

Maritain Through the Years

by Robert Speaight

613

The other day, as I was signing the register in a West Country hotel, the proprietress observed to me: 'Didn't there use to be an actor called Robert Speaight?' The remark had no importance except to flavour an autobiography or enliven a dinner table; but it had, I think, a certain significance. It signified that a day comes when we must all brace ourselves to realize that other people regard us as fuddyduddies. Jacques Maritain is the antonym of a fuddyduddy, but he is 82 years old. Since the death of his wife, Raissa, he has lived with the Petits Frères de Charles de Foucauld at their headquarters just outside Toulouse. The fine new Dominican church and scholasticate are close at hand, and here the Petits Frères follow certain courses and receive a solid theological formation before dispersing, in their groups of two or three, to the uttermost ends of the earth. They live in huts – purposely provisional, one supposes – and take their meals in 'messes' of six or eight. Maritain has his own little hut, partitioned to form a bedroom and a tiny study. He is not a canonical member of the community, but he shares its life in so far as he is able to; gives an occasional conference or seminar; and is at hand for advice. Twice a year he leaves Toulouse to visit the house which still belongs to him at Princeton – at present occupied by Arthur Lourié and his wife – or to stay with friends at Kolbsheim in Alsace.

It is a life of retirement, but not of inactivity. Nevertheless it is already twenty years since a fellow Academician enquired of François Mauriac – 'Who is Jacques Maritain?' – and Mauriac expressed his indignant incredulity that anyone – even *sous la coupole* – should be unaware of what Maritain had done for France. Newer voices – more strident and generally more obscure – were challenging St Thomas through his most distinguished contemporary disciple; and the older voices were not ready to forgive a Catholic who had questioned the crusading credentials of General Franco and refused to rally around the lowered standard of Marshal Pétain. It was about this time that a French Dominican, whose friendship I greatly valued, remarked to me: 'There are two Maritains, and Catholics generally prefer the first, but the second is the only one that matters'. This was a judgment that any consideration of Jacques Maritain's life and work forces one to ponder, and one's reply to it is largely assisted by his latest book.

*Carnet de Notes*¹ is nothing so systematic as an autobiography; it should be read in the light of an appendix to what he, or Raissa Maritain, have already written. Nevertheless, it is a book of considerable size and scope, and no other work of Maritain that I know of gives to anything like the same degree the flavour of his personality and *foyer*. It is discontinuous and *décousu*, but never casual. It is designed to fill in the gaps, and then it passes on. The first 100 pages consist of extracts from old diaries between 1898 and 1911, supplemented here and there by later elucidations. Maritain was baptized a Protestant, and his mother – Gêneviève Favre – was observed in advanced old age distributing Communist tracts in the Paris *métro*. In reply to the remonstrances of a friend, she answered with a serene reminder, 'vous oubliez que je suis une vieille révolutionnaire'. Her son, later appearances notwithstanding, had Péguy's passion for the 'harmonious city' in his blood, and there is an early entry (1905) which might stand as a text for all his thinking on social problems – 'ce qu'il y a de mauvais dans l'industrialisme, ce n'est pas la machine, c'est l'esprit bourgeois'. It was a judgment that Eric Gill, in his more reasonable moments, might well have echoed. Maritain has said – and the distinction is valuable when we are confronting the first Maritain with the second – that people have either a *tempérament de droite* or a *tempérament de gauche*. He himself has a little of both, but more of the latter than the former. This does something to explain why he has been attacked – and latterly neglected – by both sides.

To understand him we must look at the influences under which he fell and at the way in which they were obeyed, assimilated, or shaken off. Bergson had offered him an escape from materialist determinism, and then St Thomas taught him that the Bergson of *L'Évolution Créatrice* would not quite do. But with the Bergson of *Les Deux Sources*, and the Bergson who wore his star of David during the German occupation and died with the baptism of desire, the way to reconciliation was open. The influence of Léon Bloy was decisive and remained unmodified. One would have suspected a closer kinship with Péguy, but Maritain's temerity in the matter of Péguy's uncanonical marriage brought the two into conflict. (Maritain charmingly admits that it was some time before he came to understand human beings). Although the Maritains made their initial *démarche* to Bloy after reading *La Femme Pauvre*, there must have been something in the personality of Bloy – a genuine effulgence of the supernatural – which counteracted the violence and extravagance of his judgments. His spirituality, with its devotion to our Lady of La Salette, its emphasis on the Crucified – almost to the detriment, it would seem, of the Resurrected – Christ, its apocalyptic vision of history, and its anticipations of Paradise, was very much, I suspect, the spiritual climate of Meudon – although Bloy knew nothing of St Thomas, and

¹ Desclée & Brouwer.

thought that Rouault was set upon the path of artistic damnation from the moment he left Gustave Moreau behind him. Yet it would be altogether false to suppose that Bloy turned Maritain from a revolutionary into a reactionary; what he wrote in 1906 he would certainly subscribe to in 1965:

‘Everything in socialism and the class war which pretends to be a substitute for salvation, and seeks to establish a universal Happiness is false. But this truth is unassailable; the present condition of the world makes the war against social iniquity absolutely necessary.’

One must never forget that Léon Bloy was not only deeply pious but desperately poor; and although there may be conciliar voices now raised to which Maritain would listen with less than perfect sympathy, and trends in ‘progressive’ Catholicism of which he would disapprove, he has never ceased, in thought or action, to be at one with the ‘Eglise des Pauvres’.

The other important influence was Père Clérissac, O.P., who delivered him – in so far as liberation was necessary – from the prophetic anti-intellectualism of Bloy. Now Clérissac was a supporter of the *Action Française*, but unlike the other adherents of Maurras he was passionately pro-English. This did not matter to Maritain one way or the other. The Maritains knew German through their studies in philosophy and their visits to Heidelberg, but England was in every sense a foreign country. Bloy had put them on to Father Faber, but it is extraordinary that in all the 400 pages of this fascinating book there should be no mention of Newman. No one at Meudon seems to have heard of Newman, although they had heard of Father Vincent McNabb and even – no doubt to their edified astonishment – set eyes on him. Be that as it may, Clérissac unquestionably influenced Maritain’s political sympathies; but here, again, we must remember that the *Action Française*, particularly in its early days, was a revolutionary movement. Among the prominent Catholics, Péguy and Claudel were among the few to hold out against its insidious appeal. The difference between Péguy and Bloy was made clear for me when I asked Maritain what he thought would have been their respective attitudes to the Spanish Civil War. He replied that he thought Bloy would have been pro-Franco and Péguy against. Most importantly, however, it was Clérissac who determined Maritain’s dedication to Thomism and thus kept him apart – intellectually at least – from men like Maurice Blondel who were working, under close ecclesiastical suspicion, on other lines. One is interested to note that Maritain first came to St Thomas through the *Summa Theologica*; where others were caught in the throes of the Modernist crisis – of which there is no echo in these pages – he moved in the security of a faith which was not, at one moment, without its anxious trials.

Clérissac, if he had lived to endure its tribulations, would have suffered with many other Catholics of good faith from the condemnation of the *Action Française* in 1926, and the apparent injustice of the way this was

brought about. He would have shared the anguish of Garrigou-Lagrange, who was also a *tempérament de droite*. But it was Clérissac, more than anyone else perhaps, who gave to Maritain – or reinforced in him – a sense of the Church not as an institution but a *person* by whom, as well as for whom, one must be prepared to suffer. Maritain's subsequent defence of a painful decision – which disconcerted many of his friends, Massis and Bernanos among them – owed much to this vital distinction. What he describes as his *entente cordiale* with the *Action Française* – it was never closer than that – is explained in the third section of *Carnet de Notes*. He had made the acquaintance, during the first World War, of a young student, Pierre Villard, who had written to him for spiritual guidance. Villard was drawn to the Church, though he was never to be completely reconciled to it. He was also a disciple of Maurras. After he was killed in action, he left his not inconsiderable fortune to be divided between Maurras and Maritain. This did nothing to alter the Maritains' modest way of life, but it enabled them to buy the house at Meudon and to organize the Thomist circles and retreats and intellectual gatherings with which Meudon will always be associated. Meudon, as Maritain tells us, was killed by the Second World War, and its harmony had already been shaken by the Spanish inferno. We are given abundant details of these important *rencontres*: it is interesting to see that so passionate an Hegelian as Gaston Fessard was among the participants. But Catholic unity, already menaced in France by the crisis of the *Action Française*, was in schism by the time Dollfüß had bombed the Karl Marx Haus and the Sacred Heart was appearing on Moslem uniforms. It is easy to criticize Meudon as a *petite chapelle*; but it was more than a *petite chapelle* – it was a very sizable congregation, and its windows were open wide to the disasters of politics and war.

For many readers, however – and one hopes for an early translation – this book will be valued for the light it throws, not only on a development which is a clear continuity, but on the intimacies of sanctuary and home. Perhaps no one but a Frenchman could have written of them at all; and certainly no one but Maritain himself could have treated them with so exquisite a candour and tact. The life of contemplative activity which began on Montmartre, in the beggarly lodgings of Léon Bloy under the shadow of the Sacré Coeur, radiates through fifty years of peregrination from Versailles to Meudon, Rome, Princeton and New York. One asks oneself how far such a life would be possible, or even conceivable, today. The secret of its charm, and its almost miraculous efficacy, is laid bare in these luminous pages. It was the secret of three persons, very distinct in their individuality, united in their love for one another and offering that love, not without sacrifice and certainly not without suffering, to God. We follow them, from their early and extravagant mortifications, to a balanced alternation of work and prayer – except that in a sense the

work and the prayer were inseparable. The special character of their consecration could only be guessed from outside, for they were at home with all kinds of people and in all circumstances – except those of a *mondanité* which they shunned. But indeed there was no occasion which Raissa Maritain would not have embellished with her presence; as an ambassadress in Rome, in the faded splendour of the Palazzo Taverna – a setting for a heroine out of Henry James – she was completely the mistress of her *métier*. She delighted above all else in conversation, and the talk, though it was never pretentious and often turned on personalities, was never small. When she came down from her room into the rather overheated salon at Princeton and occupied her favourite corner of the sofa, one was reminded of an artist quickly and unself-consciously preparing to do what he, or she, could do best. And nothing that Raissa Maritain did was less than delicate and true and ineffably her own. So much indeed the outsider could perceive; but of her courage in the face of recurrent illness, her constancy in the night of spiritual dereliction, her acceptance of suffering – for this went far beyond a stoical submission – and the generosity of the gift of herself to God, of these Jacques Maritain has now spoken with an authority to which none but he could pretend.

In her *Journal*, which is shortly to appear in English, Raissa has told us a good deal about herself; and Maritain has completed the picture of this remarkable trio with a memoir of her sister, Vera Oumançoff. This occupies nearly fifty pages of *Carnet de Notes*, and it is a masterpiece of portraiture. If one were tempted to regard Raissa as the Mary and Vera as the Martha of the household, one's impression is considerably modified. It is true that Vera seemed the more practical of the two. She served the Scotch, and although she may not have ordered the menu, one felt pretty sure she had gone out to buy it and probably supervised its preparation. But she never appeared to be busy; and although she spoke very little she was not inattentive to what was being said, and when she intervened in the conversation it was often with a devastating *douche* of common sense. I remember that as the unfortunate marriage of a friend was under discussion, she remarked that it was better to get married because you were in love than because you imagined you were following the precepts of St Thomas Aquinas. I arrived in Princeton only a few hours after she had died, and I was present at her funeral. A number of friends gathered at the house afterwards, but, although there was a deep stillness and sadness, there was no gloom. I was reminded of this in reading Maritain's conference to the Petits Frères on *L'Eglise au Ciel* and his protest against the funereal trappings of the liturgy. He argues with an audacious charity, which is neither Utopian nor sentimental, that the *normal* – though not necessarily the most frequent – passage of the Christian soul is direct to God.

The strength, and the temerity also, of Vera Oumançoff might have been divined by the sensitive acquaintance, but here – most notably, I think – Maritain fills in the gap. He reveals the extent of her physical suffering and the quite extraordinary spiritual graces that were given her. Over a period of some years she heard divine locutions at Mass. There was in her as much of Mary as of Martha. She had wanted to be a nurse, and very often Raissa's ill health forced her to be a nurse, but a tubercular infection – subsequently cured – prevented her; and not being drawn to marriage, she devoted her whole life to her sister and brother-in-law. She wrote incessantly, though not for publication; only moving fragments of prayer, radiant with a supernatural optimism, were found at her bedside after her death. From his evocation of this *vie à trois*, which was quite literally a life of three in one, Maritain proceeds, in a chapter of great perception and profundity, to analyse the nature of friendship and of love. He distinguishes between the love which is given totally to God – a work of communication and not only of sympathy – and the love, in the nature of things much more normal, which reaches God through other people. He evidently thinks it is time somebody spoke up in favour of chastity – even of chastity and continence in married life. He shows how connatural this is to contemplation, though it is not essential to it. He presents chastity as a liberation, not as a constraint; and his argument is as timely as it is true.

Maritain allows us to hope that he will add further chapters to this absorbing retrospect. One would like to know exactly how he reached his crucial decision over the Spanish Civil War – a decision which cost him a good deal in calumny – and how his philosophy of aesthetics came to be elaborated. One would like to hear about his years in Rome, so far as diplomatic discretion permits. If in some respects he now appears an isolated figure – and neglected especially in his own country – it is worth recalling that when Monsignor Montini came to be decorated with the Légion d'Honneur at the Palazzo Taverna, he declared to a distinguished gathering that he owed all he knew to Maritain. The recent elevation to the purple of Monseigneur Journet is an indirect confirmation of this tribute – for I doubt if there is a single subject upon which Maritain and Journet have ever disagreed. Those who are inclined to criticize the cautions of the present Pontificate would do well to bear these facts in mind; if Maritain is isolated, he is isolated in august company. For the rest, this book – though it contains no word of anathema – is a rebuke to the superficiality and degradation of our times. It is already some years since Maritain prophesied the coming of a day when the world would be habitable only by the animals and the saints – and by great saints at that. When all controversy has been laid aside, he remains a living proof that holiness still has its power to charm because it is a 'holiness of the heart's affections'.