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Russia in Étienne Gilson¹

In the 1920s and 1930s France was overcome by a wave of fascination, or even a peculiar fashion for Russian culture. The reason for a situation like this was the fact that it was in this country that many Russian intellectuals, among whom philosophers, took shelter. In 1922 they were forced to leave the Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, Russian thinkers – above all Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov² – exerted a major influence on French philosophers, and particularly existentialists. The positive effect of the Russian tradition on the French intellectual milieu has been well-documented in literature. However, there are also less enthusiastic opinions concerning this – sometimes blind – rapture that engulfed the French over the Russian culture (e.g. a recent criticism of the “French illusions” was voiced by the sovietologist Alain Besançon in his book *The Holy Russia*³). Against this backdrop of the many diverse appraisals and opinions it is worth considering the approach to Russia and Russian thought adopted by Étienne Gilson, one of the most renowned French historians of the 20th century philosophy, as well as the restorer (along with Jacques Maritain) of the so-called existential Thomism. First, I will mention some of Gilson’s biographical facts which prove his knowledge of the Russian culture, and then I will analyse this French author’s intellectual relations with émigré Russian thinkers.

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² See Ж.-К. Маркадэ, *Проникновение русской мысли во французскую среду: Н.А. Бердяев и Л.И. Шестов*, in Н.П. Полторацкий (ed), *Русская религиозно-философская мысль*, Питтсбург 1975, pp. 150-163; В.П. Визгин, *Николай Бердяев и Габриэль Марсель: к феномену встречи*, “Вопросы философии” 3 (2010), pp. 110-118; idem, *Габриэль Марсель и русская философия*, in А.П. Паршин (ed), *Семинар “Русская философия” (традиция и современность). 2004–2009*, Москва 2011, pp. 214-237.

³ See A. Besançon, *Sainte Russie*, Paris 2012 (the Polish edition: A. Besançon, *Święta Ruś*, transl. by Ł. Maślanka, Warszawa 2012).

1. Gilson's Russian experiences

Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) was dubbed into “the last French humanist.”⁴ He penned many great works, in which he reconstructed – beginning with the Patristic period – the history of philosophy, and to be more precise, the philosophy that came to be known as Christian.⁵ Gilson took an avid interest in various aspects of the Russian civilisation such as the language, arts, philosophy and politics.⁶ It is noteworthy that, as a young professor of the University of Lille, he served as a second lieutenant during the First World War. In 1916 he was captured and put away in the German camp in Burg-bei-Magdeburg, near Verdun. Not wanting to fritter away time, he learnt languages from the other captives, among others Russian from nine Russian officers. He included a remark about that language in his famous work *Being and Some Philosophers* (1949, abridged English edition), where, quoting from André Mazon's Russian grammar (Paris, 1943), he included an example illustrating the copular function of the verb “to be:” “for a proposition to be a two-term one, its verb must be a mere copula which does not include the predicate in its own meaning. This is so true that some languages, Russian for instance, completely do away with the copula and yet immediately intelligible even to readers whose own mother tongue constant use of it. ‘He old,’ ‘she lovely,’ ‘they students’ do not raise the slightest difficulty in any mind, and nothing can be more clear than the following translation of a correct Russian syllogism: ‘All men mortal; Socrates men; Socrates mortal.’”⁷ There is no doubt that these deliberations bear the mark impressed by the lessons in Russian begun in the German camp.

In 1919 Gilson was in Kharkiv. Later, he regretfully and bitterly reminisced that in Russia St Thomas had been replaced with Marx. Gilson invoked the following episode from his stay in the city. While travelling on

⁴ See О.Э. Душин, *Этьен Жильсон: судьба и дело*, in О.Э. Душин, И.И. Евлампиев (eds), Альманах “Verbum,” vol. 2: *Наследие Средневековья и современная культура*, Санкт-Петербург 2000, p. 13.

⁵ See *Vie et Oeuvres d'Étienne Gilson Professeur au Collège de France Membre de l'Académie française*, in J. Maritain et al. (eds), *Étienne Gilson philosophe de la chrétienté*, Paris 1949, pp. 14–21; *Vie, titres et fonctions d'Étienne Gilson*, in *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson de l'Académie française*, Paris – Toronto 1959, pp. 9–58; M. McGrath, *Étienne Gilson. A Bibliography. Une Bibliographie*, Toronto 1982.

⁶ In *Painting and Reality* he mentioned Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Boris Godunov*. See E. Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, London 1957, p. 101.

⁷ E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Toronto 1952, p. 192.

a tram, he turned to a fellow traveller, a red commissar, observing that Kharkiv was a very big city, to which he replied that it was not only big, but also modern, for there were not many churches, but a lot of factory stacks. Gilson remarked that there was no smoke rising out of them, to which the commissar answered that it was Sunday... It was with bitterness that the French philosopher reminisced that after a few days of travelling around the city and being exposed to its indoctrination, he found the prospect of any other conversation depressing.⁸

It was not the only time Gilson stayed in the Soviet Union. In 1922, while already a Sorbonne professor, he was among the first and few French people (owing to his knowledge of Russian) to participate, as a representative of the League of Nations, in a charitable mission in the Ukraine and on the Volga, organising canteens for children in Odessa and Saratov. He wrote about the plight, the rampant famine and disease in reports submitted to the Nansen Committee. Later on, he described his experiences in *The terrors of the year two thousand*: “have only to shut my eyes for a moment to see once more, in the villages of the Ukraine and on the banks of the Volga, the dead children in 1922, whose little corpses lay abandoned in their emptied schools; or again, wandering along the railways, those bands of children reduced to savagery who later were to be mowed down with machine guns.”⁹ Other memories of his stay in Russia are included in *Where is Christianity?* Here are they in their entirety:

“(...) Where did I learn about Christianity? Let me reach even further back into the past. In September 1922 I was in Moscow, Russia, where the revolution and famine were wreaking havoc. At railway stations I was welcomed with portraits of Lenin and Trotsky, and in squares with busts of Karl Marx. There may still have been some remnants of the Catholic Church somewhere there, in Moscow, but I was dubious about that, and irrespective of how things really stood, nobody could show it to me. On the other hand, having walked up and down the streets, I reached the chapel adjacent to the Red Square and the Kremlin walls. A peek into my baedeker assured me that I was standing in the presence of the most famous church in Russia – the Iverskaya Tchassovnia or the Iverskaya Chapel of the Mother of God. There was one more mundane thing in the guidebook: ‘The chapel is normally packed full; beware of pickpockets.’ Indeed, it was so full that many believers were not able to enter, and in order to pray, they were kneeling

⁸ See É. Gilson, *Les Tribulations de Sophie*, Paris 1967, pp. 18-19.

⁹ E. Gilson, *The terrors of the year two thousand*, Toronto 1984, p. 2.

on the steps, in the street and by the walls, behind which there were Lenin himself and the supreme Soviet government on guard. I never learnt if one Christian or another was a pickpocket. But this I know for sure. On the same side of the street, between two guards, a prisoner was walking in our direction. One of the present Christians stood up, approached him and gave him a kiss of peace. I am positive that on that day in front of the Iverskaya Tchassovnia I saw Christ Himself comforting a suffering man. At that time we were not in the church, and the man was not Catholic, but he taught me that *wherever my neighbour was a Christ, there was Christianity too*.¹⁰ Apparently, the stay in Russia was instrumental in not only intellectual, but also spiritual development of the French thinker.

During his stay in Russia, and trying to see how the land lay before a potential French-Russian scholarly cooperation, Gilson wrote to A. Maizon: “each attempt at the resumption of the relations with the Russian colleagues will prove futile if it is not made in collaboration with the incumbent government.”¹¹ Still, quite soon a possibility of establishing relations with the Russian thinkers appeared, which was caused by the emigration of the latter to France. However, as the afore-mentioned A. Besançon observes, the Russian thought had little influence on Gilson’s quest, for he was too strongly attached to the Thomist tradition, which was alien to Russia, though quite popular in the 16th and 17th century. Still, he was presented with an opportunity to meet – in person and through his publications – many authors from that country, e.g. Vladimir Lossky, Alexandre Koyré, Semyon Frank, Lev Shestov. These relations will be explored in the next section. In the meantime, coming back to Gilson’s assessment of the communist regime and the reign of Marxism in the Soviet Union, we should note his comments on Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism*, which he made in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*,¹² but above all his multi-faceted criticism of atheism (including the kind of atheism that he termed proletarian¹³) as a phenomenon which had a destructive impact on the culture. It was here that Gilson sympathised with Russian religious

¹⁰ I am quoting from the Polish translation: E. Gilson, *Gdzie jest chrześcijaństwo?*, transl. by T. Rakowski, “Człowiek w Kulturze” 8 (1996), pp. 291-292.

¹¹ Quotation from S. Cœuré, *La langue russe et la “carte mentale” de l’Europe au XXe siècle. Réflexions sur l’exemple français*, “Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps,” vol. 76 (2006), p. 27.

¹² See E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, London 1928, pp. 291-293, 296, 298.

¹³ See J. Sochoń, *Wizja ateizmu Étienne Gilsona*, Warszawa 1993; idem, *Ateizm*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 248-249.

thinkers, both the ones who had emigrated and the ones who had stayed in the Soviet Union.

Being critical of the communist regime, Gilson wrote: “everywhere where is a State-enforced philosophical conception of the world, no trace of freedom is left either in the political order or in the social and economic orders. Totalitarian States may not agree on the same truth, but each of them maintains that there is an absolute truth, which is its own truth, and that just like its own citizens, the rest of the world should bow to it. (...) [T]he communist revolution was supposed to be a short interlude between the suppression of the *classe bourgeoise* and that of the State, whereas it has in fact resulted in the domination of the working class by a political party and the submission of all citizens to the most efficient State police there ever was, that if the Russian czars.”¹⁴ And towards the end of the Second World War he stated: “German hitlerism, Russian communism, Italian and Spanish fascism and American Deweyism had stood in the way then: each of them had focused on the production of their own brand of citizen, and not one of them had seen a pressing need for the teaching of moral and intellectual virtue.”¹⁵

Gilson also wrote some texts about the current political situation in Russia, which were included in the papers, e.g. *Stalin et la métaphysique*,¹⁶ *Le point de vue de Moscou*,¹⁷ *Une découverte russe*,¹⁸ and *En lisant Staline*.¹⁹ Besides, in the three texts published in “Le Monde” (*Défaitisme et neutralité*, *La neutralité vers l’est* and *La neutralité vers l’ouest*) he advocated Europe’s neutrality in the event of the war between the Soviet Union and the USA. This French historian of philosophy criticised Marxism-Leninism (and Stalinism), that is dialectical and historical materialism (“master of Holy Russia”²⁰) and political economy for their non-scientific character (in the theoretical aspect), as well as for the fact that the states

¹⁴ E. Gilson, *Dogmatism and Tolerance. An address to the Students and Faculty of Rutgers University given at the Voorhees Chapel of The New Jersey College for Women on December the 12th, 1951*, New Brunswick – New Jersey 1952, pp. 3, 6.

¹⁵ *An Abbreviated Biography of Étienne Gilson’s Intellectual Life. 1884–1978* (Except for a few minor additions, all the content in the above Biography is derived from L.K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, Toronto 1984), <<http://www.uowc.org/gilson-society/biography-of-etienne-gilson%E2%80%99s-intellectual-life/>>.

¹⁶ “Une semaine dans le monde,” 28.09.1946, p. 11.

¹⁷ “Le Monde,” 9.01.1947, p. 1.

¹⁸ “Le Monde,” 26.08.1949, p. 3.

¹⁹ “L’Aube,” 12.02.1947, p. 1.

²⁰ E. Gilson, *The terrors of the year two thousand*, p. 1.

erected on this wobbly foundation must resort to strength and violence to assure their existence (from the practical perspective). Referring to Stalin's article *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, he ironically observed that the editor of the French edition of 1945 noted that the first translation had been brought out in France in 1937, which was 300 years after Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*.²¹ Thus, Stalin was placed on an equal footing with the French pride, the father of modern philosophy, to whom Gilson devoted his PhD dissertation entitled *Liberty in Descartes and Theology* (1913). Obviously, the neo-Thomist could by no means accept such a juxtaposition. Likewise, Gilson did not have a liking for Hegel (quoted by Marx, Lenin and Stalin), emphasizing that the fact that he lived after Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas in no way meant that he was better than them.²²

It is worth noting that Gilson took an active part in the debate on the possibility of the existence of Christian philosophy, which took place in France in the years 1931–1936. Addressing all the nuances of that discussion (attended by É. Bréhier, J. Maritain, L. Brunschvicg et al.) would surpass the scope of the article;²³ at this point let me, however, point it out that Gilson took the view that the Christian philosophy is the philosophy pursued by faithful Christians, which separates the order of knowledge from the order of faith, but still recognizes the value of the Revelation for the fruitful development of philosophy as such. For Gilson the most perfect example of Christian philosophy was the thought of St Augustine and St Thomas, who – in his opinion – effected the most perfect harmony of reason and Revelation.²⁴ I am mentioning this fact because the émigré Russian theologian and philosopher Wasilij Zienkovsky took a position on Gilson's stance, though misinterpreted. Namely, in his work *The basis of Christian*

²¹ See É. Gilson, *Les Tribulations de Sophie*, pp. 121-122.

²² See *ibidem*, p. 157.

²³ See, for instance H. Gouhier, *É. Gilson et la notion de philosophie chrétienne*, in *idem, Étienne Gilson. Trois essais: Bergson, La philosophie chrétienne, L'art*, Paris 1993, pp. 37-73; G.B. Sadler (ed), *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Battle*, Washington 2011; G.B. Sadler, *Christian Philosophy in John Deely's Four Ages of Understanding*, "Semiotica," vol. 179, 1/4 (2010), pp. 103-118; *idem, The 1930s Christian Philosophy Battle: Bibliografica Tematica*, "Acta Philosophica" 21 (2012), pp. 393-406; R.J. Fařara, *Spór o rozumienie "filozofii chrześcijańskiej" między É. Gilsonem a H. Gouhierem*, "Człowiek w Kulturze" 19 (2007), pp. 331-355; P. Milcarek, *Rozumienie filozofii chrześcijańskiej przez Etienne Gilsona*, in T. Klimski (ed), *Etienne Gilson. Filozofia i mediewistyka*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 37-48.

²⁴ See, i.e. E. Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, New York 1938, p. 99.

philosophy (*Основы христианской философии*), and referring to the *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Zienkovsky stated that Gilson did not recognize the term “Christian philosophy,” considering it nonsensically analogous to the concept of Christian physics or Christian mathematics.²⁵ Zienkovsky himself defended the right to use the term “Christian philosophy,” which can already be seen in the title of his work, and moreover he made an accusation against the French historian of philosophy that he, as a Thomist, laid too great emphasis on the difference between the sphere of Revelation and the sphere of natural reason, and hence theology and philosophy, which soon after St Thomas Aquinas led to the total autonomization and secularization of philosophy, thus laying waste to the western culture. In fact, as he wrote that “to speak of Christian philosophy is equally absurd and the expression should be simply discarded,”²⁶ Gilson meant the standpoints of his opponents É. Bréhier and L. Feuerbach, who both rejected the possibility of combining Christianity and philosophy. Zienkovsky jumped to a conclusion about Gilson’s opinions on Christian philosophy, which is not surprising if we take into account the difference between their philosophical styles: the Thomist one in the case of the French author, and the style based on the Eastern Christianity tradition in the case of the Russian. While Gilson showed the dissimilarity of the orders of reason and faith, at the same time making a synthesis of these (in the form of the Christian philosophy), for Zienkovsky the only possible philosophy was the philosophy resulting from the act of faith – reasoning suffused with Revelation, devoid of any attempt whatsoever at the separation (if only formal) of *fides* and *ratio*. Both the French and the Russian thinker employed the term of Christian philosophy, though they understood it differently. The difference in the approach to the philosophising style is also discernible on the part of Gilson, who took a rather critical stance on the Russian thought – not only Leninism, which he criticised, but also religious philosophy with which he became familiar owing to the direct relations with émigré intellectuals. Namely, beside his discussion included in the *History of Philosophy and Philosophical Education*, he makes the following remark: “A philosopher (...) still needs to be taught (...). And who can help him in his need, if not another philosopher who will be for him both a master and a companion during his whole life? The most urgent of all problems, then, is to find such

²⁵ See В.В. Зеньковский, *Основы христианской философии*, in idem, *Христианская философия*, Москва 2010, p. 17; W. Goerd, *Russische Philosophie. Zugänge und Durchblicke*, Freiburg – München 1984, p. 374.

²⁶ E. Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Notre Dame – London 1991, p. 3.

a man, and this is far from easy; for in order to be a master, a philosopher should be great, and great philosophers are scarce. Very large countries, like Russia, have never seen one (...)."²⁷ It is an eloquent testimony to how much this French humanist underestimated the tradition of the Russian thought, and Zienkovsky's above-quoted opinion about Gilson complements the picture of mutual misunderstanding between the two styles of philosophizing.

2. Gilson and Russian thinkers

The proof of a different approach to philosophy can also be found in the history of Gilson's intellectual relations with Russian thinkers. Above all, we should mention Vladimir Lossky here (1903–1958). After leaving Russia in 1924, the young Lossky (who had already managed to complete a few years of philosophical studies at St Petersburg University and Charles University in Prague) became a student of Gilson at the Sorbonne. Under his direction he began writing a PhD dissertation. At first, Gilson proposed a purely historical subject related to medieval communities in Provence,²⁸ but eventually Lossky took up the issue of negative theology and cognition of God in Meister Eckhart. He worked on his text for over 20 years, until his premature death which precluded him from completing his dissertation. The Sorbonne authorities decided to confer the posthumous title of doctorant-*à-lettres* upon him. Lossky's work was published in Paris in 1960. His supervisor provided a preface, in which he set out the context of the author's conception and development of the book. He wrote that twice a year Lossky had visited him in his apartment to discuss his work. Gilson thought highly of Lossky's study. At the same time, this French historian of philosophy, whose specialism was the Middle Ages, presented a somewhat different reading of Meister Eckhart's thought than the one by the Russian author. Gilson remarked that Lossky focused primarily on the aspect of the inscrutability of God, while other readings were also possible, e.g. ones based on the notion of being, the One or the Intellect.²⁹ This, however,

²⁷ E. Gilson, *History of Philosophy and Philosophical Education*, Milwaukee 1948, p. 21.

²⁸ See H. Лосский, *Воспоминания. Жизнь и философский путь*, München 1968, p. 227.

²⁹ See E. Gilson, *Préface*, in V. Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, Paris 1960, p. 10.

was not the moot point between Lossky's and Gilson's thought. It is common knowledge that the source of Eckhart's work was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Whereas St Thomas – one of the medieval commentators of the latter – radically corrected his teachings, “cleansing” them of neo-Platonism, Eckhart not only remained faithful to the neo-Platonic tradition, but also developed it. Lossky was the first to draw attention to the fact that the Nordrhein master's philosophy was similar to the teachings of the last Eastern Christian Church Father – St Gregory Palamas,³⁰ who distinguished between the completely inscrutable nature of God and His activities-energies, through which God manifests Himself in the created world. However, St Thomas stressed the simplicity of God and His existential aspect, which was the thing particularly highlighted by Gilson. As the French thinker Olivier Clément, who, having read Lossky's works, became converted to the Orthodox faith observed: “It is exactly for this reason that the Western Church condemned Eckhart, whereas the Eastern Church recognized the palamitic expressions as articles of faith.”³¹ David Bradshaw, a representative of the western tradition, adds: “One could hardly find a more striking example of the misunderstanding between the two halves of Christendom: a view that Aquinas regards as heretical had, unknown to him, been orthodox in the East since at least the fourth century.”³²

The reason for the discrepancies in the reading of Pseudo-Dionysius, and by extension in the evaluation of Eckhart and Palamas apparently lies in the disparate exegesis of Aristotle's teachings conducted in the Christian East and West in the Patristic Period. Namely, in the West, “the works of Aristotle were translated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, *energeia* had to be rendered in different contexts by three different terms: *operatio*, *actus*, and *actualitas*. Although this division was inescapable given the resources of Latin, it tended to obscure the unity of the single concept (or family of concepts) underlying these diverse terms. Because of these limitations, the notion of participation in the divine *energeia* made little impression on western thought.”³³

³⁰ See М.Ю. Реутин, “Христианский неоплатонизм” XIV века. Опыт сравнительного изучения богословских доктрин Иоанна Экхарта и Григория Паламы, Москва 2011, p. 11.

³¹ O. Clément, *Orient – Occident, deux passeurs: Vladimir Lossky et Paul Endokimov*. Quotation from К.В. Преображенская, *Богословие и мистика в творчестве Владимира Лосского*, Санкт-Петербург 2008, p. 40.

³² D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge 2004, p. 256.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 153-154.

Both Palamas and St Thomas constructed great syntheses of the Christian thought: the one of the Eastern Christian tradition, the other of the Western Christian tradition. Lossky and Gilson became famous as outstanding commentators and continuators of their respective masters: the Russian – Palamas (whom he chose, among others, being influenced by Eckhart), and the Frenchman – St Thomas Aquinas. What is more, Lossky laid the foundation for the future, 20th-century Eastern Christian thought system, which was constructed by Georges Florovsky in the form of neo-Patristic synthesis. As the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams observed in his PhD dissertation *The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique* (1975), most probably the Russian philosopher was trying to show the Orthodox Church as a consistent and vital outlook, for Thomism was such a one in the interpretation of his teacher, Gilson.³⁴ Curiously enough, in his famous encyclical *Fides et Ratio* John Paul II quoted Étienne Gilson as an example of a “fruitful relationship between philosophy and the word of God (...) in a Western context,” and Vladimir Lossky as the respective one “in an Eastern context.”³⁵

Interestingly, it was in emigration, precisely in France, that the Russian thinkers turned to the somewhat abandoned heritage of the Byzantine Middle Ages (especially Gregory Palamas), which after all is the source tradition for the Orthodox Church. Whereas in the neo-Thomist milieu the mediaeval tradition – also owing to Gilson – was not disrupted; *philosophia perennis* set the philosophizing canon.

Another Russian-born philosopher who attended Gilson’s seminar was Alexander Koyranskiy (born in Taganrog, better known as Koyré, 1892-1964). They first met on the front during the First World War (Koyré served as a volunteer first in the French army, and from 1916 also in the Russian one, pursuant to the agreement between the French and Russian government). In 1919 he settled in France for good, fleeing from the red terror. The supervisors of his PhD dissertation entitled *La Philosophie de Jacob Boehme* were L. Brunschvicg and É. Gilson, who – according to A. Kojève – called it “one of the best books on the history of philosophy.”³⁶ Gilson also came up with the idea of a book dedicated to the Russian thought:

³⁴ Cf. P. Уильямс, *Богословие В.Н. Лосского: изложение и критика*, transl. by Д. Морозова, Ю. Вестель, Киев 2009, pp. 32-33.

³⁵ See John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 74, <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html>.

³⁶ See A.В. Ямпольская, *К проблеме феноменальности мира у Мишеля Анри*, “Логос” 5 (2010), p. 246.

*La philosophie et le problème national en Russie au début du XX^e siècle.*³⁷ Even though Koyré was primarily a renowned historian and philosopher of science, he still remembered about his teacher, which he proved by including his text in the jubilee book written in honour of Gilson.³⁸ Also, in his polemics with Karl Barth, the French philosopher referred to Koyré's reflections, that is to his interpretation of St Anselm's ontological argument.³⁹

As for other influence exerted on Gilson by Russian thinkers, one should mention Semyon Frank's dissertation (1877–1950) *The Object of Knowledge*, and more precisely its abridged French version entitled *La connaissance et l'être* (1937). In *Being and Essence* (1948), in Chapter 9 entitled "Cognition of Being," he cited Frank as a reference, writing that "the object is something perfectly defined, still the definition of it is not familiar to us, and so we need to discover it."⁴⁰ As an existential Thomist, Gilson added that "if the object is defined by its essence, then it is also defined – though in a different order – by its act of being." It is worth pointing out that Frank too – though from a different perspective – advocated the primacy of being over essence, the growing of all things out of the absolute being and further determination of their essence.

Furthermore, Gilson established contact – through Jacques Maritain – with Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), who had him staying in his apartment in Clamart near Paris, and was engaged in polemics with Lev Shestov (1866–1938). The intellectual relations with the latter merit particular attention. As early as 1923 Gilson positively responded to Shestov's article *La nuit de Gethsemani. Essai sur la philosophie de Pascal*, published in the journal "Les Cahiers verts," by sending his own text about Pascal to him. Shestov did not appreciate Gilson's study, observing as follows: "It demonstrates that 'to stupefy' does not mean 'to stupefy' but on the

³⁷ See A. Koyré, *La philosophie et le problème national en Russie au début du XX^e siècle*, Paris 1929, p. 7.

³⁸ See A. Koyré, *Jean Baptiste Benedetti, critique d'Aristote*, in C. Edie (ed), *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson de l'Académie française*, Paris – Toronto 1959, pp. 351-372.

³⁹ See É. Gilson, *Sens et nature de l'Argument de Saint Anselme*, "Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge," vol. IX (1934), p. 29; A.В. Ямпольская, *Идея бесконечного у Левинаса и Койре*, "Вопросы философии" 8 (2009), <http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=52>.

⁴⁰ É. Gilson, *L'être et l'essence*, Paris 1994, p. 285. In the English abridgement (*Being and Some Philosophers*) this chapter is missing. Cf. С. Франк, *Предмет знания. Об основах и пределах отвлеченного знания*, in idem, *Предмет знания. Душа человека*, Санкт-Петербург 1995, pp. 58-60.

contrary (he finds the article and shows me the phrase): ‘to fix the instability of reason under the stability of the automaton, that is to submit it to the dumb animal, to stupefy it...’ I wonder what he thought my answer would be? That I would agree with him? I replied that what he said was rather interesting. He was offended... His article appeared in a Protestant theology magazine... Remarkable!”⁴¹ He further writes: “Berdyayev told me that he spoke with Gilson about my essay on Medieval Philosophy. But Gilson said nothing about the ideas I expressed there... I showed there that catholic philosophy was under Aristotle’s judgment: ‘poets lie a lot.’ It did not bother him. ‘On the other hand, he said, I have only this reproach to make: why didn’t he talk about the nominalists and the realists?’”⁴² Shestov was interested in Gilson’s works: many a time he referred to his work *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, and even devoted to it the essay *Athens and Jerusalem*, which was first published in the periodical “Revue Philosophique,” and later on was as part of the book of the same title. In a conversation with Benjamin Fondane he said the following about Gilson’s work: “An excellent work, penetrating, well-informed; he speaks of the metaphysics of Exodus but he says nothing of the metaphysics of the *Fall*. He has no understanding of it. To exchange paradise for a fruit, for a *nothing*! He cannot quite see that it is Knowledge that is meant. The Greeks speak through him, there are even textual passages from Spinoza, and he thinks that he has authority from the Bible!”⁴³ Hence, “the French do not really understand philosophy”⁴⁴ – said Shestov. Gilson – having acquainted himself with the Russian thinker’s standpoint which (after Tertulian’s fashion) radically separated Athens and Jerusalem – wrote to him in a letter of 11 March 1936: “In a lecture on humanism, which I delivered at the Congress in Naples in 1924, I also quoted Tertulian’s words: ‘*Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolimis?*’ and I answered: ‘Rome.’ You return to Luter, that is to that which is Luteran and can be found in Dostoyevsky, who is so dear to you. I, for that matter, believe that the Revelation is continued through the agency of the Roman-Catholic Church, and that the mission of the Roman-Catholic Church is to fully present the Revelation.”⁴⁵ Here, we again have

⁴¹ *Conversations with Lev Shestov by Benjamin Fondane* (1934, no date provided), <http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/fon/fondane_full.html>.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem* (06.10.1934).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem* (1934, no date provided).

⁴⁵ Quotation from *Kalendarium życia i twórczości Lwa Szesztowa*, in L. Szesztow, *Apoteoza nieoczywistości. Próba myślenia adogmatycznego*, transl. by N. Karsow, Sz. Szechter, Londyn 1983, p. 223.

the example of two different styles of philosophizing, this time – the tension between Shestov's existential philosophy and fideism, and Gilson's existential Thomism. According to Shestov any attempt at combining *fides* and *ratio* is misguided, whereas it was in that relation that Gilson saw the essence of Christian philosophy.⁴⁶

This study in no way exhausts the subject of the Russian motifs in the life and work of Étienne Gilson, nor his relations with Russian thinkers. However, in conclusion, it is worth mentioning that in his lifetime his name was known above all in the emigration milieu. Currently, the rich heritage of this Parisian neo-Thomist arouses a lively interest also in Russia, where his works are being translated and published, particularly those dedicated to the history of philosophy and Christian philosophy.

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⁴⁶ For further information on this see A. Del Noce, *Gilson e Chestov*, "Archivio di filosofia," vol. XLVIII, 2-3 (1980), pp. 315-326.

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