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FREDERICK D. WILHELMSSEN: AN APPRECIATION AND MEMOIR

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FIRST MET FRITZ WILHELMSSEN IN THE SUMMER OF 1982 IN A LECTURE ROOM IN Universidad Maria Cristina aside El Escorial in Spain. He was easily the most striking teacher-in-philosophy, certainly, but really in any discipline and at any level-that I had ever met and have ever since met. By the end of six weeks of a quite simply stunning series of lectures on the history of metaphysics, from Parmenides (“the man very much to be feared” as Fritz was fond of saying) up to and including the beloved Aquinas, I was forever converted to the subject. So converted that on returning home to my undergraduate institution in the U.S., I unhesitatingly turned down a full ROTC scholarship that had been awarded me that summer and took up the study of Aquinas in earnest. After some twenty-odd hours with Fritz in the lecture room and a few more at the bar-I was ready to set aside a life-long dream of a career in the military to venture down, in a phrase of Joseph Owens which Fritz admired, “the trail that reason blazes into the supersensible.” Fritz had that kind of effect on students, and I know there are others who have similar or more dramatic stories.

More important than his awakening in me, as in others, the yearning for that wholeness of vision which is wisdom, Fritz helped us to fall in love with the faith and with its incarnation in the institutions, practices, and civilizations of time, Christendom. Christendom, that temporal, grace-endowed shadow cast by the Bride of Christ on the created but fallen world of nature and culture; Christendom, that reality “so living, so vivid, so manifold, so difficult to define ... an immense spiritual society which knows neither geographic barriers nor political boundaries and in which the Christian feels that he is always at home” (E. Gilson, “Where is Christendom?”).

Fritz was a kind of magical Christian romantic. Who, for instance, can have read his lyrical and impassioned “Christmas in Christendom” (reprinted in *Citizen of Rome*) without being moved to greater Christian devotion, and also perhaps, especially in its liturgical season, to tears? Time and space prohibit the mention of many such pieces he wrote, but they exist awaiting the discovery of a new generation committed to employing their intelligence and imagination in the service of *Cristo Rey*.

His gifts were many, and they were by no means limited to the classroom. He was a fiercely loyal friend who had learned from and lived out the maxim of Aquinas that what one cannot accomplish by oneself one can accomplish through one’s friends. Underneath an apparently tough exterior lurked a passionate and affectionate heart. And I have scarcely met a more spirited and



Fritz Wilhelmsen

engaging conversationalist. Many there are of us who treasure the hours spent in conversation with him in the smoke-filled cafes and bars of the Escorial or Pamplona or Madrid, or in the equally smoke-filled, if less Catholic in their ambiance, roadhouses and bars of the Dallas metroplex.

The topics of these conversations were not restricted to academic philosophy. Fritz was no pedant, and he had no time for pedantry. And while a great lover of academic formality, because someone with a very keen sense of the nobility of the academic vocation, he had even less time for arrogance and pretension and escapism. He was a hard and disciplined worker and writer, but he was not an obsessive academic. Philosophy, particularly Thomistic philosophy, was his life, but for Fritz it was life itself, understood and experienced deeply. He saw philosophy's sublime truths resonating in the most common of commonplaces, and in the grittiest domains of human commerce and quotidian interaction domains for which he had no lack of respect. This ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary and to effect that most difficult but necessary return from the peak of metaphysical abstraction to the singular made him a thinker of great power and a most effective teacher.

His teaching style was to lecture, not to conduct Socratic-style seminars. "I'm a professor and so *I profess*," he would often say. While not for everyone, this approach had decided advantages. Fritz came into the classroom with a mastery of his material and an inspiring capacity to employ the dramatic arts in the art of teaching. Teaching for him was a matter of communicating a body of reasoned conclusions to his audience. In the course of his perorations, and not usually without some perspiring and the occasional spinning of a cigarette end from front to back of classroom he would swiftly and adroitly lead his listeners into the heart of the matter, using gestures, intonations of voice, and evocative examples to get his points home. One was not always, perhaps not often, able to keep up. But one went away both knowing where one's thought would most likely have to arrive if it were to be following the proper trajectory and determined to try to follow the path that this vivid and penetrating intelligence had traced out before it.

At lecture's end questions were dispatched quickly but courteously. Fritz had a wise teacher's instinct for knowing whether a question was well-framed or not and knowing if and how it merited to be answered. Without

hubris but with a very sane sense of the gulf that separated his level of understanding from that of his students, he was able gently but forcibly to teach them the value of intellectual docility and of intellectual humility. This always struck me as a very formative aspect of his teaching style, and it is one, I think, that unfortunately few professors possess as he did. One did not spend time around Fritz without being made aware of what one didn't know and without being moved to do something about it.

Fritz's impassioned and chivalric loyalty to the Angelic Doctor could be mistaken—and mistaken it would be—for dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. But those of us who knew him well knew how deceptive such appearances were. In the matter of interpreting Aquinas I was continually struck, throughout the many conversations I had with Fritz about fine details in the metaphysics and epistemology of Aquinas, by his openmindedness and humility. He had a strong and principled predilection for the interpretations of Etienne Gilson, but he was willing and able to learn from all commentators of whatever alleged interpretive school. And he was quite aware that he might be getting Aquinas wrong in various respects, and quite happy, loving the truth more than his own (even published) views, to be corrected from any quarter.

Nor was he narrow in his range of philosophical interests or influences. Any reader of his metaphysical classic *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence*—and some of us have lost track of how many times we have churned through its pages from beginning to end can testify to this. This work as others weaves themes and considerations from thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Marshall McLuhan, and Eric Voegelin into the treatment of traditional Thomistic theses.

Moreover, as a disciple of Aquinas, Fritz was not an exegete; he was a thinker in his own right. He was not, in Maritain's phrase, "a backward-looking scholastic." While against the churlish fashion of the day he had great reverence for the scholastic manuals of old-models often, he would note, of philosophical clarity and rigor if not always faithful, as he was well aware, to the Thomistic text still, he was very much interested in moving the Thomistic tradition forward, engaging it in dialectic with the best philosophy of the day, and applying it to new fields of inquiry such as communication theory. Because of the particularities of his own training and background this meant for him primarily engaging Thomism with certain strands of continental philosophy and political

philosophy. But he was well aware of the need for Thomists to branch out into all other worthwhile styles of philosophical inquiry, and he had no interest in preserving Thomism as some kind of endangered, and therefore overly isolated and protected, intellectual species. Along these lines, in one of my last meetings with him in 1994, I remember him speaking with highest praise of an essay in the Anglo-American analytic style by a former student of his.

Yet it was a mark of Fritz's intellectual modesty that he did not venture lightly outside his competence: he knew and was very open about the limitations of his learning, and about where his gifts and contributions lay. And his frankness about this, both in and outside of the classroom, was refreshing and edifying.

His lean and vigorous yet often highly poetic prose was masterful and has few peers among English-speaking philosophers in his tradition to date. Fritz saw himself not only as a metaphysician and political theorist, but also as one of the last practitioners of a dying trade—the Catholic essayist. The trade may not have completely died off yet, and if it is able to rouse itself to life in a more robust form than it currently possesses, it may well have Frederick Wilhelmsen as one of its main inspirations.

Adventurer, sailor, essayist, metaphysician, political theorist, lover of history, Fritz was first and foremost a faithful son of the Church. While never without his own opinions I never knew Fritz to give his private judgment pride of place over the authoritative pronouncements of the Magisterium, ordinary or extraordinary. He had a very supernatural understanding of the Church and never indulged in the temptation—which he could have easily, given his sizable following of putting himself forward as wiser or holier than the Church hierarchy. And finally, while being known for his quickness in defending the Church, he was also slow to criticize others among her members who had fallen on hard times.

I remember one striking incident where the failings of a certain institution in the Church not known for its faithfulness of late were brought to his attention. In response, Fritz calmly but swiftly replied, “I’ve made enough mistakes in my own life, and I have no interest in publicly criticizing this institution, or any other in the church.” And he meant it. When he criticized the beliefs of others I always knew him to do it in a way that was,

even if sharp, unfailingly empathetic. He had a keen understanding of the human condition as both fallen and redeemed, and with respect to his own failings he did not make any effort to hide them, was known in conversation to encourage others to avoid them, and would not have wanted them to be whitewashed in his absence. Indeed, one of Fritz's most endearing qualities was an ability to call things by their proper name and to be both child-like and brutally honest about matters under consideration including his own state of soul. I don't know if Fritz had a devotion to the Apostle Nathaniel, but he might well have had.

Everyone no doubt has their own list of lessons learned from Fritz and what follows is a personal one, but I think it contains several items to which I know Fritz gave great importance, especially towards the end of his career.



Secular Christianity

Not in spite of but more as a result of his deep understanding of Christian sacralization, Fritz had an equally profound understanding of the Christian life lived not under the rubric of the *fugio mundi* of the traditional religious orders, but in the heart of the messy, rough-and-tumble world of the *saeculum* and under the rubric of the *instaurare omnia in Christo*. I remember once at the end of a lecture on Christ and the metaphysics of the future tense, Fritz was asked by a young student about the value of contemplative religious life. His answer, or rather the mode of his answer, gave me pause at the time, but I think I have since come to understand it. He turned with a curious look on his face, as if considering how the world of Christendom looked from a perspective that was not and would never be his, and said that this calling, however noble, was only one way of realizing one's identity in Christ.

I have since come to admire Fritz's steadfastness in his own calling; though a layman with a profound reverence for the clergy and the religious, Fritz never veered from his own secular path to God, and I never knew him to give in to the common temptation of spiritual wishful thinking. Though he had no misgivings about the value and the beauty of the eschatological calling, his way was

in the heart of the world and his bent was thoroughly incarnational.

His profound understanding of the metaphysics of creation imbued him with a passionate love for the created order, mirror of the divine and uncreated perfections, and this love was infectious, rivaling in inspirational power that of Chesterton himself. It is no exaggeration to say that the participated divinity of the most commonplace of objects, situations, and circumstances flashed into view when Fritz gestured and spoke. He left us often without words; his gestures and words were themselves often sacramentals. His child-like joy in the created order was a share in the Creator's own joy.

Secular outreach

In one of the last letters I received from our teacher and friend only two months before the end of his earthly life, he expressed a deep regret to me that his own audience had been too narrowly constituted, religiously and politically. In the eyes of the mainstream—especially English-speaking-philosophical world, Frederick Wilhelmsen is not a major thinker. He is not a thinker read outside a circle of Catholics and political conservatives. This is in some ways inevitable and in other ways regrettable. It takes a special kind of courage and Christian spirit of sacrifice, qualities in which Fritz was not lacking, to take the goods of Christian wisdom to the secular marketplace, to engage in patient and fraternal conversation with all our fellow-travelers in the intellectual life, especially the best of them. Fritz very much wanted to see this task carried out; his own work in communication theory is a model in this regard one of the many ways in which he sought to advance and apply to new domains metaphysical and epistemological theses of Aquinas. But there remains an urgent need for Thomists, following Fritz's example and with the help of his thought, to enter the increasingly sophisticated, if at times myopic, discussions that are taking place in contemporary philosophy in the key inner circle divisions of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology/philosophical psychology, and philosophical logic.

The supremacy of theology

Like his modern-day *magister* Etienne Gilson, Fritz was well aware that their common master, the Common Doctor, was first and always a theologian. With Gilson, Fritz never had an exaggerated sense of the autonomy of philosophy or of any other secular discipline, and he was very desirous of seeing his students fall in love with

the wisdom that exceeds even metaphysical wisdom: revealed theology. As a layman and a philosopher he made serious efforts to read theology and to keep informed of developments in this higher wisdom, and he was very quick to point beyond his own field of expertise, in the manner of John the Baptist, to something greater. With Gilson also it was his ardent wish to see the coming to life of a new generation of speculative theologians, faithful to the Church, imbued with Thomistic principles, and fully conversant with the scientific and philosophical advances of their time.

“In diebus illis erant gigantes super terram,” I once heard Fritz intone at the end of a stirring lecture and in reference to the stature of heroes Chesterton and Belloc. The true measure of anyone's stature as a human being and as a child of God is known to the Almighty alone, as Fritz himself would insist. But those of us still on earth are capable of our own intimations. And in the matter of his stature as a thinker in the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas—that rarest of creatures even, a Thomistic metaphysician—I think there can be little doubt: Frederick Wilhelmsen was a mighty figure indeed. For those of us who dwelt awhile in his shadow, it must be our hope, as it was Fritz's and is assuredly now, for a new generation of thinkers to follow the standard that he raised, to carry forward the tradition of Thomistic wisdom and Catholic letters against odds that must not daunt us. Of course, we must accomplish this in the spirit of a supernatural and not jingoistic triumphalism, mindful of the unmerited gift we have received and of the *in omnibus caritas*. For, as Fritz noted well, “For Christians, Being is a gift, and our response to such a dazzling inheritance as Being is to bend the knee in thanksgiving, thus saying to God through his World, Amen.”

In seeking to accomplish this we could do much worse than to imitate the courage and the Christian *joie de vivre* of our friend that staunch knight of Christendom whose absence we now lament.

