce, an era in which not only St. Thomas but also those who have taken St. Thomas seriously might be given a hearing in their own right and in the name of philosophy. If workers are not wanting—and they need not be many—the postmodern era shows every chance of realizing the velleity expressed by Maritain in his November 1, 1953, letter *Preface* to the translation of Poinset selections by Yves R. Simon:⁵⁴

It is good to be alive at the time when to read John of St. Thomas seems almost as natural as to read Berkeley or Leibniz. Twenty-five years ago we could not even have dreamt of such a victory over age-old prejudices. . . .

Of course it would be a great mistake not to scrutinize eagerly St. Thomas' text itself, and its inexhaustible riches. But it would be no less a mistake to neglect the invaluable contribution made by his great commentators, whom I would prefer to call his continuers. To do so would be to disregard the fact that Thomism is a living philosophy, which will never cease developing in time.

Philosophy lives on dialogue and conversation, and it is a mark of any great philosophy that it can manifest constantly new aspects in a conversation which is pursued through centuries . . . with organic consistency. A philosopher finds reason for melancholy in realizing that the conversation about his own ideas (assuming that he is worthy of it) will begin only when he is dead. . . . To continue the conversation with congenial and clear-sighted companions of the stature of Cajetan, Bañez, and John of St. Thomas is a privilege of the genius of Thomas Aquinas and of his grace-given mission.

The development of St. Thomas' doctrine in the works of the commentators is a fascinating process to which not enough attention has been given. The greater our familiarity with the writings of St. Thomas, the better we realize that

⁵⁴ Yves R. Simon *et al.*, *The Material Logic of John of St. Thomas*, (n. 30 above), v.

... to read St. Thomas well, the help of genius is needed and gratefully welcome. Our John is the latest and the most mature of the geniuses who explained St. Thomas.

"His thought has always been moving on and on; I am sure it still is," Gilson wrote me of Maritain (14 January 1973). Well, that is fitting. For it describes what Maritain thought of Thomism itself, that great conversation in philosophy today—now that we have survived modernity—which has the texts of St. Thomas as a center rather than as a boundary. This is something the historians among us need to better understand, "this fascinating process to which not enough attention has been given," and for which the works of Maritain stand as a sign at the boundary of modernity and postmodernity.