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# Evening Knowledge: Reflections on *La Crépuscule de la Civilisation*

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There is an interchange of metaphors between heavenly bodies and living ones: the rising sun is day aborning and the sun setting is the death of day; but we also speak of morning and evening of a life. There is inevitability in such metaphors, I think. They do not strike us as the intervention of any particular poetic genius but seem to have dawned, so to say, on all of us. When Shakespeare, in *Cymbeline*, speaks of golden lads and golden lasses, then too we seem in the presence of another fundamental way in which men speak of youth by way of contrast with age. The critic William Arrowsmith learned to his delight that the Shakespearean metaphor is actually much more specific. He found that around Stratford, dandelions are called golden lads, and thus Shakespeare must have had in mind the brief flourishing of those flowers, followed by their going to seed. Hugh Kenner, in *The Pound Era*, makes much of this, astonishingly concluding that our response to poetic metaphors is independent of understanding the meaning of the constituent words; but surely we have here an exchange of metaphors of a quite natural kind--the bloom of flowers being seen on an analogy with youth and their going to seed with aging. The reference to dandelions, which you and I might not have known apart from Arrowsmith's discovery, is a metaphor for what we would in any case have understood--namely, the transition from the ripeness of youth to a later stage in life.

All this is by way of preface to some reflections on the fact that Jacques Maritain called the essay he wrote at the dawn of a dark decade half a century ago *The Twilight of Civilization*. This is an employment of a metaphor so fundamental it seems inescapable, so much so that it can lose its metaphorical quality. When Oswald Spengler wrote *The Decline of the West*, the German word he used for the West etymologically means

the twilight lands—*abendsland*. Geography--the Orient and Occident--refers to astronomy, the solar passage, as if one man's east were not another man's west, and the round earth's imagined corners could be definitely dubbed dawn and twilight. "The Land of the Rising Sun" may sound metaphorical while "orient" sounds literal, suggesting that, as Aristotle recognized, the foreignness or unfamiliarity of a word may lend it metaphorical force.

Maritain himself comments on his title, the suggested pessimism of which he characterizes as relative only.

Si le crépuscule annonce le nuit, la nuit elle-même précède le jour. Et même, dans l'histoire humaine, il arrive souvent qu' au crépuscule du soir se mêlent déjà les premières lueurs d'un crépuscule du matin.<sup>1</sup>

I will be returning to the sequel of these words; for now it can be said that Maritain acknowledges the familiarity of the simile.

It would thus be possible to pass over the title of his essay, to see in it a powerful but otherwise uninteresting use of a basic metaphor, transferring to the presumed demise of an historical era the term used to signify the end of a single day; but the Thomist will find in this choice of the title the possibility of deeper significance.

When St. Augustine commented on *Genesis* and confronted the hexameron--the work of the six days--he faced a problem that has always faced exegetes of that book. The first day of creation precedes the creation of the sun, but what then can a "day" mean if day is precisely measured by the passage of the sun across the earth? Augustine ingeniously suggested that the stages of creation could be read from the knowledge of the angels. The six days of creation would then correspond to the six genera of created things presented to the angels. In terms of this, Augustine and Aquinas after him, spoke of the morning and evening knowledge of the angels.

Sicut autem in die consueto mane est principium diei, vespere au-

In the usual sense of 'day,' morning is the beginning of day and

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<sup>1</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Le Crépuscule de la Civilisation* (Montréal: Editions de l'Arbre, 1941), 9.

tem terminus, ita cognitio ipsius primordialis esse rerum, dicitur cognitio matutina: et haec est secundum quod res sunt in Verbo. Cognitio autem ipsius esse rei creatae secundum quod in propria natura consistit, dicitur cognitio vespertina: nam esse rerum fluit a Verbo sicut a quodam primordiali principio, et hic efflexus terminatur ad esse rerum quod in propria natura habent (*Summa theologiae*, Ia, q.58, a.6, c.).

evening its end; so knowledge of the primordial being of things is called morning knowledge--that is, insofar as things are in the Word. Knowledge of the being of a created thing which consists in its proper nature is called evening knowledge, for the being of things flows from the Word as from a primordial principle, and this outflow terminates in the existence things have in their proper natures.

Something can be illumined with reference to one thing and dark with respect to another, needless to say, and the metaphor progresses through the comparison of earthly life and the life of glory--the former being as morning to the latter as evening. So the lives of the faithful here below are morning as compared to the night of the impious and wicked. That is why the evening knowledge the angels have of created things in their own natures is, nonetheless, as morning knowledge compared with ignorance and error.

I find it difficult to believe that a Thomist such as Maritain, his head and heart full of texts of the Master, was not himself at least unconsciously aware of such discussions as these when he wrote the little book that is the subject of these reflections. Indeed, the sequel of the works quoted earlier echo those of Thomas.

Dans ma pensée l'idée des épreuves actuellement soufferts par la civilisation était inséparable de celle d'un nouvel humanisme, qui se prépare dans la présente agonie du monde, et prépare en même temps le renouveau de la civilisation, fût-ce seulement pour ce temps que saint Paul nous annonce comme une résurrection 'entre les morts.'

The dark times into which the world had fallen were seen by Maritain as the result of a humanism gone mad. The humanism we find among the Greeks is open because Greek wisdom sought to attain "that which, being the principle of reason, is better than reason." Things started to go wrong when humanism became anthropocentric, closed upon

itself, excluding the transcendental. Rejecting his status as creature, man saw himself as coming into control of nature. Enormous promises have been made, from Descartes on: the Enlightenment would automatically produce happiness and leisure--an earthly paradise.

It did not happen. The reign of reason ushered in a period of profound unreason and absurdity, or irrationality. Anthropocentric humanism produced an anti-humanist irrationalism. Dark as this all is, Maritain's point is that it is the corruption of a good thing. It is not humanism that is wrong, but anthropocentric humanism. What is needed, what will bring the dawn of a new day, is a Christian humanism. The false idea that each of us is, as it were, an individual God must give way to the true conception of the person as the image of God.

Cast in the stages of angelic knowledge that St. Thomas borrowed from St. Augustine, Maritain's point could be put as follows. We will emerge from the twilight in which we find ourselves today only if we recapture something like the evening knowledge of the angels. Angelic morning knowledge sees things in the Divine Word as their source, whereas their evening knowledge sees creatures in their own natures. *Creatures*. Not human artifacts, not mere stuff to be bent to the whim and the will of man, but things made by God. Christian humanism is not merely the periodic pious lifting of the eyes beyond; it is a way--the true way--of seeing ourselves and the world in which we are, as creation.

It is interesting to compare George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle* with this little book of Maritain. Steiner is speaking later, looking back on the dreadful times in which Maritain wrote *Le Crépuscule de la Civilisation*, though without referring to him. How could the bloody totalitarianisms of the Twentieth Century have emerged from the Enlightenment? It astounds Steiner that an era which put such a premium on universal education, the lifting of the masses, on culture, on political freedoms, should have come to this. Just as Maritain, Steiner sees our times as the failure of the Enlightenment. This is the theme that has been struck by many others, of course--notably by Alasdair MacIntyre. By now it has become almost received opinion that we live in the collapse of all those bumptious Enlightenment promises and assumptions; but Steiner, unlike Maritain, has only more of the same to offer as a solution. It was not the Enlightenment that is wrong, Steiner suggests, but the perversion of it; but unless one sees the failure as part and parcel of an anthropocentric humanism--one closed on itself, excluding the transcendent--no future worth considering can be envisaged.

It could be asked whether Maritain was wise to retain the note of

humanism and to speak of good and bad versions of it. What he calls Christian Humanism would be rejected on historical grounds. Oh, one can find, as in Renaissance humanists, the tendency to use the language of religion, to speak of man as the privileged creature of God, but this should not be understood to mean that the term "humanist" as used by Maritain signifies identically the same concept as it does when used by a contemporary, modern, or, even, Renaissance humanist. Pico della Mirandola did not think he was simply repeating standard Christian lore. *A fortiori*, when Kant and Hegel used the language of Christianity, it was clear that what was going on was a replacement of meanings, not an interpretation. If this be so, the very use of the term "humanism," however qualified, invites misunderstanding. We should not have even a terminology with the Gentiles, St. Thomas suggested about the word "fate," even though he could give an acceptable meaning of the term. To use it ran the risk of being understood to say exactly what one did not want to say.

Well, we know that Maritain's use of "humanism" and of "personalism" was taken to imply what he did not intend. I have no suggestion on the matter. There is a limit to one's responsibility for hasty and distorted readings of what one writes. In favor of "humanism" is that it corrects an impression a reader might get from "*l'évangile et l'empire païen*" --namely, that the only weapon against the twilight of civilization is Christianity. Maritain's citation of Cardinal Cerejeira's praise of Pius XI is more than justified by the stirring tone of the text. "Ceux qui se scandalisent de la suprême condamnation par le Pape des régimes persécuteurs qui se vantent d'avoir sauvé l'Europe du communisme ne savent pas (comme dit l'Évangile) de quel esprit ils sont."<sup>2</sup> The modern reader, living during the collapse of both socialisms, National and Communist, may have been scandalized by those who professed to find the Soviet Union benign because it played a role in the defeat of Fascism and Nazism. The victims from the East will have been more than scandalized, but it is not the Church that must answer to their accusation.

We remember that Maritain was a great interpreter and champion of natural law, that he saw the possibility of agreement between men whose disagreements seem to go all the way down. This little book should not be taken to mean that the only bulwark against the evils it condemns is

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<sup>2</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Le Crépuscule de la Civilisation*, 70.

Christianity. That Greek style wisdom to which he alluded could also provide a standpoint for the task. Nonetheless, the Christian answer is the complete one, comprising and including the natural one. Perhaps Maritain is reminding us it is often that Christian ambience which enables the consciousness of natural law to survive in times when it seems wholly forgotten.