

Don Federico: Presente! **WILLIAM H. MARSHNER**

FAITH AND REASON

Vol. XXII, No. 4

Winter 1996

Fritz Wilhelmsen and Bernard Lonergan first met in a hotel bar at an American Catholic Philosophical Association convention forty-some years ago. Lonergan was already glued to a barstool when Fritz came in and headed for a seat several stools away. The brash young author of *Man's Knowledge of Reality* had recognized the author of *Insight* but didn't think that the converse held. He sat down quietly, not desiring an "encounter." But after a few minutes Lonergan swiveled around and fixed eyes on him. "You don't like my stuff, do you?"

It was one of the best understatements of the Thomistic revival. In *Man's Knowledge*, Wilhelmsen had attacked the conceptualist theory of the judgment, and that was Suarez's theory, and Lonergan took it for granted. But Wilhelmsen had not attacked Lonergan by name--not in those days--and was not to do so until years later (1972) when he was doing a stint in Washington and living in my apartment. There he banged out "The Priority of Judgment over Question: Reflections on Transcendental Thomism" for the *International Philosophical Quarterly*, and I did the footnotes.

So how did Lonergan know, on a barstool twenty years earlier, that the gulf between the two men was profound? Could a quibble over the judgment entail antithetical metaphysics? I will explain the matter as Fritz explained it to me, and I will do so as my tribute to him. For this "quibble" will serve to highlight what is supreme and "for the ages" in Fritz Wilhelmsen's output as a philosopher.

What is conceptualizable is always some intelligibility within the line of essence. If judgment is the linking (or separating) of two concepts, judgment does not attain existence. It plays with blocks of essence. It puts ideas together, and then it remains for some further reflection to ask whether the ideas synthesized "correspond" to the real or have "truth." Put all the weight of truth on that second and further reflection, and you have opened a space as wide as a boulevard for Hume's skepticism, for German idealism, and for Husserl's *epoché*. You and your judgment are on one side, and real existence is on the other, with Hume/Kant/Husserl and the whole zoo of modernity strutting on parade along the boulevard in between. To get across, you will need to invent a transcendental argument. In the end, it will have to say that the inner intelligibility synthesized in your concepts demands, or posits, or entails a real existence on the other side. Like Descartes, you will have to try to squeeze existence out of a clear and distinct idea. In short, begin with the judgment as a linking of concepts, and you are stuck in the glue of modernity. Transcendental Thomism is Lonergan stuck on fly paper.

Fritz knew that existence is attained in the judgment, because the subject of judgment is already the real, referentially intended. No transcendental argument is needed to retrieve it, and none would succeed, because existence in exercised act cannot be teased out of essence or existence in signified act. (Read question 2, article 1, in the First Part of the *Summa*, and see how

Aquinas dispatches Anselm. If you don't understand it, read Cajetan's commentary. If you don't understand that, read Wilhelmsen's *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence*.)

Since existence is attained in the judgment, man's knowledge is not limited to systems of necessary (conceptual) hookups. Man's knowledge attains the existent, and hence the contingent, and hence cries out for both the Cause of the contingent and the *sense* of events. Man's knowledge attains the Cause in a proof, but the sense of the output of contingent *esse's* Cause is providence, and the ends of providence are revealed information in Christ Jesus. Thus the question of history is planted at the heart of knowledge, and the answer of the Catholic Church is planted with the question. Without that question *and that answer*, there is no knowledge of our common meaning in history.

Lonergan knew that between him and Wilhelmsen was the whole, wide boulevard of modernity, and Fritz knew that Lonergan could find no meaning but what was on parade behind Descartes/Hume/Kant and the rest. Lonergan was in the parade, and so of course he went the route of the parade, from Transcendentalism to historicism to dissent over *Humanae vitae*-from Catholic liberalism, to relativistic liberalism, to erotic liberalism.

Fritz Wilhelmsen was never in that parade. Others will memorialize in song and story the sides of Fritz that are beyond my capacity-Fritz the second Belloc, Fritz the Carlist, Fritz the intimate of Bozell and Kendall, Fritz the larger-than-life adventurer, drinker, smoker, and sailor. I knew him slightly in these dimensions, but I was too narrow-chested to take him in. Or to change the figure, Fritz was like a legendary actor, who could play any male part--the romantic lead, the tough guy, the playboy, the eccentric scholar, the old curmudgeon-and I wanted to be his understudy, but I could do so only in a few types of roles.

I knew a young chap about 18, never mind his name, who had just spent a summer learning metaphysics and carousing with Fritz in Spain. He came home in the fall with a new and burning ambition. His mind was made up, his vocation discerned. He was going to be--get this--a metaphysician/soldierof-fortune. If the reader is mystified, he didn't know Fritz. I understood the fellow's ambition the moment I heard it. He dreamed of a day when his international Catholic Brigade, after two weeks of maneuver warfare, has pinned down the Peccadores Marxistas in a narrow valley. With his AK-47 wrapped in a rosary, he is fighting against the enemies of Christ the King, while at that very moment in New York and Washington, the *Review of Metaphysics* is publishing a review of his massive treatise, *Il Miglior Fabro*, on Dante's grasp of *esse* in comparison with Goethe's. Of course. The young fellow wanted to be Fritz's understudy just as I did.

Wrong tense. I do. I still do. There is nothing impossible about a double-edged career in letters and action. It is just hard. Very hard. Most of us are too small for it. But the hero lists of the Left used to be full of men who were big enough. Think of John Comford, poet and classicist, killed in action with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. Intense young intellectuals used to burn with a faith that made one thing very clear: literature, philosophy, and military action are just so many fronts in one and the same revolutionary struggle.

Fritz Wilhelmsen was not unique because he was big enough to fight on several fronts at once. That only made him rare. He was unique because he believed in Christendom the real Christendom of throne and altar-the same way Cornford believed in Communism. To Fritz, Christendom was achievable, and good for mankind, and history was groaning for it, and we are suffocating without it, and we can make no peace with the world-wide system of liberalism that is suffocating us.

Fritz used to tell the story of a swing he made through New York, visiting and partying with the *Commonweal* crowd in the late '40s. They were literate, witty, pious (in their way) but unable to imagine anything better than tinkering about within democracy. "Yes, but what is your *vision*?" Fritz asked them. They had no answer. Liberalism was their outer horizon; they could envision nothing beyond it. Fritz astounded them with a genuine alternative: Habsburg restoration, Christendom reborn from the Andes to the Urals.

Let's give Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray their due. Anglo-American liberalism was different from the deadly Jacobin virus that killed Catholic Europe. One could hope that good, Burkean things would come of it, even Catholic things in good time. It was in suspense for almost two centuries whether Anglo-American freedom would posit its own intelligible specifications, as Thomistic *esse* posits an essence within itself, or whether it would turn out to be an ultimate vacuity, like Hegel's *Sein*, which is dialectically *Nichts*.

Well, the suspense is over. A team of nine cardiologists looked recently at "the heart" of Anglo-American liberty, and this is what five of them found. "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life," said they, in *Planned Parenthood of S. E. Pennsylvania v. Casey*, upholding a woman's right to abort her child, or keep it, as her own concept of these things dictates. Now think about a simple question. What is the job of a civilization? What do people want their civilization to do for them? May I suggest the obvious? People want their civilization to give them a common "concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." Isn't that about right? So with the sentence I just quoted, the U.S. regime declares itself the guardian of a liberty which is empty of, and incompatible with, any civilization whatsoever. American liberty is officially *das Nichts*.

This means that the regime's rules of engagement have been dictated for all future culture-wars. Religions and cultures and ethical visions and world-views are still allowed to compete in America, but only in no-win wars. No civilization is allowed to expand. Only *das Nichts* is allowed to grow. Ask the people of Colorado. *Das Nichts nichtet*, as they learned in *Romer v. Evans*.

So it is time to pass the drinks and light the cigars. The regime is doomed. Its heart of darkness is running a stake through itself. The question of the regime's very legitimacy has been raised, and in neo-conservative circles. Bork and Colson are starting to sound like Neuhaus, who is starting to sound like *Evangelium vitae*, in which John Paul II is starting to sound like a *Triumph* editorial.

This is what the new guys know: people cannot be deprived of shared, communal meaning. The whole history of mankind is about making civilizations. People are groaning for one, even now. The Left has none to offer, and a regime that declares itself the enemy of any such offer from any quarter cannot endure.

Fritz knew that much and more. He knew that the heart of every civilization is a religion, and that one religion (exactly one) is the full and complete reception of revealed Truth. Fritz knew that the wars of the twenty-first century will be happy ones, because they will be about which civilization-Islamic, Oriental, or Christian-will prevail. Fritz knew that the other civilizations duck or fudge or answer with fatal error the existential questions which pour out of the restless heart of man. Fritz knew that only one heart speaks to our heart, and it is Christ's crucified heart, alone revealing the ends of providence, alone making sense of our broken events.

I don't know whether Fritz ever doubted, while he was with us in this life, how the wars of the coming century would end. He was certainly tempted to doubt, as he watched the implosion of the Catholic Church throughout the Western world, the dance of death through the seminaries, convents, and colleges that had once been seedbeds of Catholic militancy, the failure of his Argentine hopes, the perfidy of Franco's kinglet, the self-decimation of Catholic Navarra. Here below, we see through a glass darkly; and the years of Fritz's life coincided with a gathering of the darkness to unprecedented thickness.

But if he ever tasted such doubts in the privacy of his own heart, he tastes them no longer. Today Fritz sees the Church terrible as an army in battle array. Today Fritz sees that King with the thorn-scarred face assembling *a requete* beyond all numbering, for the victory of the Lord of Hosts in the coming wars on earth. Today Fritz hears the King call out his name, and he answers with upraised hand, as he taught us all to answer the rollcall of glory: *Viva Cristo rey! Presente!*