
John M. Dunaway

Exiles and Fugitives: The Maritain-Tate-Gordon Letters

When I was writing a book on Maritain¹ in the mid-seventies, I wrote letters to a whole list of American writers who I thought might have been influenced by Maritain. The responses were quite interesting, but none so generous and enthusiastic as that of Caroline Gordon. Miss Gordon wrote several pages, in which she spoke in glowing terms of what Maritain had meant to her personally, spiritually, and in her writing career. She enclosed a copy of a wonderful letter that Maritain had sent to her after reading one of her novels, *The Malefactors*,² and encouraged me to keep in touch, saying she had in her possession other "material which I think will be helpful to you. It has not hitherto been accessible to the public." I quoted from this letter—as well as a short one from Allen Tate—in my book, but as I continued to find interesting examples of Maritain's influence among American writers, a seed was planted somewhere in my mind. It was the germ of a project that I finally began to pursue in 1988 when I was in France and visited Mme. Grunelius at the Maritain center in Kolbsheim—namely, to compile and publish the letters between the two Catholic literary couples.

During the years of Jacques Maritain's American residence he made some rather significant and lasting friendships, relationships that ended up exerting a decisive influence on the history of thought and letters in this country. Among the more enduring of such "*grandes amitiés*," if we may anachronistically appropriate Raïssa's phrase from her 1941 mem-

¹John M. Dunaway, *Jacques Maritain* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978).

²Caroline Gordon, *The Malefactors* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956).

oir, was one the Maritains enjoyed with the poet Allen Tate and his first wife, novelist Caroline Gordon.

It is often remarked that one of the greatest gifts with which Jacques Maritain was blessed was his genius for friendship. The fact that his contacts ranged much farther than the world of philosophy or theology is an indication of the special nature of his calling as a *philosophe dans la cité*. Knowing statesmen, poets, painters, priests, labor leaders, novelists, and musicians, Maritain made it his business to communicate with them in their own idiom in order to bring to bear on their diverse problems the fruitful perspectives of Thomistic wisdom.

Such a vision as the Maritains had of making their home a *centre de rayonnement* (a center for a kind of sphere of spiritual influence) in the modern world for the timeless truths of St. Thomas's work was a guiding force in the forming of their friendships, especially at Meudon in the years between the wars, but also at Princeton, Notre Dame, Chicago, and the other American cities where they lived during their long exile from their beloved France. One of the things that they held in common with the Tates was precisely the radiant hospitality that brought so many creative people to their homes. *Benfolly*, the farm overlooking the Cumberland River, was home not only to the Tates, but, for varying periods of time, Ford Madox Ford (and his wife, secretary, and sister-in-law), Robert Lowell (who showed up uninvited and pitched a tent in the lawn), and Katherine Anne Porter. Throughout their marriage, writers and artists, especially those associated with the Fugitive Agrarian movement, enjoyed the hospitality of the Tates: the Robert Penn Warrens, the Malcolm Cowleys, the Mark Van Dorens, the Andrew Lytles, and so on.

Both of these Catholic literary couples began their careers in literary renaissances: movements that favored the wisdom of the ancients over the prophets of modern secularism. Indeed, the *Renouveau catholique* in France had certain sources in common with the Southern Renaissance in the U. S., which began with the Fugitive Agrarians in Tate's undergraduate days at Vanderbilt.

The richest flowering of Southern literature probably owed as great a debt to Allen Tate as to any other single writer. His poetry and literary theory and criticism remain significant entries in the canon, and his *The Fathers*³ is one of the most remarkable first novels in American literature. While Caroline Gordon does not rank among the best known fiction

³Allen Tate, *The Fathers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

writers, she had an admirable gift for rendering detail and was a peculiarly insightful student and teacher of the craft of fiction, and readers of *The Southern Mandarins*⁴ will hardly be surprised to hear her called a gifted epistolary stylist.

The letters exchanged between the Maritains and the Tates during their lifetimes reveal a rich tapestry of mutual respect, of intellectual fervor, and of constructive criticism. There is a lively flow of ideas and advice, as well as the kind of support and counsel that can only spring from deeply shared experience.

The Tates' letters are fewer and farther between but testify to a genuine devotion to the French philosopher. Gordon's are more numerous, much longer and more directly focused on Maritain's writings, as they impinge on her own thought and fiction.

Allen Tate has stated that "Jacques Maritain's influence on me was pervasive from the time I first knew him in 1940 until his death." Yet although the Maritains eventually became the godparents of Tate and Gordon, I think it unlikely that Maritain had any decisive role in Tate's conversion, shortly after that of his wife, to Roman Catholicism in the late '40s. It is certainly clear that the Southern writer—in the absence of religious training—had arrived at the point of decision through a similar intellectual route, having long been an Aristotelian with a strong classical formation and preferring, among modern poets, such figures as T. S. Eliot and Baudelaire. Walter Sullivan observes that Tate was indeed predisposed toward the Neo-Scholastic worldview. So it is probably more likely to surmise a meeting of like minds than an influence.

The earliest reference to a face-to-face meeting between the two couples is in 1949 in New York. The first exchange of letters—these in 1944 between Jacques and Allen—concerns the latter's request for an article for the *Sewanee Review*, which Tate was directing in the mid-forties.

Press, 1977 (revised from original edition, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1938)).

⁴Caroline Gordon, *The Southern Mandarins, Letters of Caroline Gordon to Sally Wood, 1924-37*, ed. Sally Wood (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

The upshot was a translation of Maritain's *Réponse à Jean Cocteau*,⁵ published as "The Double Heart" in the *Sewanee Review* that year.

As the relationship matures, we read of Maritain asking Tate to critique an essay, especially in regard to his English usage, about which he was quite self-conscious. Caroline offers to take Raïssa for an automobile ride during one of her extended recuperations. There is mention of a bill in the Congress that is proposed in order to obtain a permanent visa for Vera. The bill is introduced by Congressman John F. Kennedy, and Tate enlists the support of Senator Taft. In 1951 there is an exchange that includes Raïssa because of her involvement with Jacques in translating Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" into French. The French version was published in this country in the *Sewanee Review* and in France in the *Figaro littéraire*.

One of the more interesting discussions in the correspondence concerns Tate's role, with Frederick Morgan, the editor of the *Hudson Review*, and Father William Lynch in the creation of an organization of Catholic men of letters. It seems that they became involved in a controversy in 1951-52 over a motion picture being shown in New York called *The Miracle*. Part of a Roberto Rossellini trilogy entitled *Ways of Love*, it was the story of an imbecilic peasant woman (Anna Magnani) who is seduced by a man she believes to be a saint. Cardinal Francis Spellman publicly condemned the film as blasphemous and insulting to Italian womanhood and called for a boycott among Roman Catholics. Pickets, counter-pickets, lawsuits--in short, a full-blown *cause célèbre*--ensued, and the stream of articles in the *New York Times* during those months included a letter from Allen Tate.

Apparently, Fred Morgan and others in the laymen's group wished to take legal action against Cardinal Spellman in the affair, but Tate was instrumental in heading off this potentially divisive tactic. Maritain wrote to him—as well as Morgan—that the group would be more effective if it were "concerned with creative and constructive work, not with ecclesiastical politics." Tate wrote back that he fully agreed with Maritain. "My opinion from the beginning...was that we should form a Catholic literary academy, not a group for political action....I agree with you that the only way to make works of imagination and sensibility a part of Catholic life is to produce enough of them, of sufficient power and

⁵Jacques Maritain, *Réponse à Jean Cocteau* (Paris: Stock, 1926).

distinction, [to] affect the education of the Catholic community as a whole, clergy as well as laity."

Thus we find Maritain and Tate in perfect accord on the ideal strategy for Catholic writers collectively to exert an effective influence on society; and Maritain supported Tate's individual public expression of opinion via the letter to the editor: "There is nothing in common between expressing one's mind on the matter, as you did, and starting a collective action which would raise the flag of a theologico-political crusade."

This much can be learned from the correspondence. However, if we read Tate's letter to the *New York Times*, we discover another important issue of this whole controversy in which the two are in apparent disagreement. In the letter to the editor, Tate argues that because of the separation of church and state there is no institution in this country with a "legitimate authority to suppress books and motion pictures, however disagreeable they may be to certain persons on theological grounds." He closes the letter by charging, "In the long run what Cardinal Spellman will have succeeded in doing is insulting the intelligence and faith of American Catholics with the assumption that a second-rate motion picture could in any way undermine their morals or shake their faith."

The clear implication in this text is that Allen Tate opposed censorship on any grounds, whether theological or moral; but his beloved friend Jacques Maritain would never have taken such a position, judging from what he wrote in *The Responsibility of the Artist*. "When it comes to the moral or immoral value of a literary work, the community may have to guard its standards against it to the extent that it is an incitation to action.... We cannot deny that people who are not specialists in literature have a right to be warned against reading authors whose artistic talent is but a means to unburden their vices and obsessions on us."⁶

Such reasoning, I submit, would indeed be salubrious today to counter the strident voices heard everywhere around us, lamenting so-called unfair government censorship in cases where it is not even a question of censorship or freedom of speech but of governmental subsidies for art that is offensive and degrading.

⁶Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Gordian, 1972) (reprint of the original edition, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 79-80.

In 1954 there is a letter from Maritain praising Miss Gordon's story "Emmanuele! Emmanuele!" The story, which appeared that year in the *Sewanee Review*, is a thinly veiled fiction whose principal character is easily recognizable to students of French literature as André Gide. Gide's stormy relationships with his wife Madeleine Rondeaux and with Paul Claudel are recreated here with what Maritain terms "such power of emotion, human compassion and generosity." The stroke of genius in Gordon's treatment, however, is to entrust the narrative perspective to an otherwise relatively minor character, an impressionable young professor and would-be poet who is hired as Gide's amanuensis. His adoring, awe struck attitude toward the great writer is replete with bitter irony, somewhat reminiscent of the Curé de Luzarne's toward Antoine Saint-Marin, Bernanos's fictionalized version of Anatole France in *Sous le Soleil de Satan*.⁷ Indeed, the French Catholic novelist would have been well pleased with Miss Gordon's satirical treatment of the legendary Gide.

Perhaps the richest literary exchange is the one occasioned by the publication of *The Malefactors*, Gordon's 1956 novel, which carried as dedicatory epigraph a quote from Maritain's *The Frontiers of Poetry*: "Few books [have] moved me so deeply," writes Maritain, "perhaps because I felt everywhere the vivid presence of your heart. This book is full of poetry,—implacable and loving, and with an admirably assured design. ...But the great thing is the sense of the loving kindness of Our Lord which permeates the entire book." Miss Gordon was particularly gratified that Maritain was one of the relatively few readers to understand that whereas real people like Hart Crane, Dorothy Day, and Peter Maurin were recognizable in the characters of her story, it had nothing to do with a *roman à clef*, "Maritain was the only critic who realized," as she wrote to me in 1976, "that I had achieved what Ezra Pound years ago labelled 'an invention.' He also recognized the technique I used: adding an extra dimension to the 'literal level' (to borrow Dante's phrase)." Several years later (December 24, 1961) she enthusiastically mentions to Maritain an essay that takes these ideas as a point of departure. Ashley Brown's "The Novel As Christian Comedy"⁸ is one of the most creative interpretations that has been written on *The Malefactors*. In addition to Maritain, it

⁷Georges Bernanos, *Sous le soleil de Satan* (Paris: Plon, 1926).

⁸Ashley Brown, "The Novel as Christian Comedy," in *Reality and Myth: Essays in American Literature in Honor of Richard Croom Beatty*, ed.

borrowed liberally from Francis Fergusson's work on the *Purgatorio*, *Dante's Dream of the Mind*. So we find in a text like Brown's a remarkable confluence of Maritain's friends and students.

The deep and enduring friendship between Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon has been documented in *The Habit of Being*⁹ and in the critical commentaries published on the two writers. It is now widely acknowledged that for many years Miss Gordon was the principal mentor in Miss O'Connor's career. There are several mentions of Flannery's fiction in these letters, and we may infer that Maritain owed much of his familiarity with the author of *Wise Blood* to Gordon. In one letter she encloses some peacock feathers from Flannery's Georgia farm, Andalusia. Then she speaks of sending a photograph of Maritain to a Father Charles at the Trappist Monastery in Conyers, Georgia. "Father Charles—originally one of the most dissolute young men who ever came Dorothy Day's way, she says—is a great admirer of yours and of Raïssa's and will be very happy to have it. These monks have sort of adopted Flannery O'Connor and me as pipe-lines to the outer world."

In a subsequent letter, Gordon writes, "I have just finished a piece in which I tried to compare the last story in Flannery O'Connor's posthumous volume, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, with the several versions of Flaubert's *Temptations de Saint Antoine* [sic]. It seems to me that Flannery succeeded where the great Flaubert failed, chiefly, because she confined herself to a portrayal of the operations of one heresy whereas Flaubert had nineteen or twenty parade past Saint Anthony."

There are two letters in 1968 and '69 in which Miss Gordon speaks of Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign. "We knew McCarthy and his wife in Minnesota. They are wonderful people. Gene is, doubtless, the best educated man in American politics. He is a devout Catholic—has taken St. Thomas More as his patron. Everybody says he can't possibly win...but a good many people are beginning to realize that he is attempting something that hasn't been attempted before [You might almost say that he is creating a new political climate]." She even compares McCarthy's significance in America to that of the Little Brothers of

William E. Walther and Robert L. Weller (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1964).

⁹Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1979).

Charles de Foucauld in France. At this time Miss Gordon was beginning her third reading of *The Peasant of the Garonne*,¹⁰ about which she was extremely enthusiastic. She told anyone who would listen that "if they want to understand their own times they had better read this book." The example she gives is a very lengthy account of her daughter Nancy's dealings with McCarthy. Nancy Tate Wood had worked quite hard in the campaign and in the fall of '69 was trying to help build the foundation for another McCarthy run at the Presidency. "Their conversation, which lasted three hours, was mostly about angels—angelism, she said. (At this point I was reminded of something you said in print years ago, that our chief danger was not from the atom bomb but from 'angelism,' man's effort to use his own intellect as if it were an angel's intellect.)" She reports that McCarthy attributed Bobby Kennedy's opportunism in the campaign to his "succumbing to the guidance of his dark angel." There are, of course, more personal notes in these letters from time to time, concerning Tate's and Gordon's marital difficulties. However, the details are sketchy enough that there is practically no material for literary muckrakers. Maritain plays the role of peacemaker on occasion, but he has the wisdom to keep his interventions at a minimum. In March of 1957 Tate writes to thank him for his faithful support during the definitive breakup of the marriage. "Your letter has been like a beacon in the night—the compassion and charity which do not judge. I am deeply grateful, and send you all my love." Maritain's reply a few days later: "I was touched to the heart by your letter,—as I was also by my talk with Caroline. So deep a mutual love, and such suffering at the core of it!"

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned Maritain's vision of his home's becoming a *centre de rayonnement*, where writers and artists would encounter the reality of divine grace and its energizing possibilities for them. That vision reappeared in a more generalized form near the end of his life in the concept of the "little flocks of the laity," which he hoped would exert such a profound influence on modern culture. While the Tates were unable to continue to operate together along these lines after the 1950s, up until that point they had indeed fulfilled many of Maritain's cherished goals. That they continued to work toward them individually after their divorce is perhaps best evidenced in Caroline

¹⁰Jacques Maritain, *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966).

Gordon's plan to bequeath a portion of her papers to the Raïssa Maritain Library, run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. "One reason for leaving my stuff to the library at Stuart Hall is the chance that some earnest young writer may meet Mother Kirby or some of the other Sisters of the Sacred Heart and, consequently, have a little light thrown on his pathway....I hope the deposits will serve the purpose we both have at heart to lead people not of the faith to Raïssa who will, as you say, lead them to Christ."

To a whole generation of American Catholics, Jacques Maritain was *the* authoritative thinker and theologian (even though he persistently refused the latter role himself). The Maritains were even godparents to a considerable number of converts—American as well as French. His importance to both Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon was illustrative of the position he commanded in American religious and intellectual circles in the two decades following the Second World War.

Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and the Maritains devoted much of their careers to the renewal of modern culture in the West. A succinct expression of the essential hope for such a renewal is found in the following passage of Miss Gordon's letter to Maritain of May 7, 1954: "Allen is representing the United States at Mayor La Pira's Christian Congress in Florence. His speech will be largely his comments on your new book: 'It will be just the right thing,'" she quotes Tate as saying, "'for Jacques' theory of art boils down to the doctrine that Culture cannot survive without Revelation.'"