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A Portrait of Gilson¹6 mai 1935. Conversation
Du Bos.

Il admire en Gilson ce simple bon sens qui n'a pas besoin de se simplifier. Ce n'est pas la formule exacte, mais c'est à peu

6 May 1935. Conversation with
Du Bos.²

Du Bos admires Gilson's simple common or good sense which needs no further elaboration. These are not his exact words, but they are

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e-mail: rjfafara@gmail.com • ORCID: no data¹ Mme. Marie-Louise Gouhier suggested the title for this excerpt from Henri Gouhier's (1898–1994) personal journal which she graciously allowed me to publish. An earlier translation of this excerpt was published in: *The Malebranche Moment. Selections from the Letters of Étienne Gilson & Henri Gouhier (1920–1936)*, trans. & ed. Richard J. Fafara (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007), 133–135.² Charles Du Bos (1882–1939) was a writer and French literary critic whom Gilson and Gouhier came to know and admire. They first met in 1930 when they were all in Jacques Maritain's circle of friends. After losing his Catholic faith at Oxford (1900–1901) and subsequent years of agnosticism, Du Bos returned to the Catholic Church in 1927. He worked as a newspaper correspondent and at French publishing firms (1919–1927); lectured at universities in Germany, Italy, and Switzerland (1925–1932); and became the editor of a short-lived review, *Vigile* (1930–1933) to which Gilson contributed two important articles (“La tradition française et la chrétienté” and “Examen de conscience”). Du Bos also taught at the University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College in Indiana (1937–1939). Relying on intellectual and spiritual sympathy rather than on precise analytical judgments, Du Bos' literary criticism focused on understanding the human mystery in a writer, the soul or creative source, which is expressed in a work and, in turn, affects the soul of a reader. See Étienne Gilson, “Charles Du Bos et les Théologiens,” *Cahiers Charles Du Bos* 18 (1974): 3–16; Henri Gouhier, “In Memoriam: Étienne Gilson et Charles Du Bos,” *Cahiers Charles Du Bos* 23 (1979): 61–62; and Wallace Fowlie, *The French Critic 1549–1967*, preface Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 45–47.

près le sens. En effet, ce qui est étonnant chez Gilson, c'est la force par laquelle il gonfle d'intelligence le bon sens. Le bon sens est chez la plupart des gens à qui on l'attribue, une baudruche dégonflée, de l'intelligence anémiée. Ou encore—sous le nom de rude bon sens—on célèbre une espèce de brutalité intellectuelle qui est simple paresse d'esprit.* Chez Gilson le mot *bon* a repris la signification de *droit*. Le bon sens, loin d'être une simpliste des questions, est au contraire ce qui lui permet de montrer spontanément la complexité réel des questions sous leur apparente simplicité.

Je connais peu d'hommes qui aient moins de préjugés. Il y a chez lui une probité qui fonctionne avec la précision d'un déclic devant tout jugement: la réduction au réel est instantanée. Il va immédiatement voir *ce qui est dessous*. Jamais dupe du décor, il commence par aller dans les coulisses.

* Ou beaucoup moins: le culte de Clément Vautel représentant

close. What is astonishing about Gilson is how forcefully he infuses common sense with intelligence. Common sense, for most of those thought to have it, is an indecisiveness of a weakened intellect. In the name of basic common sense, some even celebrate a kind of intellectual viciousness which is just mental laziness.* But with Gilson, the word *good* regained its *rightful* meaning. Good or common sense, far from being an oversimplification of questions, is, on the contrary, what enables him to show spontaneously the real complexity of questions despite their outward simplicity.

I know few people with less prejudices. Gilson's integrity functions with hair-trigger precision prior to all judgment: it instantaneously grasps the real. He will immediately see *what lies below*. Never fooled by the scenery of the stage, he begins by going backstage.

* Or much less: the cult of Clément Vautel representing common sense

du bon sens pour les lecteurs du *Journal*.

Il y a un génie du bon sens.

Une œuvre comme celle de Gilson est parfaitement objective. Il est historien. Il ne parle jamais de lui. Mais, sur le plan objectif, cette sérénité historique est la transposition de la sérénité intérieure sur le plan de la vie. On sent que c'est le même homme qui conduit Bernard au zoo et qui reconstruit la pensée de St. Thomas. Il y a un équilibre souverain qui s'exprime dans chaque démarche de cette âme.

C'est par là qu'il donne l'impression d'âme. Souvent celle est donnée par la fragilité, la maladie même, tout ce qui est diminution de matière ou même diminution de la matière. Il y a là un signe de notre dégénérescence. L'âme est d'abord unité et santé, équilibre et domination. Gilson ne peut pas donner l'impression de l'âme

for the readers of the *Journal* (Gouhier's note).³

There is a genius of common sense.

A work such as Gilson's is perfectly objective. He is a historian. He never speaks about himself. But, objectively, this historical serenity is the transposition of interior serenity in terms of life. We sense that this is the same man who takes Bernard⁴ to the zoo and reconstructs the thought of St. Thomas. There is an absolute equilibrium expressed in every step this soul takes.

That is how he reveals his soul. Frequently, it is conveyed by frailty, even sickness, everything that is physical decline or even diminishment of the physical. Therein lies an indication of our own degeneracy. The soul is, above all, unity and health, equilibrium, and mastery. Gilson cannot convey an impression of the soul to aesthetes, to spiritual snobs who see the soul on-

³ Clément Vautel (1876–1954), a prominent French novelist, historian, dramaturg, and the most popular newspaper columnist between the two world wars (more than 30,000 articles), was known for his wry sense of humor and his right-leaning, xenophobic, and exaggerated antifeminist views. From 1918 to 1940 his popular daily column, "Mon Film," in the *Journal* provided brief commentary on the news.

⁴ The reference is to Gilson's son Bernard (1928–2009).

aux esthètes, aux snobs de la spiritualité qui ne voient l'âme qu'à travers les corps à la Greco. Il est vrai qu'elle est là, mais pas exclusivement là. D'ailleurs ce serait ne rien comprendre à Greco que de prendre ces formes spiritualisées des corps anémiés.

C'est par cette présence de l'âme, santé et équilibre que Gilson est parent de Claudel. Si Claudel était aussi intelligent que Gilson, nous aurions un Goethe catholique.

ly via bodies like those of El Greco.⁵ It is true that the soul is there, but not exclusively. Furthermore, we would understand nothing of El Greco if all we know are his spiritualized forms of anemic bodies.⁶

By this presence of the soul, health, and equilibrium, Gilson has much in common with Claudel.⁷ If Claudel were as intelligent as Gilson, we would have a Catholic Goethe.

⁵ El Greco (1541–1614), a Greek painter of the Spanish Renaissance, combined courtly elegance with religious fervor in his work. Influenced by the dictates of the Counter Reformation in Toledo, Spain, El Greco intentionally elongated or distorted form to emphasize the spiritual quality of a figure or event in order to affect the viewer emotionally and impart a sense of piety. Penitence, as exemplified by the Catholic saints, was one of his common themes.

⁶ Years later, Gouhier echoed and elaborated on Du Bos' views. Gouhier accepted Maine de Biran's observation that "hardly any besides those who are ill know they exist," but while art and thought owe much to a "sickly existence and unhappiness, [Gouhier maintained that] we must not forget what these realms also owe to a well-balanced existence and joyfulness. Health is profound when it is the lucid health of Saint Thomas, the exuberant health of Rubens, the triumphant health of Paul Claudel. Gilson did not go from the history of philosophy to philosophy. He was first and foremost a philosopher because he always knew and loved life in its fullness. His activity has always gone far beyond the vast culture of the specialist. . . . The perfectly healthy man is aware of his existence and philosophy almost necessitates this unity. . . . Physical misery and distress produce or can produce a type of pathetic dematerialization, [but] there is also an equilibrium that intensifies spiritualization." Henri Gouhier, "Étienne Gilson ou la vitalité de l'esprit," *Ecclésia* (May, 1960): 45–47; *Études sur l'histoire des idées en France depuis le XVII^e siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980), 161–162.

⁷ Paul Claudel (1868–1955) a French poet, playwright, essayist, and diplomat was a towering force in French literature. "Claudel and Gilson . . . were both exemplary Catholics who lived in the public eye, and both were active in the French cultural mission. Despite different interests they were both involved with literature. And in their respec-

A Portrait of Gilson

SUMMARY

In the early 1930s, when they were all in Jacques Maritain's circle of friends, Étienne Gilson and his pupil and colleague Henri Gouhier came to know and admire the writer and literary critic Charles Du Bos known for his intellectual and spiritual sympathy for the authors he studied. In 1936, Gouhier took notes on a conversation with Du Bos in which he commented on Gilson's extraordinary common sense, inner serenity, and healthy and balanced soul. The result is a brief, insightful, and original portrait of Gilson.

KEYWORDS

Charles Du Bos, Étienne Gilson, Henri Gouhier.

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tive modes of thought, both were realists." Laurence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 178.