

Maritain on the Song of Songs

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Several years ago I undertook to teach a Bible class at church on the *Song of Songs*. Like everybody else, I suppose, I had always been puzzled by this mysterious and controversial text and hoped the challenge of teaching it would help me understand it better. Its pure poetic beauty and its rich love allegory had always appealed to me, and I sensed a profound kinship between it and some of my favorite literary works: Dante's *Commedia*, for example, and certain other poems and novels where the metaphorical treatment of human and divine love recalls Paul's famous analogy in Ephesians between marriage and the relationship of Christ to his bride, the church. Ever since that project I have wanted to pursue the subject in a more scholarly vein, so I was delighted to rediscover Maritain's chapter on *Song of Songs* in *Approches sans entraves*.¹

We are told that Saint Thomas Aquinas on his deathbed gave a teaching on the *Song of Songs*, no record of which, alas, has survived. And to those for whom the *Song of Songs* has become the most sublime love poem of all time, it would indeed seem a tragic loss. The man whose mystical union with Christ was so awe-inspiring that it caused him to refer to the *Summa Theologiae* as "so much straw" must have had a unique insight on Solomon's canticle. Yet it is perhaps appropriate that the celebrated "silence of Saint Thomas" should forever include this oral commentary; it might have been misunderstood, given the controversial history of exegesis to which the *Song* has been subjected over the centuries.

In any case, it is most certainly not happenstance that the twentieth century's greatest disciple of Saint Thomas wrote the very last chapter of his very last book on the very same subject. Maritain's meditation, which

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Approches sans entraves* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), "[En complément du livre 'De l'église du Christ, sa personne et son personnel'] Le Cantique des cantiques: une libre version pour l'usage privé," chap. 19, pp. 532-95. All translations of this chapter are the author's. For the English translation see *Untrammeled Approaches*, trans. Bernard Doering (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana, 1997).

figures as the concluding chapter of *Approches sans entraves*, was occasioned by his desire to compose a “free version for private use” of the biblical text, and this rendering is printed at the end. John Howard Griffin notes in *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* that Olivier Lacombe read the then-unpublished text as part of Maritain’s funeral mass in Kolbsheim in 1973.²

Maritain explains that he set out to produce a reading of the *Canticle* that would please him personally. “As far as all it brings to the spirit, I wanted its prophetically Christian meaning to appear explicitly and markedly enough to satisfy me in prayer. As far as what it brings to the ear, I wanted it to appear to me in the form of a French poem that would spring from a single, continuous thrust, in its incomparable beauty, thus satisfying my need for poetry better than generally do the literal translations.”³ He also notes that it really is not, properly speaking, a translation, since he did not know Hebrew or Syriac. Instead, he gathered all the existing French translations and compared them, coming up with the blend of them that best suited his aesthetic taste. He was particularly heavily influenced by the rendering of André Chouraqui, who notes in his preface that “the *Canticle*, which belongs to the wisdom writings whose definitive content was...determined at the time of the second Temple, has never ceased since then to be venerated by Jewish tradition and chanted at each Friday evening service at the synagogue as the sacred song *par excellence*.⁴”

Maritain insists his is not a “reflexive reading” of the *Song*, that is, a formal theological exegesis. He calls his interpretive remarks a “*lecture de premier jet*,” which might be translated a “first-blush reading.” With a great enigmatic poem such as this, he avers, “it’s not a matter of evoking ideas, but of obeying, in order to give it a voice, an entirely intuitive and supra-conceptual élan of the soul in which the resonances of language reverberate *ad infinitum*. It goes straight to its object, which is absolute love. It sings of love in its pure essence as its immediate signified.”⁵ Surprisingly Derridian terms for a Maritain text, although used in a decidedly un-Derridian way!

Maritain postulates three legitimate interpretations of the *Song* on three different levels of meaning, depending on who we understand the interlocutors of the text to be. It may be understood as a dialogue between:

² John Howard Griffin and Yves R. Simon, *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1974), p. 64.

³ “Le Cantique des cantiques,” pp 570-71.

⁴ Ibid., p. 532.

⁵ Ibid., p. 533.

- 1) Yahweh and the chosen people;
- 2) Christ and his Bride, the Church; or
- 3) “God and the soul wholly devoted to him in the secret of mystical contemplation” (534). This third interpretation, epitomized by that of St. John of the Cross, is one that works by analogy, however, whereas the first two operate on the basis of a *direct* reading.

What Maritain calls a reflexive reading according to the second interpretation would be concerned with “the spiritual experience lived out by the person of the Church, the Bride of Christ, in her innermost self, in her relationship with the Bridegroom, and at the successive phases of progress of her unfailingly holy love, with the vicissitudes, the purifying dark nights, the renewals of ever-deepening union with the Beloved.”⁶ Since, as he observes, the great commentaries of the patristic writers could not take into account the Church’s historical itinerary through such vicissitudes and phases of progress, there has yet to be written a thorough and satisfactory reflexive reading according to the second interpretation. So Maritain evidently would have had no delusions about the definitiveness of St. Thomas’s deathbed commentary.

One of the most significant details in which Maritain corrects the traditional readings concerns the sleeping of the Shulamite. Nearly all the commentators have agreed that her sleeping episodes signify “guilty torpor, due to the fact that she has forsaken the Bridegroom and must return to Him, and that these torpor testify of the infidelities and betrayals she has committed.”⁷ And indeed, such an interpretation would seem to fit the pattern of behavior of the chosen people decried by the prophets throughout the Old Testament, as well as the Church as Bride in her moments of greatest failure (evils of the Crusades, the Inquisition, her treatment of the Jews, etc.). Yet Maritain points out that the *Canticle* contains absolutely no reproaching of the Beloved (whether taken as Israel or the Bride) and that the word infidelity is never pronounced in it. “All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you.”⁸

For Maritain, the sleeping of the Shulamite Beloved is an allegorical picture of the spiritual faculty of vision that can take place only in the serenity of contemplation, as in the description of 5:2, where the Bride says, “I slept but my heart was awake.” In 1:7, where she longs not to be like a veiled woman, Maritain gives us: “*Qu'il tombe enfin, le voile* [Let the veil finally fall,” and adds “*Pour que je voie* [that I might see]!”⁹ And

⁶ Ibid., pp. 538-39.

⁷ Ibid., p. 546.

⁸ *Song of Songs*, 4:7. All biblical quotes, other than of Maritain’s version, are from the New International Version.

in four separate passages having to do with sleep, his translation adds specific phrases to describe the sleep as contemplative rest—She “abandons herself to rest [*s'abandonnent au repos*] ... Her eyes rest in plenitude [*reposent en plénitude*] ... Let me dream in your arms ... Dream? But this is holy reality [*Laisse-moi rêver dans tes bras ... Rêve? Mais c'est la réalité sainte*],” and, finally, she asks how one could awaken love “now that in the Beloved, it exults forever beyond sleep [*maintenant qu'en l'amante / Il exulte à jamais au-delà du sommeil?*]”¹⁰ Thus, Maritain rejects out of hand any interpretation that would suggest that the sleeping episodes signify any sort of *acedia* or truancy on the part of the Beloved, who instead is now seen by her Bridegroom as the one rendered perfect by her fixed gaze, the soul lost in the wonder of contemplation.

A key to understanding Maritain’s approach to the *Song* is to remember that it has nothing to do with discursive knowledge. “It is thanks to the insightful emotion of the heart awakened in us by the poet; it is musically, if I may say so, not conceptually, that it reaches and enlightens us.”¹¹ Maritain achieves his most remarkable insights thanks to what I consider one of his most exciting and fruitful epistemological building blocks. As we look at his “Many Ways of Knowing,” we should be especially grateful for his development of the Thomistic notion of connatural knowledge. As he delineates it in *Art et scolaistique* and in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, connatural knowledge is the secret of poetic creativity in all the arts. A non-conceptual mode of knowing, it is a “knowledge through affective union...or inclination, connaturality or congeniality.”¹² The supreme rule for the artist is to love what one is making. “Thus art, like love, proceeds from a spontaneous instinct, and it must be cultivated like friendship.”¹³ In this regard, I like the quote from Alfred Sisley that Maritain cites in *Creative Intuition*: “Every picture shows a spot with which the artist himself has fallen in love.”¹⁴ And those who have tried their hand at drawing know the truth of that axiom.

Maritain explains the failure of traditional commentators to see certain facets of the text by “the fact that they exerted themselves in a totally reflex-

⁹ “Le Cantique des cantiques,” p. 578.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 580, 588, 592.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 541.

¹² Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 115-17.

¹³ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 41.

¹⁴ *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 58.

itive and expressly allegorical reading of the inspired poem, without seeking...to enter into the character of the inspired poet.”¹⁵ Maritain, on the other hand, precisely by entering into the poet’s character through connatural knowledge is able to understand that the poet of the *Song of Songs*, while he certainly was extensively and painfully aware of the many infidelities of the chosen people, was able to leave that knowledge buried in his subconscious during the composition of the inspired poem and to extol the Bride as being totally without spot or wrinkle. Equally striking is the prophetic quality of the poem, through which the Old Testament writer was able to speak, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of the Bride—the Church—of which he had no natural foreknowledge whatsoever.

That the perfection of the Bride is a dominant theme in the *Song of Songs* is first a function of the literal level of meaning, where the poet is so madly in love with his betrothed. And, this applies at all levels: Yahweh loving his chosen people and Christ loving his bride, as well as God loving the soul who is totally devoted to him. With the notion of mad love (*l’amour fou*), I see Maritain again appropriating a language that is normally associated with a movement that is considered anything but Thomistic: namely, Surrealism. But as I have shown elsewhere,¹⁶ André Breton’s doctrine of the poetic consciousness is in some ways not terribly far from that of Maritain. Breton was fond of the phrase *l’amour fou* (along with *le merveilleux* and *le hasard objectif*¹⁷) to describe poetic inspiration. It is the contradiction of material determinism and logical discursive reasoning. This perfect, free spontaneity is what happens when beauty, in its supreme innocence, becomes “the perfect mirror in which all that has been and all that is called to be is admirably bathed in what is going to be this time.”¹⁸ For both Maritain and Breton, then, there is a magic moment of creative intuition in the poet in which something novel and unique is born through mad love.

In *Song of Songs*, God is so consumed with *l’amour fou* for his people that he forgets their transgressions. The Bride is so consumed with *l’amour fou* for Christ that she is able to pass beyond the trials and vicissitudes mentioned in the *Canticle* into a more perfect union with her Divine Beloved.

¹⁵ “Le Cantique des cantiques,” p. 546.

¹⁶ John Dunaway, “Maritain and Breton: Common Denominators in the Aesthetic Confrontation of Thomism and Surrealism.” *French Literature Series*, vol. VI (“Authors and Philosophers”), (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1979), pp.16-25.

¹⁷ “The wonderful” and “objective chance.”

¹⁸ André Breton, *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1955), p.167 [Translation is the author’s].

Here Maritain quotes Psalm 45:10, the companion piece to the *Song of Songs*, where the Bride is entreated to “Listen, O daughter, consider and give ear: Forget your people and your father’s house” in order to cleave to her new Betrothed. Only for Maritain, the interpretation also applies to God, who is being entreated to forget the sins of his people. “Raise your eyes only on the Bride *restored to grace*. Why? Because in the poem everything belongs to love and is for love; because what it sings is absolute love, the love of Yahweh for the Bride he has chosen. And God himself, in his love stronger than death, and which asks only to pardon.”¹⁹

The notion of the spotless Bride, then, is made possible in *Song of Songs* by the ruling power of *l’amour fou* in the creative consciousness of the divinely inspired poet. And it explains further the injunction of chapter 2, verse 7, where the Bridegroom warns the chorus not to awaken love. The sleep of the Beloved is a function of her love. She has fallen asleep in the satiety of *l’amour fou*. “I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the deer, by the hinds of the fields, not to waken love until she wishes.’ There is nothing but tenderness in this. And if instead of saying ‘not to waken the Beloved’ the Bridegroom says ‘not to waken love,’ it is because the Beloved in her sleeping as in her waking is entirely love herself.”²⁰

The Bride’s first sleep in 2:7 is not even associated with night. She dozes off in the Bridegroom’s arms, saying “I am faint with love.”²¹ This particular instance of sleep Maritain interprets as “the highest, most important, and most hidden activity in the life of the Church in her love-relation to Christ...the silent ardor of holy contemplation, eyes closed on all the rest.”²² Rather than a failure to remain soberly vigilant, as in the Gethsemane scene, where the disciples could not watch and pray for even one hour, it is a heightened mode of consciousness ruled by the second sight of the contemplative visionary. The intense desire of *l’amour fou* is its enabling precondition.

But perhaps the most noticeable aspect of Maritain’s translation of the poem is its strengthening of the erotic language on the literal level. Five times he renders what in the English-language versions is described simply as “love” by “caresses.”²³ Four times he adds references to love in terms of wine or intoxication.²⁴ In 1:2 the New International Version reads: “Your love is more

¹⁹ “Le Cantique des cantiques,” p. 545.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 547.

²¹ *Song of Songs* 2:5.

²² “Le Cantique des cantiques,” pp. 558-59.

²³ *Song of Songs*, 1:2, 1:4, 4:10a, 4:10b, 7:13, although one of these also appears in the Louis Segond translation.

²⁴ Ibid., 1:2, 1:3, 2:4, 5:1.

delightful than wine,” whereas Maritain’s reading is: “*Caresses de ses mains meilleures / Que l’ivresse du vin fou* [His hands’s caresses better / Than the intoxication of mad wine].” In 1:16, where the Bridegroom exults over his Bride: “How handsome you are, my lover! / Oh, how charming! / And our bed is verdant,” Maritain adds two entire lines: “*D’un printemps éternel qui monte autour de nous; / Seul à seule! Deux dans un seul souffle d’amour* [With an eternal springtime that rises around us; / Alone, the two of us in a single breath of love].” There are several other passages whose poetic language in the Maritain rendering seems to me a clear improvement on the English-language versions, but it would be difficult to capture those improvements by again translating his translations into English!²⁵

My final comment on the spotless, perfect Bride of the *Songs of Songs* is that Maritain’s interpretation really goes back to his fundamental premise in his 1970 book *De l’église du Christ*. The mystical *person* of the Church is the spotless Bride, and she is unsullied by the errors and excesses of the *personnel* of the Church. “The person of the Church is unfailingly holy, her personnel is not.”²⁶ The very title of this chapter of *Approches sans entraves*, in fact, proclaims it to have been written as a complement to *De l’église du Christ*.

Maritain includes a gesture of ecumenical peace-making toward Eastern Christians when he says that he wishes to correct a previous statement in *De l’église du Christ* and include not only the Roman Catholic but also the Orthodox Church in his interpretation of the Bride of the *Canticle*. This is another evidence of the continuing evolution of Maritain’s thinking on the church near the end of his life.

Another interpretive insight worth comment, perhaps, is the famous refrain: *Nigra sum, sed formosa*. Again, Maritain emphasizes the tenderness of the Bridegroom’s attitude toward his Beloved and the lack of reproach. The Bride’s blackness does not detract from her beauty. “Let us not imagine that she is black because of the faults of her members and her personnel. She suffers for those faults, she does penance for them, but they are totally foreign to her personality. If she is black, if she has darkened skin, it is because the sun of history has burned her.”²⁷

In 1:7, the Bride complains of her veiled face and wishes she could remove the veil in order to *see*. “She aspires to *see*, to pass, when the blessed hour of noon comes, beyond the knowledge of Faith in order to enter completely into the Vision of the divine essence.”²⁸ The *Song of Songs* is, after all,

²⁵ Ibid., 4:15, 5:6, 5:16, 7:2, and 8:6.

²⁶ “Le Cantique des cantiques,” p. 549.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 567.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 570.

one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible at least partly because its evocation of the relationship between the Church and the Bridegroom pushes us, of necessity, beyond our present relationship with Christ to contemplate the direct, unmediated beatific vision in eternal glory. It is the love poem that goes beyond George Herbert, Graham Greene, Mauriac, or even the bold vision of Dante's *Paradiso*. And all literary texts that plumb the depths of meaning in the analogy of human and divine love are derived from it.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."²⁹ This great mystery of divine and human love is at the core of life's very meaning. Friendship, marriage, our relationship with our Creator—all these form the crucible out of which the character of God is developed within us. Knowing our friends, our spouses, or our Redeemer activates the connatural mode of knowledge that also enables us to imitate the Divine Artist as poets, painters, composers, or even perceptive interpreters. Jacques Maritain was often described as having a genius for friendship, and he was also a devoted husband who seemed only a shadow of himself in his grief over the death of Raïssa. I have said before that for me he is less a philosopher of art than an artist of philosophy. Of the many modes of knowing that he so masterfully distinguished in order to unite, I think the quintessential one is connatural knowledge.

There are also, of course, some changes or additions in Maritain's free version of *Song of Songs* that I have difficulty understanding, some that, in my desultory reading at least, don't seem to enrich or clarify. One mysterious example is in perhaps the most famous passage of the poem, the concluding panegyric to love in 8:5-7. "Many waters cannot quench love..." etc. What puzzles me is why he chose to omit the last line of verse 7: "If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned."

Near the end of the essay, Maritain confesses that most scholars will doubtless find his free translation a bit *farfelu*—a wonderfully untranslatable French word that roughly means "bizarre with just a hint of mischief." Yet he also confesses that he has always had a liking for the *farfelu*, and has always longed for an opportunity to do a project that would put the *farfelu* in the service of the rational and vice versa. I am certain that all true poets—and wannabe poets, too—will find such a confession congenial and salutary. And who cares about stuffed-shirt scholars!

Maritain also deletes the final verse in which the Bride asks the Bridegroom to flee far from her on the fragrant mountains. He sees this as an

²⁹ St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, 5:31-32

apocryphal interpolation from an overzealous priest or pharisee who was afraid that the picture of God in the *Canticle* is not sufficiently transcendent and otherworldly. While I'm not sure I agree with him here, I do find emotionally and theologically effective his choice of the passage with which to replace it. To conclude the *Song of Songs* with a paraphrase of Jesus's description of the Good Shepherd in John chapter 10 is an indication of the way Maritain apprehended, through connatural knowledge, the matchless love of Christ. And the last verse recapitulates the ecumenical spirit in which he wrote the last chapter of *Approches sans entraves*: "I have other sheep who are not of this flock. Those also I must lead, and they will hear my voice. And there will be only one flock and one shepherd."³⁰

³⁰ "Le Cantique des cantiques," p. 594.