

PART ONE

JACQUES AND RAISSA

POETRY, POETICS, AND THE MARITAINS

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This paper calls attention to the other side of a question now being debated in Maritain criticism and scholarship--the question of what Jacques owed to Raissa. I ask also what Raissa owed to Jacques. In broader terms, I advance the opinion that the entire issue of Jacques' debt to Raissa and Raissa's debt to Jacques, in poetics and, I suspect, in most other matters, is something of a red herring.

The catalyst for my views is a sentence near the end of *Existence and the Existent*. The context of the sentence is Jacques' contention that poetry of the highest order must be granted the element of obscurity proper to human intelligence of the divine. He is referring to the allegedly failed efforts of Kierkegaard and Chestov at understanding the great mystics. "They cruelly and rather shabbily misunderstood them," he says. Their philosophers' understanding was inadequate because--and this is the sentence--"the place towards which [the mystics] journeyed through the shadows was that place where souls possessed and illuminated by the madness of the Cross give their testimony."¹ In other words, potential understanding of the mystics' experience of God lies not in philosophy but in contemplation. And the "madness of the Cross," the generative force of contemplation, is love. Philosophy may be the love of wisdom, but it is not love. It is not madness and it does not testify.

Simplistic as this lexical exercise may seem, it lies at the heart of the opinion I wish to put forward--namely, that we will never know who owed what to whom between Raissa and Jacques, on the matter of poetics or, I am also willing to wager, anything else, because the evidence lies buried in the sanctum of private experience. Further, and more to the point, it lies buried in the mystery of love which transforms all rational, measurable reality into metaphor for everyone but the lover. For all we will ever know, Jacques did gain access through Raissa to kinds of knowledge and levels of understanding which he would not have reached on his own, thus escaping the fate of Kierkegaard and Chestov. I could be cautious and say only "ways of knowing," and thus limit my assertions to the safe arena of process and possibility. But why should I be cautious where he was bold, and not only bold but insistent, reiterative, and tireless in his acknowledgements?

Why should I dilute the actual, if astonishing, record of their interdependence?

I will limit my specific assertions to poetics, since I am not a philosopher, and poetics is the only area of Jacques' work I understand even dimly; I am convinced that he did accede at least to poetic knowledge as a direct result of his experience in love with Raissa. Like Dante at age nine struck dumb and granted access to new awareness by the simple presence of a girl named Portinari, Jacques knew the authority of true poetry and the mystery of being by the simple presence of Raissa Oumansov. And "simple," of course, is the palest of designations for this least simple of privileged experiences: the coming to knowledge through love. If one believes, as Jacques did, that one's partner in love is God's creation and God's direct communicant, then the knowledge flowing through her can only be true knowledge.

As for Raissa, she never ceased to insist that from the age of seventeen, when she met Jacques, she owed everything she knew to him. It was through him that she was able to reach the particular kinds of knowledge that he claimed were uniquely hers: namely, poetic knowledge and the contemplative's knowledge of truth through love. Her deference to him is not surprising. She was a willing heir to two authoritative traditions--the Judaic tradition of Eastern Europe and European Russia, and the resurgent Catholic tradition of anti-positivist, turn-of-the-century France. In what they called their "search for truth," she, at least, never sought to break away from authority, but rather to find and obey the one true authority. Like that of the institutional Church of her and Jacques' time, her thinking was based on a hierarchical model. God, St. Thomas, and Jacques, in that order, were by definition above her in the hierarchy. This arrangement suited her natural disposition; it allowed her to integrate the paternalistic heritage of Judaism into her acquired Christian culture. More to the point of my present topic is that the arrangement locked Raissa into a prescribed intellectual relation to Jacques. He was the active, authoritative partner in their joint endeavors; she was the passive, receptive partner. In her auto-biography, she conveys this relation not only by what she says, but by her very language, as in this representative passage:

It has been my great privilege to receive, with no merit and no effort, to receive from such a dear hand, the fruit of his labor, which I could not attain without his help, yet to which I aspired with a deep and vital longing. I have been blessed in this way; I have lived in an atmosphere of intellectual rigor and spiritual righteousness, thanks to St. Thomas, thanks to Jacques, and I cannot write these things without being overcome with tears and love.²

Repeatedly in her autobiography she reveals her conviction that women in general and herself in particular are inherently incapable of taking the active role of artist, scientist--by which term "philosopher" is implied--or scholar: "They do not create," she says of women, "any more in the arts than in the sciences."³ Women may only study and analyse and appreciate the work of men, who *are* equipped to create.

I lay out this brief exposition of Raissa's self-effacement, not to quarrel with her or deplore her attitude. I only wish to establish the queer complementarity of her deference to Jacques and his deference to her. His is extreme and has often been commented upon, sometimes with annoyance. Hers is as extreme as his, although far more culturally sanctioned. From our present perspective, it is impossible not to be aware of the manipulative and power-shifting strategies that such a definition of roles can lead to. I do not wish to deny that some of those strategies came into play in Raissa and Jacques' case--I think they did. Nor do I wish to dwell on them. I am not interested in amateur psychological analyses, mine or anyone else's, of the Maritains' domestic life or their relative intellectual and spiritual gifts. That is the vicious circle I choose to step out of by accepting the Maritains' own claims at face value. I think Raissa did accede through "the fruits of [Jacques'] labor" to kinds of knowledge she "could not attain without his help." I also think that Jacques' intransigent deference to her was based on the reality of *his* experience, and that he did learn, reach understanding, and gain knowledge through her. And that, of course, is the key to breaking open the vicious circle: we must give up our outsiders' perspective and grant the reality of his experience of her and her experience of him, which was an experience grounded in love.

In the epistemological terms that the couple used in defining their mutual relation, my answer to the question of what Raissa owed to Jacques is straightforward: she owed him everything. In his role as the interpreter of Aquinas and the successor to her grandfathers and her father, he validated whatever she may have reached toward but not grasped on her own. Let me extend a point made by my colleague Deal Hudson in a recent address to a regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion. He argued that Raissa's function as Jacques' Muse was quite literal and continued unabated into Jacques' old age.⁴ I trust that Hudson will forgive my reduction of his point to this summary: early in their married life--in October 1912, when they were both still in their twenties--they took the vow as third order Benedictines, pledging themselves to a celibate marriage, at least partially because they understood the enormity of what Raissa represented for Jacques. She represented knowledge through love, divine knowledge that had to be welcomed, honored, served at any cost. It was related to carnal knowledge as Scripture is related to these paltry words I am speaking. I would suggest that the vow was doubly motivated, and that they also understood the enormity of what Jacques represented for Raissa. He

represented the authority she needed in order to proceed, in love and obedience, with her own intellectual, spiritual, and artistic growth. If we can move beyond stereotypes of male artist-scientist-scholar and female muse, we can entertain the possibility that Jacques was Raissa's Muse. As indeed I think he was.

In another recent address, this one to last year's American Maritain Association meeting, another colleague, William Bush, also argued the essential part Raissa played in what Jacques knew.⁵ As has happened with others, Bush's patience wears thin when assaulted with Jacques' single-minded citing of Raissa on subjects ranging beyond any competence she herself claimed or, for that matter, demonstrated. Bush maintains, I think rightly, that the point lies in Jacques' experience, not ours, and he did experience Raissa as an earthly transmitter of divine knowledge. I apologize also to Bush for this reduction of his comments. I propose a mirroring of them, along the same lines as I proposed with Hudson's: Raissa considered Jacques an authority on subjects on which he himself stubbornly deferred to her, especially contemplation and poetics. I cite Hudson and Bush because I think their comments, or perhaps I should say intuitions, are correct; in order to tell the whole story, or as much of it as can ever be told, the comments require the mirroring, the playing back upon themselves, that I have just proposed.

A readymade example of Raissa and Jacques' own mirroring, in the area of poetics, is provided by the history of the essay "Poetry as Spiritual Experience." It was originally given as a talk by Raissa to a conference on aesthetics in Washington, DC, in 1942, during the Maritains' wartime exile in the United States. A slightly revised version of the talk, under the names of both the philosopher and the poet, was published in a special issue of the journal *Fontaine*, devoted to poetry as spiritual exercise. The English translation, which appeared a year later, also carries both names. Then, when Jacques included the essay in Raissa's *Poemes et essais* (1968), he listed it under her name alone.⁶ From this sequence, one can infer at length about who wrote, who revised, and who owed what to whom in the process. Having done that, I can only contend, as I did at the beginning of this talk, that the issue is a red herring. We are asking the wrong question when we insist on trying to figure out relative debts and influences. A more answerable question requires a suspension of control on our part--a leap of faith, of sorts: "How did Jacques owe everything to Raissa and Raissa everything to Jacques?" That is the question I have been attempting to address.

Long before the present debate over who owed what to whom, Henry Bars recognized the current from love to knowledge between Raissa and Jacques. Bars incorporated his recognition into *Maritain en notre temps* (1959), written now almost thirty years ago. In a more recent and more pointed assessment, Bars proposes an intellectual genealogy for Jacques, to

supersede the conventional one that situates the philosopher in the lineage of Aquinas. "I have sometimes thought," says Bars, "that one could imagine for [Jacques] a much shorter genealogy, and one that discounts biology: 'Jacques de Raissa'--Jacques of Raissa, in the manner of John of St. Thomas."⁷ Bars' genealogy is somewhat fanciful and certainly affectionate; the rest of us, I think, have lagged behind Bars in recognizing that fancy and affection, not "just" intellect, kept the waters of knowledge flowing between Raissa and Jacques. The ludic communion of lovers was theirs from the beginning and only deepened over the years. Jacques' tireless editing, annotating, and quoting of Raissa's papers after her death reflects not only his determination that "justice be done to Raissa," in his phrase;⁸ it also reflects his impossible wish that Raissa be seen through his eyes. As Bars has said, that could not be.

My reason for citing Bars, however--to whom I also owe apologies for reductionism--is that he comes closest to telling, or at least hinting at, the other side of the story: what Jacques would be like seen through Raissa's eyes. Using the central image of her only surviving love poem to Jacques, "Night Letter," Bars suggests that she alone could see into the heart of Jacques the philosopher and Jacques the lover; what she saw was her own small image illuminated there (Bars, 29). The word "small" is hers, and signifies, once again, her experience of Jacques' superior intellect and his transforming power in her life. The fact that the image is there constitutes a poetic admission which Raissa could not make in any other form: without her--more precisely, without the image of her--Jacques would falter.

In the four essays of *Situation de la poésie* (1938), Raissa and Jacques first enunciated together the underlying principles of a poetics they both endorsed throughout their lives as poet and philosopher. Jacques' fullest development of the principles came fifteen years later, in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), where they are extended to visual art. Raissa worked closely with him on the book. As he says in the Acknowledgements: "Raissa, my wife, assisted me all through my work [on the lectures in this book]--I do not believe that a philosopher would dare to speak of poetry if he could not rely on the direct experience of a poet."⁹ Very briefly, the principles laid out in *Situation de la poésie*, and extended in *Creative Intuition*, posit: (1) timeless standards of beauty consonant with the existence of a divine intelligence; (2) contemplation, or at the very least, *recueillement* (recollection), as a condition for release of the artist's creative potential; and (3) the element of mystery that signals the presence of the divine in all true art and links meaning inextricably to form. When Raissa chooses poets whose best work embodies these principles, she aims high; in her most substantive essay in *Situation de la poésie*, she names Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Racine, Goethe, Pushkin, and Baudelaire. Jacques also aims high, in the exemplars he names in *Creative Intuition*; he chooses, among others, Dante, John of the Cross, Donne, Blake, Hopkins,

Shelley, Mallarmé, and Eliot. The telling choice, however, is none of these--it is Raissa.

Repeatedly, in the company just named, Jacques cites Raissa's poems. And he does not necessarily choose the ones that would best illustrate his (and her) poetics. For example, he does not include "Le Revenant" or "Mirages," easily among her most mysterious and accomplished poems of the contemplative experience. He does include a long and somewhat preachy evocation of an Edenic state of consciousness ("Le Quatrimé Jour") and some fragments of other poems that need their original context in order to signify much of anything. There is no doubt that Raissa was aware of what Jacques was appending to the book by way of examples; perhaps she made some of the choices herself. That is a question of the sort that I think can never be answered, and in any case is ill-conceived. The inescapable conclusion, based on the way the Maritains worked together and deferred to each other, is that *they* considered the choices appropriate to the purpose of illustrating the principles of *their* poetics, as outlined briefly above. And they were blind to all that was contingent in each other--which included, of course, anything so incidental, so accidental, as a poem or a choice of illustration for a book. The explanation of this otherwise inexplicable blindness on both their parts now seems obvious to me, after years of obtuseness on my part: Jacques knew what he knew through Raissa, and Raissa knew what she knew through Jacques. The work of each was but a bare extension of the beloved person, and not distinct from that person's bearing of knowledge as God's scribe.

To return to the quotation from *Existence and the Existent* that set off these remarks, I want to close by turning Jacques' claim about Kierkegaard and Chestov onto myself: just as Jacques conceded philosophical analysis as an inadequate means toward understanding the experience of the great mystics, I concede any analysis I could conduct as an inadequate means toward understanding why Jacques thought Raissa was a great poet and Raissa thought Jacques was a great philosopher. In poetics, the only area where texts of his and texts of hers provide a base to work from, I can define a remarkable convergence between his signaling of the mystery essential to true poetry and her enactment of the mystery in a few true poems. Beyond that, I risk the shabby and cruel misunderstanding that Jacques deplored in Kierkegaard and Chestov. I prefer to avoid the risk and opt for a twist of Pascal's wager: I am willing to gamble on Henry Bars' genealogy--"Jacques of Raissa"--and to turn it the other way as well--"Raissa of Jacques." If I am wrong, if they lived an illusion, I will never know. If I am right, someone sometime can mark down another small victory for the

difference that one human being can make in the life of another. In the convergence of Raissa and Jacques, pebbles thrown into broader waters than they ever imagined, the circles are still widening.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*. (Westport, CT, 1975) 132-33.
2. Raissa Maritain, *Les Grandes Amitis*. (Paris, 1949) 242.
3. Raissa Maritain, *Journal de Raissa*, ed. Jacques Maritain (Paris, 1963) 100-01.
4. Deal W. Hudson, "Consummation and Creation: The Meaning of the Muse," Lecture delivered to the Southeastern regional meeting, American Academy of Religion, April 1987. A revised version is published as "'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, 1988).
5. William Bush, "RAISSA MARITAIN...et Jacques," Published in *Understanding Maritain* (see note 4).
6. Jacques and Raissa Maritain, "La Poésie comme expérience spirituelle," *Fontaine* 19-20 (Mar.-Apr. 1942): 22-25. Jacques and Raissa Maritain, "Poetry As Spiritual Experience," trans. Julie Keman, *Spirit* 9 (Jan. 1943): 181-83. Raissa Maritain, *Pomes et essais*, ed. Jacques Maritain (Paris, 1968) 278-84.
7. Henry Bars, "Raissa et Jacques au jour le jour," *Cahier Jacques Maritain* 7-8 (Sept. 1983): 28.
8. Jacques Maritain, "Avertissement" to the *Journal de Raissa* (see note 3) 8.
9. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, 1953).