

On Postmodernism and the "Silence" of St. Thomas

James V. Schall, S.J.

Oh my soul, I gave you back the freedom over the created and uncreated; and who knows, as you know, the voluptuous delight of what is yet to come?

Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, III.¹

There is the *extraordinary regime* of intelligent creatures insofar as they are *free agents*: to receive without having asked.

Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*.²

I have begun these reflections on the "silence" of St. Thomas and postmodernity with two very curious, very contrasting remarks, each in its own way, I think, pertinent to the subject at hand. One citation is from Nietzsche, who more than any one else, sensed the death of modernity and defined the nihilist attractions of postmodernity. The other passage is from Jacques Maritain, who saw in St. Thomas that human liberty would be most free precisely when it received into itself, not exclusively itself, but rather *all that is*.

Nietzsche accused classical metaphysics and Christianity of a kind of weakness or even cowardliness. Nietzsche would not allow the suspicion, contained both in classical metaphysics and Christianity, that what is to be given to man is more than man can ever imagine by himself. That is, all humanly constructed utopias are insufficient precisely as utopias. This is the most telling judgment of revelation on all rationalism. Indeed, when spelled out, what man would be given would be precisely what he would want if he could have it. This perception that we do not even realize what it is we are to

¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, iii.

² Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks* (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1984), 280.

ask for, of course, is the sense of Maritain's remark that free agents are to receive what is properly theirs "without having asked."

The struggle between these two positions, the one that creates its own world, its own pleasure, and the one that receives what in fact *is*, is, in a way, a struggle over utopias. But it is over advanced utopias that have themselves previously rejected the utopias of the philosophers (Plato) and of those utopian thinkers who wish to establish the kingdom of God on earth (the Enlightenment) because, it is thought, the religious location (i.e., eternal life) has failed or is impossible. The issue in this sense is not primarily an intellectual one but a spiritual one, one that sees within itself the possibility of receiving or rejecting a love that is genuine and best for the receiver, but one not intrinsically formulated by the receiver.

David Walsh's remark about Nietzschean tradition is to the point:

The analysis (of modernity) must recognize that the closure (the refusal to accept a natural or supernatural order) is motivated at root by the revolt against God, and that it is only the grace of divine reconciliation that can finally overcome it. If the problem could be resolved through the discovery of an acceptable intellectual formulation, then it would have been remedied long ago; it would not have been a spiritual crisis, in which the refusal to acknowledge what we know we should acknowledge constitutes the crux of the issue.³

Walsh was here developing a theme familiar in Voegelin, namely, that the denial of God is not primarily an intellectual problem about proving God's existence but a spiritual problem, a murder in fact. There are basic questions that we refuse to ask so that our problem is not really intellectual but spiritual, a problem of will and not of intellect.⁴

To bring up the question of the silence of St. Thomas in the context of postmodernism hints, I presume, at a common, but dubious, suspicion that the configurations and gyrations of the contemporary mind are so unique and so original that they cannot possibly find response in the perennial philosophy of St. Thomas. Modernity, for its part, which we perceive to be largely over, was indeed confronted by the efforts of the sundry famous and not so famous neo-Thomists, even by those neo-Thomists who identified themselves as Thomists and not neo-Thomists, as most did. And the specter of Nietzsche has always stood for a kind of mocking challenge to modernity, prodding its adherents to have the faith of their convictions. Since God is dead, these superior men can

³ David Walsh, "The Crisis of the Modern World: Nietzsche and Nihilism," *World & I*, ii (May, 1987), 564.

⁴ See Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Regnery, 1968), 83-84.

inaugurate their own rights and their own delights, free from both the "created" and the "uncreated," as Nietzsche put it.

The modern project, to use Leo Strauss' term, conceived itself to be erected over the tomb of St. Thomas. Strauss himself knew of this tomb but did not think it pertinent except as a marker on the road to Aristotle. The modern project is also that against which postmodernity claims to rebel. The modern project consisted in the effort to use human intelligence for the charitable benefit of man. It based intellect on nothing but itself as the only criterion for valid knowledge of reality. This project seems to have run full course in the failure of Marxism and the growing statism of liberalism.

What has appeared among us instead of the perfect society, much to our surprise, has been pure thought with an unexpectedly inhuman face. Paradoxically, this face was most distorted when modernity sought to put into being its highest longings with the best of intentions. We have denied the possibility and necessity either of defining or of practicing virtues as the classics understood them, only to be rather astonished at the sorts of conduct, based on the premises of this very denial, that have appeared among us. The denial of original sin and the declarations of the goodness of man only seemed to make matters worse.

The effort to exclude systematically from modern life anything that could claim human attention from revelation was proposed to be the essence of humanism and the core of the project for human improvement. Religion, subsequently, has come to be identified as the only vice that remains recognized among us, that is, "fanaticism." The only acceptable world was the self-made world of pure reason. The only true evil is "intolerance;" that is, the claim that some truth demanding attention and obedience exists and can be discovered by the human mind.

This theoretic analysis of modernity led to a brave project, to be sure, one reminiscent of the account in *Genesis* of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, of the claim of man to decide for himself the distinctions between good and evil. Interestingly enough, this claim of autonomy has been fought out largely in the name of "human rights," in perhaps one of the most ironic twists of intellectual record ever witnessed by the philosophic historian. If we pay careful attention to their intellectual origins and justifications, human rights in

⁵ See Henry Veatch, *Human Rights: Fact or Fancy?* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); James V. Schall, "Human Rights as an Ideological Project," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 32 (1987), 47-61; "On Being Dissatisfied with Compromises: Natural Law and Human Rights," *Loyola Law Review* (New Orleans), XXXVIII (#2, 1992), 289-309.

modernity are not equivalent to the classical "natural law."⁵ It is especially dangerous to make them so.

Human rights find their origins in Hobbes' notion of will presupposed to nothing but itself. This will, in itself, has an absolute right to everything. The "war of all against all" is natural right in its purest form. With considerable irony, human rights have come to function as the replacement for and, as to their content, the contradiction of what was considered to be the content of natural law. Natural law, for its part, did not depend on the human will or intellect for its content or for the fact that this content constituted the human good itself if freely understood and chosen. The natural law corresponded to the true human good.

Strauss' exact words about the modern project need to be repeatedly pondered:

The modern project was originated (by philosophers) as required by nature (natural right) . . . to satisfy . . . the most powerful natural needs of men: nature was to be conquered for the sake of man who himself was supposed to possess a nature, an unchangeable nature; the originators of the project took it for granted that philosophy and science are identical. . . . The conquest of nature requires the conquest of human nature and hence . . . the questioning of the unchangeability of human nature: an unchangeable human nature might set absolute limits to progress. . . . The natural needs of men could no longer direct the conquest of nature; the direction had to come from reason as distinguished from nature, from the rational Ought as distinguished from the neutral Is.⁶

This remarkable passage underscores better than any other I can think of the reason why theories of human autonomy and human right have turned against human nature.

Ideologies, that is, world views whose content depend on nothing but will, seem to be the logical political alternatives to substitute for classical philosophy and revelation as a guide for human action. Ideology is formulated by a "rational Ought" that does not derive its content from any given nature, natural, human, or divine. The mind is free to speculate independently and with presumably exhilarating liberty about what it wants. It is thus free to establish an "Ought" independently of an "Is," since no "Is" by itself supposedly engages human intellect. As a result, the reason why an "Ought" might be limited by or, better, fulfilled by a given nature or "Is" has been theoretically eliminated by a science that can find no "reasons" or secondary causes in nature.⁷

⁶ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 7.

⁷ The manner in which this relationship works itself out is best traced in Charles N. R. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

The postmodern project appears at first sight, as it were, to be more humble. Nevertheless, it takes off from the unexpected and dire results of the modern project as Strauss understood it. Postmodernism doubts not only these grandiose rationalist schemes to transform the world in the name of autonomous man, but also the very notions of universal good, knowledge, and prosperity, on whose majestic premises the modern project was, in its own view, initially based.

Chesterton remarked in *Orthodoxy* that the problem of the modern mind is that it has mislocated the virtue of humility by putting it in the human intellect. Thereby, this pseudo-humility makes the intellect incapable of affirming the truth of anything. The proper place of humility is rather in the human will. Postmodernity, in an odd fashion, agrees that will not intellect is the crucial power. For the classical and medieval thinkers, however, will was to follow intellect, whereas for the postmoderns it was to be independent of it.

The problem with modernity, then, was not that it did not discover vast reaches of the human mind and hand. Rather it was that it did not want to see these reaches to be anything but products of the human intellect presupposed to no criterion but what it imposed on itself. Modernity was still under the assumption that the conquest of nature was guided by mind. But this guidance was not through reference to a divine mind that might lie at the origin of the distinction in things, including the distinction between human, non-human, and divine things.

Reacting to this anthropocentric view, the postmodern mind suspected in fact that one of the directions that we could and perhaps should take, once modernity reached its own impasse, something made most vivid by the fate of Marxism, was towards a revival of virtue, classical metaphysics, and revelation. The historic and philosophic reasons why these classic ideas were rejected by modernity did not in retrospect hold. Realizing that the ideologies that took the place of religion could also themselves turn out to be the opium of the people, postmodernity took steps to protect itself from any implication that classical metaphysics and revelation might still be valid and true alternatives to the impasse of modernity.

This postmodernist defense of itself was by way of defining all knowledge, including religious and especially moral knowledge, as simply power. As McCoy pointed out, prudence was replaced by art as a guide to reality.⁸ What caused the intellect to move was not, as Aristotle had held, wonder, but rather self-interest and control. In a move of what can only be called desperation, rather than admitting some normative value to truth and being, postmodernism doubted the very capacity of intellect itself to know anything at all.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31–36.

Solzhenitsyn recently described the situation quite accurately:

For a postmodernist, the world does not possess values that have reality. He even has an expression for this, "the world as text," as something secondary, as the text of an author's work, wherein the primary object of interest is the author himself in his relationship to the work, his own introspection. Culture, in this view, ought to be directed inward at itself; it alone is valuable and real. For this reason the concept of play acquires a heightened importance – not the Mozartian playfulness of a universe overflowing with joy, but a forced playing upon the strings of emptiness, where an author need have no responsibility to anyone. A denial of any and all ideas is considered courageous. And in this voluntary self-delusion, "postmodernism" sees itself as a crowning achievement of all previous culture, the final link in its chain. We can have sympathy for this constant searching, but only as we have sympathy for the suffering of a sick man.⁹

Solzhenitsyn, be it noted, here stresses the same point of "a universe overflowing with joy" over against "the strings of emptiness . . . with no responsibility to anyone" that I tried to emphasize earlier in my remarks on Nietzsche and Maritain.

Postmodernism allows no apparent opening to anything that might suggest that there was in fact an objective truth to which the mind was naturally oriented. The given world for the mind to know, a given world that was, to recall Aristotle's definition of knowledge, "to become" his after the mind's own manner of being, could not be reached. However "courageous" it might be to live with the denial of everything, that empty world was in fact most dangerous since everything was now permitted.¹⁰

"In literature, postmodernism amounts to a denial of the fixity of any 'text,' of the authority of the author over the interpreter, of any 'canon' that 'privileges' great books over comic books," Gertrude Himmelfarb has perceptively summarized this position's central theses.

In philosophy, it is a denial of the fixity of language, of any correspondence between language and reality, indeed of any "essential" reality and thus of any proximate truth about reality. In law (in America, at any rate), it is a denial of the fixity of the constitution, of the authority of the founders of the constitution, and of the legitimacy of law itself, which is regarded as nothing more than an instrument of power. In history, it is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past.¹¹

⁹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "How the Cult of Novelty Wrecked the 20th Century," *American Arts Quarterly*, 10 (Spring, 1993), 18–19.

¹⁰ See Peter Shaw, "The Rise and Fall of Deconstruction," *Commentary*, 97 (December, 1991), 50–53.

¹¹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling It As You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight from Fact," *Times Literary Supplement* (London, October 16, 1992), 12.

Fact and truth are thus looked upon as tyrannical in postmodernity because they prevent the free human intellect from creating what it wants, what it could do if it would.

While modernity was willing to consider that truth could be found if thought were left free to be thought, which is what science originally meant, postmodernity argued that an objective world to which the intellect was open and from which it could learn something would necessarily restrict that same intellect from doing what it wanted if the world was not the way it would like it to be. If human nature is changeable, and thus open to scientific manipulation since *what is* need not be what it is, only the boldest souls will be able to choose that into which it ought to change.

In Milan Kundera's novel, *Immortality*, we read the following extraordinary passage:

Because people in the West are not threatened by concentration camps, and are free to say and write what they want, the more the fight for human rights gains in popularity, the more it loses any concrete content, becoming a kind of universal stance of everyone toward everything, a kind of energy that turns human desires into rights. . . . The desire for love the right to love, the desire for rest the right to rest, the desire for friendship the right to friendship . . . the desire to shout in the street in the middle of the night the right to shout in the street.¹²

Kundera has sensed here what I have suggested earlier, that there is a specific relation between the rise of human rights, as they are most commonly understood, and the loss of any sense that might imply an "unchangeable human nature," to use Strauss' words.

Desires thus become rights without the benefit either of clergy or even of nature. And desires, by themselves, are strictly speaking unlimited, as Plato already understood. Human rights, when based solely on desires, mean ultimately nothing other than what we want them to mean. In this context, moreover, "we" is usually a political we, since individual rights have no grounding against collective ones. In other words, we have the strange phenomenon of human rights with no standard of what it is to be human other than what we might want. No transcendent or natural notion of the human good is either possible or wanted.

In Josef Pieper's wonderful opusculum, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, we read these words:

The last word of St. Thomas is not communication but silence. And it is not death which takes the pen out of his hand. His tongue is stilled by the

¹² Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, Grove/Weidenfeld, in *The Wall Street Journal*, July, 16, 1991

superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depths of the mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech.¹³

Pieper in context, of course, is referring to the fact that St. Thomas, who wrote an incredible amount of the profoundest of things before he died at fifty, did not finish his great *Summa Theologiae*.

St. Thomas did not finish his great work, Pieper emphasized, because he suddenly died or because he was prevented to finish it by some natural or political reason. He did not finish it because of a vision he had in which he realized, as he said, in a remarkable phrase, that all he had written, compared to the depths of God, was "but straw." For Pieper this event signified that it was part of the essential nature of St. Thomas' work that it was "unfinished," as if to imply that human knowledge could not by itself ever penetrate to all the things that were to be known, especially the highest things.

Let us ask, then, what might be St. Thomas' position were he to have encountered "postmodernism," always a dangerous supposition, I know. What happens, we might ask, when this postmodernist "right" to "shout in the streets," to take up Kundera's remark, meets the silence of St. Thomas? In the first place, we know that the proper Thomist approach to a thing like postmodernism would be initially the effort to formulate accurately what it is, to formulate it perhaps better than postmodernist writers themselves could formulate their own position. Even in this most skeptical postmodernist position, there is some truth or point that can be distinguished, some truth that can be accepted.

I want to suggest that the effort to escape from reality that Gertrude Himmelfarb rightly saw in the postmoderns is, in a way, the logical antithesis of St. Thomas' mysterious silence. But to establish this point, or at least to clarify its possibility, I want to cite a passage from a lecture of Professor Richard Kennington about the strange position of charity in modernist thought, a point that Leo Strauss had also emphasized. In his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss had remarked that modernity had rejected the means that were implicit in medieval (that is revelational) theories about the grace needed to achieve many of the elevated positions of charity and mercy that were introduced into the world by revelation.¹⁴ Even though modernity rejected these means, it did not reject the goals to which they pointed. Hence the characteristics of the city in

¹³ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (Chicago: Regnery, 1957), 38. See also, James V. Schall, "The Law of Superabundance" (Maritain), *Gregorianum*, Rome, 73 (#3, 1991), 515-42.

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The Free Press, 1958), 85, 231-33.

speech or the city on the hill were thought now to be feasible in a way that neither the classics nor revelation itself warranted.

Kennington wrote, in this regard,

The secularization of charity is . . . a constituent element of the founding of modern philosophy. For the fruits of this charity both motivate the philosopher, guaranteeing him the love and gratitude of all mankind, and supply those benefits that anchor this love and gratitude in the self-interest, "rightly understood," of the rest of the human race. The right of mankind "to be satisfied," in Hegel's phrase, . . . has been placed on a solid footing. But humanity needs desperately . . . some standard of the good and evil of life, by which to choose among satisfactions, if only because universal satisfaction is not available for all individuals, races or peoples. The very goal of mastery of nature, that appeared to put us on the road to universal satisfaction, is the reason why nature, the standard of the good and right, of natural right and natural law, can no longer have for us that function. The secularization of charity is held hostage by the secularization of nature.¹⁵

Bacon's goal of the mastery of nature to result in universal satisfaction through material goods has eliminated as a criterion of good and evil nature and especially human nature.

This project was what was meant by the famous "lowering of the sights" so that questions of the higher things would not be elements of the public order because they were seen as interfering with material progress. Human nature, as Strauss remarked, came to be seen as a dangerous limit on the progress of science. Without this unchangeable nature, however, the distinction of good and evil disappears. The secularization of nature prevents grace from working on nature to achieve the elevated goals that were introduced into the Enlightenment world as a secularization of the eschaton. This strain to achieve the unacknowledged higher means by science alone came to justify the significance of ideology in the public order in modernity

If we return to St. Thomas' silence, then, it is possible to suggest, at least, that the order of the world, which Thomas did so much to articulate, with its relation to revelation, which he integrated into a way of looking at both, of accounting for both, leaves us with the famous Socratic knowing that we know nothing, or with St. Thomas' negative theology, with the fact that what we know about God is that we know nothing. Both Thomas and postmodernism do, in a strange manner, testify to the insufficiency of the actual world. St. Thomas testifies to it while granting its wonder and radiance and light. Postmodernism testifies to it while affirming that nothing in the world is at all

¹⁵ Richard H. Kennington, "Theories of Secularization and Their Relation to Modern Legitimacy," Lecture, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D. C., April 22, 1993, 13-14.

binding or true in comparison to imagined worlds presumably better than the one *that is* about which we can know nothing.

Gertrude Himmelfarb sought to take up a kind of Thomistic effort to suggest how bright young historians, tempted by the dead-end of postmodern theory, might think their way back into reality. Her way was, perhaps not too unremarkably, the very way of Aristotle and Thomas in their approaches to the existence of God through the reality of particular things.

[The postmodernist argument in history] has meant abandoning not only the conventions regarding the presentation and documentation of evidence, but the very idea of historical reasoning, of coherence, consistency, factuality. The postmodernist argument is that these are the "totalizing," "terroristic" practices of an "authoritarian" discipline. But they are also the hard practices of a difficult discipline. Gresham's law applies in history as surely as in economics: bad habits drive out good, easy methods drive out hard ones. And there is no doubt that the old history, traditional history, is *hard*.

Hard – but exciting precisely because it is hard. And that excitement may prove a challenge and inspiration for a new generation of historians. It is more exciting to write true history (or as true as we can make it) than fictional history, else historians would choose to be novelists rather than historians; more exciting to try to rise above our interests and prejudices than to indulge them; more exciting to try to enter the imagination of those remote from us in time and place than to impose our imagination upon them. . . .¹⁶

This excitement has, as its grounding, not the discovery of some imagined history, of some imagined account of how things might have been were we gods to recount them, but the humble respect for what we can know and for what did happen.

The epistemological skepticism about either our knowing faculties or the moral skepticism about our ability to see beyond your own self-interest can both be faced head on. We can show that skepticism is itself theoretically contradictory. We can experience our ability to subject self-interest to common good and objective reality. We can also follow the path of what happens when we deny in theory either of these bases of thought and morality.

The "silence" of St. Thomas, I think, is of a very different nature from that which professes to be able to account for nothing except what it freely chooses because nothing to contradict our own thoughts can, presumably, affect us. Pieper has stated the alternative well:

Man, in his philosophical inquiry, is faced again and again with the experience that reality is unfathomable, and Being is mystery – an experience, it is true, which urges him not so much to a communication as to silence. But

¹⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling It As You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight from Fact," 15.

it would not be the silence of resignation and still less of despair. It would be the silence of reverence.¹⁷

The "silence of despair," it would seem, would characterize the postmodern enterprise, if by despair we mean that, in the end, what we encounter and can encounter in the world is only ourselves. The "silence of reverence," on the other hand, would grant how little we actually might know about things in their order, but it would recognize that since even the tiniest thing has its existence, its being outside of nothing, from the only source that can cause something to stand out of nothingness in the first place, that our not knowing is but an invitation to knowing, "to receive without having asked."

In his *Approaches to God*, Maritain remarked that "what we prove when we prove the existence of God is something which infinitely surpasses us – us and our ideas and our proofs."¹⁸ What we should not conclude from this is that the effort to know as much as we can about God, the effort to state clearly and accurately what we know about Him and about *what is*, is either futile or contrary to our nature and faculties of knowledge. If we might agree with postmodernism about the vastness of what we do not know about ourselves and the world, we can still agree with the silence of St. Thomas in recognizing that the proper path to understanding what it is we do not know is only through what it is we do know.

"We can never properly grasp this correspondence between the original pattern in God and the created copy, in which formally and primarily the truth of things consists," Pieper wrote.

It is quite impossible for us, as spectators, so to speak, to contemplate the emergence of things from "the eye of God." . . . The reason for is that things are *creaturae*, that the inner lucidity of Being has its ultimate and exemplary source in the boundless radiance of Divine Knowledge.¹⁹

The silence of reverence and the humility we need before *what is* are the true sources of excitement, of the real drama of our lot which knows that we did not create ourselves.

Voegelin's remark to a group of students in Montreal, in conclusion, is decisive here: "We all experience our own existence as not existing out of itself but as coming from somewhere even if we do not know from where."²⁰ This initial experience itself can be misunderstood, deliberately misunderstood, to mean that the source of our own radical experience that we "come from somewhere"

¹⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 110.

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God* (New York: Collier, 1962), 24.

¹⁹ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 63.

²⁰ *Conversations with Eric Voegelin*, ed. R. Eric O'Connor (Montreal: Thomas More Institute Papers, 1980), 9.

not ourselves is not primary. The silence of St. Thomas witnesses to the expectant awe of *what is*, of what we did not ask for in the presence of a postmodernism that can listen only to itself. The freedom over the created and the uncreated, the delight of what is yet to come, finds its proper context in St. Thomas rather than Nietzsche precisely because we do not experience our own existence nor that of anything else as coming from out of ourselves. That is, we are agents free enough even to receive a gift, even the gift of ourselves, without our having had to ask for it.