

***Composing Subjectivity:
Maritain's Poetic Knowledge in Stravinsky and
Messiaen***

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Although Jacques Maritain interrogated the nature of poetic knowledge in several studies, scholars have struggled to clarify his views. In focusing their attention on the relationship between morality and poetic knowledge, they have overlooked the fundamental importance that Maritain invested in subjectivity. "The primary requirement of poetry," he wrote, "...is the obscure knowing, by the poet, of his own subjectivity."¹ At the same time, studies of poetic knowledge have maintained a philosophical approach to the concept, even though Maritain claimed that "Poetic knowledge...finds its expression not in conceptual statements, but in the very work made."² This study attends to two works made whose subject is truth, Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927) and Olivier Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935). Historical surveys of each composer establish Maritain's influence on their works and demonstrate that the relationship between poetic knowledge and subjectivity is closer than even Maritain asserted.

Though Maritain explored the philosophical components of poetic knowledge (particularly in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*), his attempts to trace the route of artistic creation back to its seed as poetic knowledge do not venture far down the path of art criticism. In explaining a poem by Donne, for example, he reduces the germ of the poem to three words: "He begins with creative emotion, or poetic intuition, and

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 83.

² Maritain, "Poetic Experience," *The Review of Politics* 6: 4 (October 1944), pp. 387-402, originally published as "Connaissance Poétique," *École Libre* 4, no. 12 (1943). Maritain's principal treatise on poetic knowledge is *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, though parts of *Art and Scholasticism*, *Art and Faith*, and *The Situation of Poetry* also address the subject.

the argument follows. Donne forcefully and eloquently developed his theme—...poisonous minerals, and me—and by virtue of which the whole poem exists.” His reading of a poem by Blake is equally unconvincing: “In an invisible flash of intuitive emotion, which is obscurely conveyed to us—what can we say? Dust of pride and God’s glory—and by virtue of which the whole poem exists.”³ Maritain’s literary criticism is hardly more illuminating than the “texts without comment” he quotes in *Creative Intuition*. Maritain’s critical aims are better served in less laconic terms, especially when the artistic self-consciousness with which *Oedipus Rex* and *La Nativité* treat their themes of truth reveals so much about the poetic knowledge in each work. That a work’s subject is truth may seem irrelevant to its poetic knowledge, since the former is a conscious intellectual concept, whereas Maritain’s idea of the latter is preconceptual.⁴ However, in the works discussed here, musical symbols of truth permeate the score. They constitute the very substance of the works, not an intellectual overlay on the underlying music, and so are identifiable with the poetic knowledge at their core. Maritain described the relationship of poetic knowledge to truth as one of conformity, where an artwork’s veracity is proportional to its degree of conformity with the original poetic vision.⁵ Though the primordial state of any poetic vision is by nature evanescent and ineffable, the fact that these works concern veracity itself enables a glimpse into their original condition. They can be read, in other words, as statements on the artistic process itself and as evidence for the character of the composers’ poetic knowledge. Because there are significant differences between the two composers and their works, the reflection of each composer’s view of truth in his composition exemplifies Maritain’s claim that subjectivity is at the center of poetic knowledge.

Basing Knowledge on Music

For Maritain, poetic knowledge is an intuitive knowledge gained by an artist during the process of creation.⁶ He based his concept of poetic knowl-

³ *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 258–59.

⁴ For more on the relation of concepts to poetic knowledge, see *ibid.*, p. 223.

⁵ On truth and poetic knowledge, see *ibid.*, pp. 34, 38, 52, and 174.

⁶ See Samuel Hazo, “Maritain and the Poet,” *Renascence* 34: 4 (Summer 1982), pp. 229–44; Gerald C. Hay, “Maritain’s Theory of Poetic Knowledge: A Critical Study,” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1964); and Francis Fergusson, “Poetic Intuition and Action in Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*,” in *Jacques Maritain: The*

edge on Thomas Aquinas' distinction between two styles of making moral judgment. Thomas illustrates the first in the figure of the philosopher who, though educated in the moral virtues, may not be virtuous. He locates the second in the uneducated man who cannot discuss the philosophy of the moral virtues, but who exercises them because they are part of his nature, due to his "affective union" with them. The unlettered man has a "connatural" knowledge of virtue, a knowledge by inclination or intuition that is intellectual, but preconceptual.⁷

Maritain applies Thomas' distinction between types of knowledge to art. There are craftsmen, he says, who know how to construct art based on rules and yet fail to express significant artistic sentiment. Real artists, on the other hand, know how to express truth within the realm of artistic value, even if they lack a refined knowledge of their craft. They possess their poetic knowledge through their connatural union with the art object. Maritain defines poetic knowledge in terms of the artist's subjectivity:

That is poetic experience or poetic knowledge, where subjectivity is not grasped as an object, but as a source.... The more deeply poetry becomes conscious of itself, the more deeply it becomes conscious also of its power to *know*, and of the mysterious movement by which...it draws near to the sources of being.⁸

Maritain thus intimately ties artistic creation to the self-consciousness of the artist. But he also repeatedly emphasizes throughout his works that self-knowledge and awareness of identity result from a consciousness of the outside world. In *The Situation of Poetry*, for example, he writes that "It is in awakening to the world, it is in obscurely grasping some substantial secret in things, that the soul of man obscurely grasps itself." Restated less poetically but more clearly, he writes in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* that "the content of poetic intuition is both the reality of the things of the world and the subjectivity of the poet."⁹ Maritain thus acknowledges the influence of the greater world on the poet's subjectivity.

Nevertheless, he focuses on the genesis of the artwork, frequently adopting the metaphor of music to describe poetic knowledge.¹⁰ In *Creative*

Man and His Achievement (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 128–38. Ralph McInerny, "Maritain and Poetic Knowledge," *Renasissance* 34: 4 (Summer 1982), pp. 203–14, addresses the relationship between artists and morality rather than poetic knowledge per se.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3m.

⁸ "Poetic Experience," p. 387.

⁹ *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Maritain's most extensive writings on music are, in order of interest, "Sur la musique d'Arthur Lourié," *Oeuvres de Jacques Maritain* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Éditions

Intuition in Art and Poetry, he says that music is the first step of artistic creation: "The very first effect, and sign, of poetic knowledge and poetic intuition, as soon as they exist in the soul—and even before the start of any operative exercise—is a kind of musical stir produced in the depths of the living springs in which they are born."¹¹ In *The Situation of Poetry*, music becomes the original condition and the very soul of art: "Art...always supposes a moment of contemplation, and the work of art a melody, that is to say, a sense animating a form."¹²

Maritain's ideas about music derive in large measure from the Russian composer and critic Arthur Lourié. Lourié admired Maritain and his wife, as seen in his various settings of texts by Raïssa Maritain and in his advocacy of Maritain's neo-Thomism. In turn, Maritain wrote an article on Lourié, calling his music "ontological"—a high honor indeed from a philosopher, meant to indicate how closely connected he found Lourié's music to his initial inspiration.¹³ Lourié introduced Maritain's philosophy to Stravinsky. As an émigré in Paris, he served as Stravinsky's amanuensis, reading proofs and preparing piano reductions of his scores in the 1920s and 30s. His own music followed Stravinsky's lead into a neoclassical style of composition. In his Thomistic critique of Stravinsky's ballet *Apollo*, he correlated ethics and aesthetics, and he composed two well-received works for orchestra and chorus, a *Sonata Liturgica* in 1928 and a *Concerto Spirituale* in 1929, that are sometimes regarded as precursors to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* of 1930. His disapproval of Stravinsky's marriage to his second wife soured their relationship, but by this time Lourié had piqued Stravinsky's interest in Maritain.

Lourié's article "De la mélodie" (1930) is the principal source for Maritain's view of music.¹⁴ For Lourié, melody is the locus of artistic

Universitaires, 1984), vol. 6, pp. 1060–66; "De Quelques Musiciens," *Oeuvres de Jacques Maritain*, vol. 14, pp. 1117–26; "Préface à *Sonata grafica*: Les dessins d'Arthur Lourié," *Oeuvres de Jacques Maritain*, vol. 13, pp. 1244–51, and "[Message]," *Oeuvres de Jacques Maritain*, vol. 6, pp. 1053–54. For an excellent study of Maritain's views on music, see Clare Joseph Martini, *Maritain and Music* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1958).

¹¹ *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 202.

¹² Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, trans. Marshall Suther (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 50.

¹³ "Sur la musique d'Arthur Lourié," p. 1062. In *Creative Intuition and Art and Poetry*, Maritain writes: "These lines, which deal with poetic intuition in general, were written in relation to music, and to Arthur Lourié, who to my mind provides us with the greatest example, in contemporary music, of that depth in creative inspiration of which I spoke" (p. 105). In the footnote to this sentence, Maritain cites Frederick Goldbeck's attempt to legitimize Lourié by placing him in a "direct line" of descent from Monteverdi.

¹⁴ Arthur Lourié, "De la mélodie," *La Vie Intellectuelle* (25 December 1936), pp. 491–99.

truth because it reveals the ineffable artistic subject. Unlike harmony and counterpoint, which he regards as “objective,” melody for him is “subjective.” He situates the meaning of a composition exclusively in melody, for only in the melody do “the depths of existence and of the subject communicate.” Following Lourié, Maritain too emphasizes the pre-eminence of melody, as he wrote in his *Situation of Poetry*: “Melody is the very spirit of the music and the realisation of the intimate being of the musician.”¹⁵

Maritain exerted a strong but understated influence on Stravinsky, catalyzing his religious conversion and coloring his aesthetic writings with neo-Thomist austerity. The earliest link between them is Maritain’s attack on Stravinsky’s music in the first edition of *Art and Scholasticism* (1920). In a chapter entitled “The Purity of Art,” Maritain says that both Gregorian chant and Bach employ “no material element from things or the subject except what is absolutely necessary,” whereas the “impure” music of Stravinsky and Wagner tend to “dull or ‘debauch’ the eye, the ear, or the mind.”¹⁶ Maritain revised his judgment of Stravinsky in a well-known footnote from the 1923 edition of *Art and Scholasticism*:

I regret having thus spoken of Stravinsky. All I had heard was *Le Sacre du Printemps*, and I should have perceived then that Stravinsky was turning his back on everything we find distasteful in Wagner. Since then he has shown that genius conserves and increases its strength by renewing it in light. Exuberant with truth, his admirably disciplined work teaches the best lesson of any to-day of grandeur and creative energy, and best answers the strict classical “austerity” here in question. His purity, his authenticity, his glorious spiritual strength, are to the gigantism of *Parsifal* and the Tetrology as a miracle of Moses, to the enchantments of the Egyptians.¹⁷

Maritain’s rescue of Stravinsky from Wagner’s debauchery—with an orientalist metaphor that substitutes Stravinsky’s Russia for Moses’ Canaan—is not surprising in itself, for French musicians had long opposed

¹⁵ *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 63. Maritain’s use of the word “melody” is vague and poetic. Although Maritain insisted that poetic knowledge is manifested only in works of art, he never successfully demonstrated this in his writings on music, the very art he felt most directly touched the source of artistic creativity. His descriptions of music are never specific and are often naïve and fanciful, as when he wishfully describes Satie’s *Socrate* as being written in Gregorian modes, or when he elevates Lourié to the spiritual line of Debussy and de Falla without providing justification. See “De Quelques Musiciens,” p. 1124.

¹⁶ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1923), p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60n1.

Wagnerian decadence.¹⁸ But the reasons that Maritain gave for it unmask his ignorance of Stravinsky's music.

What caused Maritain to reverse his condemnation of Stravinsky? Between 1920 and 1923, Stravinsky showed increasing signs of his so-called neoclassical style with works such as *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920) and *Mavra* (1922). Since Maritain claimed that he did not hear Stravinsky's ballets *Petruschka* or *Les Noces* until after 1923, it is probable that he simply did not know much of Stravinsky's music when he wrote the original critique and the later footnote. In the early 1920s, however, critics like Boris de Schloezer garnered Stravinsky with the epithet "neoclassical"—an adjective surely appealing to Maritain's anti-art-for-art's-sake aesthetics.¹⁹ So it is apparently Stravinsky's changing reputation, rather than his music, that accounts for Maritain's reversed opinion.

Maritain and Stravinsky first met after a concert on 10 June 1926, at the time that Stravinsky was writing his first work with a religious text, a Pater Noster for four-part chorus. That year, Cocteau published his *Lettre à Jacques Maritain* and Maritain his *Réponse à Jean Cocteau*; both volumes are dedicated to Stravinsky. By the end of April 1927, Stravinsky had returned to the Orthodox faith that he had abandoned in his youth. He later wrote that "Jacques Maritain may have exercised an influence on me at this time [1926]."²⁰ Though Stravinsky denied that Maritain played a role in his conversion, his assistant Robert Craft says that Maritain did exert some influence on his return to the Church.²¹ In May 1927, Stravinsky's operatorio *Oedipus Rex*, a collaboration with Cocteau, premiered in Paris. Following *Oedipus Rex*, however, Stravinsky's attitude toward Maritain became ambivalent. In 1928, he wrote to one of his patrons, Victoria Ocampo, that Maritain's entourage nauseated him. In another letter he describes Maritain as:

one of those people of superior intelligence who are lacking in humanity, and if Maritain himself does not deserve this judgment, certainly it applies to a great deal of his work.

¹⁸ See Jean Cocteau, *Cock and Harlequin*, trans. Rollo H. Myers (London: Egoist Press, 1921). Saint-Saëns was a still earlier early critic of the excesses of Wagner's followers.

¹⁹ See de Schloezer, "La musique," in *La Revue contemporains* (1 February 1923): pp. 245-48. It is ironic that the word neoclassicism in music came to refer (among other things) to music stripped of extramusical meaning, for in literature and painting it refers to the representational art that Maritain advocated.

²⁰ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (Garden City, New York: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp. 64-65.

²¹ Robert Craft, *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship*, revised ed. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), p. 15.

Maritain is still attached to the nihilism of his youth, and this can be sensed in all of his books, despite the great value of his work in Christian and Thomist thought.²²

Stravinsky's famous Norton Lectures of 1941, delivered at Harvard University and later published as *Poétique musicale*, refer several times to Maritain and borrow his neo-Thomistic definition of a composer as a medieval artisan who orders and disciplines his craft.²³ The book's considerable debt to Maritain includes quotations from the very same passages from Baudelaire, Poussin, Bellay, and Montaigne that Maritain had used in *Art et Scholastique* two decades earlier.²⁴ He also jibes the patrons of art by describing the reluctance with which pompous Parisian society read "the great Saint Thomas Aquinas"—but still they read him, he says, because "*snobisme oblige*." By 1944, both men had emigrated to the United States. Their friendship, if not their mutual respect, ended after Stravinsky consulted with Maritain about a continuing spiritual crisis.

Oedipus Rex

Composed at the time of Maritain's greatest influence on Stravinsky, the Christian overtones of *Oedipus Rex* are so clear that Lourié compared the work to a Bach passion. Cocteau's libretto identifies Oedipus Rex with Jesus Rex: the chorus calls for Oedipus to "save" the city; Oedipus boasts of his ability to deal with the powers of darkness; it is rumored that God speaks to Oedipus and that he is born of a great god; and as an infant, his feet are pierced and he is found by a shepherd—in the Latin of the libretto, "pastor."

Stravinsky did not deny that *Oedipus Rex* was a sort of Christian allegory. "A Christianized *Oedipus*," he wrote, "would require the truth-finding process to resemble an *auto-da-fé*, and I had no interest in attempting that. I can testify, though, that the music was composed during my strictest and most earnest period of Christian Orthodoxy."²⁵ His stated reason for its not

²² Letter dated 5 November 1936 to Victoria Ocampo, quoted in Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 632.

²³ It is often observed that Stravinsky did not write his *Poétique musicale*, but that Alexis Roland-Manuel and Pierre Souvchinsky were his ghost-writers. However, Maritain's influence is discernable in Stravinsky's own notes for the lectures, as when he declares that "the phenomenon of music is one of speculation." See *ibid.*, p. 511.

²⁴ Louis Andriessen and Elmer Schönberger, *The Apollonian Clockwork: On Stravinsky*, trans. Jeff Hamburg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 81–96.

²⁵ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963), p. 9.

being Christian, then, is that he did not wish to portray the overwhelming feeling of guilt that Oedipus would display upon learning that he had killed his father and married his mother. The explanation implicitly approves of a Christian interpretation and is plausible in light of Stravinsky's new aesthetic of neoclassical understatement. Stravinsky also connected his opera-oratorio with his conversion in his book *Dialogues and a Diary*. Immediately after attributing *Oedipus Rex* to his "most earnest period of Christian Orthodoxy," he describes his return to the Church, when, in answer to his prayers, his injured finger miraculously healed before playing a concert.²⁶

The design of *Oedipus Rex* turns on Oedipus' discovery of his true identity and what he has done with his parents. An article by the English musicologist Wilfred Mellers helps to explain the emergence of Oedipus' identity by showing that the work uses certain keys and key relationships to symbolize the tragedy's ideas.²⁷ Truthful statements, for instance, are written in D major. Power relations take the idea of the "dominant" key literally: the stronger force is always portrayed in the dominant key relationship. There is no stronger force in the opera than D major, that of truth. Tiresias, the seer who alone knows the truth, sings his obscure condemnation of Oedipus, "Rex peremptor regis est" [The king is the king's murderer], in a stentorian D major. When Oedipus asks rhetorically, "Did Jocasta say crossroads?" he sings a D on the word "trivio," Latin for crossroads. There follows a short duet between Oedipus and a timpani as Oedipus admits to Jocasta, his mother and wife, that he killed an old man (his father) at a crossroads. The duet is in G minor, making his D on the word "trivio" the dominant—the dominating truth—of the murder that Oedipus describes.

Soon the messenger brings the news that Polybus is not Oedipus' real father, but that Polybus had merely adopted Oedipus as a foundling. Responding in the key of G major, the chorus sings "Falsus pater per me!" [He was not Oedipus' real father!]. It is well known that in this chorus, the words "falsus pater" are painted by a "false relation," a conflict between two tones with the same letter name, in this case F and F#. In G major, the F# is the proper note, the F-natural the false one. The F# also distinguishes D major, the key of truth, from D minor. These keys

²⁶ See Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 26. This book is a shortened version of *Dialogues and a Diary*.

²⁷ Wilfred Mellers, "Stravinsky's Oedipus as 20th-Century Hero," in *Stravinsky: A New Appraisal of His Work*, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: Norton, 1963).

become important when Oedipus pompously sings about how he will uncover his true lineage in “Ego exul exsulto” [I, an exile, exult]. Oedipus’ long, high notes are F-naturals, making the aria in D minor, not major. The minor key underscores his continued denial of the truth behind his illicit relationships with his parents.

Finally, Oedipus owns up to his guilt and accepts the truth. The chorus’ statement that the truth never should have come out is sung in D minor, followed by a low D minor chord in the strings that alternates with a high D major chord in the flutes. In his Octet of 1924, Stravinsky had said that he preferred the rigidity of wind instruments to stringed instruments, which he found “less cold and more vague.” The lucidity of the flute chords leads to Oedipus’ admission of the truth. When he sings “Lux facta est!” [All is now made clear], he intones the word “Lux” [light] on an F# to signal in D major his acceptance of the truth (Example 1).

Example 1. Stravinsky’s “Lux facta est” at rehearsal 169 of *Oedipus Rex* (reduction).

The problem with the F# is that “Lux facta est” is not heard in D major at all. Oedipus’ melody is best heard in B minor, the F# being the fifth scale degree, not the third scale degree in D major. The accompanying harmonies, however, strongly suggest D major. The clarinet even adds a famous trill leading to a G-flat, equivalent to an F#, that highlights this tonal ambiguity. The music seems to tell us that Oedipus sees the light (with the F#), but not fully (hence its placement in B minor). He soon blinds himself when he finds that his mother has killed herself from shame, and is then driven from the city by the riotous chorus.

Oedipus Rex’s disturbingly ambiguous notion of truth exemplifies Maritain’s convictions that an artist expresses his or her subjectivity in the work made, and that knowledge of the artist’s intentions is essential to an understanding of the work. The ambiguity of truth may result from Stravinsky’s own status as an exile and his probable identification with

the character of Oedipus.²⁸ In a religious reading of the opera, Oedipus is best regarded not as Christ himself, but rather as a Christian, as Stravinsky had recently become. Moreover, both protagonist and composer are exiles questioning their identity. In an article written in 1921 on his opera *Mavra*, Stravinsky reveals that he was greatly concerned about the meaning of being a Russian exile in Western Europe (he had left Russia for professional opportunities in Paris, but did not return because of the Russian Revolution). To reflect this state, he chose to subdue the romantic "raw individuality" of his early ballets and to take pre-existing formal models as the material for his compositions. This was the advent of his neoclassical style, where style itself is part of the message of the work. He described his preoccupation with style in his *Autobiography*. "The need for restriction," he says, "for deliberately submitting to a style, has its source in the very depths of our nature."²⁹ The nature that Stravinsky expresses, however, is an adopted one, a musical language foreign to his native palette. The arias in *Oedipus Rex* display an intentionally wide range of sources, from Handel to Verdi. However Italianate early Russian opera was, such sources were not the bread and butter of the pupils of Rimsky-Korsakov. The Italianate music expresses the subjectivity of an exile returning to Christianity and searching for the essence of his identity. In a Christian interpretation of Sophocles, this subjectivity is common to both Oedipus and Stravinsky. His Orthodoxy was intimately bound to his identity as a Russian. He said that "Perhaps the strongest factor in my decision to re-enter the Russian Church, rather than covert to the Roman, was linguistic. The Slavonic language of the Russian liturgy has always been the language of prayer for me."³⁰ The use in a composition of a "sacred language" (Church Slavonic in his Pater Noster or Latin in *Oedipus Rex*) had occurred to him, he said, since the time of his deracination.³¹

Defining Stravinsky's subjectivity with reference to his biography is not, I think, a method that Maritain would have prescribed for art critics. He intended subjectivity to convey "the substantial totality of the human person," not "the inexhaustible flux of superficial feelings in which the

²⁸ Stephen Walsh has also suggested an autobiographical reading of the work in *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 443. Walsh's book appeared after the delivery of the first draft of this paper.

²⁹ Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), p. 207, anonymous translation of *Chroniques de ma vie*, 2 vols. (Paris: Denoel and Steele, 1936).

³⁰ *Expositions and Developments*, p. 65.

³¹ *Dialogues and a Diary*, pp. 3-4.

sentimental reader recognizes his own cheap longings."³² And yet Maritain himself took recourse in biography writ large at the end of *Creative Intuition* when he describes Dante's successes as a poet. He considers the general trends of the man and his times as influences on Dante's subjectivity and on his poetry, writing of Dante's luck to be so gifted and to be living at a time propitious for a summation of Christian thought like the *Divine Comedy*.³³ Critical methods in the last forty years have properly corrected the extreme disassociation of the artist from his or her work, a belief promoted by Maritain's friend T. S. Eliot and other advocates of the New Criticism that was popular during Maritain's lifetime. Though the biographical portraits I use to describe the subjectivities of Stravinsky and Messiaen are writ slightly smaller than was Maritain's practice, they are essential to the poetic knowledge experienced by each man.

The untidiness of Stravinsky's ambiguous harmonies and ambivalent meanings has led some Stravinsky scholars to try to impose order on Stravinsky's deliberately unsettled scores. Stephen Walsh, for instance, the author of the only monograph on *Oedipus Rex*, admits that the tonality in Stravinsky's neoclassical works is ambiguous. Nonetheless, he denies the ambiguity in the crucial passage at "Lux facta est":

Why invent an ambiguity to express a certainty as divinely inspired as Oedipus' 'Lux facta est?' The answer must surely be that there is not so much an ambiguity as an enrichment, an opening out of possibilities.... The entry of light into that benighted soul called for some fresh musical initiative, and Stravinsky, typically, found one that is rich but lucid, direct but resonant.³⁴

Walsh too easily brushes aside the ambiguous tonality. The confusion of B minor and D major is intentionally ambiguous; it purposefully does not sound like an "entry of light," for there is darkness in the truth of Oedipus' identity.

Stravinsky is highly self-conscious personally and stylistically, a condition Maritain claims is necessary for becoming aware of poetic knowledge. However, Oedipus cannot assert the truth without either denying it or destroying himself. This is the reason not only for the F-naturals that confuse the F#s, for the G-flats that confuse the F#s, and for the tonal ambiguity, but also for the sounding of so many dominant chords in the minor, an effect that Stravinsky said would be important for the work's critics.³⁵ For

³² *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 84.

³³ *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 274-81.

³⁴ Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 61-63.

³⁵ *Dialogues*, p. 28.

Stravinsky in the 1920s there was no certain home, faith, music, truth, or poetic knowledge.

Dieu parmi nous

The situation was in all respects reversed for Messiaen in the 1930s. Unlike Stravinsky, Messiaen never met Maritain, though by his own account he did read one book (probably *Art et scholastique*) by him in 1927.³⁶ He said it was “a book of high philosophy that seemed very difficult to me,” but admitted having benefited from it.³⁷ Maritain's influence is suggested in Messiaen's views on artistic imitation, his skeptical attitude toward science, his apparent interest in Emmanuel Mounier's personalist movement, and his rhetorical use of terms such as “poetic intuition.”³⁸

Among Messiaen's early works, *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) most strongly suggests Maritain's influence in its Thomistic theme of truth. Like *Oedipus Rex*, *La Nativité* opens a window onto Messiaen's epistemology. Comprised of nine movements for solo organ lasting twice as long as any composition he had yet written, *La Nativité* quickly entered the organist's repertoire and remained one of his favorite works. Though it bears no dedication, Messiaen later said it was written in homage to his teacher Paul Dukas.³⁹

³⁶ See Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinéa, 1989), p. 178. Of Maritain's twelve books published by 1927, nine might qualify as “high philosophy” to the eighteen-year-old Messiaen. Only two of these were published in 1927, *Primauté du Spirituel* and the third printing of *Art et Scholastique*. Olivier Messiaen's father, Pierre Messiaen, did know Maritain, whose books quote English Romantic poetry in the father's translations.

³⁷ Massin, *Une Poétique du Merveilleux*, p. 178. Messiaen's full account of Maritain reads: “Je ne l'ai jamais rencontré. Mon père le connaissait. Moi je n'ai jamais fait que lire un de ses livres à dix-huit ans, c'était ma première année d'orgue. J'ai été malade plusieurs semaines, j'en ai profité pour lire Maritain, un livre de haute philosophie qui m'a semblé très difficile.” Note that Messiaen claimed that he had read Thomas Aquinas as early as 1923 or 1924, making Maritain's influence on his love of Thomas indirect at best (see Massin, *Une Poétique du merveilleux*, p. 31).

³⁸ Messiaen says he likes the term “poetic intuition” in Messiaen and Claude Samuel, *Music and Color*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), p. 15. Note that Maritain had written a letter to Stravinsky, dated 28 July 1935, in which he explains his idea of “creative intuition” (see *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents*, p. 222). Messiaen's interest in Mounier, a Maritain protégé, is most evident in his concern for liberty during his Jeune France years of the late 1930s.

³⁹ Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une poétique de merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989), p. 172.

At its premiere, Messiaen marked the significance of *La Nativité* by distributing a leaflet stating his personal artistic credo. This strange document shows Messiaen's philosophical self-consciousness toward his art, a circumspection that heightens the role of his subjectivity in his music. The manifesto reads with broken syntax:

L'émotion, la sincérité de l'oeuvre musicale.
 Qui seront au service des dogmes de la théologie catholique.
 Qui s'exprimeront par des moyens mélodiques et harmoniques....
 Le sujet théologique? le meilleur puisqu'il contient tous les sujets.
 Et l'abondance des moyens techniques permet au coeur de s'épancher librement.

[The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work.
 Which shall be at the service of the dogmas of Catholic theology.
 Which shall be expressed by melodic and harmonic means....
 The theological subject? The best, for it comprises all subjects.
 And the abundance of technical means allows the heart to pour out freely.]⁴⁰

The published score includes a lengthy preface that expands on the ideas in this manifesto and details his innovations in rhythm and harmony.

La Nativité's last and longest movement, "Dieu parmi nous" [God among us], explicitly links the idea of Christ with truth. The title is a pun on the word "Emanuel," which means "God with us," a phrase subtly distinct from "God among us," though the latter phrase (with the word "parmi") does refer to Christ in Luke 7:16 and John 1:14. Messiaen forged musical symbols depicting "the Incarnation" and "truth" by drawing from pieces by his teachers, the composer Paul Dukas and the organist-composer Marcel Dupré. Dupré's organ teacher, Charles-Marie Widor, had helped to foster this sort of musical symbolism in France by instigating his student Albert Schweitzer to write a book describing how the musical syntax in J. S. Bach's chorale preludes for organ imitates the hymn texts.⁴¹ The best example, Schweitzer said, was in the chorale prelude *Durch Adams Fall*, BWV 637, where the fall of Adam is depicted with a sequence of descending sevenths. Schweitzer's book was widely read and

⁴⁰ Translation mine. The leaflet is preserved under the call number "Rés. Vmd. ms. 0094" at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and is reproduced in Nigel Simeone, *A Bibliographic Catalogue of Messiaen's Works* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1998), p. 46. An alternative English translation is printed in Madeleine Hsu, *Olivier Messiaen, the Musical Mediator: A Study of the Influence of Liszt, Debussy, and Bartók* (Madison and Teaneck, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), Appendix D, p. 158.

⁴¹ See Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, trans. Ernest Newman, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), vol 2., p. 3.

established a precedent for Messiaen's imitation of abstract ideas in the organ repertoire.

The influence of Schweitzer's interpretation of *Durch Adams Fall* is obvious in Messiaen's own description of "Dieu parmi nous," in which he writes that the descent in fourths of the theme of truth "is the glorious and ineffable fall of the second person of the Holy Trinity into a human nature—it is the Incarnation."⁴² It descends, he says, "in imitation of Truth coming down from heaven to earth." Messiaen derived this musical symbol from Paul Dukas's opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, where it functions as a leitmotif for the heroine, Ariane, who in turn symbolizes truth. Ariane, the last of Bluebeard's wives, discovers the previous wives (who were thought dead) in the basement of Bluebeard's castle. Ariane urges them to leave the castle and to free themselves of their nefarious husband, but the wives are unwilling to go. In his 1936 essay on the opera, Messiaen relates this situation to a statement from the Gospel of John: "The Light [Ariane] shines in the darkness, and darkness has not understood it."⁴³ Messiaen calls the grand trombone entrance at the end of Act II the simplest version of the Truth theme, though the theme recurs in every act. He quotes the theme at the beginning of "Dieu parmi nous" (Examples 2a and 2b).

The image shows a musical score for Example 2a, which is Dukas's "Truth theme" from the opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*. The score is written in 7/8 time and consists of four staves. The top two staves are for the vocal line, and the bottom two staves are for the piano accompaniment. The middle staff (the second staff from the top) begins with a melodic line that descends in fourths, which is the "Truth theme" mentioned in the text. The bottom staff features a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamic markings "dim." and "molto".

Example 2a. Dukas's "Truth theme" beginning in the middle staff, four measures after "Je vais tomber dans vos ténèbres!" at the end of Act II of *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*.

⁴² Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen: The Composer Writes About His Works*, trans. Irene Feddern (Bloomington, Indiana: Frangipani Press, 1986), p. 13.

⁴³ Olivier Messiaen, "Ariane et Barbe-Bleue de Paul Dukas," *Revue musicale* 166 (1936), pp. 79–86. For more about Dukas' connection of truth and light, see Anya Suschitzky, "Ariane et Barbe-Bleue: Dukas, the Light and the Well," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9: 2 (1997), pp. 133–61.

The musical score for Example 2b is written for piano and bass clef. It begins with the tempo marking *Tr s mod r* and the dynamic *fff staccato*. The first system shows a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The second system is marked *Lent et puissant* and features long, sustained chords in both hands. The third system returns to the *fff staccato* dynamic, with a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand.

Example 2b. Messiaen's quotation of Dukas's "Truth theme" in the pedal at the beginning of "Dieu parmi nous," the last movement of *La Nativité du Seigneur*.

This theme of descending fourths recurs at the end of "Dieu parmi nous" beneath the perpetuum mobile filigree of a toccata derived from Marcel Dupré's popular Christmas composition *Variations sur un Noël*. Messiaen performed Dupré's work publicly in the Christmas season of 1935 and 1936, when he was composing his own Christmas work, *La Nativité du Seigneur*.⁴⁴ The similarity of these Christmas toccatas is unmistakable. In Dupré's work, the left and right hands quickly alternate pairs of repeated notes while the pedal plays a familiar carol. Messiaen imitates this texture but replaces the carol with Dukas's Truth theme (Examples 3a and 3b).

The musical score for Example 3a is written for piano and bass clef. It begins with the tempo marking *Presto* and the dynamic *fff*. The first system shows a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The second system is marked *fff* and features long, sustained chords in both hands. The third system returns to the *fff* dynamic, with a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand.

Example 3a. Dupré's toccata texture set over a traditional Noël, concluding his *Variations sur un Noël*.

⁴⁴ *Le Guide du Concert* 22, no. 12–14 (20 and 27 December 1935, 3 January 1936).

The musical score consists of four systems, each with three staves (treble, middle, and bass clefs). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The first system is marked "Vif et puissant" and "fff staccato". The second system includes "staccato p." and "fff". The third and fourth systems continue the complex, layered texture with various chordal and melodic fragments.

Example 3b. Messiaen's toccata texture set over Dukas's "Truth theme," concluding his "Dieu parmi nous."

Both pieces conclude with the fireworks of a quickly repeating figure that is put into diminution, followed by a brief descending scale for a final cadence.

By setting his teachers' works in counterpoint, Messiaen purposefully ascribes truth to the Catholic notion of the Incarnation. Messiaen was preoccupied with the idea of truth. The most important aspect of his work, he said, was "the illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith,"⁴⁵ and one of his favorite aphorisms was that "God dazzles us by excess of truth; music carries us to God for lack of truth." This is a paraphrase of a passage from the *Summa Theologiae*: "Just as human reason fails to grasp the import of poetical utterance on account of its deficiency in truth, neither can it grasp divine things perfectly on account of their superabundance of truth; and therefore in both cases there is need of representation by sensible figures."⁴⁶ Messiaen's motto about truth recalls Maritain's view of poetic knowledge:

At the culmination of our knowledge we know God as unknown, St. Thomas said, after the pseudo-Dionysius, with regard to mystical contemplation. We must say of the poet: at the source of his creative movement he knows things "as unknown" together with his own soul.⁴⁷

Messiaen's belief that he could not "grasp divine things" did not discourage him from seeking truth, though Stravinsky's similar uncertainty is reflected in *Oedipus Rex*'s equivocation toward truth.

Like Stravinsky, Messiaen is stylistically self-conscious, borrowing from Dukas and Dupré, using the cyclical forms that César Franck had popularized in France, and subscribing to the tradition of writing toccatas for the organ. His manifestos, prefaces, and quotations from scripture in his publications all evince his awareness of his own work. Unlike Stravinsky, however, Messiaen's self-consciousness was not due to a feeling of loss or lack of identity, but to a surfeit of faith in the teachings of the Catholic Church. "I didn't have a sudden conversion, as did Blaise Pascal or Paul Claudel," he said. "For me, there was nothing of the kind. I've always been a believer, pure and simple."⁴⁸ He did not question or ironize the representations of truth and the Incarnation by Dukas and Dupré, but accepted them and built upon them.

⁴⁵ Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), p. 20.

⁴⁶ Messiaen's paraphrase may be found throughout his many interviews. It is most famously quoted in the last scene of his opera *Saint François d'Assise*. The source of Messiaen's paraphrase has been uncovered by Camille Crunelle Hill, "Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Theme of Truth" in Siglind Bruhn, ed., *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love* (New York: Garland, 1998): p. 145. Thomas' reference to "sensible figures" (I-II, q. 101, a. 2, ad 2) is, as the following quotation from Maritain indicates, taken from the Pseudo-Dionysius' *On Divine Names*.

⁴⁷ "Poetic Experience."

⁴⁸ *Music and Color*, p. 16.

Though he was self-conscious, a sincerity bordering on naïveté pervades Messiaen's writings. He called for a sincerity of expression in the leaflet and the preface for *La Nativité*, as well as in his manifesto for *La Jeune France*, a composers' collective he founded the following year. In Messiaen's music, truth is conveyed by deep conviction and powerful emotional expression.⁴⁹ Believing that he could not fully know the truth of a paradoxically transcendent yet immanent God, he composed in a highly personal idiom that shows certainty of knowledge through conviction of faith. For Messiaen, true knowledge came from faith and poetic knowledge derived from communion with God.

Messiaen's self-consciousness may also be traced to the period of his life when he wrote *La Nativité*. In the mid-1930s, he was beginning to build a reputation in Parisian musical circles. The year he wrote *La Nativité*, he crossed into a public life by co-founding the group *La Spirale* (which later became *La Jeune France*) and he defined himself against the prevailing neoclassical aesthetic, whose works he found anachronistic, insincere, and sometimes distastefully bawdy. To live in Paris in the politically polarized 1930s was to choose between fascist and communist ideology, urban and rural life, sacred and secular culture. Throughout the decade, Messiaen re-evaluated much of what he had been taught, and self-consciously fashioned himself as a successor both to the French organ tradition and to the tradition of exoticism prevalent in French music since Saint-Saëns and Debussy. He defined himself with the conviction of a highly gifted and independent young man in a divided society. The formation of his identity, of his subjectivity, was thus different in every way from Stravinsky's uncertainty of faith, home, music, and knowledge.

The different conceptions of knowing truth in Stravinsky and Messiaen are also evident in the texts that accompany their compositions. Stravinsky strategically set a Greek tragedy for its widespread familiarity, since he knew that he would not have been able to set the text in Latin if the story were not well known. Messiaen, however, prefaced "Dieu parmi nous" with a quotation from Ecclesiasticus (aka the Book of Sirach), a particularly Catholic text excluded from the Protestant and Hebrew Bibles. His ideal audience was thus more personal than Stravinsky's.

Messiaen called the story of Dukas's *Ariane et Barbe-bleu* "the tragedy of Truth misunderstood."⁵⁰ The misunderstanding results from

⁴⁹ For more on conviction in art, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁵⁰ Messiaen, "Ariane et Barbe-Bleue de Paul Dukas," *Revue musicale* 166 (1936), pp. 79–86.

Bluebeard's wives' lack of faith in finding a better world than the basement of Bluebeard's castle. Messiaen seems to have rectified Dukas's tragedy by associating Dukas's truth with the truth he found in Christ. The tragedy of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* is that Oedipus will not accept the truth when he learns of Laius' murder at the crossroads. Messiaen conveys certainty, while Stravinsky expresses doubt. To repeat Maritain's distinction, Stravinsky grasped his subjectivity—and his music—as an object to be defined and redefined at will. The critic Boris de Schloezer disparaged him as a Pelagian for this reason.⁵¹ Like Stravinsky, Messiaen drew upon his subjectivity as a source for his works. However, he did not manipulate it, but rather immersed himself within it. He surrounded himself with works that confirmed his identity as a French Catholic organist and so composed works that appear sincere, free of irony, and composed with conviction.

Maritain's writings claim that subjectivity is central to the expression of poetic knowledge in art, an idea confirmed in Stravinsky and Messiaen, where knowledge of their own identities is directly reflected in their ideas about truth and thus knowledge. Stravinsky's subjectivity was confused and his expression of truth ambiguous, whereas Messiaen's subjectivity was firmly planted and his notions of truth clear. Though Stravinsky's and Messiaen's notions of truth are different, subjectivity, as influenced by the world, determines their understanding of the nature of truth and so creates their poetic knowledge. The clear reflection of subjectivity in their work affirms Maritain's claim that subjectivity is a source of poetic knowledge, but Stravinsky's case contradicts and expands Maritain's claim by showing that subjectivity can also serve as the object of poetic knowledge.

⁵¹ Boris de Schloezer's comment is related in Robert Craft, ed., *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence*, 3 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 2: 503.