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Dogmatism & Belief in French Cultural Life in the 1930s

What follows is a cautionary tale about belief and certainty and insularity. With fifty years' perspective--in some instances, more--it requires no great insight to trace patterns of conflict in French artistic and intellectual life in the 1930s; and the origins and extensions of the patterns in earlier and later decades. What may not be so easy, for advocates of one or another persuasion, is to entertain the idea that there was no mainstream in the highly pluralistic climate of France in the decade before World War II. This cautionary tale entertains such an idea, and in the end proposes Jacques Maritain as a moderating voice in a contentious arena.

To reduce the argument to manageable proportions, I will single out only four competing currents: Catholicism, Modernism, Surrealism, and Existentialism. Certainly, the phenomenon called the Catholic Renaissance in the between-war years cannot be contained within the decade of the 1930s. Modernism and Surrealism also have their origins earlier in the century. Existentialism only began to gather momentum in the thirties and then flourished in the decade following. Nonetheless, in the years immediately preceding World War II, all four coexisted as conflicting systems of belief—as the French would put it, they cohabited, in a *cohabitation difficile*; and here is where the cautionary tale begins: adherents to each of the four were inclined to see themselves as the core or center of the intellectual and artistic life of their time. They all tended to regard their persuasion as the mainstream which would save France from darkness, wrongheadedness, or mediocrity.

With no polemical intent, I wish to observe that each of these groups defended its principles with something very akin to religious fervor. I, therefore, frame the cautionary tale in the language of belief--sometimes used ironically, sometimes not. That is the language frequently used by

the Catholics, Modernists, Surrealists, and Existentialists I discuss, and by their critics. It is also the language best suited to the conventions of this particular cautionary tale; for there is an edge of self-righteousness, of implied rightness and wrongness, to the polemical writings of all four of the groups. Only the Catholics explicitly acknowledged that they believed truth was in their camp, and that art and discourse should reflect the truth; but the others behaved and wrote as if they believed it. All of them regularly censured members of other faiths; they also censured members of their own for straying from a perceived orthodoxy. When that happened, the language of belief became that of dogmatism.

Some preliminary examples may clarify these observations. It is no accident that André Breton was dubbed the Pope of the Surrealists for his zeal at setting dogma and excommunicating the lapsed. It is no accident that Sartre was dubbed the Pope of the Existentialists, for the same reason, and his disciple Francis Jameson, the Cardinal; or that Simone de Beauvoir wrote a 500+-page book, *The Mandarins* (1954), in which she exhaustively and belatedly excommunicated Camus, disguised as Henri, for contumacy and moral turpitude. The French Modernists didn't have a pope, probably because there were two acknowledged giants of Modernist prose in France--Proust and Gide; and each made up an exclusive congregation of one. Proust has been described by Henri Peyre as having concelebrated daily mass with himself in his cork-lined sanctuary.¹ So what if Peyre made the remark with a twinkle in his eye? Not so much given to twinkles as to dodges, Gide once explained his flirtation with the Communist party as a way of deflecting those who insisted on anointing him as the papal arbiter of Modernism.²

What I am proposing in this tale of camps and congregations and believers is that all four of the groups to which I am alluding—Catholics, Modernists, Surrealists, and Existentialists—tended to attract convertible personalities, many of whom did undergo some kind of conversion experience and then felt marked with the colors of a cause. In their new lives, they usually saw themselves as standard bearers or guardians of

¹Henri Peyre in discussion at a session on the modern French novel at the Modern Language Association national meeting in New York City (December 1985).

²Judith D. Suther in conversation with Gabriel Marcel (Paris, June 1980).

lofty and exclusive principles. Not only can the Catholic artists and intellectuals be characterized in this way, as is traditional; the Modernists, Surrealists, and Existentialists were fired with equal conviction.

For the Modernists, Gide's journey from a comfortable middle class background to a credo of questioning everything is an apt model of the Modernist conversion. His novel *The Counterfeiters* (1926) is a paradigm of an old order in dissolution and a new one always just out of reach. Gide, and the Modernists in general, rejected not only high culture and inherited values; they rejected the possibility of stable meaning itself. Once they had invested themselves in the inquiry, inquiry itself became the new god--again the language of belief shades toward dogmatism. True to the model of Gide, other Modernist conversions, such as Valery's, were gradual and deliberate, akin to Bunyan's account of his own in *Grace Abounding*. Valery's early essay "An Evening with Monsieur Teste" (1896) is a long intellectual preparation for his most famous Modernist statement, the statement that appears above the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris: "*Nous autres civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortels*" ("Now we know that our civilizations too are mortal").

For the French Surrealists, there is a wide field of candidates to serve as conversion models. Breton is not a voice crying in the wilderness. One of his earliest disciples is an almost caricatural Surrealist conversion figure: Yves Tanguy was riding on a bus in Paris in 1925 when he saw one of Giorgio de Chirico's *metaphysical* paintings displayed in a gallery window. He jumped off the bus, in a state of high excitement examined the painting, and, by his own account, became a Surrealist on the spot.³ In the closed economy of this cautionary tale, the nature of Tanguy's work and his loyalties after that encounter make it fair to compare his experience with the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus. Tanguy underwent a sudden metamorphosis, as opposed to the slow transformation experienced by Gide and Valery. Knowing full well that I can never prove it, I will hazard the opinion that these contrasting patterns of conversion are generally valid for other Modernist and Surrealist figures. Certainly, strength of conviction and reform of manners following the conversion experience *are* typical of all of them.

³Recounted by Patrick Waldberg in *Yves Tanguy* (Brussels: André de Rache, 1977), 90-91. Tanguy himself also recounted the incident numerous times to critics and interviewers.

For the Existentialists, again the best-known exemplar, Sartre--the Alsatian burgher turned Parisian iconoclast--is not the only candidate for conversion model. Camus presents a better paradigm, at least a more dramatic and attractive one, in his youthful battle with the demon of mortality, which for him took the form of tuberculosis. He emerged momentarily the victor, in 1930; and as long as he lived, espoused some variation of Humanism, for lack of a more precise word. I say Humanism, rather than Existentialism, because Camus himself objected to the label *Existentialist*, although it is the term most often applied to his work. As the editor of the wartime underground newspaper, *Combat*, and the writer of a strangely lean and sensual prose, he was a great agent of secular conversion for those who had lost every faith. The fact that he did not accept this role only increased his effectiveness.

To return to the thread of the cautionary tale, the beliefs of each of the coexisting groups tended to take on the characteristics of a holy mission. From there to the conviction that one's own mission represented the mainstream of the historical moment is a very small step. Most of the converts to each of the groups I have named took the step. What makes the proposition doubly interesting is that there was very little crossing of lines, of professing more than one allegiance. The Modernists tended not to be Catholic, and vice versa. The Surrealists tended to be unsympathetic to the Existentialists, and vice versa; and so on and so forth, in all directions. The tendency toward exclusiveness applied to all the groups. It is as if each of them professed a religion, and as if the religions were mutually exclusive. Members of each group used religious terms disparagingly to characterize members of another group. Raïssa Maritain wrote for all to read in her autobiography that Modernism was the *heresy* of the between-war years.⁴ She also wrote, but this time in her journal for no one to read, that Paul Sabon "felt the devil in the surrealists" and got away just in time.⁵ In "Sense and Non-Sense in Poetry," she asserts that the Surrealists "burdened [poetry] with the duties of sanctity, without the means of sanctity."⁶ In "Poetry as Spiritual Experience," a talk

⁴Raïssa Maritain, *Les Grandes Amitiés* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1944), 392.

⁵Raïssa Maritain, *Journal de Raïssa.*, ed. Jacques Maritain (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), 177-78.

⁶Raïssa Maritain, *Poèmes et Essais.*, ed. Jacques Maritain (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968), 219.

later revised into an essay, she states that Paul Eluard is a poet who achieves spiritual heights *despite* his Surrealist affiliation [her emphasis].⁷

Other converts—converts as defined in this cautionary tale—express themselves in terms similar to those used by Raïssa. Gide wrote in his journal that Jacques Maritain was priestly and proselytizing, which was not a compliment. "The stooped, bent carriage of his head and his whole person displeased me," said Gide, as did "a certain clerical unction in his gesture and voice."⁸ Peggy Guggenheim, a kind of surrogate Surrealist, wrote in her memoirs that Yves Tanguy "seemed to think his whole life depended on his being a Surrealist. It was worse than having a religion," she declared, "and it governed all his actions."⁹ There is a whole body of critical writing by Christians, mainly Catholics, postulating that if Camus had lived beyond the age of forty-six, he would have converted from the *illusory* religion which he espoused, Existentialism, to their religion. They liked the poor boy from Algiers who wrote such seductive prose. They wanted him in their camp. Both Sartre and de Beauvoir, for their parts, expended many pages explaining that if you were Catholic, you were intellectually bankrupt and, therefore, morally stunted. Pierre Mabille, a tireless zealot of the Surrealist persuasion, added a clinical dimension to the lexicon of disdain. He wrote an entire book on Thérèse of Lisieux, explaining how she was the victim of a parasitic faith because her parents, indeed her grandparents, had already been *infected* with the *deadly virus* of Catholicism. Mabille, a physician, manages to equate the Catholic faith with disease, while propagating his own faith, Surrealism *cum* Marxism.¹⁰ In this welter of self-righteous accusations, a common denominator links accusers and accused: survivors of a war and heirs to more than one failed panacea for the ailments of their society (positivism, materialism, militarism; somewhat later, Communism and populism), they all suffered from a sense of loss, and they all sought something in which to believe. When they settled on what it would be, they formalized their beliefs into systems (for the Catholics,

⁷*Ibid.*, 280.

⁸André Gide, *Journal d'André Gide, 1889-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), I, 772.

⁹Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of this Century: Confessions of an Art Addict* (New York: Universe Books, 1987), 182.

¹⁰Pierre Mabille, *Thérèse de Lisieux* (Paris: Corti, 1936).

the institution of the Church was already in place).

Each group then conceptualized its own system as the main current, the cleansing agent that alone represented the artistic and intellectual future of France. This attitude automatically marginalized all currents except one's own; it also led quite naturally to the dogmatic vocabulary appropriated by members of the conflicting factions. In the massive demoralization of France after World War I, it may have been impossible to conceive of a successfully pluralistic society; the dominant position which each group claimed for its own beliefs, once they had been constructed from beyond despair, may have been inevitable.

I wish to shift out of the linguistic register of dogmatism and belief now, and propose Jacques Maritain as the modest hero of this cautionary tale. Despite a quick temper and a prolific output of position papers and manifestoes, he has left a record more leavened by understanding than marred by intolerance. No stranger to polemics, even bitter polemics, he seems, nonetheless, to have been more receptive to artistic and intellectual pluralism than most of his contemporaries. This is not to question his unwavering commitment to what he called "philosophizing in the faith." On the contrary, to an observer who knows more about Modernists, Surrealists, and Existentialists than about Catholic philosophers, Jacques Maritain appears to have been that rare presence among them all: that is, the convert who could look, listen, learn, and change, win some, lose some, lash out on occasion, but ultimately remain open to great art, surprising ideas, or intellectual honesty from any quarter. He seems to me to have branded only faintly by the insularity so often seen in his Modernist, Surrealist, and Existentialist contemporaries—indeed, his Catholic contemporaries.

To illustrate, with a final set of examples: from early in his career, Jacques Maritain engaged in combat, usually courteous on his part, with various members of the Modernist, Surrealist, and Existentialist groups. His most extended contact with any of them was with the Modernists and Modernist critics at Princeton. To judge by the evolution of his taste from the youthful manifesto *Antimoderne* (1922) to *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), this longest association was probably also the most satisfying to him. During and after World War II, in the United States, he continued to be the target of ironic anti-Catholic barbs aimed at him by Modernist spokesmen, framed in the familiar dogmatic language. A long article in a 1942 issue of the *Partisan Review* attacking his anti-Modernist

views on esthetics is called, with curled lip, "The Profession of Poetry or, Trials Through the Night for M. Maritain."¹¹ In most instances Maritain did not rise to the bait, and he continued to evince a genuine and admiring interest in Modernist works, particularly those of English-language writers such as Hart Crane, Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Wallace Stevens, and Allen Tate (Tate and his wife Caroline Gordon, Modernists and Catholic converts, are notable exceptions to the pattern of exclusiveness which I have put forward). When Maritain criticized the work of American Modernists, he generally did so in measured terms of courtesy and respect, free of charged language. For example, of Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he writes discreetly, "I am afraid that T. S. Eliot...missed the distinction between creative Self and self-centered ego....That is probably why...he uses the word 'personality' where *individuality* is the proper term."¹² In a recent article in *The American Scholar*, entitled "Remembering Jacques Maritain," Wallace Fowlie reports that Maritain was fascinated with Eliot's poetry, despite reservations about his critical writing. According to Fowlie, Maritain liked to hear the last lines of "Ash-Wednesday" read aloud by a native English-speaking voice:

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain,
 spirit of the garden,
 Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
 Teach us to care and not to care
 Teach us to sit still
 Even among these rocks,
 Our peace in His will
 And even among these rocks
 Sister, mother
 And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
 Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.

¹¹ Harold Rosenberg, "The Profession of Poetry or, Trials Through the Night for M. Maritain," *Partisan Review* 9 (Sept.-Oct. 1942): 392-413.

¹²Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Bollingen Foundation by PantheonBooks, 1953), 313, n. 18.

Fowlie says that Maritain listened enthralled to these lines and asked if Eliot were a religious man. When told yes, he did not pose sectarian questions.¹³

With the Surrealists and Existentialists, Maritain's relations were of lesser duration, but on his side at least, no less marked by decorum and an attempt to understand views different from his own. His admiration for Reverdy's work and his friendship with him did not diminish after Reverdy's loss of faith and his period of frequenting the Surrealist commune on the *rue du Chateau*—in fact, living there for a while. The same can be said of Maritain's relations with Cocteau. Years after the standoff following their exchange of letters in the 1920s, eventually published in English as *Art and Faith* (1948), Maritain would name Cocteau as one of the truly inventive and versatile artists of this century.¹⁴ He did not censure Cocteau for what to some looked like a staged conversion to Catholicism and a betrayal of a friend's good will. As for his efforts at keeping the dialogue open with the Existentialists, Maritain's brief book *Existence and the Existent* (1948) is probably the best summary he left. Written under pressure, when his political engagements were approaching fever pitch, this "short treatise on existence and the existent," as the French title reads, is remarkably balanced and, on the whole, coolly argued. Even after a burst of typical Maritainian invective at the Sartrean doctrine of freedom, Maritain backs off and reflects. "M. Sartre is right in declaring himself firmly optimistic and in leaving the tragic sense to Christians," he writes, a bit pompously. Then he ends the passage with an admission of what really bothers him in the existentialist atheology: it is the "astounding renunciation of any measure of grandeur" for the human person in the absence of God. This is hardly a statement of intolerance or disdain. It reads more like a sorrowful recognition of human incompleteness than like an antagonist's sally.¹⁵

¹³Wallace Fowlie, "Remembering Jacques Maritain," *The American Scholar* (Summer 1987), 355-66.

¹⁴Judith D. Suther in conversation with Gabriel Marcel, Paris, June 1980).

¹⁵Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1975), 9.

So, if the example of Maritain has any validity, perhaps the spirit of pluralism can survive in the most contentious of climates. Perhaps the clamor of *-isms* that raged in France between the two world wars is not the only echo that will be heard in another fifty years. The polarizing language of dogmatism and belief that became a fashionable vernacular of those times may not constitute the sole surviving script, as the record is read and reread and revised. Without ascribing a false heroism to Jacques Maritain, I think he contributed some indelible lines to an alternative script of his time.

The cautionary tale ends with a few lines written by Maritain in a footnote to *Creative Intuition*. They have nothing to do with the *-isms* and other antagonisms discussed here; they carry no polemical freight. By their very vulnerability, they suggest that if dogmatism occasionally blurred Maritain's vision, he had an instinct for correcting the distortion. The lines from *Creative Intuition* read: "In *Man and Superman*, Bernard Shaw condemned Shakespeare on the ground that his philosophy was 'only his wounded humanity.' Well, I do not complain of being taught by the *wounded humanity of a Shakespeare* about man and human existence, and many things which matter to me in the reality of this world."¹⁶

¹⁶Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 131, n. 19.