

A Gothic Approach:  
Reading Maritain after Reading Cayley  
by Robert Kugelmann

I first encountered Ivan Illich when he came to Dallas with Barbara Duden and others to think about body history. What I recall most vividly was being awakened—for me—to a new way to look at experience. I had been, up to that point, trying to take an archetypal approach, along the lines of James Hillman. As I was not an analyst or a psychotherapist, I was dissatisfied with what I was doing: it lacked a grounding in some praxis. Then came Dr Storch and his 18th century patients who, according to Duden, did not experience their bodies as we do.<sup>1</sup> The historicity of experience, of phenomena, of perception, of thought styles, of matter even, grabbed my imagination. I studied Illich's earlier work, especially *Medical Nemesis*. His incisive critiques of contemporary institutions were clear enough, but their sources remained obscure. Lee Hoinacki taught me that the work of Thomas Aquinas was fundamental to Illich's ways of approaching modern certainties, although Thomas alone would not have necessarily led Illich in the directions that he followed. I am not arguing otherwise.

Nevertheless, an insight into Illich's deployment of Thomistic concepts emerged in his use of "subsistence." In *Toward a History of Needs*, Illich contrasted subsistence with "professionally certified lack, need, and poverty."<sup>2</sup> He proposed:

1 Barbara Duden, *The Woman beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth Century Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

2 Ivan Illich, *Toward a History of Needs* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1978), 52.

to recover the term [subsistence] by speaking about modern subsistence. Let us call modern subsistence the style of life that prevails in a postindustrial economy in which people have succeeded in reducing their market dependence, and have done so by protecting—by political means—a social infrastructure in which techniques and tools are used primarily to generate use-values unmeasured and unmeasurable by professional need-makers.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of subsistence fosters what Illich called—and attempted to keep as a non-technical term—“aliveness” in individuals and communities. “Personal aliveness contributes [the area of subsistence] to social reality,” and that is distinct from what “formal economic activities” contribute to social reality.<sup>4</sup> Subsistence consists in minimizing economic neediness, and aliveness flourishes when people can maximize their lives outside consumer dependence upon technological goods and services.

There is, however, a deeper connection between aliveness and subsistence, to be found in Aquinas’ analysis of “the person.” Following Boethius, Aquinas defined the person as “an individual substance of a rational nature” (I, Q.29, art. 1). A person “subsists.” Subsistence is “that mode of existence which is self-contained and independent of any subject, and also a being that exists in this manner, synonym of *hypostasis*, *res subsistens*, *persona*, i.e., both that which exists for itself and not in another and also the manner of existence.”<sup>5</sup> Persons subsist, that is to say, they are not constituent parts of

3 Illich, 1978, 52.

4 Ivan Illich, “Subsistence,” in *Powers that make us human*, ed. Kenneth Vaux (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 50.

5 Roy J. Deferrari, Sister M. Inviolata Barry, and Ignatius McGuinness, I. (ed.), *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas based on the Summa Theologica and Selected Passages of his Other Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 1063.

something else. A human hand, for example, does not subsist, since it is part of the body. In economic terms, subsistence is relative to the degree that individuals are not simply dependent on consumer goods but make their own living.

In this respect, Illich was—not a Thomist—but Thomistically informed. Reading Cayley, I discovered that this Thomistic streak in Illich's work ran deep, and that the key to this streak was the work of the French Thomistic philosopher, Jacques Maritain. In the late 1940s, Illich had studied Aquinas with Maritain, who at that time was France's ambassador to the Vatican.<sup>6</sup> Illich did not become a Neoscholastic, which was a type of Scholastic philosophy that systematized Thomas and other Thomistic thinkers ahistorically, and which was the official orthodoxy of the Church at the time, especially in its fight against modernism. The goal of Neoscholastic thought was, in the words of Pope Leo XIII, who championed the "return" to Thomas, *vetera novis augere et perficere* (strengthen and complete the old by aid of the new).<sup>7</sup> Illich (1992) recalled Maritain's "Gothic approach, both narrow and precise, and extraordinarily illuminating ... [which] laid the Thomistic foundations of my entire perceptual mode."<sup>8</sup> He continued, saying that "I experienced Thomism—no, *Thomas*—as I discovered him through Jacques Maritain, as the architecture which has made me intellectually free to move ... without getting dispersed."<sup>9</sup> The metaphors he used, "foundations," "architecture," and "move," are related to Maritain's "Gothic approach." It is worthwhile to pause an exploration of subsistence to understand a bit better Gothic architecture, and what kinds of movements it fosters.

6 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 33.

7 Pope Leo XIII, *Aeterni patris*, 1879, Section 24.

8 Illich, in David Cayley (ed.), *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 150.

9 Illich, in Cayley, 1992, 150.

Maritain supplied a guiding thought:

The radiating dissolution of the Middle Ages and of its sacral forms is the engendering of a secular civilization—of a civilization not only secular, but which separates itself progressively from the Incarnation. It is still, if you wish, the age of the Son of man: but in which man passes from the cult of the God-man, of the Word made man, to the cult of humanity, of sheer man.

To characterize as briefly as possible the spirit of the epoch dominated by the humanist Renaissance and by the Reformation, let us say that it has wished to proceed to an anthropocentric rehabilitation of the creature, of which a palpable symbol, if one sought in religious architecture a correspondence of the soul, could be found in the substitution of the Baroque style (very beautiful in itself, moreover) for the Roman and Gothic styles.<sup>10</sup>

According to Maritain, the modern world originated in the Renaissance, with a turning away from the transcendent dimension of life, a secularization of the Christian message.<sup>11</sup> Illich developed much further the thesis that modernity was not simply a secularization of the Christian message but a corruption of Christianity. What is at issue here is that Illich's approach to social issues was grounded in Christianity and in the Incarnation as the pivot of history. His work is incomprehensible without acknowledging the primacy of the transcendent dimension of human living.

Maritain's colleague at Princeton's Institute of Advanced Studies, Erwin Panofsky, already addressed what a

10 Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a new Christendom*, trans. J. W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner, 1968), 15.

11 W J Schultz, *Jacques Maritain's social critique and his personalism* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1982).

Gothic approach could mean in his *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. Gothic art and Scholasticism shared “a mental habit—reducing this overworked cliché to its precise Scholastic sense as a ‘principle that regulates the act.’”<sup>12</sup> Maritain’s Gothic approach provided such a “principle that regulates the act” for Illich.

We can specify this mental habit in a number of ways, drawing on Panofsky:

(1) This mental habit was a search for “the unity of truth.”<sup>13</sup> This meant for the Scholastics that ultimately there were not two truths, one of faith and one of reason, and it meant that all truths lead to the Divine. In Illich’s writing, this search was often veiled, and Cayley shows the extent of this search, especially in seeing the Incarnation as the central event in history.<sup>14</sup>

(2) This mental habit took shape as *manifestatio* or “clarification,” “a system of thought complete and self-sufficient within its own limits yet setting itself apart from the realm of revelation, it became necessary to ‘manifest’ the completeness, self-sufficiency, and limitedness of the system of thought.”<sup>15</sup> For Panofsky, this resulted in the formalism of Scholastic writing, including Aquinas’ arrangement of arguments, objections, and replies, all highly structured “according to a system of homologous parts and parts of parts.”<sup>16</sup> In Illich, it showed itself in his interrogation of “certainties,” and not in any obvious Scholastic formalism.

(3) This mental habit, or disposition, entailed *concordantia*, “the acceptance and ultimate reconciliation of contradictory

12 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, qu. 49, art. 3, c, in Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: New American Library, 1985, 21.

13 Panofsky, 28.

14 Cayley, 2021.

15 Panofsky, 30-31.

16 Panofsky, 31.

possibilities.”<sup>17</sup> We see *concordantia* in Illich’s position on the *corruptio optimi pessima*, especially in his analysis of “life” as an idol, although it also shows in his critiques of modern institutions, such as medicine and education, which become self-destructive and counter-productive when they exceed certain limits. Within limits, these innovations do good, but the worm of evil lies within them.

Subsistence was a Scholastic term as we have seen, referring to the mode of existence of a person. Subsistence means that a person is not a monad, enclosed upon itself. In fact, we can contrast the person, as Illich used the term, with “possessive individuals,”<sup>18</sup> that is, the social units “who live in an environment where values are scarce by their very nature, and who make each of their decisions in light of some marginal utility,”<sup>19</sup> and whose relationships with others are contractual. Modern institutions serve possessive individuals, and eclipse the person.

This contrast between the possessive individual and the person that is everywhere in Illich’s writing, owes much, I claim, to Maritain, and the contrast was part of the Gothic approach that Illich took. For Maritain, “individuals” are parts of the social order to which they have obligations and rights. We are individuals by virtue of being material beings, although we are not, in Scholastic thought, simply material beings, since we are ensouled, the soul being the formative principle of living. We are also persons, and it is important to note that in Aquinas, humans are called “persons” analogically, God being the perfection of what it means to be a person. For Maritain:

17 Panofsky, 64.

18 C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

19 Illich, 1985, 48.

a Person is essentially a spiritual totality, characterized by independence. A Person is a universe to itself, a universe of knowledge, love and freedom, a whole which cannot be subordinated as a part, except with regard to such wholes to which it can be related through the instrumentality of knowledge and love. Personality is an analogical and transcendent perfection, which is fully realized only in God, the Pure Act.<sup>20</sup>

For Maritain, these two, individuality and personality, are not separate realities: “Our whole being is an individual by reason of that which derives from matter, and a person by reason of that in us which derives from spirit.”<sup>21</sup> We are not simply and automatically persons, even though that is our potentiality, our telos: “he himself, in the moral order, must win his liberty and his personality. In other words ... his action can follow the bent either of personality or of material individuality.”<sup>22</sup> Maritain’s critique of the modern world rests upon this notion of the person.

We cannot understand the person in this sense without considering love, according to Maritain. Personhood is subsistence:

the ultimate achievement by which the creative influx seals, within itself, a nature face to face with the whole order of existence so that the existence which it receives is *its own* existence and *its own* perfection. Personality is the subsistence of the spiritual soul communicated to the human composite. Because, in our substance, it is an

20 Jacques Maritain, J., “The Immortality of Man,” *The Review of Politics*, 3, no.4(1941): 416.

21 Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. J. J. Fitzgerald, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966) 43.

22 Maritain, 1966, 44.

imprint or seal which enables it to possess its existence, to perfect and give itself freely, personality testifies to the generosity or expansiveness in being which an incarnate spirit derives from its spiritual nature and which constitutes, within the secret depths of our ontological structure, a source of dynamic unity, of unification from within.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, being a person “requires communication with *other* and *the others* in the order of knowledge and love.”<sup>24</sup> The human person has a form that is an *imago Dei*, and the Trinitarian God is the ultimate form of subsistence in relationships of love. This understanding of what it means to be a person underlies all of Illich’s analysis of the modern age. It is not the only thing, to be sure, but it does reflect what Illich may have learned from Maritain’s Gothic approach.

A final aspect of the Gothic approach is that it occurs at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions. A Gothic cathedral, compared to earlier styles, accentuates the vertical dimension, the human aspiration for the divine and the divine presence among us, manifested in the light that comes from on high. Simultaneously, there is the horizontal dimension, that of social life, worship and commerce, baptisms, weddings, and funerals, for example. If one were to emphasize the vertical dimension in Illich’s analyses—stress too much his grounding in faith, one would miss the threats and realities that he tackled in his critiques of modern certainties. If one were to neglect the vertical dimension, however, then one would miss why the critiques matter.

Let me give a few examples of this approach as it

23 Maritain, 1966, 40-41.

24 Maritain, 1966, 42.

informed Illich's work. First, there is his critique of systems as the structure of contemporary institutions. Cayley, drawing on Illich and on Katherine Hayles, points out that "the age of systems," in which we reside, is self-regulating, abstract, and without thresholds that open to an outside.<sup>25</sup> The worst part of the age of systems is not that we are increasingly enclosed in virtual realities. The worst is that the absence of boundaries tempts us to forget that we are persons, in Maritain's sense. Depersonalization in this specific sense is a contemporary vice. We remain "individuals" in Maritain's sense, even if individuality is redefined as a self-regulating subsystem who manages risks and potentialities for optimization of the use of the system's benefits.

At this juncture, I must introduce a *sed contra*, to use a Scholastic term for making an objection to a thesis. Emmanuel Levinas, in a brief essay, "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us" challenges the Heideggerian critique of technology as rendering us "unknowingly manipulated by calculations, statistics and planning."<sup>26</sup> Yuri Gagarin, on April 12, 1961, was launched into earth orbit, becoming the first human being ever to leave the earth and see it from above. Gagarin's orbit of the earth could symbolize the enframing of nature by technology. Levinas, however, while acknowledging the threats of technology to our personhood and to the well-being of the natural world, sees something else going on. For Levinas, technology "wrenches us out of the Heideggerian world and the superstitions surrounding Place. From this point on, an opportunity appears to us: to perceive men outside the situation in which they are placed, and let the human face shine in all its

25 Cayley, 2021, 246-251. See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Infomatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

26 Emmanuel Levinas, "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 231.

nudity.”<sup>27</sup> Gagarin’s achievement “is that he left the *Place*.”<sup>28</sup> Technology breaks the spell of local customs and opens up possibilities for universality.

One might say, Gagarin left the flesh behind. Cayley devotes a great deal of attention to Illich’s use of “flesh,” as opposed to the body, the anatomical body, the body as perceived with the medical gaze.<sup>29</sup> Forgetfulness of the flesh leaves us bewildered without anchor in reckoning with the Incarnation. While he says much about it, I cite one passage: “Flesh, then, names an inchoate dimension of experience that each age constructs differently as its ‘epoch-specific’ body.... Flesh names the element of continuity—the underlying stuff that we are. It is what bears the ‘image of God’ that was impressed upon Adam and Eve and what intermingles with God in the Incarnation.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time, flesh is rootedness in Place. It masks the “nudity of the face.” Something like this was recognized in the work of John Cassian, one of the founders of western monasticism in the early fifth century. The monk, in order to achieve purity of heart and an approach to the Almighty, had to separate himself from the flesh. This meant not only fasting, vigils, prayers, following the rule of the house; it also meant separation from family, which was flesh of my flesh. There is another journey that we take, one that leaves Place behind, the ethical journey of Abraham from the land of his birth to an unknown land, never to return. Ultimately, then, being a person is to be open to the other and otherness even in a technological system.

In Scholastic argumentation, there must be a reply

27 Levinas, 232-233.

28 Levinas, 233.

29 Cayley, 2021, 254-272.

30 Cayley, 2021, 272.

to the sed contra. Let us grant that technological systems, in which we increasingly dwell, arise from aspirations of the human soul. That in itself does not guarantee that “leaving the Place” is benign. Technological systems include nuclear weapons as well, serving as self-regulating keepers of some semblance of world peace. The genius of “mutually assured destruction” is that the system regulates our behavior, keeping it within limits. To unleash them would assure a flesh-less universality. In this regard, the systems within which we find ourselves open up on horror as well as the ethical relationship. Illich’s analyses, which Cayley elucidates, direct our attention to this intersection of good and evil, an intersection with no beyond.

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