

≈IV≈

AESTHETIC TURN

C. A. TSAKIRIDOU

Spiritual Expressionism

*Léon Bloy, the Maritains, and
the Mystery of Israel*¹



“The Mystery of Israel” is included in *Redeeming the Time*, a collection of essays first published in 1943. Maritain’s view of Israel in this period should be seen through the prism of his and Raïssa’s encounter with the idiosyncratic spirituality of Léon Bloy (1846–1917), the French author and self-professed mystic, who became their godfather when they converted to Catholicism in 1906. Bloy’s apocalyptic, anti-modern, and anti-bourgeois ideas, his conflicted personality, and claims of divine election and extreme suffering, gave him unprecedented psychological authority over the young couple and captured their imaginations for years to come. In reading what Jacques and Raïssa wrote about Israel and the Jewish people, we encounter elements of a spiritual expressionism that emphasizes intense psychological and emotional states and intimates a Manichean world: dark, pathetic and overwhelmed by sin, where holy souls do battle with evil. Bloy’s identification of sainthood with artistic genius and his view of Israel as the protagonist of a great redemptive drama centered on the Passion of Christ, helped define the Maritains’ vision of a vital, creative, and revolutionary Christianity.²

1. For Paul and Margot Soven.

2. John Howard Griffin and Yves R. Simon, *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* (New York: Magi Books, 1974), 4–5.

I. The Jewish Passion

Maritain had discussed the persecution of European Jews a few years earlier in a lecture titled "A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question," given in Paris in 1938 and later that year in New York. In a 1921 essay, "On the Jewish Question," he presented Jews as being alien and adverse to a Christian civilization and as aligned with international finance and Masonic intrigues.³ In his study of the development of Maritain's thought on this subject, Richard Crane has put these views in their proper historical and social context, pointing out, among other things, that Maritain's friend and mentor, Charles Péguy, an adamant defender of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, easily divided Jews between those governed by a spirit of avarice and those who embraced a spirit of poverty.⁴ These divisions and the ambiguities they imply remained with Maritain in the pre-World War II period and are very much present in "The Mystery of Israel." The essay examines the spiritual and philosophical aspects of the problem, specifically the notion that Israel has a divine vocation and that anti-Semitism is a spiritual phenomenon. Maritain's approach is "metaphysical and religious" and is concerned with the "hidden and sacred meaning" of events affecting Jews living in Europe and elsewhere in the world.⁵

There are two obvious difficulties with what Maritain is trying to do in this essay. The first is that, as Zygmunt Bauman has shown in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, anti-Semitism in itself, as a ubiquitous phenomenon in many societies and especially dominant in late nineteenth-century France, is not sufficient to explain the systematic extermination of Jews under the Nazi regime.⁶ What is needed, according to Bauman, is an understanding of the political and social mechanisms by means of which anti-Jewish violence was organized and dispensed on this catastrophic scale.⁷ Even though Bauman's argument targets the Holocaust, it can be extended to other acts of violence aimed at Jews and their institutional and ideo-

3. Richard Francis Crane, *Passion of Israel: Jacques Maritain, Catholic Conscience and the Holocaust* (Scranton, Pennsylvania: University of Scranton Press, 2010), 10.

4. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

5. Jacques Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, translated by Harry Lorin Binsse (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1946), 124.

6. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 31–32.

7. See *ibid.*, 33.

logical contexts. By approaching anti-Semitism as a “spiritual disease” and largely ignoring these factors, Maritain was depriving his analysis of the critical perspective that, according to his friend and student, the philosopher Yves Simon, was essential to understanding the scope and range of French Catholic anti-Semitism.⁸

Secondly, Maritain assigns to Jews a collective destiny because of who they are or what they have done, and explains, on that basis, acts of violence and oppression committed against them. By stating, for example, that “the mystical body of Israel is a Church fallen from a high place,” he is in effect saying that all Jews, wherever they are, are subject to this collective failure or error.⁹ The fact that by “Israel” here is meant a spiritual state and not a race or people as such, does not alter the concrete historical and political consequences which necessarily follow from this condition. Thus analogies between the Diaspora and the Body of Christ in Communion—where Israel, like the Host, must be broken and shared by humanity (“the earthly leavening of the world”)—point at the necessity of Jewish dispersion, fragmentation, and suffering.¹⁰ Furthermore, when Maritain writes in 1938 that Israel’s persecution will end “only with the reconciliation of the Synagogue and the Church,” what he means by reconciliation is not co-existence but conversion.¹¹ From an eschatological standpoint, Jewish suffering is therefore justified and inevitable: justified because of the rejection of Christ, and inevitable because of a divinely ordained imperative of conversion through suffering which, set in motion like a Hegelian dialectic, gradually clears the “obscuring mist” of Jewish piety and brings it to Christ.¹²

In an essay published in Robert Royal’s *Jacques Maritain and the Jews* (1994), John Hellman has argued that at least prior to World War II, Maritain believed that Jews could only find spiritual fulfillment in Christianity and that their inadequate spiritual state was the cause of the subversive role that they played in society. He also showed how indebted this view was to the writings of Bloy and specifically his book, not translated in English, *Le*

8. See Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 126; John Hellman, “The Jews in the ‘New Middle Ages’: Jacques Maritain’s Anti-Semitism in Its Times,” in *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, edited by Robert Royal (Notre Dame, Indiana: American Maritain Association, 1994), 89–103.

9. Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 134.

10. *Ibid.*, 134, 136.

11. Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1939), 33.

12. Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 135.

Salut par les Juifs (1892). Hellman's characterization of this work as Bloy's "most vitriolic and anti-Semitic diatribe," is accurate and hard to challenge, particularly when considering his description of Jews as "venomous parasites," or of Jewish merchants that he encountered in Hamburg as "impure profiteers whose obsequious howling clings to me."¹³ Bloy's revulsion for Jewish physical existence is supposedly mitigated by his recognition of Israel's spiritual majesty, a majesty, however, that is possible only when Israel and the Jewish people are seen as progenitors of Christ and their religion is assimilated into the life and destiny of the Church.

It is true that the Jewish critic and journalist Bernard Lazare, a friend of Péguy, considered Bloy a "philosemite" who at least allowed Jews to survive as unwilling witnesses to the divine Passion and catalysts to salvation.¹⁴ Lazare's view is an important reminder of the need to appreciate the cultural and ideological environment in which Bloy's and Maritain's ideas were developed and thus to avoid an anachronistic assessment of their thought. Indeed, when compared to other Christian writers of the time, especially the anti-Semite Edouard Drumont (1844–1917), Bloy clearly embraced the co-existence of Jews and Christians and idealized the religious Jew. Still, the fact that Lazare's surprising endorsement of *Le Salut* in 1892 did not stop Bloy from reasserting his view of Jews as justly oppressed for being the most "despicable" oppressors of the poor, points at the conflicted nature of Bloy's attitudes.¹⁵ The same applies to Maritain. His claim in the essay that "Israel has quit reality for an illusory image, money," an idea that he assigns to Bloy as one of his "most profound themes," shows clearly that he had not at the time abandoned dangerous stereotypes.¹⁶

Like Bloy, who saw in the religious Jew a reflection of the genealogy of Christ and his Mother, and thus as a type of holy image that Christians should reverence, Maritain condemns anti-Semitism because it is essentially an affront to Christ. It is Christ that sanctifies the Jewish race "despite itself."¹⁷ Judaism is thus deprived of its distinct theological and spiritual voice and the Jews of the right to a Jewish salvation, while in their social existence Jews are viewed as compulsive capitalists, whose inordinate pas-

13. Hellman, "The Jews in the Middle Ages," 90.

14. Nelly Wilson, *Bernard-Lazare: Antisemitism and the Problem of Jewish Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 87–88.

15. *Ibid.*, 237 n. 37.

16. Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 153.

17. *Ibid.*, 155

sion for the world (“materialized Messianism”) leads to the exploitation of the poor.¹⁸ Israel is “mystically” drawn to money, “the poor man’s blood,” a Bloy expression that Maritain adopts.¹⁹ But Israel is also drawn to the service of God’s justice on earth (“Israel’s other center of attraction”).²⁰ Jews, in other words, have replaced their passion for God either with a passion for wealth or with a passion for worldly justice. Unwilling members of a divine drama, they exist in a state of alienation from God.

For Maritain, the conversion of Jews to Christianity is preordained, as is the suffering that their rejection of Christ brings upon them, such as the Diaspora, persecutions in the hands of gentile nations, and enslavement to materialism. In the Royal volume, Rabbi Leon Klenicki uses Martin Buber’s expression to describe Maritain as a “metaphysical anti-Semite.”²¹ On the other hand, Crane describes Maritain’s attitude to Jews as “ambiguous philosemitism.” After taking a thorough look at the intellectual, religious, and social context that informed Maritain’s views, Crane concludes that he “wrestled with a theological mystery that cannot be avoided when examining the long story of Jewish-Christian relations.”²²

Crane actually quotes a passage which, far from settling the matter, as he thinks, shows exactly where the problem lies. Writing in 1944 to his friend and future Cardinal, Charles Journet, Maritain confesses that he finds the suffering of the Jews unbearable and expresses his frustration with how Christians “have not comprehended the divine tragedy, the sacred horror of this Golgotha of a people.”²³ The extermination of Jews is here a Christian rather than a Jewish tragedy. It is seen through “Golgotha” rather than “Egypt” or “Babylon.” Jewish suffering is sanctified and we are presented with the spectacle of a “sacred horror,” an unfolding sacred drama. Why didn’t a Catholic intellectual, an advocate of Thomistic catholicity, see in Jewish suffering a simply human suffering, the direct result of human prejudice and malice? Why was he drawn, instead, to the image of Jews grafted onto the Passion of Christ, a perpetual reminder of their role in deicide? Didn’t the bestowed honor affirm the offense and even exaggerate it?

18. *Ibid.*, 147.

19. *Ibid.*, 140.

20. *Ibid.*, 140–141.

21. Leon Klenicki, “Jacques Maritain’s Vision of Judaism and Anti-Semitism,” in *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, 72–88.

22. Richard Francis Crane, “Jacques Maritain, the Mystery of Israel and the Holocaust,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (2009): 25–56.

23. *Ibid.*, 56.

The notion that the state of Israel is an exception to the “law” that drives the majority of the Jews to live in the Diaspora, outside “temporal society,” and that neither nationhood nor statehood is appropriate to a people charged with a “mysterious historic mission,” seems to condemn Jews to perpetual exile while depriving them of a homeland and the right to self-determination.²⁴ Certainly Maritain did not oppose the existence of a Jewish state and certainly the idea that only God can establish a state for Israel in his own good time has been entertained by Jewish sages and rabbis. The idea itself is not problematic. What is problematic is the fact that consideration of the dangers affecting stateless peoples and especially those persecuted for their otherness is entirely absent from Maritain’s vision of Israel, a vision which the “consecrated tribe,” bound, as he puts it, to “the law of the desert,” wanders in the wilderness until, like a decimated prodigal son, it returns home to the God of Christianity.²⁵

We cannot help but wonder why the Maritains did not approach Israel from the standpoint of Maritain’s 1927 essay “Primacy of the Spiritual.” In this essay, in what was to become one of the dominant themes of Vatican II (1962–65), Maritain embraces a universal rationalism mediated by Christ and promulgated by the Church, in which all nations, even those that are not Christian, can participate by virtue of the “hidden stepping stones” that God has placed in every corner of the world.²⁶ “Man and reason,” he writes in that spirit, “are everywhere the same.”²⁷ Anticipating Benedict XVI in Regensburg, Maritain warns that the evils of history are the result of human error; of the abandonment of “the absolutism of truth and charity,” rather than the unfolding of a divine drama.²⁸ There is, to be sure, a sense of apocalyptic urgency in what Maritain writes in this work that recalls Bloy, but the overall approach is optimistic and centers on the illuminating and salvific work of Christian reason and of a Christian humanism that in the end will prevail.

Instead of integrating Israel in this humanistic and lucid vision, Jacques and Raïssa chose a far more obscure alternative, a vision in which unconverted Jews are subject to dramatic, if not catastrophic, spiritual and mate-

24. Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 129.

25. *Ibid.*, 130, 151.

26. *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, edited by Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (New York: Image Books, 1965), 150.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 151.

rial consequences, and the excruciating suffering caused by their rejection of Christ is in reality the expression of divine mercy. True, the notion of divine punishment for disobedience is found in the prophetic tradition and in the Old Testament, as is God's mercy for the punished. But why, given the virulent anti-Semitism of French society at the time, rely on such politically and viscerally charged notions of Jewish separation, opposition, and punishment? This lack of discernment is puzzling. And so are the ideas that history at once punishes and redeems Jews by assimilating them to Christianity through centuries of suffering—every suffering Jew being an *alter Christus*—and that Nazi anti-Semitism is actually an opposition to Christ. The Jews are hated and killed, Maritain argues, because they gave Christ, a Jew, to the world. This makes Nazis Christophobes and murdered Jews *de facto* Christians: a conversion by death in which they have no say. Why would Jacques and Raïssa think this way?

II. A Soul Oppressed by Genius

Bloy's view of Israel shaped the Maritains' first encounter with Christian spirituality and their subsequent conversion. The young couple's friendship with Bloy was sealed by *Le Salut par les Juifs*. The book's subject was of more direct relevance to Raïssa (née Oumancoff), a Jewish émigré, than to Jacques, but the two had been impressed earlier by Bloy's novel *The Woman who was Poor* (1897), in which abject poverty became a supernatural virtue and the antidote to bourgeois charity.²⁹ Like the novel's wretched heroine, an equally destitute Israel was to find redemption in unmitigated suffering and rejection.³⁰ There were, of course, other factors involved, such as Maritain's attraction, during that period, to the reactionary politics of *L'Action Française*, the association of neo-Thomist thought with that movement (e.g., in Father Humbert Clerrisac, whom the Maritains admired, or Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, in the case of the Pétain regime), and the popularity of anti-Semitic ideas and stereotypes in late nineteenth-century and pre-World II France. But the psycho-spiritual and aesthetic elements are essential for understanding the persistence of

29. See Julie Kernan, *Our Friend Jacques Maritain: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 29.

30. See Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris 1919–1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 66–67.

these themes in their thought and their inability to see Bloy's spirituality for what it really was.

The Maritains' emotional and intellectual vulnerability to this self-professed prophet and mystic is undoubtedly related to the tragic circumstances of their conversion to Catholicism: the suicide of Maritain's father in February of 1904, and Raïssa's life-threatening illnesses in the winter of 1906 and again in 1907—a pattern that would continue throughout her life. These events exacerbated the sense of displacement and disorientation that the two were experiencing at the time, especially in the case of Raïssa, the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Russia who arrived in Paris in 1893, one year before the eruption of the Dreyfus affair (1894). Coupled with their little knowledge of Catholicism and Judaism, they created a psychological and spiritual vacuum in which the exaggerated religiosity of Bloy, expressed in an imagery of prophetic rage and self-immolation, would find little resistance let alone critical judgment.³¹ When Raïssa's life was placed in the hands of Our Lady of La Salette, whose personal emissary Bloy claimed to be, the newly converted Maritains found in her recovery and Bloy's explosive piety the certainty that had eluded them in their university years. They also found themselves immersed in a cosmic drama, in which their personal lives could be totally absorbed and transfigured.

The influence of Bloy on Raïssa and Jacques has been discussed extensively in this connection, but the aestheticism involved in their fascination with Bloy has not. Bloy's morbid and Manichean view of Christ's Passion, coupled with his manipulative narcissism and decadent piety, had a lasting impact on the Maritains, who became his awe-struck audience and eager patrons. This entry in Bloy's diary on June 20, 1921, on the day that he received their letter of interest, is quite revealing: "a young man and his wife suddenly offer themselves to become our friends, at the same time expressing their ambition to *make themselves useful* (emphasis added)."³² In his response the next day, in a letter that Raïssa included in her anthology of his works, he mentions his dire financial situation three times and thanks them for the money they already sent him.³³ In 1906, days before Raïssa's illness and a few months before their conversion in June of the same year,

31. See *ibid.*, 71.

32. Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together: Memoirs*, translated by Julie Kernan (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1942), 117.

33. See *ibid.*, 116.

she and Jacques paid for the re-publication of *Le Salut par les Juifs*, which the grateful Bloy dedicated to Raïssa. Later the Maritains also financed the publication of *Celle Qui Pleure*, Bloy's book on the La Salette apparitions.³⁴

"The Mystery of Israel" is heavily indebted to *Le Salut*. Even though, as expected, its arguments are more sophisticated and sober, the iconography of Israel remains the same. Thus, on the one hand we have the universality and transcendent unity of the Church, and on other the "mystical body" of Israel which has been condemned to be "disjointed from itself, broken and dispersed" because of its unfaithfulness.³⁵ This brokenness also takes a spiritual form since Jewish piety, according to Maritain, is in reality nothing more than the exiled Jew's unconscious embracing of Christ's passion, "without realizing what he does."³⁶ The Jew, then, is not really a Jew. Maritain takes a dialectical perspective when he writes that the Jews are the spiritual cause of the "misfortunes" that "activate history" and thus its natural "scapegoats."³⁷ Even the most lenient reader must try hard to justify these ideas and the image of Israel as a people that is both opposed to and grafted into Christ, and tries hopelessly—since nothing can stop this divinely ordained progression—to bring salvation to an unwilling and hateful world: "Israel thus suffers the repercussion of the activation it produces, or which the world feels it is destined to produce."³⁸ The most generous thing that we could say about this statement is that it paints Jews as the mystically sanctified victims of the enemies of Christ.

The idea of extreme suffering and degradation for the sake of God was one of Bloy's signature themes (or obsessions). From a fierce and fearless prophet ("I obey a command from on high"), to a destitute and tormented mystic ("buffeted, spit upon, scourged, crucified"), Bloy was convinced of his divinely ordained mission and supernatural gifts, and his "mysterious affinity" with the saints.³⁹ It was a strange mixture of self-pity and arrogance, megalomania and humility, an image that Bloy carefully cultivated throughout his life and one that had a powerful attraction for Jacques and Raïssa, as can be easily seen in Raïssa's recollections of that time. In her memoir, *We Have Been Friends Together* (1942), she explains statements like

34. See Emmanuela Polimeni, *Leon Bloy: The Pauper Prophet* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 53.

35. Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 134.

36. *Ibid.*, 135.

37. *Ibid.*, 136.

38. *Ibid.*, 137, 130.

39. Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 106, 117, 114.

“anyone who is not instinctively disgusted by the Synagogue is unworthy of a dog’s respect” as flamboyant rhetoric and hyperbole, and marvels at Bloy’s “adamantine impartiality” because he heaps similar insults on Christians, describing them as “swine” who like the “pigs of the Synagogue” are being fed by Christ’s blood.⁴⁰

Her admiration for Bloy has a devotional quality that is hard to miss: “Grandeur, simplicity, unshakable conviction, disdain for contingencies, singleness of purpose likened him in our eyes to one of those sturdy and magnificent messengers of God.”⁴¹ She compares him to “a torrent which drags the rocks and trees from its banks and carries them headlong with the mud and the pebbles from its bed.”⁴² “Life,” she writes of their first encounter, “cast him upon our shores like a legendary treasure—immense and mysterious.”⁴³ His medieval vision of Jews in *Le Salut* may have expressed “inadmissible” detestation but it was to be excused because of its mystical artistry.⁴⁴ Bloy, Raïssa explained, “painted a picture of the Jewish people which was a contrast in light and shadow. The picture he purposely blackened at times, so that its light might shine forth all the more brightly.”⁴⁵ Bloy was sublime, immense, a force to be reckoned with, a modern day Jonah, a man of genius who “suffered the captivity of misery, the anguish of solitude, the harsh contact with mediocrity,” in short an avant-garde genius who painted what God revealed to him in dramatic and violent tones, who delighted in extremes and loved to shock his readers with a morbid and vulgar imagery.⁴⁶

He was not the last narcissist to have seduced the Maritains. Jean Cocteau, as I have shown elsewhere, appealed to them for a very similar combination of qualities: Christ-like suffering stemming from a life-long opium addiction and a misunderstood and vilified genius (much like Bloy).⁴⁷ The Maritains were introduced to the work of Cocteau through Georges Auric, who was also a frequent guest in the Bloy household. Like Bloy, Cocteau was a master of self-promotion and particularly adept at performing the role of the immolated soul to an eager audience. The title of his 1930 film, *Blood of a Poet* echoes, as was Cocteau’s habit, Bloy’s *Le Sang du Pauvre* (1909), and so do other Bloy expressions that he and Maritain used in

40. Ibid., 125.

42. Ibid., 109.

44. Ibid., 124.

46. Ibid., 111–112.

41. Ibid., 106.

43. Ibid., 120.

45. Ibid.

their correspondence, like that of a glove turned inside out, an image that in Bloy describes the conversion of Israel and that Cocteau later adapted to his own homoerotic fantasies and verse.⁴⁸

As Schloesser has shown, Cocteau succeeded in enchanting Maritain and convincing him that his was the genuine avant-garde aesthetic, one that centered on the notion of the artist as a sacramental being that penetrated through unconscious processes, deeper realities, and profound truths.⁴⁹ Maritain's praise of Cocteau in a 1923 letter as "a soul sought out by the angels," is typical of the kind of exchange between the two that culminated in their published correspondence, *Art and Faith: Letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau* (1948).⁵⁰ Only later would Maritain realize the frivolous nature of Cocteau's anti-modernism and Catholic fervor.

Maritain's introduction to the 1947 English edition of *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, a collection of Bloy's writings edited by Raïssa, presents his godfather's manic personality and penchant for vitriol as evidence of mystical and artistic gifts granted to him by divine grace: "In this violence one must see, first of all, the effect of a very special kind of abstraction, certainly not philosophical but *artistic*, or, if one prefers a very special kind of typification; every event, every gesture, every person, here and now, was instantaneously transposed . . . and transformed, in the eyes of this fearful visionary, into the pure symbol of some devouring spiritual reality."⁵¹ Bloy is portrayed as a man possessed by God who sees people and the world around him as divine signs, a mixture of prophet and artist, whose incinerating visions create a supreme spiritual art. In the same essay, Maritain describes his godfather as "a soul whom genius oppressed."⁵²

Here, spirituality becomes an aesthetic condition, and one can almost

47. See Cornelia Tsakiridou, "'Redeeming Modernism': Jacques Maritain and the Catholic Vocation," in *The Vocation of the Catholic Philosopher*, edited by John P. Hittinger (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association, 2010), 94–109.

48. See Hellman, "The Jews in the Middle Ages," 93; Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, translated by John Coleman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 21.

49. See Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 148.

50. *Ibid.*, 177.

51. Bloy supporter, Emile LaDouceur, writes: "It is difficult indeed to condone or to justify his unwise polemics and his intemperate outbursts of temper." Bloy was incapable of holding a job, which explains his poverty. Léon Bloy, *She Who Weeps, Our Lady of La Salette*, translated and edited by Emile LaDouceur (Fresno: Academy Library Guild, 1956), 12–13. Also see Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1947), 11.

52. Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute*, 9.

see Bloy as a grand master of visions and visitations, or perhaps more accurately, a spiritual conjurer and master of “mystical keys” that tries to make the tangible sing for God.⁵³ Another expressionist icon follows: “the feeling of mystery, so pure in itself, so lofty in Bloy, sometimes translates itself by means of lighting flashes and a darkness which is too material.”⁵⁴ Bloy, Maritain writes, lived in a “spiritual universe,” immersed in a sorrow that followed him from his early childhood, and suffered visions that made him impatient with the world’s “perishable forms,” which he did not hesitate to angrily deplore.⁵⁵ Bloy’s Pythic explanation, “my anger is the effervescence of my pity,” recalls the self-ennobling aphorisms used by Cocteau, and resonates with Maritain who comments: “he felt he could treat men like signs or counters with which his art spelled out the mercy or the indignation of God.”⁵⁶

In his remarks, Maritain urges the reader who wishes to understand Bloy’s struggle for sanctity to read a letter he wrote to Jean de la Laurencie. In it, Bloy professes humility but with a clear conviction of his supernatural gifts, “the feeling, the need, the instinct ... of the Absolute, ... an extremely rare gift,” which he confesses to have wasted.⁵⁷ Suffering in his vocation as a writer, failing in his call to be a saint, ever in tears, but never in doubt of his prophetic and literary genius, Bloy delights in seeing Christian life as a perpetual course of misery, pain, and darkness, and elevates his suffering to a mystery worthy of contemplation. As observed Sister Mary Rosalie Brady in her incisive 1945 study of Bloy’s thought, his was a Tertullian vision that degraded the body and saw no merit in improving the condition of the poor through social and economic means—contrary to Church teaching (Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*).⁵⁸ Rather than celebrate the joyful mysteries of the Church, Bloy saw them as occasions for even more intense suffering. “In all these reflections,” Brady writes, “he puts a natural pathology on a supernatural level.”⁵⁹ Bloy’s claim that he was the recipient of a supernatural secret (for which, apparently, a confessor’s approval was never sought or given), as well as his bragging (apropos of the baptism of

53. *Ibid.*54. *Ibid.*55. *Ibid.*, 12.56. *Ibid.*, 13.57. *Ibid.*, 293.58. See Sr. Mary Rosalie Brady, *Thought and Style in the Works of Léon Bloy* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945), 29.59. *Ibid.*, 32.

Jacques and Raïssa) that his books "were approved not by a Bishop or a Doctor but by the Holy Spirit," raise serious questions about the integrity of his Catholicism.⁶⁰

One of the most revealing examples that Brady cites is Bloy's identification of genius with the Holy Spirit: "Talent, which everybody in the world loves, belongs to the Father and the Son. Genius, which everybody in the world hates, belongs exclusively to the Holy Spirit."⁶¹ The self-referential nature of this statement is hard to miss since it was Bloy himself who, like the Holy Ghost, was a genius hated and misunderstood by the world. Here, the tormented and vilified artist or mystic (the two are actually interchangeable) participates in the life of the Holy Spirit. When he suffers, so does the Holy Spirit. In this passage from *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, Bloy claims extraordinary insights into the mystery of the Trinity: "Remember also this thing which long ago was revealed to me, and which I *alone* in the world have been able to say, namely, that this Sign of suffering and ignominy is the most expressive figure of the Holy Ghost."⁶² Read together, the two statements paint a picture of spiritual and artistic election that is inundated with theological error and grandiosity.⁶³

Like a somnambulist and a clairvoyant, Bloy, as he writes to Jacques, discovers truths that elude philosophy, "tripping blindly over a threshold and being thrown flat on one's stomach into the House of Light."⁶⁴ Sanctified by the "Absolute," the direct sight of which makes him godlike and allows him to see in the souls of others, he travels back to the time of the Jewish patriarchs and recognizes Raïssa's Christian soul.⁶⁵ Or, he turns to Israel and sees the "constant lingering" of the Holy Spirit Who manifests Himself in the wretched of the world. Thus "the very abjectness of that Race is a divine sign," Bloy writes, reminding us of Maritain's attempt to explain his penchant for vulgarisms and the grotesque as a mystical code or a spiritual symbolism of a literary genius.⁶⁶

It is clear that Bloy felt at liberty to create his own theological imagery.

60. *Ibid.*, 27, 52, 64–65.

61. *Ibid.*, 53 (my translation).

62. Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute*, 338.

63. See Rayner Heppenstall, *Léon Bloy* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1954), 47–48, 54.

64. Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute*, 278.

65. See *ibid.*, 277.

66. *Ibid.*, 269.

Apocalyptic visions of the Cross as the Holy Spirit revealed only to him, and given in flashes of revelation (“the very tip of the arms of lightning”) that illuminate a dark and condemned world accompany the familiar theme of deicide where Jews nail the Word of God on the Cross as a sign of “crushing Love.”⁶⁷ Part Symbolist, in its effort to interiorize and reconfigure reality, part Expressionist, in its fascination with distortion and emotional intensities, it is an imagery that draws its energy from an undisputed center: the ineffable and inexplicable subject immersed in its own sublimity (Bloy himself). Maritain’s attempt to explain Bloy’s genius shows how little he understood the play of these elements in Bloy’s work and perhaps more significantly how indebted his own views of the spiritual life and art remained to Bloy’s ideas.

Bloy’s style, Maritain writes, uses words “to procure, as he used to say, the feeling of mystery and of its actual presence.”⁶⁸ Everything is intended to “express reality in the very darkness that joins it to this feeling,” and the language therefore, as St. Thomas would concur, “endeavors primarily to make you divine reality, to make you touch it without saying it.”⁶⁹ Compare Heppenstall’s view of Bloy’s work: “In modern times no Frenchman has written prose so riotously excessive.”⁷⁰ Maritain describes Bloy as a mystical illustrator who strives to make the divine realities that are revealed to him visible to others. Language in his hands becomes an instrument for creating similes and figures which are meant to awaken the mind to this hidden world. And he concludes with a poetic remark of the type that often appears in his writings about art: “All his literary efforts,” he says of Bloy, “consisted in projecting in the mirror of enigmas and similitudes the rays of this substantially luminous night.”⁷¹ It is hard to tell what Maritain is describing here.

The image of Bloy as the archetypal Christian artist-mystic is easily identified in *Art and Scholasticism* but is less pronounced in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953). The former’s third and final revision in 1935 pairs Bloy with Rembrandt as examples of great artists who have the license not to work for a living and support their families.⁷² Statements like

67. *Ibid.*, 253.

68. *Ibid.*, 19.

69. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

70. Heppenstall, *Léon Bloy*, 45.

71. Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute*, 20.

72. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, translated by Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 15–16.

the following fit Bloy perfectly: "The Artist is subject, in the sphere of his art, to a kind of asceticism, which may require heroic sacrifices.... He must pass through spiritual nights, purify himself without ceasing, voluntarily abandon fertile regions for regions that are barren and full of insecurity."⁷³ Cocteau is recalled in this context for yet another of his pan-artistic aphorisms that apparently impressed Maritain (it was repeated in *Creative Intuition*), who seems to overlook the significance the term "angel" had in Cocteau's poetry (e.g., his 1925 *L'ange Heurtebise*): "We shelter in ourselves an Angel whom we constantly shock. We must be the guardians of this angel. Shelter your virtue."⁷⁴

Aesthetic virtue, comparable to that of the ascetic, is justified by art's intrinsic prudence. The artist's sanctity is art's work. But some artists, Maritain observes, still "opt for the devil," something that apparently art's prudence cannot prevent.⁷⁵ Among the few who choose Christ, "Léon Bloy and Paul Claudel have particular historical significance. Through them the absolute of the Gospel has entered into the sap of contemporary art."⁷⁶ The influence of both men and of Bloy, in particular, on modern art is here overestimated. Maritain's enthusiasm and spiritual aspirations influence his judgment.

III. A Darker Picture

In his 1953 study Rayner Heppenstall, the British novelist and critic (himself a Catholic convert and once fascinated by Bloy's poverty mysticism), gives one of the most negative portraits of Bloy as a man troubled by "symptoms of persecution mania and other recognized forms of psychosis," including "coprophilia, sado-masochism and narcissism."⁷⁷ Heppenstall's analysis systematically uncovers the inconsistencies and contradictions in Bloy's statements and actions, from the more benign tendency to exaggerate his self-importance and literary legacy, to his belief that his mistress Anne-Marie Roulet had apocalyptic visions about the Day of Judgment in which he was destined to play the role of St. John the Baptist.⁷⁸ Roulet be-

73. Ibid., 78.

74. Ibid. Also see Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Bollingen Series, vol. 35.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 392.

75. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 138.

76. Ibid.

77. Heppenstall, *Léon Bloy*, 37.

78. See *ibid.*, 12, 40.

came the character Véronique in Bloy's 1887 novel *Despairing*, who in an ultimate act of chastity tries to nullify her lover's passion by parting with her hair and teeth.⁷⁹ In real life, Roulet (who was a prostitute when they met) and Bloy ended their relationship and lived as spiritual partners before she was overcome by madness and committed to the Bon-Saveur asylum outside Paris, where she died in 1907. According to Heppenstall, Bloy may have sent money to the asylum but never visited her in the 25 years that she spent there.⁸⁰

His habit of soliciting money from friends and first acquaintances is well-documented, as we saw in the case of the Maritains. Bloy could actually be quite pressing, as happened in the case of a wealthy donor, a woman who gave him 200 francs, and was reproached for not offering a higher amount to support the publication of one of his books.⁸¹ He apparently lied about payments that he received from his publisher and his own contribution to his poverty, whether due to incapacity or choice or both.⁸² This self-imposed poverty becomes an aesthetic element in his novels, which like the early paintings of his friend Georges Rouault, are obsessed with unmitigated depravity, darkness, and sin.

The last chapter of *The Woman who was Poor* (included in Raïssa's anthology), paints a gothic portrait of the heroine Clotilde as she "walks from cemetery to cemetery," her head "covered only with the hood of a large black cape," moving around on her knees, "her eyes burned out with the tears that have furrowed ravines in her face."⁸³ Bloy's equation of poverty with utter destitution leads him to absurd conclusions like this: "woman only *exists*, in the truest sense, if she is without food, without shelter, without friends, without husband, without children.... [O]nly thus can she compel her Saviour to come down."⁸⁴

The novel concludes with Clotilde's occasional visits to Lazare Druide, a painter of grotesque and morbid paintings of passion, who was "like Delacroix, reproached for the poverty of his drawing, the frenzy of his colouring."⁸⁵ Druide painted a picture titled *Andronicus Delivered to the Populace of Byzantium*, a picture of torment, blood, and death in which Andronicus

79. See *ibid.*, 11.

80. See *ibid.*, 11–12.

81. See *ibid.*, 37–38; Brady, *Thought and Style in the Works of Léon Bloy*, 36.

82. See *ibid.*, 39.

83. Léon Bloy, *The Woman Who Was Poor*, translated by I. J. Collins (Lanham, Maryland: Sheed and Ward, 1947), 353.

84. *Ibid.*, 353, 355.

85. *Ibid.*, 169.

appears like a “Redeemer” figure as the hateful crowds, “their eyes dazzled with the sun of torture,” delight in his demise.⁸⁶ The narrator marvels that the “composition, vast as its scale is, bursts with its content, and the breathless drama overflows it, and surges out, like a dragon, into the midst of the terrified spectators themselves.”⁸⁷ In what seems like a self-portrait, Bloy describes Druide in these terms: “swift as a volcano, and no less sonorous, when some boor was disrespectful, his fury, instantly pathetic, would burst forth, to the confusion of the Philistine, from the heart of a politeness so exquisite.”⁸⁸

It was this kind of bipolar sensibility that the Maritains encountered in 1905. Raïssa quotes Jacques’ description of their first encounter with Bloy from his Preface to the *Letters of Léon Bloy to his Godchildren* (reprinted in the 1947 edition of *Pilgrim of the Absolute*). It reads like a fairy tale: “June 25, 1905, two children of twenty mounted the sempiternal stairway.”⁸⁹ They were destined to meet the “strange beggar who, distrusting philosophy, cried divine truth from the rooftops,” and whose “unsheltered greatness” would fill them with compassion. Bloy, Maritain recalls, “seemed almost timid, he spoke but very little and very low.” Writing in 1942, Raïssa remembers that they felt “enriched by a unique friendship, so gentle on the part of this violent man, that all fear had left us from the day of our first meeting, and our respect became daring and familiar, like that of children who feel that they are loved (emphasis added).”⁹⁰

It is interesting that she describes an equally intimidated Rouault reacting to Bloy’s denigration of his work: “How many times in the following years did not we see Rouault at Bloy’s house, standing and leaning against the wall, with a slight smile on his closed lips, his gaze far off, his face apparently impassive but with a pallor that increased when the question of modern painting was broached.”⁹¹ Her attempt to portray Bloy’s abusive behavior as an expression of his spiritual and aesthetic authority and the painter’s need for correction is far from convincing but represents accurately how she and Jacques chose to rationalize the man’s darker side and idiosyncratic spirituality: “It seemed as if he [Rouault] sought from Bloy

86. *Ibid.*, 171.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

89. Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 118.

90. *Ibid.*, 120.

91. *Ibid.*, 158. Pierre Courthion, *Georges Rouault* (London: Thames and Hudson), 104.

the very indictments that tormented within him that which he held most dear ... to test against them the strength of that instinct that impelled him toward the unknown."⁹²

But what troubles Heppenstall the most is the misanthropic and misogynist satisfaction Bloy seems to draw from the deaths of prominent Parisian women in the 1897 Charity Bazaar fire that killed 121 people. As Bloy describes it, "A large number of handsome ladies were reduced to ashes, last evening, within less than half an hour. *Non pro mundo rogo*, saith the Lord."⁹³ In a letter to Andre Rouveyre that Raïssa reproduces in *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, he finds imagining the stampede of these "chaste lilies" and "tender roses" as they struggled in vain to escape the incinerating furnace, delightful.⁹⁴ Not even the blessing of the papal nuncio, minutes before the inferno, could save "the dainty and voluptuous carcasses which those full dress clothes covered" from the "black and terrible aspects of their souls."⁹⁵ In Bloy's esoteric pneumatology, the nuncio's blessing is "sacrilegious" and the fire to which it is condemned is nothing else than "the roaring and wandering abode of the Holy Spirit."⁹⁶

And his recollection of that day becomes even more bizarre: "On reading the first news of this fearsome event I had the clear and delicious feeling of an immense weight lifted from my heart. The small number of victims, it is true, set limits to my joy. At last, I said to myself, all the same, at last! AT LAST! Here then is a beginning of justice."⁹⁷ The fire's "unbelievable *swiftness*" and the gruesome images that followed were God's infernal punishment of the rich: "The uniform appearance of the bodies on which the Symbol of Charity hurled itself with a kind of divine rage ... was obvious enough."⁹⁸ Bloy was to express similar views about the sinking of the Titanic and the fire at the Iroquois Theatre in Chicago in December of 1903.⁹⁹ Ignoring the hundreds of children that were among the fire's 605 casualties, he praised the demise of the Theatre's proprietors.

Mystical literature has the license to paint its subjects in vivid colors and graphic forms, for such is often the nature of the ecstasies, stigmatizations, and sweeping visions that it describes. Bloy had the Maritains read

92. Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 158.

93. Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute*, 196.

94. Ibid. Heppenstall, *Léon Bloy*, 38-39.

95. Raïssa Maritain, *Léon Bloy: Pilgrim of the Absolute*, 198.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid., 197.

98. Ibid., 199-200.

Anne Catherine Emmerich's mystical writings and there is little doubt that he saw himself as a mystic of the same order, whose mission was to exaggerate the depravity and excruciating suffering of human life and the ugliness and demonic darkness of sin.¹⁰⁰ The prevalent racial stereotypes of Jews provided him with a framework for translating this vision into prophetic terms, painting images of appalling depravity (as he did of the Hamburg market), and excruciating expiation (the crucified Jew that Maritain adopted and saw in Marc Chagall's paintings).¹⁰¹

But as Brady wisely pointed out, the line between the pathological and the spiritual can be very fine. A morbid, and obsessively dolorist spirituality, arbitrarily exercised and dispensed, and prone to the exaggerations and extremes that we find in Bloy, lacks the moderation, humility, and joy that permeate the great Mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Person of Christ himself, and seems oblivious to the healing power of love with which Christ transfigures all beings. It is not an accident that the Druide character—who fits Rouault perfectly—paints terror and death rather than joy and life. There is in Bloy an oppressive monotony, something that we also see in the work of Rouault. Rouault, termed a Fauve and an expressionist (by Maritain), was criticized in the 1904 *Salon d'Automne*, for eliminating light from his "black pictures" (*tableaux noirs*) in contrast to the Impressionists, "for whom light was everything."¹⁰²

The Bloy-Rouault relationship is important because it serves as a key link to Maritain's aesthetics and his idea of the artist as a saint and mystic. Having read Bloy's *The Woman Who Was Poor* in 1904, Rouault was enthusiastic about meeting him. A very impressed Rouault met Bloy in April of 1904 and as Pierre Courthion writes in his magisterial volume on the painter, the two soon discovered that they "shared the same vision of reality, apparently terrible and relentlessly sordid."¹⁰³ Courthion in fact notes: "Bloy's style was loaded with the same explosive expressiveness that marked Rouault's new manner of painting." And he considers the prostitutes that populate his canvasses in that period (and roughly until 1908), "to a certain extent, sisters and daughters to Bloy."¹⁰⁴

Contrary to what any rational person would expect, Bloy's response to

99. See Brady, *Thought and Style in the Works of Léon Bloy*, 47.

100. See Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 151.

101. See Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, 156.

102. Courthion, *Georges Rouault*, 102.

103. *Ibid.*, 98.

104. *Ibid.*

these paintings that so resembled the world he created in his novels, was not one of approval. In November of 1904 he accused the artist of suffering from "some unbelievable mental aberration."¹⁰⁵ Then in 1905, after seeing a triptych of prostitutes in which one panel depicted a grotesque couple inspired by characters in the *Woman Who Was Poor*, he lashed out at Rouault for painting "atrocious, vengeful caricatures."¹⁰⁶ And in 1907, in a letter to Rouault, he was even more vehement and abusive: "I have two things to say to you ... the last I shall ever say, after which, for me, you'll be merely a chunk of likable meat... [Y]ou are attracted solely by the ugly... [Y]ou have a vertigo of hideousness... [I]t is time for you to stop."¹⁰⁷ But Bloy, who in his younger days had entertained the thought of becoming an artist, could easily swing to the other side. When in 1904, *Le Figaro* published a review that criticized Rouault's work for its "unmitigated blackness," Bloy advised the artist that he was God's chosen victim. "You will not be more flagellated than I," he wrote, shifting the subject to himself.¹⁰⁸

Maritain admired Rouault and wrote about his work as early as 1910, at a time when his knowledge of art was very limited. Having met Rouault through Bloy, the Maritains became even closer to him and his wife, when they moved into the same neighborhood (Versailles) in 1909. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue, Maritain, struggling with the grotesque character of the artist's work but ever generous, praises the "exaggeration of his forms" for their ability to penetrate the reality of things while giving them the dramatic forms this reality assumed in the artist's inner world.¹⁰⁹ According to Schlosser, he "portrayed Rouault as being simultaneously medieval and contemporaneously expressionist."¹¹⁰ In a 1924 review, and in subsequent editions, Maritain described Rouault's prostitutes and clowns rather opaquely with a visual poetry of his own, as "precious transparencies ... the wound of Sin ... the misery of fallen nature" and the painter as imbued with a mystical spirit, "passing through the world of human abysses," filled with "creative emotion" and a "genius" by virtue of "his poetic force."¹¹¹ This shift to the creative subject and its spiritual energies was to remain at the core of his aesthetics. But Rouault, like Bloy, according to

105. *Ibid.*, 103.

107. *Ibid.*, 104.

109. *Ibid.*, 221-22.

111. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, translated by R. de P. Matthews (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), 28-29.

106. *Ibid.*

108. Schlosser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 218.

110. *Ibid.*, 221.

Maritain, was also “a stubborn hermit,” whose “gift of pitiless observation” explains the “true meaning of his vehemences.”¹¹²

Here Bloy and Rouault fuse into one persona. In a later essay, Maritain describes the Rouault that he met in 1905 in terms that would apply equally well to Bloy. He is tormented by “ferocious images through which he discharged his anger; he depicted heartless and ugly judges, pitiable clowns, prostitutes, shrews, smug and arrogant upper-class ladies.”¹¹³ Rouault is “the painter of original sin and of the misery of wounded humanity.”¹¹⁴ For Maritain, creative emotion is the mark of the great artist but it must be mediated by suffering. Great art is impossible without the “steady struggle inside the artist’s soul, which has to pass through trials and ‘dark nights,’ comparable, in the line of the creativity of the spirit, to those suffered by the mystics in their striving union toward God. Such was the case with Rouault.”¹¹⁵

Maritain’s characterization of Rouault as “the greatest religious painter of our time,” is questionable largely because his evaluation of the painter’s work lacks a credible aesthetic basis and instead relies on the spiritual states that he associates with the creative process.¹¹⁶ There are tangential references to features of Rouault’s paintings but they are overwhelmed by spiritual considerations which lead Maritain to assign to them a grandeur and expressive intensity that they clearly do not have: “In his scenes of the Passion, paroxysmic deformation has been superseded by the majesty of a suffering which, before coming from the wickedness of tormentors, comes from the very will of the Lamb of God offering Himself by love.”¹¹⁷ Rouault’s 1918 painting of the *Crucifixion* and his 1932 *Christ Mocked by Soldiers* are grotesque, somber and solemn—the latter is chromatically more expressive and dynamic—but nothing like what Maritain describes.

IV. Conclusion

In writing about Maritain’s affiliation with *Action Française*, Ralph McInerny draws our attention to his philosophical passion for “atemporal things,” in which is implied an innocence or naivety when it comes to

112. *Ibid.*, 25.

114. *Ibid.*

115. Jacques Maritain, *Georges Rouault* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1969), 16.

116. *Ibid.*, 32.

113. *Ibid.*, 26.

117. *Ibid.*

the practical realities of politics.¹¹⁸ A contrast may be drawn here between Maritain's poetic vagueness in these matters and Simon's notion that philosophy errs when it "uses a term whose meaning cannot be reduced to being."¹¹⁹ But Simon's assessment of his friend's contemplative and artistic nature and "gifts of intuitive familiarity," should put what may appear as a weakness in a different light.¹²⁰ In what was to be his last public lecture, Simon said this: "He [Maritain] has always been in warm contact with the existential man, and his excellence in the rational analysis of the soul has never interfered with his *intuitive relation to men such as they are here and now, such as they have been shaped by history, by grace and by suffering, and such as they behave with regard to their eternal destiny.*"¹²¹ We may infer from this statement and from the text of Simon's homage to Maritain, that his philosophical examination of spirituality and art was rooted in the existential conditions of the time, and that he saw in these conditions, and in the grave moral and spiritual challenges they posed, the ground where a vital Thomism would take root. This means that whatever obscurities one might encounter in that path would eventually give way to the lucidity and charity of reason.

In the case of Israel, Bloy, and avant-garde art, Maritain's "practical opacity," as McNerny so aptly called it, was informed by the spiritual world that he and Raïssa encountered in the early years of their conversion to Catholicism.¹²² The figure of Léon Bloy, painted in the extreme and explosive colors of mystic, genius, martyr, and prophet, stands at the center of this encounter. Destitution and majesty, sacrifice and glorification, rage and meekness were polarities that informed his spiritual and literary persona, creating an amalgam of radical faith and art that the young Maritains found irresistible. Projecting into that experience not only their Bergsonian intuitionism but also their sympathy for the anti-establishment art of the avant-gardes, they naturally saw in Bloy a rebellious spirit who could perceive reality in its purest and most sacred forms and embody these forms in a language that only few could decipher. This was also the dream and

118. Ralph McNerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 64.

119. Walter Nicgorski, "Yves R. Simon: A Philosopher's Quest for Science and Prudence," *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 68–84.

120. Griffin and Simon, *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures*, 7.

121. *Ibid.*, 4. Emphasis added.

122. McNerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain*, 64.

claim of many avant-gardes. It was thus easy for Jacques and Raïssa to see in painters like Rouault, whose work shocked bourgeois and academic art sensibilities, the toils of holy souls seeking redemption in the name of a transcendent purity.

Far away from her native Russia and having abandoned the religion of her ancestors, Raïssa was especially vulnerable to the aestheticism of this vision in which Israel too becomes a mystery to be deciphered and the great masterpiece of divine providence. In her memoirs, she draws attention to the last chapter of *Le Salut*, where Bloy improvises on the La Salette prophecies. She calls the text "magnificent and obscure" and blames hers and Jacques' youthful ignorance for failing to understand "Bloy's complex symbolism" when they first read it. Still, "its beauty," she recalls, "was obvious."¹²³ She remains confident that, just as Bloy had predicted, the "Passion of Israel will be the reflected image of this agony of Love. And in this unspeakable community of suffering, Israel will recognize Him of Whom it is the symbol."¹²⁴

Having noted the problematic aspects of Maritain's essay, it is important to keep in mind the nature and scope of the spirituality that informs it. This is not to deny the presence of anti-Semitic elements in its imagery and vision, especially when considering both from the sophisticated understanding of anti-Semitism that we have today. It is, rather, to place them in their proper context. From this perspective, it is fair, I think, to conclude that the Maritains' fascination with the world of Bloy and his views of the Jewish people, was part of a long journey to clarity and an attempt to reconcile the radical hope and charity of Christianity with a broken world.

123. Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 135.

124. *Ibid.*, 136.