

**Mieczysław Gogacz**

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University  
Warsaw, Poland

## ÉTIENNE GILSON'S INFLUENCE ON PHILOSOPHY IN POLAND

**Spreading É. Gilson's Thought by S. Świeżawski**

*Achievements*

É. Gilson's influence on philosophy in Poland started after the Second World War, precisely in 1948. The influence was caused by professor S. Świeżawski through his attractive teaching of the medieval philosophy and the philosophy of being at the Catholic University of Lublin. He based his lectures devoted to those subjects on É. Gilson's work. He developed and perfected Gilson's interpretations with his own studies of the texts and problems. This was admired by the listeners of the lectures. They perceived the lectures as the presentation of the latest, exact receptions of the medieval philosophy and the philosophy of being. They believed that, receiving professor S. Świeżawski's explanations and, through him, É. Gilson's thought, they stood, as Bernard of Chartres put it, on the shoulders of giants and they got fuller view of the problems of medieval philosophy and the history of the philosophy of being.

Professor S. Świeżawski, after some time, published a confession that "in his university teaching since the very beginning [he has regard-

---

*Editio Prima* (in Polish): Mieczysław Gogacz, "Wpływ É. Gilsona na filozofię w Polsce," *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 29: 1 (1993): 21–30.

ed] Gilson—a medieval and patristic philosophy historian—as his guide.”<sup>1</sup> And he added that, in his teaching on the history of medieval philosophy and the philosophy of being, he would use É. Gilson’s works and develop his achievements.<sup>2</sup>

É. Gilson’s influence on philosophy in Poland is manifested in three conspicuous results:

a) He shaped a fuller and more true picture of the Middle Ages, especially of the history of medieval philosophy. Before the period of the influence of É. Gilson’s thought that picture was fixed in Poland by the works of K. Michalski, A. Birkenmajer and M. Grabmann. Theirs was the picture narrowed down to discovering texts and informing about the texts’ content. It was only É. Gilson who fully showed the philosophical dimension of the medieval texts.

b) É. Gilson showed a new, surprising, and at the same time, different from Aristotle’s metaphysics and convincing version of the philosophy of being read from St. Thomas Aquinas’ texts.

In Poland, like elsewhere, St. Thomas’ metaphysics had been treated as identical with Aristotle’s metaphysics. Also there had been a commonly accepted theory that St. Thomas had made a compilation of all the most significant statements ever pronounced in the history of philosophy. St. Thomas Aquinas had been considered a “genius of synthesis” and creating syntheses had been acclaimed as the proper way of philosophical work. Today we know that synthesis is a way of creating a worldview and it was I. Kant who proposed creating syntheses to culture. No one had been disturbed while reading in metaphysics handbooks compilations of St. Thomas’ thought with views of St. Augu-

---

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Świeżawski, “Opoka mądrości [A Pillar of Wisdom],” *Znak* 9 (1979): 929–930.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stefan Świeżawski, *W nowej rzeczywistości [In a New Reality]* (Lublin 1981), 241: “In the course of the first years of my didactic work after 1945, I came to the conviction that, if I want to teach the history of medieval philosophy honestly and sensibly, I can do nothing better but base my teaching on the work done by Gilson; the same applies to the history of the philosophy of being in which one should continue and develop the achievements he had arrived at and stick to the line he had delineated.”

stine, John Duns Scotus, Descartes, Ch. Wolff. Metaphysics lectured according to scottizing conceptions of John of St. Thomas, J. Gredt, Ch. Boyer had been exercised.

Only É. Gilson freed the lecture of St. Thomas' version of the philosophy of being from other philosophers' propositions which were not consistent with that lecture. He made a distinction between St. Thomas' metaphysics and Aristotle's metaphysics and, following St. Thomas, he emphasized the role of the existence in the structure of being. He distinguished the essentialistic conception of being from the existential one (which is far away from the modern and contemporary existentialism). Gilson's interpretation labeled as "existential Thomism" became a dominant version of Thomism at the Catholic University of Lublin.

In the course of time thanks to professor S. Świeżawski's publications, and then thanks to professor M. A. Krąpiec's works who, according to professor Świeżawski, "understood very well É. Gilson's contribution to the development of metaphysics,"<sup>3</sup> existential Thomism became a prominent philosophical orientation in Poland, outdistancing a traditional verbal Thomism, Lowan Thomism binding metaphysical theses to the theses of particular sciences, obligatory Marxism spread at universities, and phenomenology which was considered to be a philosophy fuller than Thomism, as the one concerning possibility and thus embracing as its fragment a theory of real beings. É. Gilson made clear the ontic distinctiveness and separateness of individual beings, and possibility was counted by him into the realm of concepts exclusively.

c) Professor S. Świeżawski spread the conception, elaborated by É. Gilson, of the history of philosophy as the investigation of the history of philosophical problems formulated in texts and proclaimed by philosophical schools or trends. He spread the conception of the history of philosophy as ever lively reaction to the problems which are important to culture and man. This conception outdistanced the history of

---

<sup>3</sup> Świeżawski, *Opoka mądrości*, 930.

philosophy conceived as exclusively philological text analysis or as only registering outworn views. Yet today such philological and positivistic conception of the history of philosophy is practiced in Poland again.

*The History of Contacts as a Proof of  
the Acceptance of É. Gilson's Thought*

Professor S. Świeżawski met É. Gilson for the first time in Paris when listening to his lectures in College de France during the academic year 1929/1930. Before he had already read É. Gilson's book *La philosophie au moyen age* as well as medievistic works by K. Michalski; also he had agreed with K. Ajdukiewicz in Lvov that his doctoral dissertation would be devoted to the concept of intention in scholastic philosophy thus allowing interest in the Middle Ages which had been a sign of an arising tendency at Lvov University to overcome the exclusiveness of Cartesian orientation, mainly post-Kantian, dominant at the Lvov-Warsaw School. K. Twardowski as F. Brentano's student respected medieval thought "which was actually not known and barely studied."<sup>4</sup>

The next meeting took place during the academic year 1933/1934. It was connected with S. Świeżawski's preparations for writing a habilitation thesis.

Being in a direct touch with É. Gilson in matters of his doctoral and habilitation theses and making closer and closer friends with him, professor Świeżawski becomes more and more convinced about É. Gilson's realism and his wisdom. And he claims that É. Gilson

has brought for ever into . . . European thought philosophical and theological output of the Middle Ages. He not only carried out a fundamental rehabilitation of that output, but incontestably proved its timeless and classic valor as well as its presence in modern philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 923.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 926.

While reading successive publications by É. Gilson, professor S. Świeżawski was realizing that É. Gilson became his “proper master.” Professor S. Świeżawski took as his guidance É. Gilson’s conception of being, his theory of philosophy’s relation towards theology and faith, his thesis about vague boundaries between periods of history and philosophy.

For all those reasons, during the Stalinist time of academic and cultural isolation of Poland from the West, professor S. Świeżawski decided in 1955 to get in touch with É. Gilson and present to him the summaries of the works written at the Catholic University of Lublin (CUL) in the field of the history of medieval philosophy as well as the philosophy of being. At stake there was an issue of supporting students—exposed to the attacks of Marxism—in the conviction that studies and research at CUL are scientifically correct. The idea of publishing those summaries was accepted by prof. A. Schaff, a director of Social Sciences Institute at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (KC PZPR), and the whole initiative was financially supported by Pallottinum Publishers. The summaries of the dissertations in Polish and in French were ready in February 1956.<sup>6</sup> In the second half of July 1956 the meeting with É. Gilson in Poitiers took place and there were weekly talks about the history of medieval philosophy and the philosophy of being in Poland.

After returning to Poland, professor S. Świeżawski reported that, according to É. Gilson, it was right to concentrate upon the analysis of the content of medieval texts; É. Gilson also recommended undertaking studies on the Polish medieval philosophy and on the XV<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Professor S. Świeżawski caused to organize in

---

<sup>6</sup> See *Streszczenia rozpraw doktorskich, magisterskich i seminaryjnych* [*The Summaries of Doctoral, M.A. and Seminary Dissertations*, written at the Catholic University of Lublin under the supervision of prof. dr Stefan Świeżawski (History of Philosophy) and prof. dr M. A. Krąpiec, OP (Metaphysics)] (Poznań 1956).

<sup>7</sup> Świeżawski, *W nowej rzeczywistości*, 280: “Having seen . . . the book of *The Summaries* . . . Gilson assured me that in our teaching and studying the history of philosophy

the Polish Academy of Sciences the research on medieval manuscripts in Poland, and he himself published 8-volume *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej w XV wieku* [*The History of the European Philosophy in the XV<sup>th</sup> Century*].

The last, accidental and brief, meeting of professor S. Świeżawski with É. Gilson took place in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome during a break in "one of the great public conferences" of the Vatican Council II.

While the Council was in progress, professor S. Świeżawski, an auditor of the Council, wrote and published, together with professor J. Kalinowski, the book *La philosophie a l'heure du Concile*. The authors dedicated the book to É. Gilson and J. Maritain. É. Gilson and J. Maritain reacted to the book with writing letters to the authors. Professor S. Świeżawski when informing about the letters wrote that these were the letters from "those two irreplaceable lights to whom the contemporary Church and the whole humanity owe so much."<sup>8</sup>

In É. Gilson's letter we find a sentence: "What S. says about what it means to be a Thomist seems perfect to me."<sup>9</sup>

So É. Gilson's Thomism and S. Świeżawski's Thomism are convergent. But professor S. Świeżawski confesses and confirms that it was É. Gilson who was "his master as well as his scientific and didactic guide, especially in philosophical orientation and in medieval studies."<sup>10</sup>

---

we follow the right path. He emphasized . . . that a big plus of our work done during the Stalinist time was the necessity to concentrate on studying the [original] texts . . . He considered it to be very important to invite us to organize research work on the Polish medieval philosophy; he also said that we should take the initiative to study the XV<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy, continuing the work of Fr. Konstatnty Michalski who initiated studies on the XIV<sup>th</sup> century." Cf. Świeżawski, *Opoka mądrości*, 933–934.

<sup>8</sup> Świeżawski, *Opoka mądrości*, 937.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 938.

<sup>10</sup> Świeżawski, *W nowej rzeczywistości*, 257.

Professor S. Świeżawski's personal contacts with É. Gilson explain and warrant spreading É. Gilson's thought in Poland by professor S. Świeżawski.

### **Spreading É. Gilson's Thought through Reacting to the Translations of His Works**

#### *Remarks on the Role of the Translations*

The first text by É. Gilson, published in Poland in 1948, was the translation of his speech delivered in the French Academy: *Reason is God's Favorite Creation*. The text deeply highlighted the uniqueness and ontic distinctiveness of man and, at the same time, his distinctive feature: reason. The text, in a sense, questioned Marxist identification of man with society and ascribing to the working class and their party the monopoly to recognize the truth. At the same time it indirectly questioned all kinds of idealism, mainly Hegel's idealism so close to Marxism. Later, in the course of time, other articles or fragments of texts written by É. Gilson appeared in Poland.

The first book which was published in Poland in 1953 was the translation of É. Gilson's book *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin*. This was the text which showed great thought of a great philosopher and theologian and also it was a way of presentation of the views formulated long time ago as readable, understandable and still timely today. Gradually, the translations of almost all É. Gilson's books came out.

The translations of É. Gilson's articles and books taught readers to understand the Middle Ages, the philosophy of being and theology, philosophical and theological truth about God and, at the same time, the truth about man as a self-existing substance and a person. They protected against monism and idealism and helped to get distanced from Marxism and Hegliism.

*The Reactions of the Proponents of  
the Philosophy of Being*

It was the reviews that were the quickest information about the reactions to É. Gilson's thought. According to the bibliography records, over 50 reviews have been published since 1946. Half of those reviews are positive reactions. They are the presentation of the chief emphases in É. Gilson's thought. The titles of the reviews point out that reviewers reacted to such subjects as: the connection between philosophy and theology, nature and grace, Christian philosophy and humanism, the understanding of being, realism, the philosophical cognition of God. The reviews show that most urgent questions, attacked by Marxists and Hegelians and then Heideggerians, were undertaken. É. Gilson's influence on the philosophy in Poland consisted in that case in delivering serious arguments protecting the philosophy of being and theology.

É. Gilson's thought was also the topic of more extensive papers. The bibliography records note over 40 articles and dissertations, among them there is a book about his aesthetic views. Those records do not embrace mentions and chapters about É. Gilson's views which are included in philosophical books. Thanks to spreading É. Gilson's thought by professor S. Świeżawski, and generally, due to existential Thomism developed mainly by M. A. Krąpiec and thanks to the translations, É. Gilson's views were discussed in almost all philosophical publications. They were accepted or negated. There might be pointed out over 20 accepting attitudes. They concerned the place of É. Gilson's thought in culture and Christianity, É. Gilson's version of Thomism, his theory of art and aesthetics, his conception of the history of philosophy, his conception of cognition, also the cognition of existence, his theory of man.

*The Reactions of the Opponents against  
the Philosophy of Being*

É. Gilson is widely and frequently written about by Marxism followers. Let their standpoint be illustrated by this quotation:



We try to understand all philosophical conceptions, also Gilson's Christian metaphysics, as a certain way of articulating the states of consciousness of some groups of people. We tend to suppose that Gilson's Neo-Thomism is the manifestation of the views shared within moderately conservative Catholic circles . . . Gilson's approach arose and gained some popularity as an expression of those circles' fear of . . . science and due to creating clear demarcation line between science and Christian metaphysics . . . Is it possible nowadays to approve of a philosophy which programmatically separates itself from science?<sup>11</sup>

Marxists and the adherents to Marxism mean here particular sciences. They think that scientists study physical causes exclusively. Nevertheless É. Gilson as a metaphysicist is not afraid of

paralogisms, unjustified statements and mental leaps . . . in order to force the thesis about the existence of necessary being that is God . . . We reject . . . the whole construction as cognitively sterile and, moreover, limiting the freedom of scientific cognition . . . We will seek . . . a way to cognize the world through the methods which have been elaborated by particular sciences.<sup>12</sup>

Positivistic program adopted by Marxists was set against É. Gilson's thought. Thus not only was the whole of his metaphysics rejected; so was his theory of man, since, as they claimed, making man's existence dependent on God excludes the autonomy of the human cognition.<sup>13</sup> One of the reviews of É. Gilson's book *Le philosophe et la théologie* [*The Philosopher and Theology*] has a telling title "Autoportret Faryzeusza [A Self-Portrait of a Pharisee]."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Tadeusz Płuzański, "Tomizm—filozofia współczesna? [Thomism—A Modern Philosophy?]," *Studia Filozoficzne* 9 (1976): 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tadeusz Płuzański, "Metafizyka i człowiek w ujęciu É. Gilsona [Metaphysics and Man According to É. Gilson]," *Człowiek i Światopogląd* 9 (1975): 74.

<sup>14</sup> Andrzej Kijowski, "Autoportret faryzeusza [A Self-Portrait of a Pharisee]," *Twórczość* 11 (1960): 168-171.

Questioning É. Gilson's thought was also present in a total negation of the existential Thomism.<sup>15</sup> Thomism was gradually replaced by Heglism and Heideggerism. These orientations are winning in Poland and they open people to, forcefully popularized, ominous New Age ideology.

### **Perfecting É. Gilson's Metaphysics as an Actual Form of His Influence**

In spite of the fight against Thomism in Poland, and thus the fight against epistemological realism and pluralistic metaphysics, Thomism is cultivated by some Polish philosophers. It has been destroyed at state universities as well as in many theological seminaries and intellectual Catholic circles. But it has some representatives at the Academy of Catholic Theology<sup>16</sup> in Warsaw and at the Catholic University of Lublin.<sup>17</sup> Thomism cultivated and studied in Poland has the form of existential Thomism as formulated by É. Gilson. J. Maritain's Thomism is less known. É. Gilson's version of Thomism was spread in Poland by professor S. Świeżawski and professor M. A. Krapiec. This kind of Thomism is continued by some of their students. They make use of high number of the translations of É. Gilson's books.

Knowledge about É. Gilson's thought in Poland might be summed up in the following way.<sup>18</sup>

É. Gilson as a philosophy historian is the most penetrating mind among the philosophy historians known in Poland; he shows so broadly and inquisitively the history of the very philosophical problems, and not

---

<sup>15</sup> From the standpoint of Marxism, and then neopositivism and "Heglizing" religious studies, Thomism has been negated by Leszek Kołakowski. From the standpoint of Heidegger's existentialism and, today, from the standpoint of Hegel's thought, Thomism has been fought against by Fr. Józef Tischner. Thus both of them have been fighting against realism, defending monism and idealism.

<sup>16</sup> Currently Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (M.J.-P.).

<sup>17</sup> Currently John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (M.J.-P.).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Mieczysław Gogacz, "Gilson i filozofia [Gilson and Philosophy]," *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 16: 2 (1980): 134-144.

only the history of texts, philosophers and schools. Such work demands from a philosophy historian to be, first of all, a philosopher, and not only a philologist and a historian. Neither the history of texts, which is comprised by philologists, nor the history of schools, which is worked out by historians, are the proper history of philosophy. The former only assist the latter.

É. Gilson as a medieval philosophy historian revealed a variety and wealth of the problems and views constituting the medieval philosophy as versions of problems proclaimed by a huge number of writers, schools, intellectual circles and academic institutions. He showed that the medieval philosophy is the direct source for modernity, that the Middle Ages filled the philosophical output of Greece and Rome with theological reflections, that the medieval theology and faith caused philosophy to develop towards shaping within it the metaphysics of existence.

É. Gilson thought over anew the metaphysics, extracted from Thomas Aquinas' texts, of the being as the existing. Today in Poland this metaphysics constitutes existential Thomism. It shares the view that *esse* is the basis of metaphysics, that the theory of existence makes metaphysics precise, and this is the way to the realness of beings and the realness of God.

É. Gilson as a metaphysicist introduced into the XX<sup>th</sup> century philosophy this magnificent metaphysics of a really existing being, and together with J. Maritain, he became a co-creator of the existential version of Thomism. He questioned epistemological idealism. He defended cognitive realism. Through his thought he caused transformation of philosophical views and the need to perfect his metaphysics.

This stage of perfecting metaphysics makes up now the way by which É. Gilson influences philosophy in Poland.

*Translated by Małgorzata Jałochó-Palicka*

## ÉTIENNE GILSON'S INFLUENCE ON PHILOSOPHY IN POLAND

## SUMMARY

The article consists of the following parts: 1. Spreading É. Gilson's thought by professor S. Świeżawski: (a) Achievements, (b) The history of contacts as a proof of the acceptance of É. Gilson's thought. 2. Spreading É. Gilson's thought through reacting to the translations of his books: (a) Remarks on the role of the translations, (b) The reactions of the philosophy of being proponents, (c) The reactions of the opponents against the philosophy of being. 3. Perfecting É. Gilson's metaphysics as an actual form of his influence.

## KEYWORDS

Étienne Gilson, Stefan Świeżawski, history of philosophy, Poland, philosophy of being, metaphysics.

## REFERENCES

- Gogacz, Mieczysław. "Gilson i filozofia [Gilson and Philosophy]." *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 16: 2 (1980): 134–144.
- Kijowski, Andrzej. "Autoportret faryzeusza [A Self-Portrait of a Pharisee]." *Twórczość* 11 (1960): 168–171.
- Plużański, Tadeusz. "Metafizyka i człowiek w ujęciu É. Gilsona [Metaphysics and Man According to É. Gilson]." *Człowiek i Światopogląd* 9 (1975): 60–74.
- Plużański, Tadeusz. "Tomizm—filozofia współczesna? [Thomism—A Modern Philosophy?]" *Studia Filozoficzne* 9 (1976): 3–17.
- Streszczenia rozpraw doktorskich, magisterskich i seminaryjnych [The Summaries of Doctoral, M.A. and Seminary Dissertations]*, written at the Catholic University of Lublin under the supervision of prof. dr Stefan Świeżawski (History of Philosophy) and prof. dr M. A. Krąpiec, OP (Metaphysics)]. Poznań 1956.
- Świeżawski, Stefan. "Opoka mądrości [A Pillar of Wisdom]." *Znak* 9 (1979): 922–942.
- Świeżawski, Stefan. *W nowej rzeczywistości [In a New Reality]*. Lublin 1981.