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*Immediacy and Meaning: J. K. Huysmans and the Immemorial
Origin of Metaphysics* by Caitlin Smith Gilson (review)

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SMITH GILSON, Caitlin. *Immediacy and Meaning: J. K. Huysmans and the Immemorial Origin of Metaphysics*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. xxvi + 297 pp. Cloth, \$120.00—The title does not do justice to this book's rich, eclectic contents; it manages to contain at once an analysis of J. K. Huysmans's Durtal tetralogy, a philosophical inquiry into the nature of human knowledge and freedom, a theological exploration of prayer and suffering, and a florilegium of passages from various poets, mystics, and philosophers in and outside the Catholic tradition. It concludes with a long excerpt from a poem written by Smith Gilson herself. The central theme in which these strands cohere is the nature of the life of faith as such—the *homo viator's* quest. Huysmans's novels supply the background pattern and occasion for this theme; they are not scrutinized as objects of literary criticism. The result is a highly personal meditation—Thomistic in inspiration—about God's intimate participation in human freedom, and about human life as a context of God's activity.

The book is divided into three long chapters, each of which develops a set of questions loosely keyed to Durtal's trajectory, from *The Damned* to *The Oblate*. The first chapter sets out to develop a philosophical approach adequate to the biographical uniqueness of human incarnation. Smith Gilson argues that our intellect is chronically prone to the error of too readily assimilating, mediating, and over-conceptualizing the presence of the other (and the Other). This error—the temptation to the idolatry of abstractions—is presented here and throughout as the exemplary foil to her account. The nonmediated, irreducibly personal character of experience is not a contingent fact about our freedom, but the essential setting within which we make contact with eternity. Smith Gilson argues that this is the intuition and (partial) truth of nominalism. "The oddness of human temporality is that it is formed by our responsiveness to what we cannot assimilate."

This strongly immanentist approach naturally raises the question of God's relation to our own experience. Smith Gilson addresses this issue in the second chapter, by developing an account of an "engodded" metaphysics that at once respects the fundamental difference between God and human beings (she takes care to distinguish her position from pantheism), while affirming the ultimate union of God's being with "the living existential act of each being." God is not a maximally universal being in need of subsequent mediation with particular experiences. Rather, "The sensible, particular, determinate world *already* unites us to the universal . . . it is *already* in contact with and participates in His Immediate Presence and, at its innermost as uncreated, is identical with Him." Smith Gilson characterizes God's antecedent presence within the unmediated and specific particulars of our life as "immemorial" (picking up Jean-Luc Nancy's use of the term). It is this dimension of our experience that finally allows us "*to remember something that never occurred but which was implicit in all that did occur*," allows us to discover the Providential plan within "the epistemology of the specific and particular."

The final chapter then speaks to the issue of what it might mean for us to suffer and to pray, precisely in light of the fact that God is not a mere spectator or an umpire aloof from our concerns. Here is the best material in the book. Smith Gilson manages both to emphasize the fundamentally mysterious character of suffering (in light of familiar paradoxes about God's omniscience and omnipotence)—its recalcitrance to easy explanation—and helpfully to elaborate the point that prayer is itself the cultivated experience of the unmediated, “uncreated” desire, in and through which we experience God's presence. “Prayer is both an act of superhuman obedience and superhuman freedom, for its true force is that it places us within the appetite of and for the infinite, within the freedom which precedes all acts.”

The book is hard going for stretches. While Smith Gilson calls attention to the problem of communicating philosophically at all, one does not have the ready sense that she has given sustained attention to that problem within the practice of her own prose. Her strong emphasis on the ineffable and untranslatable is not, furthermore, comfortably consistent with the possibility of a discursive philosophical account like her own. The notion of an “epistemology unique to each human soul,” understood in the most literal sense, would be as incoherent as a private language. Smith Gilson acknowledges as much, but there is not much discussion of the ways in which logoi still manage to touch us by meaning more than they say and by saying more than they mean. It is nonetheless the case that one meets the poetic intensity of a burning heart in these pages—a thinking more finally akin to the mysticism of Meister Eckhart than to the philosophy of Aquinas. The reader's patience is well rewarded.—Antón Barba-Kay, *The Catholic University of America*

TAYLOR, Robert S. *Exit Left*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 130 pp. Cloth, \$80.00—Twentieth-century liberalism can be characterized in myriad ways, including the well-known negative/positive liberty dichotomy. Negative liberty is the freedom from governmental or other constraint, such as laws that infringe the right to free speech or association. Positive liberty entails the capacity and means to act upon the autonomous choices one has made. Robert Taylor, in *Exit Left*, fuses these two types of liberty in advocating laws and public assistance that enhance the capacity of individuals to act as they freely choose.

Taylor seeks to increase the sphere of individual liberty in democratic society by limiting the use of arbitrary power. Current republican scholarship promotes the liberty of citizens to voice their expressed interests and ideas through rights to free speech, press, litigation, and elections. Taylor critiques this theory, best articulated by Philip Pettit, as insufficient to protect individual liberty from arbitrary power. Instead, Taylor insists that the realistic possibility of exiting an abusive or