

AN INTRODUCTION TO LEON BLOY¹

IT is an important book which can throw light, as this book by M. Fumet certainly does, on the life and writings of Léon Bloy. For since his death Bloy, as man and as thinker or seer, has come to exert great influence in the world of Catholic thought, greater perhaps than that of any other writer of modern times. Already towards the close of his life, it is true, his apostolate had begun to tell (notable among his converts being Jacques and Raïssa Maritain²), but it was only posthumously that fame of him blazed out and he came to be widely recognized as a great exemplar and proclaimer of the spirit of Catholicism in its opposition to all that is mediocre or bourgeois. Yet there is a scandal which still somewhat limits the range and force of his influence. To come into contact with Bloy is not only to be thrilled by a new perception of the splendour and vitality of the Faith, but also to be confounded by the violence and exaggeration of his ideas and the extravagant vehemence and seeming insufferable arrogance of his character. Where we cannot accept all, we are inclined to reject entirely. M. Fumet comes to save us from ingratitude and superstition. This present article is no more than a series of hints at the contents of his book, at the image of Bloy emerging from its pages.

If Bloy's mind can only be understood through knowledge of his life, practically all the clues lie in the first half of it, running to the period of the tragic experiences dramatized in *Le Désespéré*. After that his mind crystallized, he lived on his deposit. Born in 1846, he inherited from his mother, so he supposed, his sombre cast of mind, which was to develop in him to morbid attunement to suffering: even as a child practising self-denial simply because he thought it "plus noble de souffrir." A child of his age, too, in this;

¹ *Mission de Léon Bloy*, by Stanislas Fumet. (Desclée de Brouwer, Les Iles.)

² Cf. *Lettres à ses Filleuls*, with introduction by M. Maritain, and his introduction also to *Lettres à Véronique*.

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having kinship with Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud. He admits, "le principal attrait du Christianisme a été pour moi l'immensité des douleurs du Christ, la grandiose, la transcendante horreur de sa Passion." The stigmata stamped upon all his thought. All this modifies but does not disqualify the sublime religious tragic vision of life he came to possess. To Paris, aged eighteen. Several years at dismal clerical work. Futile ambitions after painting and then poetry. A period of collapse of faith and morals, steady hatred of Christ and His Church forming in him. Then his amazing conversion, aged twenty-three: turning to the Church at the bidding of Barbey d'Aureilly, too cynically fine a gentleman of letters to be a practising Catholic himself. Bloy to become his very antithesis as a Catholic, now immediately: an "absolute" Catholic for whom his religion meant everything from now till his death some fifty years later. "Ma raison . . . c'est abolie dans la foi, elle s'y est retrempée et, en s'y retrempant, est devenue invulnérable . . . je fais tout découler de la foi." After an interval, to which belongs his military service against Prussia (found smoking his pipe peacefully within easy range of the Bosche, he the great hater of the Prussians who declared it would be joy to dig out their eyes, being challenged explains: "J'aurais peut-être tué un père de famille. C'est bête, n'est-ce pas?"), back again in Paris, aged twenty-seven. His first fervour at its intensest. Persuaded to resort to Communion daily; from which time until his death, except for the desperate period following on the madness of Anne-Marie, scarcely a day passed un nourished by this food, unratified by the Mass. His letters, journals, "novels" marvellously express and confess this presence. Already now his mind is full of two Christian doctrines which he was to ponder incessantly all his life and pursue in all their possible ramifications. First, the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, with Joseph de Maistre as inspirer. In 1873 to a friend: "Il m'est arrivé les choses les plus extraordinaires et les plus incroyables, et les plus heureuses." "Je me trouve en présence d'une complexité de mystère qui ne permet pas que je me comprenne facilement moi-même . . . je suis entré de plein-pied dans

la vie surnaturelle. Cela de la manière la plus soudaine et la plus miraculeuse. Je suis relativement heureux pour la première fois de ma vie." "Quand je pense que par derrière cette muraille de chair il y a tout un monde d'âmes, si différent de celui des corps, toute une hiérarchie immortelle qui a ses Rois, ses Aristocraties, ses magistratures héréditaires et de droit divin, ses Soldats, ses Bourreaux, son Peuple et sa Canaille! et que cela se gouverne sous l'oeil de Dieu par une politique réelle et infallible. . ." And already he had seized on the wonderful confluence of the doctrines of solidarity, merit and satisfaction which he calls the mystery of la Reversibilité: "qui est le nom philosophe du grand dogme de la communion des saints. Tout homme qui produit un acte libre projette sa personnalité dans l'infini. S'il donne de mauvais coeur un sou à un pauvre, ce sou perce la main du pauvre, tombe, perce la terre, troue les soleils, traverse le firmament et compromet l'univers. S'il produit un acte impur, il obscurcit peut-être des milliers de coeurs qu'il ne connaît pas, qui correspondent mystérieusement à lui et qui ont besoin que cet homme soit pur, comme un voyageur mourant de soif a besoin d'un verre d'eau de l'Evangile. Un acte charitable, un mouvement de vraie pitié, chante pour lui les louanges divines, depuis Adam jusqu'à la fin des siècles; il guérit les malades, console les désespérés, apaise les tempêtes, rachète les captifs, convertit les infidèles, protège le genre humain."³ Suiting action to belief it is at about this time that he invokes expiatory suffering upon himself, on behalf of his benefactor Barbey d'Aurevilly and of certain of his friends. One of the "secrets" of Bloy's life, no less generously and touchingly communicated than the others. Later he was to thank the Blessed Virgin for having answered his prayer—far beyond his merits and far beyond his capacity! He was entering now upon the state that was to become chronic for him: of poverty, abject poverty. Abandoning his clerical employment to enter upon a journalistic career. Failing inevitably; for the reason that his ideas, as Fumet expresses it, "s'évadaient du cadre journalistique"; but

³ From *Le Désespéré*.

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attributing his failure to injustice, to a base disregard of his genius. Bitterness then, and virulent contempt ever afterwards for all successful men of letters; in return for which quite naturally the real banning of his later authentic great work. M. Fumet's analysis of the egoism permeating the whole of Bloy's character is delicate, thorough, quite reassuring to any one inclined to love the man and recognize his genius. For example, his judgment on Bloy "*Le Mendiant Ingrat*" who gathered alms with the assurance of a priest gathering tithes.⁴

Now the critical, the finally formative period of his life. Aged thirty-one. Abandonment to an abandoned woman—the Veronica of *Le Désespéré*, in real life Anne-Marie; mastery of himself then sufficient to convert her. She becomes a tigress of a Christian. Bloy hopelessly caught in his passion; shrinking from marriage in horror at the thought of her past desecration. Poverty gnawing them. Then, for a brief two years friendship and spiritual guidance found in a priest, a certain Abbé Tardif de Moidrey. Two vitally important services he rendered to Bloy. First, he introduced him to his own method of biblical exegesis: based on the Catholic recognition of a spiritual, a symbolical meaning in Scripture following on the literal meaning insofar as the things, the truths, literally expressed are taken themselves to represent other things, other truths divine and human: which they do in consequence of the divine art ordaining all things to an interrelated end and as expression of His own goodness. Serious abuse of the system by Bloy, with Anne-Marie as accomplice, but also in some important ways as instigator and leader. Instead of a restrained objective reading of the symbolism, guided by Scripture itself and by Catholic tradition, the forcing of it to harmonize with his own dreams and theories; in particular a taking of every detail in Scripture as reflecting the nature or life of the Blessed Trinity with a symbolism to which he—Bloy—supposed that he held the master-key. Next, his appli-

⁴ On which cf. also M. Maritain in preface to *Lettres à ses Filleuls*.

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cation of the same principle to profane history; and so his extraordinary attempts to read and even to produce a grammar of what he called the hieroglyphics of history: discovery of the real meaning of Napoleon, for example, as "La Face de Dieu dans les ténèbres"!—tendency in him thus to turn this world into a phantom world like that of the apocalyptic writers; or on the other hand a stronger tendency to identify symbol with what is symbolized, and thus what looks like a movement towards pantheism. But in all this it must be remembered that Bloy has to be judged not as a philosopher nor as a theologian, but as a poet and a lover. "Quand on parle amoureusement de Dieu, tous les mots humains ressemblent à des lions devenus aveugles et qui chercheraient une source dans le desert," is his superb defence. And consider this admission: "Dieu m'a donné de l'imagination et de la mémoire, rien de plus, en vérité, mais j'ai la raison fort pesante, à peu près comme pourrait être la raison d'un boeuf, et la faculté d'analyse, telle que les philosophes l'entendent, me manque d'une manière absolue." Through all the exaggeration and the fantasy there shines forth a vast and glorious truth of which Catholics must recover the vision if they are to be truly Catholic in mind; in the meantime all attempts towards a popular revival of the liturgy being doomed to failure. The second service rendered by the abbé was the introduction of Bloy to the cult of Our Lady of La Salette, Our Lady of Sorrows, that is, as she appeared in 1846 (note!) to two peasant children and told them the—for Bloy at least—marvellous, world-shaking truth "qu'elle souffre pour son peuple," that she ever weeps over the sins of mankind; this, with the message of warning that "si mon peuple ne veut pas se soumettre, je suis forcée de laisser aller le bras de mon Fils." To Bloy learning for the first time of this it seemed that he had heard a heavenly voice confirming the verdict of all his deepest intuitions into the meaning of Christian suffering: God Himself still suffers, Christ is still on the Cross, all hope lies in the promise, according to his notion, of a reign of the Holy Ghost to be established on earth visibly, and the coming of which Anne-Marie was soon to prophesy as

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imminent. Here we have the key to a whole province of his subsequent speculations.

Bloy, then, dedicates himself to Our Lady of la Salette. Immediately on this comes news of the death of the abbé. Bloy aged thirty-three. And then comes the worst blow: under the strain of poverty, the strain of Bloy's passionate yearning towards her, above all the strain of the terrific doctrine administered to her excited brain, Anne-Marie goes out of her mind. Already some time before she had become an ecstatic, a domestic pythoness prophesying for the edification of Bloy and his friend and abettor, in some important ways his master, Ernest Hello. Her chief prophecy announced the Advent of the Holy Ghost, Bloy to be the herald of His glorious reign on earth. But when date after date assigned for its realization passed without event, Anne-Marie became wholly demented, uttered blasphemies against God as impotent or as treacherous, finally was removed and confined in an asylum. This in 1882. Bloy never saw her again. But most tenderly he cherished her memory, continued always to believe in her prophecy, waiting for its fulfilment and pathetically grasping at every happy turn of fortune as a possible omen of deliverance at hand. *Expectans expectavi*. Years of terrible anguish followed for Bloy, in which there accumulated in his heart and soul all the bitterness and horror which he was to vent in his autobiographical novel *Le Désespéré*, but of which he was never entirely to rid himself. He in his turn taunts God with cruelty and ingratitude. "J'aurais honte de traiter un chien galeux comme Dieu me traite," he writes to a friend. Yet, though he dropped his practices of religion, his faith did not waver and he was fully aware what the purpose of his suffering was if only he could submit. "Poète, je t'avenglerai parce que je suis la Foi, je te désespérerai parce que je suis l'Espérance, je te dévorerai parce que je suis la purété même, je t'inonderai de ténèbres parce que je suis la lumière," he had magnificently written at an earlier time and was to repeat later. Meanwhile he is, as M. Fumet expresses it, "le lion blessé qui se tourne et se retourne sur sa couche de nuit, en exaspérant sa plaie." When presently his

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literary activity returned, he compromised his art, lowered his ideals, consorting with "des bohèmes," "des auteurs médiocres, des poètes et des artistes montmortrois de petite qualité" (expressions of M. Fumet). This after the splendid society he had known of "Barbey d'Aureville, Louis Veuillot, Blanc de Saint-Bonet, le compte de Gobineau, le compte Roselly de Lorgues, après Ernest Hello, après le bon Paul Féval et après élégant Paul Bourget"! Nevertheless great gain for his style, which acquired suppleness, colour, richness of vocabulary; was forged into the terrible weapon with which he would soon be hacking right and left. On Bloy's ferocious spirit and methods of denunciation and vituperation M. Fumet makes a number of happy, badly-needed observations. For example: that one must take into account a powerful streak in him of Rabelaisian humour (Remy de Gourmont: "Ses livres ont l'air d'avoir été écrits par Thomas d'Aquin en collaboration avec Gargantua"); his impersonalness: it is rather that he seizes *occasions* to pour out the vials of his wrath (true he did once exclaim: "Il faut se vomir," and on receiving sympathetic assent, add: "sur les autres"! The darling): so that in fact he was wont to be surprised and indignant that his victims should resent their treatment. Further, however, he held a manly Christian view about the alliance of charity and justice. Finally, there is a whole school of friends and disciples who have borne testimony to the goodness, the amazing tenderness of his heart. On the other hand what glorious use he made of his art in weaving for Truth festal robes of prose, in clothing his thought about God (most of his thought *was* about God) in language rich and beautiful like the Church's liturgy (and actually redolent of the Latin of St. Jerome's Vulgate).

During this same period two women again enter into his life and are lost to him: prostitutes both of them: of one of whom we know only that he reached out in pity to her dying in misery, but the other being "Clothilde" of "la Femme Pauvre," whom he rescued from the streets and thought to marry. Child of "le romantisme exasperé" in this sympathy for the prostitute? Something of that perhaps.

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But in him the morbid was transcended: if he leaned over the gulf of horror and desecration, it was with continual yearning that the Kingdom of God might there be established, and so the folly of the Cross, the headlong love of God be realized. Further, meanwhile by a glorious vision he saw in all that appears as lost and depraved the most glorious symbol of the divine love that seeks to redeem it: for that love until it comes into its own is a vagabond on the earth, suffering, rejected, nailed to the Cross, groaning. "L'ignoble a fourni à Bloy un thème continuel pour l'exaltation de Ce qui est le plus opposé par définition à la chair, le Saint-Esprit. Il abat l'amour, qui est son nom céleste sur la terre, dans le dérèglement des sens, il le roule dans les milieux de prostitution et la couvre d'immondices; il n'avilit jamais assez la créature pour la sanctifier d'autant, ensuite, et glorifier incommensurablement Dieu en elle. . . . Il veut planter la verticale de la Redemption dans les gouffres et il l'enforce le plus bas qu'il peut." *Abyssus abyssum invocat*. For the rest his ideal of womanhood could not have been higher, more completely Catholic; it was compounded of his sense of all womankind's virtual solidarity with Mary the Mother of God, and of the sacredness of the body, of all flesh, made sacramental through the Incarnation. On this, he expresses himself with unbelievable beauty and fire. Take this isolated phrase: "(elle possède) un trésor si précieux qu'on ne peut l'acheter qu'au prix du Sang de Jesus Christ, c'est-à-dire par le septième sacrement de la sainte église." Or again, ". . . nulle prière, nulle pénitence, nul martyre, n'ont une suffisante efficacité d'impétration pour obtenir cet inestimable joyau que le poids en diamants des nébuleuses ne pourrait payer. Jugez de ce qu'elles donnent quand elles se donnent et mesurez leur sacrilège quand elles se vendent." It were a great pity not to know the passage, however—a Christian companion-piece, with humour added, to Pater's Mona Lisa paragraph—in which he apostrophizes the, to him, worse than prostitute, the woman who entices only to deny, the *virgo inclemens*. "Tu es haute et folle comme la mer, et tu cribles de tourments les malheureux qui 'reçurent leur âme en vain.' Horrible vierge aux entrailles inacces-

sibles, Verseuse de poison . . . , Brute sublime! . . . les petites étoiles qui roulent dans le fond du ciel nous sont plus proches que toi, beaucoup plus proches, et c'est effroyant de penser à la multitude morose des cochons noirs qui te font cortège et qui auraient pu demeurer des hommes, si tu avais eu le coeur assez grand pour devenir, tout de bon, une gourgandine. Or tu es une vierge sage, qui ne laisse pas éteindre sa lampe, et tu es toujours prête aux délectations de l'Épouse qui vient sans être attendu. Tu n'es souillée ni ta robe—à peu près absente, il est vrai—ni ta chair très-pur, et cela t'est bien égal, n'est-ce pas?" etc. With the final: "Que tu veuilles ou ne veuilles pas, il faudra qu'ils te possèdent, ces incocuifiables époux, car il n'est pas de promesse qui ne se doive infailliblement accomplir, à la fin des fins!"⁵ Who doesn't know he exaggerates? Nevertheless, it is sad to think that *La-Bas*, *La Cathédrale* and the rest should be read sometimes by schoolboys, while the merest handful in this country know of Bloy's *La Femme Pauvre*, of which M. Fumet is not ashamed to say: "Le paganisme ancien a eu l'Illiade et l'Odyssee. Le Christianisme modern a la Femme Pauvre"; of his *Le Désespéré*; of his *Exégèse des Lieux Communs*.

The course his life then took, from his marriage in 1890 with Jeanne Molbech (foreigner and heretic who had first to be converted!) until his death: the insistent, often terrible poverty, wife and children knowing veritable hunger; the ostracism, Catholic and secular; the ferocious campaigning against heresy without and (especially) against mediocrity and pharisaism within the Church—all this can be clearly followed in his own writings. But to an understanding of the sheet-lightning of his thought through this period, of his mystic theses on poverty, on money, on the Jews, M. Fumet provides rich assistance.

Finally he attempts a confessor's judgment on Bloy. The deepest struggle in the man was that between artist and Christian in him. "Je n'ai pas fait ce que Dieu voulait de moi, c'est certain. J'ai rêvé, au contraire, *ce que je voulais*

⁵ From *Le Mendiant Ingrat*.

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de Dieu, et me voici, à soixante-huit ans, n'ayant pas dans les mains que du papier!" His denunciation and rejection of art becomes intelligible. "S'il existait un art chrétien ou pourrait dire qu'il y a une porte ouverte sur l'Eden perdu" (says Marchenoir in a marvellous scene in *La Femme Pauvre*. To which Lazare Druides, i.e. Henry de Groux: "Si vous n'êtes pas un artiste, qu'êtes-vous donc?" "Je suis Pelerin du Saint Jombeau!") What he rejected was that perversion of art as he experienced it in himself as well as saw it in others which serves a most subtle idolatrous instinct, which led Bloy for example to dictate to God how His own glory must be attained, to require of God specific manifestations, and to grow exasperated and sullen when "there was no voice nor any that answered." *Expectans expectavi*, with yearning but also with peremptoriness. In the end he submitted, God broke through his pride. A light kindles towards the close by which we are able to see in his whole life and work, not so much a history of Bloy on God but of God on Bloy. He finally accepted the Kingdom of God on God's own terms unconditionally; as he had always tried to do, desperately tried but failed. "Je pouvais devenir un saint et un thaumaturge. Je suis devenu un homme de lettres." "Que certaines personnes m'admirent tant qu'elles voudront, cela ne m'empêchera pas d'être, au fond et même à la surface, un assez vilain personnage, Dieu le sait. Je demande seulement aux personnes qui ont la bonté de m'aimer, de me supporter avec patience, de me pardonner avec douceur tous les déplaisirs ou scandales que j'ai pu leur causer."

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