

# LONELINESS AND THE EXISTENT: THE DARK NIGHTS OF PIERRE REVERDY AND RAISSA MARITAIN

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The world of Jean Paul Sartre is filled with a motley mass of beings that exist *en soi*. There is no God to explain their existence; they are simply there and they are *de trop*. In this nauseating multiplicity of objects, there exist certain beings that are conscious of their own existence and of the existence, outside themselves, of objects *en soi*. These conscious beings exist *pour soi*, in a world of pure *subjectivity*. But the conscious existent, the *subject*, can know the existents about him, including other conscious beings, only as objects *en soi*. This leads the subject to the forlorn conclusion that he himself is known to other conscious beings only as an *object*, never as a *subject*; that is, he is never known for himself, in the intimate core of his being. He is never understood completely. He is forever judged unjustly. He is alone. This is the universal human condition, to which, according to Sartre, the typical reaction is the nausea of anguish, loneliness, and despair, a kind of philosophic Dark Night of the Soul.

In his reply to Sartre, *Existence and the Existent*, Jacques Maritain agrees that the conscious subject grasps, in a flash that will never be dimmed, the fact that *he is a self* who is *at the center* of the world. "This privileged subject," says Maritain, "the thinking self, is to itself not object but subject; in the midst of all the subjects which it knows only as objects, it alone is subject as subject."<sup>1</sup> "To be known as object, to be known to others, to see oneself in the eyes of one's neighbor (here Sartre is right)," says Maritain, "is to be severed from oneself and wounded in one's identity. It is to be always unjustly known..."<sup>2</sup> *L'Enfer, c'est les autres*, said Sartre. Hell is other people.

For Maritain, however, God does exist; and as a consequence, the subjective "I", who stands before the tribunal of other subjectivities "accoutered in a travesty of himself," can nevertheless say, "I am known to God. He knows all of me...not as object but as subject in all the depths and all the recesses of subjectivity."<sup>3</sup> This exhaustive knowledge of God is a

loving knowledge. "To know that we are known to God is not merely to experience justice, it is also to experience mercy."<sup>4</sup>

But how does the finite conscious self come to know both himself as subject and that Transcendent Self by whom he is known as subject? The knowledge of subjectivity as subjectivity is not a knowledge by mode of conceptual objectization, says Maritain.<sup>5</sup> It is rather a knowledge by mode of "experience." In *Existent and the Existent*, he divides this latter type of knowledge, that is, by mode of experience, into two kinds; first, a formless and diffuse unconscious or preconscious experiential knowledge in which subjectivity is not so much known as "it is felt as a propitious and enveloping night,"<sup>6</sup> and, secondly, an experiential knowledge by mode of inclination, sympathy, or connaturality. This knowledge by connaturality appears under three specifically distinct forms. The first of these is knowledge by affective connaturality which judges by the practical, inner inclination of the subject. The second is knowledge by poetic connaturality *ad extra* by mode of creation. And the third is knowledge by mystical connaturality *ad intra*, by mode of nescience, by possession-giving not-knowing. In his essay "The Natural Mystical Experience and the Void" (published in *Redeeming the Time*) Maritain divides this third knowledge by mystical connaturality into two forms. One is an *affective* experience, a supernatural mystical experience which passes by way of the Dark Night of purgation, loneliness, and abandonment through illumination to the union of love. This is an experience which depends on supernatural charity or grace, and which God, in His inscrutable judgments and unsearchable ways, grants to some souls and refuses to others. The other experience is *intellectual*, a natural mystical experience which passes by way of the Dark Night of the subjective experience of the Void to an intellectual grasp of the Transcendent Self, but no more.<sup>7</sup>

Maritain recognizes that, although singularly exalting combinations (even if they are muddy at times) of the supernatural mystical experience with either poetic experience or natural mystical experience can be found among Christian contemplatives and mystics such as Saint Augustine, and Rysbroeck, and especially Boehme, the distinction between poetic or natural mystical experience on the one hand and supernatural mystical experience on the other must be strictly maintained.<sup>8</sup> In the book which he wrote with Louis Gardet, *L'Experience du Soi, Etude de Mystique comparée*, Olivier Lacombe, a long-time friend and disciple of Maritain, insists, along with Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, that supernatural mystical experience must pass by way of the infused theological virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which accompany them.<sup>9</sup> "Christian faith and reflection tell us," he writes, "that God, even though He is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves, nevertheless remains inaccessible in His transcendence to any direct experience that might be the fruit of those spiritual energies which are proper to our nature. The mystical experience

of God such as He is in Himself, in the unsoundable depths of His being, can be nothing other than a gratuitous gift, a supernatural grace."<sup>10</sup> Maritain insists that there is no correspondence or parallelism between the nights of the senses and the spirit experienced by St. John of the Cross and the void of the natural mystical experience.<sup>11</sup>

In *Situation de la poésie* Jacques and Raïssa Maritain made a careful distinction between knowledge by poetic connaturality and knowledge by natural mystical experience, even though, they say, there is a "proximity, in the same divine source, in the experience of the poet and that of the mystic."<sup>12</sup> Though poetic experience is indeed, and preeminently, an experience, and is more an experience than it is knowledge, and though it may very well dispose the mind of the poet to mystical experience and is often full of contemplative flashes, it is not properly a mystical experience, particularly not one that is possession-giving. It does not have its goal and its fruit in itself; it does not tend to silence, as mystical experience does. Rather it tends toward utterance *ad extra*. It has its fruit and its goal in an external work which it produces, that is, the poem.<sup>13</sup> When the poet, disposed by poetic connaturality toward contemplation, advances into the mystical experience of the void, the Dark Night of the spirit leads the poet to a radical horror of his own life, to a spiritual death and a despair of *everything* (even of God). Such an experience, in its own special order, says Maritain, is like hell itself. If this Dark Night is a purely natural experience, then for the poet/mystic such a Night, of itself, ends in a catastrophe of the spirit, as it did for Arthur Rimbaud and Lautreamont. In order to survive such a Night, divine grace is necessary. The supernatural night of the spirit, says, Maritain, is the only night from which the spirit can emerge alive, because at the heart of the poet/mystic's radical despair, grace alone maintains a secret hope.<sup>14</sup>

Two poets, contemporary to Jacques Maritain and very close to his heart, both of whom he must certainly have had in mind when he wrote of the natural and supernatural nights of the spirit, were his wife Raïssa and his close friend, Pierre Reverdy. Both were poet/mystics who tried to describe in poetry the mystical experiences they had undergone. They are perfect exemplars, it seems to me, of Maritain's distinction between the Dark Night of an *affective*, supernatural mystical experience on the one hand, and the Dark Night of an *intellectual*, natural mystical experience on the other.

Raïssa Maritain was first and foremost a mystic. Robert Speaight called her poetry "the handmaid of contemplation."<sup>15</sup> In 1912, nine years after their marriage, Jacques and Raïssa took a vow of celibacy so that both of them, and Raïssa in particular, could better devote themselves to a life of contemplation. According to Jacques, it was only fourteen years later that Raïssa began to write poetry.<sup>16</sup> In his preface to the *Journal de Raïssa*, after stating that Raïssa told us everything in her poems, Jacques asks the reader rhetorically if those poems "were not born at the point where, in a very rare

encounter, all sources are one and where the creative experience of the poet is but the pure mirror of the mystical experience."<sup>17</sup> On the following page Jacques quotes from the letter which Pierre Reverdy, our other poet of the Dark Night, sent to Raïssa concerning her volume of poetry *Au Creux du Rocher*. "Raising poetry to its highest degree by the simplest of means," he wrote, "you have used it as the step-ladder needed by your sensitivity to follow your soul to the heights of its mystical experience."

But to arrive at the heights of mystical experience, Raïssa had to follow all alone a path that led through the valley of the shadow of death, through the Dark Night of acedia and abandonment, in many ways not unlike Sartre's nauseous experience of anguish, loneliness, and despair. Her *Journal* is filled with the anguish of this Dark Night. In an entry dated October 27-31, 1924, she writes:

I have suffered very much. God is absent. My soul is completely crushed. When I feel this horrible emptiness in my heart, I utter terrible cries within me. I seem to have not a scrap of faith left, not a single atom of hope.... No one is there to lift me from the ground, and I am like a bird with broken wings. I drag myself along and everything causes me pain.<sup>18</sup>

And these sufferings become progressively more intense as she advances toward the union of love. A year later she wrote:

Suddenly I saw myself plunged into an abyss of pain, in the midst of temptations so penetrating and so profound that my heart was absolutely martyred by them.... My sufferings are indescribable, and I feel that they have taken root in the depths of my soul, at the very springs of my nature.... Poor heart! It has left no resource but tears. Silent tears, so bitter and so hard.... I am at the extremity of distress and I need exterior help since God has abandoned me. I have periods of suffering so terrible that I seem to be losing my mind.<sup>19</sup>

One of the "Feuilles détachées" of her *Journal*<sup>20</sup> contains this poem:

Tous les moyens se sont avérés impuissants,  
Tous les chemins *trop courts*.  
La nuit divine impénétrable.  
La solitude intolérable, et nécessaire, inévitable.  
Toute parole de consolation paraît mensonge  
Et Dieu nous a abandonnés.

All means have shown themselves powerless,  
 All roads too short.  
 The divine night impenetrable.  
 The solitude unbearable, and necessary, inevitable.  
 Every consoling word seems like a lie  
 And God has forsaken us.

If the sufferings of these Dark Nights are progressively more intense it is because they are punctuated with periods of consolation, peace, and light that in their turn are more and more profound. On January 31, 1936, after a period of intense suffering, she wrote:

...a happy surprise awaited me; it was a period of  
 recollection immediately very profound and very sweet,  
 very peaceful and very restful....<sup>21</sup>

In the beauty of natural phenomena Raïssa found both the consolation of God's presence and the anguish of His absence. In "Chant Royal" she wrote:

Dans le silence éclore voix si frêle  
 Et qui dessine un frais ruisseau fleuri.  
 Quel doux réveil me font ces notes grêles  
 Malgré la neige et le ciel triste et gris.

A frail voice opens like a blossom in the silence And  
 pictures a cool flowery stream.  
 What a sweet awakening these slender notes bring me  
 In spite of the snow and the sad grey skies.

If God hides behind the veil of his creatures it is a light, diaphanous veil, "*un léger voile*." Although it hides her Beloved, the world is "sweet" because it also reveals Him and brings her the peace of His presence.

Douceur de monde!  
 Jusqu'où monte et descend en mon coeur ta musique!  
 Ta magie se donne pour l'éternité....

O gentle sweetness of the world!  
 How your music rises and falls in my heart!  
 Your magic is given for all eternity....

Prestiges du printemps, jardin persistant des délices.  
 Le ciel est limpide et lavé.  
 Une lumière tendre paraît  
 descendre du paradis.

Fascination of springtime, enduring garden of delights.  
 The sky is limpid and washed clean.  
 A tender light seems to come down from paradise.

Her universe is filled with stars; the world she knows is gentle and kind; she admires its "générosité végétale," the "fécondité miraculeuse du bois"; before the love she sees scattered throughout the world ("épars dans le monde") she cries: "O suavité, plénitude, joie!" (Douceur de monde). Like a ship she rides at anchor on the peaceful waters of the harbor (Chant royal).

But sighs and tears are not excluded from the "orchard" of this world, from this "garden fresh and pure" (Louange de l'épousé). "The gates of the horizon" may still "crumble in the gloom," where souls may still lose their way "in the hellish maze of madness" and cry out their despair (Portes de l'horizon). In the "agony and misery" of its Dark Nights, which the poet calls "those divine throes of death," when God takes back the gift of his presence, the suffering heart is forced by God to "forget the return of those days of peace which love has promised it." (Chant royal)

In the advanced stages of contemplation, the experience of the presence of God, with all His perfections, becomes so very real that, in contrast with the imperfections of the creature, the very intensity of this experience deepens the anguish of the Dark Night, so much so that eventually the pain of abandonment and that sense of distance due to the imperfections of the creature become almost one with the joy of union, as is shown by a poem she entered in her *Journal* on November 11, 1937:

O mort où est ton aiguillon  
 Le chemin de la mort et le chemin de la vie  
 Sont un seul chemin si nous allons à pas d'amour....

O death where is thy sting?  
 The road of death and the road of life  
 Are one single road if we walk in the steps of love ....

Dans les ténèbres de la vie humaine  
 Brille une lumière fragile  
 Comme une étoile qui envoie ses rayons  
 D'une inimaginable distance:

C'est qu'il faut monter à pas de mort  
L'échelle de la vie.<sup>22</sup>

In the darkness of human life  
Shines a fragile light  
Like a star that sends its rays  
From an unimaginable distance:  
It is with steps of death that we must mount  
The ladder of life.

No poem expresses better than "Tout est lumière" Raïssa's characteristic mystical experience of passage from loneliness to union, from anguish to peace, from darkness to light:

Tout est donné. L'angoisse a passé,  
Et la mort.  
Que mon âme est légère.

All has been given.  
The anguish has passed,  
And death too.  
How light my soul feels.

J'ai mis mon esprit entre les mains de Dieu.  
Mon coeur est pur comme l'air des hauts lieux.

I have placed my spirit in God's hands.  
My heart is pure like the air  
of the mountain tops.

Tout est lumière.

All is light.

Pierre Reverdy's experience of the mystical life was very different from that of Raïssa. After his arrival in Paris in 1916, Reverdy dabbled in many of the avant-garde movements: Dada, Surrealism, Cubism, Simultanism, and Futurism. Apart from the enthusiasm of the two years during which he founded and edited the review *Nord-Sud* (March 1917 to October 1918), his writing gives evidence of ever increasing emotional turmoil, psychological uncertainty, and personal fragmentation. At the center of his interior anguish was a profound religious crisis. In 1921, he and his wife converted to Catholicism under the influence of his poet/friend Max Jacob, who, after his own conversion, retired to the Benedictine monastery of

Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire. In 1925, Reverdy began to frequent the Sunday meetings in the Maritains' home at Meudon, despite his antipathy toward most of the intellectuals he met there, and he participated actively in the Maritains' efforts to bring Jean Cocteau back to the faith. During the two years that followed, there is a rather frequent exchange of letters between Reverdy and the Maritains. At Jacques' suggestion he made a retreat at Solesmes where he found an "old abbey wall against which I can lean like a trellis" (letter of January 22, 1926).<sup>23</sup> Four months later Reverdy and his wife moved to Solesmes where they sought seclusion and a life of prayer in the shadow of the old monastery. He remained there till his death in 1960.

In 1927, in Maritain's collection "Roseau d'or," Reverdy published *Gant de crin*, a book containing his views on aesthetics and some personal reflections. It was filled with his admiration of equilibrium and stability and with his newfound religious enthusiasm. But in 1928 he underwent another religious crisis. Jean Schroeder states categorically that Reverdy lost his faith completely in 1928.<sup>24</sup> Gerard Bocholier wonders if he really lost his faith since he continued to speak of religious matters with a certain monk at Solesmes<sup>25</sup> who told me once that Reverdy never ceased to struggle to believe. John Howard Griffin, in a rare interview with Reverdy in 1946, quotes the poet, who, speaking "as though he were very tired," said, "it's hard to believe, you know. It's very hard to believe."<sup>26</sup> After Reverdy's death Griffin received a letter from Maritain concerning his friend's faith in which he wrote:

...Pierre van der Meer (who is now a Benedictine monk in Holland) met a monk at Solesmes who saw Reverdy frequently, and what he learned from this monk filled him with admiration and confidence. Reverdy believed he had lost the Faith. In reality, God hounded him constantly. He hungered for God; this great soul had a passion for the Absolute, which even if it never was satisfied, placed him always close to the Divine.<sup>27</sup>

Reverdy's letters to Maritain are filled with his hunger for the Absolute. On January 8, 1925, more than a year before he moved to Solesmes, he wrote:

...I have no other resource than to push on to the very end....I must give everything to God or I will risk giving him nothing at all or very, very little.... I am extremely fragile. I must hold on to the little strength I have. I need to die. That's right--to disappear, to become nothing--to give myself to God as a religious does, not by abandoning my state in life--but by completely leaving behind the

world and the senseless whirlwind of men who still believe in other things than God and the life beyond this envelope of nothingness.<sup>28</sup>

He knew, perhaps more deeply than any other poet, what Maritain called the subjective natural mystical experience of the Void, and though he tried desperately to fill this Void with something more than a purely "intellectual grasp of the Transcendent Self," he never seems to have arrived at, or been granted, the grace of an "affective supernatural mystical experience" of illumination or of union. His poems are filled with the forlorn anguish of his loneliness and after the religious crisis of 1928 they become more and lugubrious.

Poetry, said Reverdy, is made of images. The images that predominate in his poems are "walls" and "barriers" beyond which the poet cannot advance, "hedges" through which he cannot see, "rooms" in which he finds himself enclosed without knowing how he entered there, "curtains" that are almost drawn, "doors" that are barely ajar, "shutters" that are almost closed, "thresholds" that cannot be crossed, closed "eyelids" that shut out the light, "culs-de-sac" with no way out, "cross-roads" where the poet has no idea which way to turn, "deserted streets" which everyone else has left, passing by the poet in indifferent silence. The reader is reminded of the empty, somber city landscapes of the painter Chirico, except that in Reverdy's poems the poet is always standing there confused, trembling and alone.

Darkness and shadows are everywhere; the poet is frightened by his own shadow or by others which move furtively along the wall. What lights there are go out. If there are stars in the sky, the wind passes by and screws them out like light bulbs. Or stars are like eyes in the sky over which eyelids open and then close.

And everywhere there is a mysterious unidentified and unidentifiable presence. "Quelqu'un," someone, is there, behind the curtain, behind the shutters, behind the door, on the other side of the wall, an indistinct voice in the other room or behind the bushes. The poet never finds out who this is, always there, never revealing himself, never responding to a cry for help. In "Coeur à coeur" the poet writes:

Je tremblais.  
 Au fond de la chambre le mur était noir....  
 Comment avais-je pu franchir  
 le seuil de cette porte?  
 On pourrait crier;  
 Personne n'entend.  
 On pourrait pleurer;  
 Personne ne comprend.

I was trembling.  
 At the back of the room the wall was black...  
 How was I able to cross that door's threshold?  
 I could cry out;  
 No one hears  
 I could weep;  
 No one understands

For Reverdy nature was not the gentle mirror of the Creator, the "léger voile," the diaphanous veil that reveals as much as it hides. At worst it was hostile, at best cold, silent. In his poem "Le Coeur écartelé" (The Quartered Heart) all the elements of nature are indifferent, useless.

Il se ménage tellement.  
 Il a si peur des couvertures,  
 Les couvertures bleues du ciel,  
 Et les oreillers de nuages,  
 Il est mal couvert par sa foi.  
 Il craint tant les pas de travers  
 Et les rues taillées dans la glace.  
 Il est trop petit pour l'hiver,  
 Il a tellement peur du froid....  
 Le temps le roule sous ses vagues.  
 Parfois son sang coule à l'envers  
 Et ses larmes tachent le linge....  
 Sa foi est un buisson d'épines,  
 Ses mains saignent contre son coeur,  
 Ses yeux ont perdu la lumière,  
 Et ses pieds traînent sur la mer  
 Comme les bras morts des pieuvres.  
 Il est perdu dans l'univers,  
 Il se heurte contre les villes,  
 Contre lui-même et ses travers.  
 Priez donc pour que le Seigneur  
 Efface jusqu'au souvenir  
 De lui-même dans sa mémoire

He takes such care of himself.  
 He is so afraid of blankets,  
 The blue blankets of heaven,  
 The pillows of clouds,  
 His blanket of faith is not much help.  
 He is so afraid of missteps

And the streets carved into the ice  
 He is too small for winter,  
 He is so afraid of the cold....  
 Time rolls him over under its waves.  
 Sometimes his blood runs backwards  
 And his tears stain the sheets....  
 His faith is a bush full of thorns,  
 His hands bleed against his heart,  
 His eyes have lost their light,  
 And his feet drag across the sea  
 Like the dead arms of an octopus.  
 He is lost in the universe,  
 He bumps against cities,  
 Against himself, and against his failings.  
 Pray then to the Lord  
 That He wipe from his mind  
 The very memory of himself.

The poem that best pictures for me the *paysage intérieur*, the interior landscape, of Reverdy is his "Son de cloche" (Bell Sound):

Tout s'est éteint  
 Le vent passe en chantant  
 Et les arbres frissonnent.  
 Les animaux sont morts,  
 Il n'y a plus personne.  
 Regarde!  
 Les étoiles ont cessé de briller,  
 La terre ne tourne plus.  
 Une tête s'est inclinée,  
 Les cheveux balayant la nuit.  
 Le dernier clocher resté debout  
 Sonne minuit.

All the lights have gone out,  
 The wind passes by singing  
 And the trees shiver.  
 The animals are all dead,  
 There is no one left.  
 Look!  
 The stars have stopped shining,  
 The earth is no longer spinning.  
 There is a bowed head,  
 Its hair sweeping the night.

The last belfry left standing  
Tolls midnight.

What a contrast in the works of these two poet/mystics, both ardently pursuing the same goal of mystical union, one of whom found "suavit, plnitude, joie" (as she put it), the other, only the black Void. How explain the difference? Maritain's answer to Sartre, that the Transcendent Self is there, One who is more present to us than we are to ourselves, who knows us as subjects and whom we can know as Subject, was spare consolation to Pierre Reverdy. The experience of God's presence and the very faith that makes it possible are both graces which God bestows at his good pleasure.

This was not the first or the last time that Maritain ran up against this ancient and troubling problem of Grace. Georges Bernanos once asked him in a letter: "Why does God refuse Himself to those who desire Him and love Him? This is the problem." Maritain wrote that the grace of a supernatural mystical experience depends on the practice of virtue, especially charity toward one's neighbor.<sup>29</sup> As difficult a personality as he appeared to be, was Reverdy so devoid of virtue? Maritain knew he had no satisfying answer for his friend and could do little more than offer the compassion he showed in his letter to John Howard Griffin. Concerning this same problem, in his book *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, the famous Dominican theologian Father GarrigouLagrange, Maritain's longtime mentor, and tormentor as well, carefully skirted the issue. He wrote:

God is not obliged to remedy our voluntary faults, especially when they are repeated. The truth of the matter is that He often does remedy them, but not always. Therein lies a mystery.<sup>29</sup>

Well, I suppose we must leave the question there. If for Raïssa Maritain "Tout est lumière" (all is light) and for Pierre Reverdy "Tout s'est éteint" (all the lights have gone out), with Bernanos we can only wonder why.

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## NOTES

1. J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York, 1948) p. 68.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
7. J. Maritain, "The Natural Mystical Experience of the Void," in *Redeeming the Time* (London, 1943) pp. 232f.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
9. O. Lacombe and L. Gardet, *L'Experience du soi, étude de mystique comparée* (Paris, 1981) p. 21.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
11. *Redeeming the Time*, p. 251.
12. J. and R. Maritain, *Situation de la poésie* (Paris, 1938) p. 67.
13. *Redeeming the Time*, p. 231.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 253-54 *passim*.
15. R. Maritain, *Arbre patriarcale* (Worcester, 1965) p. xiii.
16. R. Maritain, *Poèmes et essais* (Paris, 1968) p. 12.
17. R. Maritain, *Journal de Raïssa* (Hors commerce, 1962) p. 11.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 169. All translations are those of the author.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
23. In the Maritain archives at Kolbsheim.
24. J. Schroeder, *Pierre Reverdy* (Boston, 1981) pp. 19-21.
25. G. Bocholier, *Pierre Reverdy, le phare obscur* (Saint-Juste-la-Pendue, 1984) p. 18.
26. J. H. Griffin, "My Neighbor Reverdy," in *The John Howard Griffin Reader* (Boston, 1968) p. 569.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 569f.
28. In the Maritain archives at Kolbsheim.
29. *Redeeming the Time*, pp. 226, 249, 254.
30. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Contemplation and Perfection* (London, 1937) p. 87.