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# Jacques Maritain on the Mystic-Poet

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## Abstract

I examine Jacques Maritain's assertion that his godfather, the Catholic writer Léon Bloy, was both an artist and a mystic, capable of reaching the heights of mystical contemplation of God. First examining this assertion in light of Maritain's mystical theology and philosophy of creativity, I show that a conventional reading of their operative principles renders mystical experience and artistic experience essentially different in their respective modes and objects of knowledge. Drawing on Maritain's personal reflections on Bloy and recent developments in Maritain scholarship, however, I then make the case that by virtue of relatively unexplored elements in Maritain's testimony and theoretical principles, the Christian artist can also have the experience of the Christian mystic when they direct their work to the mysteries of the Christian faith. I call this convergence 'Infused-Poetic Contemplation'.

## Keywords

Jacques Maritain, Léon Bloy, mysticism, art, poetry

## Distinguish to Unite

In his most famous work treating of mysticism and mystical experience, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, Jacques Maritain sketches a hierarchy of all modes of knowing that human beings are capable of in this life. Such a colossal enterprise—one which Maritain pursued throughout his life—requires us to understand the ultimate existential and spiritual ends of human beings and carefully distinguish both the means and objects of a multitude of sciences and experiences.

Maritain asserts that the ultimate destiny of every human being is life in and with God, and that intimations of this post-mortem state in genuine mystical experiences of God constitute the highest mode of human knowing. Even metaphysics, which is the highest human science and mode of knowledge by means of natural human

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reason, stands below mystical experience of God. This is because in metaphysics we only approach God as an object—the first cause, or 'being as being'—and cannot *experience* God as a subject, like ourselves.[1] Maritain claims that metaphysics is both the greatest and most dissatisfying rational mode of knowledge, for even as the metaphysician pursues the essence of the first cause, they can never know God as he really is in essence or act, which is love. Consequently, the metaphysician 'does not know what he thus desires, for the philosopher as such has no conception of the Beatific Vision and of what God has prepared for those who love Him. His desire is a natural mystical desire.'[2]

Naming the desire of the metaphysician to know God as first cause or being as being a 'natural mystical desire' in contrast to supernatural mystical experience of God requires Maritain to acknowledge and distinguish a multitude of other phenomena that can be said to anticipate supernatural mystical experiences of God. Among these are experiences induced in the 'natural mysticism' of non-Christian mystics and 'natural analogies of mystical experience' which include 'metaphysical experiences' (what Maritain later calls the 'intuition of being'), experiences of the good and the beautiful, and human love.[3]

Having noted that for Maritain the experience of the beautiful is a 'natural analogy' of mystical experience, it is also worth pointing out that for him the genuine artist is always inspired by the beautiful and necessarily aims to produce beautiful art works. Establishing how this is so and whether the experience of the beautiful can contribute to mystical experience, rather than merely serve as its natural analogy, will be explained later. Let us note for now that for Maritain, the spiritual dynamism by which the artist is inspired and creates their work—what he calls 'poetry' (as distinct from the art of writing verses, and which I shall hereafter capitalize for clarity, following John Trapani's example)—stands with beauty in a relationship of mutual dependence. Consequently, the creative experience of the artist involves both Poetry and beauty, and in experiencing the beautiful working in them, the artist has experiences which are analogous to mystical experiences of God. Maritain is clear, though, that the Poetry through which the artist maintains their craft can never exceed the status of an analogy of mystical experience: 'Prayer, holiness, mystical

[1] Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 7.

[2] Ibid., pp. 284–285.

[3] Ibid., p. 300; see also Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. L. Galantiere and G. Phelan (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1948), p. 19; Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ*, trans. Joseph Evans, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 95.

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experience—[P]oetry, even pure [P]oetry, is none of these things. But it is their most beautiful and most dangerous moral symbol.'[4]

What is so curious, however, is that Maritain makes this assertion even as he asserts elsewhere that his godfather, the Catholic novelist Léon Bloy, was subject to 'a most harsh mysticism' and that 'the true secret of Léon Bloy is the intensity of the three theological virtues in him, the absolute firmness and ador of his faith, in a soul belonging to [P]oet and prophet'.[5] This amounts to claiming, as I will show, that Bloy had the experience of both the artist and the mystic. How can this be understood in reference to the previous claim that Poetry and mystical experience are essentially different?

Making sense of Maritain's position and determining whether, for him, Bloy's Poetic experiences and mystical experiences were mutually dependent or were somehow one and the same requires (i) a deeper analysis of the key operative principles at work in Maritain's mystical theology and philosophy of artistic creativity, (ii) a look at Maritain's personal reflections pertaining to why he would assign this privileged vocation to Bloy specifically, and (iii) developing a Maritainian conceptual framework by which we can understand Bloy's creative and mystical vocation. To this end, I will introduce the notion of 'Infused-Poetic Contemplation'.

## Grace and Mystical Experience

Following Aquinas and St. John of the Cross, Maritain teaches that mystical experience of union with God, or 'infused' contemplation, is both the highest mode of knowledge that human beings are capable of in this life and the pinnacle of the Christian life lived for the sake of God.[6] Infused contemplation is a supernatural product of the love between God and the human soul, a dynamic mystical state which 'penetrates and secretly tastes divine things in Faith, *by the very virtue of the love* which makes us one spirit with God.'[7] It is, then, a relational or dialogical experience and knowledge of God 'in an affective, experimental and obscure manner … superior to every concept and image.'[8] Infused contemplation is a 'connatural' meeting and union of

[4] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 300.

[5] '*[L]e vrai secret de Léon Bloy c'est l'intensité en lui des trois virtus théologales, c'est la fermeté absolue et l'ardeur de sa foi, dans un âme de poète et de prophète*'. See: Jacques Maritain, 'Lettre-préface', in Georges Cattui, *Léon Bloy* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1954), p. 7 (my translation).

[6] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 367.

[7] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence*, trans. Algar Thorold (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1928; Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2016), p. 13. Citations refer to the Cluny edition.

[8] Ibid., 12 (original emphasis).

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two subjects born of a love between God and the human person which becomes a formal mode of knowledge as much as an experience.[9]

According to Maritain, for the soul to be able to enter into infused contemplation, there must be an infusion of God's grace so that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, can dwell and grow in the soul.[10] He ascribes these to Bloy in speaking of 'The theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost planted in a profound and intuitive soul famished for the divine vision.'[11] The infusion of grace rendering this possible, however, can occur only if the soul is rendered passive and offers itself to the will of God through constant spiritual and ascetic practice.[12] Yet, infused contemplation is not to be regarded as something attained through human effort. Rather, God gifts it to those who are sufficiently prepared by being detached from such notions.[13] Then the mystic's beloved (God) enters into their will, such that 'the beloved becomes the principle of action, the "weight" of the lover.'[14]

In the highest possible mystical state that infused contemplation affords—what Maritain, following St. John of the Cross, calls the 'spiritual marriage'—God is experienced as the ultimate end and meaning of human life. For such a state to be possible, however, the soul must undergo extreme ascetic training. Following the classical, Dionysian model, Maritain delineates the stages of the mystical life as a purgative stage in which the soul is first stripped of its attachments, an 'illuminative' stage in which the soul then receives communications from God and enjoys greater knowledge of divine truths, and a final, unitive stage, in which the soul is united to God in the spiritual marriage.[15]

Precisely as 'superior to every concept and image', infused contemplation, Maritain says, is neither a visual nor a discursive experience. For while it is 'a token and shadow, an experienced promise of vision' of the essence of God,[16] the soul, when having progressed far enough in contemplative union, 'no longer thinks of anything but loving.'[17] There is an *apophasis* that renders mystical

[9] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 93.

[10] Ibid., p. 382.

[11] Jacques Maritain, 'Introduction', in Bloy, *The Pilgrim of the Absolute*, ed. Raïssa Maritain, trans. John Coleman and Harry Lorin Binsse (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1947; Tacoma, WA: Cluny Media, 2017), p. xv. Citations refer to the Cluny edition.

[12] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence*, pp. 20–21.

[13] Ibid., pp. 23–24.

[14] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 93.

[15] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence*, pp. 3–4.

[16] Jacques Maritain, *Man's Approach to God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), p. 34.

[17] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence*, p. 71.

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union in infused contemplation possible. This is a knowledge of God 'stripped of all accidents and images.'[18]

We see further evidence that infused contemplation is supra-sensorial and supra-conceptual for Maritain in his reference to St. John of the Cross' three signs or 'symptoms' of the beginnings of the contemplative way. The signs are a cessation of desire for discursive meditation on divine mysteries, the cessation of any desire to intentionally fix either the imagination or the senses on any internal or external object, and the soul finding itself in a peaceful state when alone with God and 'without any discursive acts or exercises of the powers of memory, understanding or will.'[19]

With such criteria and carefully-considered divisions pertaining to contemplative experiences of God, are we to infer that such experiences are the sole preserve of spiritual masters? Maritain denies this. Genuine Christian mysticism, he argues, occurs in degrees of intensity and insight, according to each person's level of spiritual development. 'The end of the journey is transformation into God, which is begun here below by grace, faith and love', and 'all souls, by the fact that they are called to heavenly beatitude, are also commonly called in a general way to enjoy the beginnings of beatitude on earth by means of infused contemplation.'[20] We will see that this is significant when it comes to Christian artists such as Léon Bloy.

## Poetry, Beauty, and Poetic Contemplation

Deal Hudson remarks that as we trace the development of Maritain's thoughts on the vocation of the artist, 'Maritain's emphasis shifted from the philosophy of art to the philosophy of [P]oetry, and finally, to the philosophy of creativity.'[21] In what follows, we shall be taking a similar course, for I shall argue that in the case of Bloy, the convergence of artistic experience and mystical experience lies in the creative process of the artist himself, rather than in the artefacts he produced. First, then, a brief exposition of what Maritain means by 'Poetry', for with infused contemplation, Poetry forms our epistemological foundation for understanding Christian artists whose creative process is suffused with what I call Infused-Poetic Contemplation.

[18] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 388.

[19] St. John of the Cross, quoted in Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence*, p. 27. Maritain does not provide a reference.

[20] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 367.

[21] Deal W. Hudson, '"The Ecstasy Which Is Creation": The Shape of Maritain's Aesthetics', in Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini (eds.), *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 236–237.

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For Maritain, the artist is inspired by being able to figuratively see the world through emotion, such that in being inspired and deploying the content of that inspiration in their work, they enjoy an intuitive kind of knowledge which is at once preconceptual, cognitive and affective.[22] Previously, we saw that Maritain describes infused contemplative experience of God as a 'connatural' meeting and union of the human soul and God. He also describes the knowledge of the artist as a species of 'connatural knowledge' or an 'experience-knowledge',[23] with the difference that whereas in mystical experience the human person is co-natured with God by entering into the life of God through love, the artist, in their creative experience, is co-natured with external objects, whose 'secret meaning' the artist divines through emotion[24] *directed* towards the production of some artefact or performance.[25] This process Maritain calls '[P]oetry'.

Maritain posits that the emotions of the artist are turned toward both the Freudian subconscious and a spiritual 'preconscious', which by association, then transforms the emotion into a 'spiritualized' or 'intentional emotion', giving it aspects of the object of which it is an emotion.[26] The emotion that is associated with a thing becomes one with it in the mind of the artist, and they in turn become one with the thing, such that they are able to manifest the spiritualized emotion that is both about a thing in itself and the artist's own emotions pertaining to it in an artwork. The intentional emotion with which an artwork is imbued bears informative power for its audience to ascertain its meaning or the artist's 'intentions' in the work.[27] Poetry allows the artist to penetrate the mystery of things and allows their audience to share in such manifestations of meaning.

According to Maritain, Poetry has both cognitive and creative aspects,[28] and these correspond to the cognitive and creative aspects of the intellectual nature of human beings.[29] The 'cognitive' aspect of aesthetic experience allows everyone to appreciate and contemplate art. Maritain makes a distinction between the universal capacity to apprehend and share in intentional emotion as '[P]oetic intuition' and the artist's incitation to produce an artwork in virtue

[22] Anthony Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', *New Blackfriars*, 96 (2015), pp. 533–534.

[23] Jacques Maritain, *The Situation of* Poetry, trans. Marshall Suther (New York: Philosophical library, 1955), pp. 44–51.

[24] Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: New American Library, 1953), p. 3.

[25] Ibid., pp. 85–86.

[26] Ibid., pp. 87–89; see also Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', p. 533.

[27] Sean M. Sullivan, *Maritain's Theory of Poetic Intuition* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, 1963), p. 59.

[28] Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', p. 534.

[29] Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 168.

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of intentional emotion as 'creative intuition', for the sake of a work to be produced.[30] But while the cognitive and creative 'aspects' can be logically distinguished for non-creative audiences of art who can have Poetic insights without producing works of art, they exist in logical and temporal unity for the artist as what Maritain calls 'Poetic Knowledge'.[31]

Still, Poetic Knowledge is best understood in terms of the cognitive and creative elements of the intellect, and the difference between them will be crucial in determining the relationship between artistic experience and mystical experience for Maritain. For just as in ordinary knowledge the object of cognition and that which is produced on the basis of knowledge of the object (the concept) are different to the object and work produced in virtue of Poetic Knowledge, so will the object and that which is produced in mystical experience differ from those of Poetic Knowledge.

Toward what, then, do Poetry and the artist's creative intuition tend? To the creation of a work, yes, but what is the most fundamental quality of the intentional emotions involved in an artwork which, we may say, *define* the experience of art that moves us? Put simply: why is art special for so many of us?

Maritain writes that 'the free creativity of the intellect … cannot help tending … toward that in which the intellect has its ultimate exultation, in other words, that which causes the pleasure or delight of the intellect.'[32] That which engenders pleasure or delight for the intellect, according to Maritain, is beauty, one of the transcendentals or qualities of ultimate reality, or what shall hereafter be referred to as 'Being', encountered through potentially infinite instantiations in the world.[33] Following Aquinas, Maritain posits that the beautiful consists in three properties: 'integrity', 'proportion', and 'clarity' (or 'radiance'), which encompasses the former two and denotes the intelligibility and splendor of the form of a beautiful object.[34]

For Maritain, when the mind recognizes matter so intelligibly arranged as to be beautiful, it recognizes its own nature and rejoices in delightful contemplation (*gaudium*).[35] It is because of this that the intellect longs to create the beautiful as a matter of pure intellectual

[30] Ibid., pp. 78–98.
[31] Ibid., pp. 85–86.
[32] Ibid., pp. 130–131.
[33] Ibid., pp. 25–46.
[34] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930), pp. 24–25.
[35] John Trapani, *Poetry, Beauty & Contemplation: The Complete Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2011), p. 132; see also Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', p. 535.

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delight.[36] What is most important here with regard to the relationship between the mystic and the artist is that for Maritain, sensual delight only accompanies an intellectual delight upon the perception of the beautiful, and that the beautiful is an occasion to contemplate Being.

If the process of creating a beautiful artwork is 'cleared of all adventitious elements' such as egotism on the part of the artist or mere sentimentality in content rather than genuine sentiment, that process will be a matter of pure intellectual delight.[37] The intellect, then, longs to create the beautiful, because the beautiful is a manifestation of Being—an inexhaustible wellspring of intelligibility in which the mind, spontaneously and non-self-consciously, delights. However, concerning the Poetry underlying the artist's Poetic Knowledge, Maritain writes that it 'stands in the line … of the delight procured by beauty'.[38] Maritain here seems to place the natural ability to appreciate the beautiful on equal terms with Poetry as the uncovering of hidden meaning in things. It also suggests, as Trapani says, that the relationship between Poetry and beauty is one of mutual dependence and presence, that 'where there is one, there also will the other be found.'[39]

> Thus beauty is … the transcendental *correlative* of [P]oetry. Beauty is not an object, even infinite (as Being is for science), which specifies [P]oetry, and to which [P]oetry is subordinate. But beauty is a necessary correlative for [P]oetry. It is like its native climate and the air it naturally breathes in … an end beyond the end. For [Poetry] there is no goal, no specifying end. But there is an *end beyond.* Beauty is the necessary *correlative* and *end beyond any end* of [P]oetry.[40]

The intellect seeks the beautiful as that through which it can rejoice in the infinite richness of Being, and for this reason, Maritain asserts that the genuine artist necessarily seeks to create beautiful works. Trapani argues that for Maritain, 'our ultimate happiness and fulfilment is obtained through the satisfaction of the natural desire of the intellect for beholding the fullness of Being.'[41] One can understand this in the following way. The intellect desires what is most real, and the beautiful, unlike the merely sentimental or the grotesque, as the shining forth of the infinite mystery of Being and analogously manifesting the Being that is the heart of all reality, gives us the opportunity to delight and contemplate the mystery of Being itself. This is why Maritain says that 'if [P]oetic intuition is *really*

[36] Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 40; see also Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', p. 535.
[37] Haynes, 'Jacques Maritain's Definition of Art', p. 535.
[38] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 97.
[39] Trapani, *Poetry, Beauty & Contemplation*, p. 163.
[40] Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 130–131.
[41] Trapani, *Poetry, Beauty & Contemplation*, p. 141.

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expressed it will inevitably be expressed in beauty … for any real expression of [P]oetic intuition derives from it integrity, consonance [or proportionality], and radiance.'[42] All this amounts to saying that the beautiful is *lovable* and that the hidden source of art is Poetry, which aims for the beautiful. Furthermore, the beautiful mirrors the other transcendentals of the good and the true.

Coming now to the subject of the relationship between art and the mystical, it is because this contemplation of the beautiful, corresponding to the cognitive rather than the creative aspect of the intellect, is not merely an instance of sensual pleasure but first of all an intellectual delight, that Trapani takes up a notion that Maritain rarely used and never developed: 'Poetic Contemplation'.[43] According to Trapani, Poetic Contemplation bears an analogous relationship to supernatural contemplation or mystical experience in that it is a species of practically disengaged, natural contemplation of Being through the analogate of the beautiful, but unlike supernatural contemplation, does not have God in His very essence as its object and, consequently, not consist of direct, loving communion with God.[44]

Now, however, I will take the notion of Poetic Contemplation further by exploring two issues which Trapani does not address: the relationship between the *Christian* artist and the mystic, and the relationship between specifically *Christian* Poetic Contemplation and infused contemplation.

## Bloy as Mystic-Poet

We have just established that Poetic Contemplation consists of intellectual delight in the beautiful, whereas infused contemplation is a direct experience of loving union with God. Yet, we also know that Maritain ascribes the experiences of both the mystic and the Poet to Bloy. It seems that understanding where Bloy stands in relation to Maritain's mystical theology and philosophy of creativity requires exploring a third component, lest we merely remain in the realm of paradox.

This third component is what Maritain says about Bloy's mysticism and creative process specifically. Maritain writes that an artwork is 'always nourished by the experience of the man',[45] and so if we are to understand Bloy's vocation as what I shall call a 'Mystic-Poet', we must first understand how Maritain perceives Bloy's personal

[42] Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 132.
[43] Trapani, *Poetry, Beauty & Contemplation*, pp. 159–163.
[44] Ibid., pp. 159–160.
[45] Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), p. 93.

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experience as an artist and a mystic. A particularly pertinent question in this regard is how, according to Maritain, Bloy's mystical experiences inform his art, his Poetic Knowledge and Poetic Contemplation. Let us begin with how Maritain conceives Bloy's mode of expression as a Christian artist, that is, his use of the tangible as signs of the divine.

> 'I only understand what I guess,' Bloy would often say . . . . [W]ith the three theological virtues and the mere organism of the infused gifts the most powerful gifts of intuition . . . . he did not use human language, as do metaphysicians and theologians . . . to try to express . . . whatever we are able to know of transcendent reality . . . he used it to try to evoke that which in this reality goes beyond the mode of our concepts, and remains unknown to us . . . . [H]is words tended less to state truths directly than to procure . . . that feeling of mystery and of its actual presence. As he used reason and intellectual speculation according to a mode more experimental than demonstrative, to express reality in the very darkness that joins it to this feeling, the writers among whom Léon Bloy can suitably be classed necessarily make use of the parables and hyperboles to which mystical expression has recourse.[46]

Here Maritain classifies Bloy's literary language along the same lines as mystical language, which differs from ordinary language and metaphysical propositions in its use of the symbolic and overstatement to convey existentially important truths. 'For example', writes Maritain, 'the mystic, in describing his experience of created being before God, would say that the creature is nothing, that it is nothing at all. Yes, but these expressions have a mystical, not an ontological meaning.'[47] In this connection, it is also worth reflecting on a passage relating to the pursuit of Christian sanctity from Bloy:

> [B]ecome resigned to the fact you will seem ridiculous . . . if you are to enter the service of Splendor. Then you will know what it means to be the friend of God.
>
> The Friend of God! I am on the verge of tears when I think of it. No longer do you know on what block to lay your head, no longer do you know where you are, where you should go. You would like to tear out your heart, so hotly does it burn, and you cannot look upon a creature without trembling with love. You would like to drag yourself on your knees from church to church, with rotten fish strung from your neck, as said the sublime Angela of Foligno. And when you leave these churches after speaking to God as a lover speaks to his beloved . . . . All the thoughts that had been pent up unknown within you, in the caverns of your heart, run out in tumult suddenly like virgins who are mutilated, blind, starving, nude and sobbing. Ah! Surely at such

[46] Maritain, 'Introduction', in Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.
[47] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 347.

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> moments the most horrendous of all martyrdoms would be embraced, and with what rapture.[48]

Leiva-Merikakis writes that in this striking passage, and many more throughout Bloy's writings, 'both the fury and the lyricism are vehicles of love. What gives … all his works, a fundamental unity is this passionate love of God, what Jacques would later call *amour fou* (mad, frenzied love)'.[49] In this connection, the notion of the 'friend of God' that Bloy speaks of is also important for Maritain. For when listing the 'practical ways' of coming to knowledge of God, he includes the 'testimony of the friends of God', highlighting the role of saints in pointing us to a transcendent meaning of life by means of their service done in and through a love which is beyond measure.[50]

Bloy was certainly such a person for Maritain. For long before Maritain picked up the *Summa* of Aquinas, he desperately searched for a meaning to his life and was led to the Catholic faith through Bloy's writings and his novel, *La femme pauvre*, especially.[51] The last line of that book reads 'Il n'y a qu'une tristesse, c'est de n'être pas des SAINTS' ('the only sadness is not to be a saint'). This is a proclamation which Maritain celebrates in his reflections on Bloy, who was, for him, 'devoted to beauty as to one of the names of Him who is' and always sought to make his art 'a monstrance of truth.'[52] It was the mysterious power of the Catholic faith to provide such a meaning, conveyed through Bloy's Catholic piety, lay mysticism and literary work, that led Maritain to become Catholic.

'"Mystery is luminous and impenetrable"', Maritain quotes Bloy.[53] The mystery of the personal example of the mystic corresponds to the mysterious and sometimes baffling notions and turns of phrase of mystical language. Another common feature of mystical language which Bloy exhibits in his writings is the refusal to ascribe any knowledge of God in His essence whatsoever (*apophasis*), or the use of negative propositions about God in order to speak about Him (*via negativa*). 'You are seeking', Bloy tells Maritain. He then declares: 'I never sought or found anything, unless one wishes to describe as

[48] Léon Bloy, *Oeuvres de Léon Bloy*, *11* (Pars: Mercure de France, 1956), pp. 313–314, quoted and translated in Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, 'Léon Bloy and Jacques Maritain: *Fratres in Eremo*', in Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini (eds.), *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 77.

[49] Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, 'Bloy and Maritain', p. 77.

[50] Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God*, trans. Peter O'Reilly (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), pp. 63–64.

[51] Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, trans. Julie Kernan (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., Inc., 1942), p. 105.

[52] Maritain, 'Introduction', in Léon Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, p. xxiii.

[53] Jacques Maritain, *Untrammeled Approaches*, trans. Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 38.

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a discovery the fact of tripping blindly over a threshold and being thrown flat on one's stomach into the House of Light.'[54]

'All his [Bloy's] literary efforts', Maritain says, 'consisted in projecting in the mirror of enigmas and similitudes the rays of this substantially luminous light.'[55] Having seen examples of Bloy's literary techniques, what are the themes and subject-matter of his work serving as rays of divine light? Two which are particularly important for our purposes are suffering and the pursuit of spiritual purity. They mirror and give expression to Bloy's life, and he also saw them as a necessary part of his Poetic vocation. For he writes that 'Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.'[56] He also writes, with equal beauty and poignancy: 'A heart without affliction is like a world without revelation' and that 'Suffering is the helper of creation.'[57]

Maritain writes that there was, in Bloy, 'a poor human heart preyed upon by all that is superhuman in the divine requirements, and by all that is inhuman in the despotism of art; the great storms, the nights, the tears of a most harsh mysticism'.[58] Here Maritain seems to bring together the demands imposed by the mystical love of God and the virtue of art as that produced for the sake of the beautiful to suggest a unity of vocations in Bloy.

For the Catholic, however, suffering is also a means to participate in the Cross of Christ and, consequently, a means of purification and purging of the soul's desires.[59] Such asceticism constitutes a central element of Christian mysticism. It is especially pronounced in Bloy and another of Maritain's great influences, St. John of the Cross.

The saint famously speaks of both an actively endured and a passively endured 'night of the senses', as well as an active and passive 'night of the spirit' or soul, in which a human soul, trusting in God, walks in darkness, ceasing to rely upon any mental representation of God or of divine union.[60] This ascetic means of reaching spiritual perfection is best exemplified in St. John's *'todo y nada'* ('everything and nothing'), which he presents in sublime poetic form:

[54] Léon Bloy, *The Pilgrim of the Absolute*, ed. Raïssa Maritain, trans. John Coleman and Harry Lorin Binsse (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1947; Tacoma, WA: Cluny Media, 2017), p. 230. Citations refer to the Cluny edition.

[55] Maritain, 'Introduction', in Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, p. xxv.

[56] Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, p. 294.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Maritain, 'Introduction', in Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, p. xv.

[59] Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), pp. 58–59.

[60] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 385.

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> To reach satisfaction in all
> desire satisfaction in nothing.
> To come to possess all
> desire the possession of nothing.
> To arrive at being all
> desire to be nothing.
> To come to the knowledge of all
> desire the knowledge of nothing.[61]

Concerning this 'nothing', Maritain explains that the saint 'asks for everything' and that 'This death is called self-surrender . . . . [which] transforms us into love.[62] As we see in Maritain's treatment of mysticism in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, this self-surrender becomes a positive force, allowing for the gathering and focusing of spiritual energy and God's entering the soul. He descries the mystic's experience of having passed through the nights of purgation in the following manner: 'I was reduced to nothing and I knew no more . . . . For now my exercise is in loving alone.'[63]

This experience is mirrored in the Christian artist, for they recognize in the beautiful that which is most real, most lovable, and in the case of the Christian artist who pursues the divine as their very subject matter, love also becomes their mode of knowledge. This we see in Bloy and it is here that we arrive at the convergence of the experiences of the mystic and the Poet, of infused contemplation and Poetic Contemplation. On the basis of Maritain's own principles and testimony, it is evident that for him, God is known directly by Bloy in a contemplative union of love that is also an experience of the beautiful of the highest order, and which, according to the artist's creative intuition, finds expression in a work of art.

In Bloy, precisely because there is the purging of knowledge and a humbling of self in the face of the mysteries of the divine, God is not an object of consciousness like a being in the world, but is an immediately felt, personal reality, the love of whom can never be directly expressed, only suggested. Maritain writes movingly in this regard:

> [Bloy] was never willing to renounce completely the splendors of the tangible, in order to seek beyond, in the darkness of a purely spiritual contemplation, Him who is above all images and all thought. Perceptible and tangible signs of God—such were the objects of his never-sated hunger. Thus it is in the world of forms and images that the mystical keys have their repercussion, and there take shape the melodies of a

[61] St. John of the Cross, 'The Ascent of Mount Carmel', in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated and edited by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (revised edition) (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), ch. 13 (11).

[62] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 353.

[63] Ibid., pp. 371–372 (original emphasis).

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> most genuinely Christian sense of the absolute requirements of the Lord.[64]

As late as 1968, Maritain affirms that Bloy was able to enter infused contemplation while enjoying the Poetic Knowledge and Poetic Contemplation of the artist, with the unique requirement that even in its most sublime forms, violence must be done to art in order for it to be ordered to Christian truth.

> [I]n the case Léon Bloy—and it is, I believe, a unique case—since the reality signified is the infinite fire of the unfathomable God, it was necessary to do violence to art and to the works which the [P]oet fashions in words, in order to bring them to a superhuman excess, which is still unworthy of the reality which they evoke . . . .
>
> Bloy had assigned himself as artist ... a supreme effort of [P]oetry which overflowed from his contemplative prayer and which, in comparison to the treasures glimpsed in that prayer, was like a resplendent rag. For Bloy knew very well that the silence of adoration will always praise God better than any word.[65]

In the art and person of Bloy, God is known and contemplated by means of an imageless, pre-conceptual mystical insight born of love which I shall call 'Infused-Poetic Contemplation'—capitalized for the reason that I refer to the Poetry at the heart of all artistic creation and wish to emphasize the creative function of the infusion of grace in this case, as opposed to infused contemplation *per se*, which does not involve the creative function of the intellect.

Yet, as much as I have stressed the apophatic in Bloy's mysticism, we can see that Bloy's mysticism remains strictly within the Catholic tradition, with a view to meeting the 'absolute requirements of the Lord' and to sainthood. Bloy's strong belief in the value of the Sacraments in the Catholic spiritual life is also important in this regard. To understand how they relate to art and mysticism for Maritain, let us first briefly consider the work of the painter Georges Rouault, who was Maritain's neighbour and a close friend of his for many years.

## Art as Sacrament

Cornelia Tsakiridou writes that for Maritain, Rouault's religious art functions in an analogous manner to Byzantine icons in that the artist participates, in making an object for contemplation of divine things (such as the Crucifixion), in the Cross of Christ themselves. Referring to the same dictum of Fra Angelico's that Maritain quotes, that 'to

[64] Maritain, 'Introduction', in Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, p. xv.
[65] Maritain, *Untrammeled Approaches*, pp. 40–41.

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paint the things of Christ, the artist must live with Christ', can help us make sense of this. As Tsakiridou explains, it implies that the virtue of art in this instance functions as *ascesis* (spiritual discipline) and the work of art functions as an object for mystical contemplation.[66] This mystical contemplation upon what defines the artwork—its Christ-centredness—Tsakiridou calls '*visio divina*' ('prayerful seeing'), as analogous to *lectio divina* ('prayerful reading').[67]

'From Maritain's standpoint', writes Tsakiridou, 'the Cross is the *locus mysticus* (mystical place) of communion, the intersection and union of God and man, in which the theanthropic mystery is both finalized and opened to humanity.'[68] As the artist approaches the divine as the subject of their art, any egocentric preoccupations that the artist may have are revealed and shattered by the 'charismatic being' of the religious artwork as participative in 'What in [B]eing is transcendental, its goodness, beauty and truth' and activated by grace.[69]

Here we are reminded of why Poetry tends to the beautiful, which is that the beautiful is eminently lovable and worthy of contemplation. Hence, an artwork that is at least in some way directed to the divine functions in the same way as the Cross in laying bear human weakness and sin insofar as the mysteries of the divine overwhelm all of our attempts to define, contain, or use it for our own advantage.

In the case of the Christian artist, they must undergo an analogous *kenosis* (self-emptying) as that of Christ, as they find that their work inevitably fails to express the infinite mysteries of God.[70] In living according to charity and directing their work to the beautiful, the artist, says Maritain, can 'give himself totally ... first to his God and second to something that is a reflection of his God.'[71] This *kenosis*, wherein the dynamism of purgation, the stripping of knowledge and divine illumination occurs, is why Maritain writes, in a collection of Rouault's work, that in genuine Christian art there is a 'final victory of a 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 toward union with God.'[72]

[66] Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, 'Vera Icona: Reflections on the Mystical Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain and the Byzantine Icon', in John G. Trapani (ed.), *Truth Matters: Essays in Honor of Jacques Maritain* (Washington, DC: American Maritain Association, 2004), pp. 225–226.

[67] Tsakiridou, 'Vera Icona', p. 226.

[68] Ibid., p. 229.

[69] Ibid., p. 241.

[70] Ibid., pp. 241–242.

[71] Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 108–114.

[72] Jacques Maritain, in *Georges Rouault* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, 1952), p. 8.

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Rouault's paintings of Christ exhibit a unity of artistic and mystical insight in the use of particular artistic techniques and the bringing forth of powerful emotions to make Christ's presence 'a presence of suffering in and with our sufferings.'[73] Tsakiridou points out that in Rouault's *Christ Mocked by Soldiers* of 1932, for example, 'the expansion of the line itself is made into an expressive object' as Christ is outlined in the same rough, powerful strokes of the bodies and faces of those around him (be it the soldiers mocking him or the distraught Mary and John). This implies that there is no 'marked domain of ugliness and beauty, vice and virtue', and that the Cross gathers all in suffering, the transcendence of suffering, and redemption.[74] The Cross, says Maritain, is a 'place of supreme torments and the beatitudes of peace.'[75]

In Rouault's artworks, the Cross is the *locus mysticus* and invites *visio divina*, and for both Bloy and Rouault, contemplating the inspired artwork and the process of creating it are both nothing less than sacramental, that is, acts of worship. Understood as outward signs of inward or invisible divine grace, the Sacraments themselves have a central place in the Catholic faith. However, as Bloy points out, they are no less mysterious:

> Sanctity is so required of us, it is so inherent in human nature, that God presumes its existence, so to speak, in each of us, by the means of the sacraments of His Church, that is, by means of mystical signs invisibly making operative in souls the beginning of Glory . . . . A Sacrament is nothing other than a sacred, withdrawn and mysterious thing . . . . [with] the effect of *uniting* souls to God.[76]

Mystical artworks, such as those of Rouault, are sacramental in the same way, for they reveal to us the presence of God in Christ, even as the Cross represents mystery in all its darkness. In mystical artworks, God is known and experienced as ineffable mystery, suffering savior, and infinite love, emptying itself of all power to redeem sin and suffering. There is the co-happening of the revelation of God and His withdrawal.

For Maritain, the artist must approach such religious works with a holy fear, aware, passively but intensely, of divine inspirations which demand expression in some manner. In approaching the artwork as nothing less than sacramental, the Christian artist must enact the same *kenosis* as when they approach the Cross and engage in the same self-renunciation and passivity needed for infused contemplation. In cases

[73] William A. Dyrness, *Rouault: A Vision of Suffering and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 186.

[74] Tsakiridou, 'Vera Icona', pp. 243–244.

[75] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 385.

[76] Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, p. 296.

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such as Rouault's paintings of Christ, Tsakiridou says, the artwork is experienced 'as an invitation to prayer',[77] for it is in virtue of grace that the artist has been inspired to create a work that is truly Christian, and that 'its ontology is mystically formed and awaits recognition'[78] as an occasion for worshipping God.

## Conclusion: Mystic-Poets

Having explored Maritain's conception of the mystical in the Christian visual art of Rouault, we are now better able to appreciate the roles of the cataphatic, doctrinal, and sacramental in what are instances of Infused-Poetic Contemplation. We are also in a position to suggest that by virtue of the principles of Maritain's mystical theology and philosophy of creativity, which apply just as well to any Christian artist as to Bloy, the convergence of mystical and Poetic experience in Infused-Poetic Contemplation is potentially shared by a multitude of others who, like Bloy, are sufficiently advanced in the mystical life to enter into infused contemplation and whose work arises from and expresses the truths and mysteries of Christianity.

While Maritain does not comment on Rouault's mystical capacities, we have seen that in his writings about mystical theology, Maritain relies heavily on St. John of the Cross, the 'mystical doctor' of the Catholic Church. The saint's poems and mystical exegesis are among the most celebrated in Western Christianity for their beauty and profundity. Perhaps with him, then, we have another example of the convergence of mystical and artistic vocations in Infused-Poetic Contemplation.

Another possible case is Maritain's wife Raïssa, who, as an accomplished poet and spiritual writer herself, collaborated with Jacques on other works pertaining to contemplation and mysticism. These include the early work *Prayer and Intelligence* and the later *Liturgy and Contemplation*. Maritain relates in *The Peasant of the Garonne*—written after Raïssa's death—that he owes his understanding of mystical contemplation to Raïssa and her sister Vera. 'They taught me what contemplation in the world is', he writes. 'I have been taught, and taught well, by the experience, the sorrows and the insights of these two faithful souls.[79]

[77] Tsakiridou, 'Vera Icona', p. 244.
[78] Ibid., p. 240.
[79] Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 196.

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While I did not explore the art or religious thought of Raïssa Maritain here, it is not unreasonable, on the basis of Maritain's testimony and her own poetic vocation, to regard Raïssa as a Mystic-Poet who was also capable of Infused-Poetic Contemplation.

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