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## Maritain's Influence on American Literature



While I was in graduate school, I enrolled in an extraordinarily stimulating class on French literary criticism. The professor, Wallace Fowlie—who happened to be one of Maritain's innumerable godchildren—assigned to each of us an oral book report. For some reason, as I looked over the list of standard books in the field—Bachelard, Barthes, Poulet, Thibaudet—I was intrigued by a dusty old tome by a philosopher who called himself an anti-modern, and whose aesthetics was based, of all things, on the quaint old notions of the medieval Schoolmen.

Ever since that first reading of *Art et scolastique*,<sup>1</sup> I have tended to see modern literature in the light of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Jacques Maritain. At that time in my life, I thought I was only interested in modern literature. Anything that came before 1900 had to be thoroughly outdated and puerile. But eventually I discovered that the twentieth-century writers who interest me the most are almost exclusively the most anti-modern.

When I wrote my book on Maritain in the mid-seventies,<sup>2</sup> I devoted a chapter to his influence on writers and artists. I began to compile a list of those who found his aesthetics important enough to mention the debt. I sent letters to writers in England, Canada, and the United States, asking to what degree and how they were influenced by Maritain. As a matter of fact this particular part of the project turned out to be one of the most rewarding. I received some fascinating responses, some of which included

1. Jacques Maritain, *Art et scolastique* (Paris: Librairie de l'Art catholique, 1920).

2. John M. Dunaway, *Jacques Maritain* (Boston: Twayne, 1978).



further leads that I was able to pursue on the topic. Since that time I have continued to run into examples of Maritain's profound impact on modern literature.

Later I wrote letters to several more American writers and critics inquiring about the Maritain connection. What I propose to do in the next few pages is first to review briefly the most pertinent findings I published in my Twayne book on Maritain, then to suggest several possible areas for further exploration, and finally to concentrate on two examples of a truly profound Maritain influence: Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor.

The United States had a special place in Maritain's heart. He was persuaded that the hand of God was what led him to this country and that his vocation as Christian philosopher gave him a message that should be heard among American Catholics. In articulating his Christian humanism, he expressed great faith in the potential of American democracy as an example of sociopolitical justice for the whole modern world. He devoted an entire book to this country.<sup>3</sup> In the realm of aesthetics, *Art and Scholasticism* had been available in translation as early as 1947;<sup>4</sup> *Art and Faith*<sup>5</sup> and *The Situation of Poetry*<sup>6</sup> by 1948 and 1955, respectively. And, interestingly enough, his masterwork of aesthetics, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*,<sup>7</sup> as well as *The Responsibility of the Artist*<sup>8</sup> were among the few books he actually composed directly in English. They were, thus, written primarily with the American public in mind.

Clearly, Maritain was aware of his role as philosophical conscience to a whole generation of American Catholics, and it is probably a fair supposition that few Catholic writers active in this country during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s went untouched by his ideas on art.

Princeton University was the site of Maritain's most lengthy residence

3. Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

4. First published in English by Sheed and Ward. An improved translation by Joseph W. Evans (and requested by Maritain) was published as *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962). The original translation in English was made by J. F. Scanlan (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947).

5. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, translated by John Coleman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).

6. Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, translated by Marshall Suther (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955).

7. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

8. Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960).



in America (1948–1961), and it was there that he gathered around himself perhaps his most enduring and personally significant American literary acquaintances. The most prominent members of this Princeton group were Francis Fergusson, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and the Maritains. All traditionalists by temperament, they found in Saint Thomas Aquinas a well-articulated philosophy to serve as a foundation for their diverse fields: Fergusson the critic, Tate and Raïssa the poets, Gordon the novelist, and Jacques the philosopher of art. Tate has said: “Jacques Maritain’s influence on me was pervasive from the time I first knew him in 1940 until his death. . . . Jacques was a very great man. Not only a great intellect, but a warm and friendly human being who had he been a clergyman would no doubt be canonized.”<sup>9</sup> Fergusson, who knew Tate and Maritain quite well at Princeton, told me that the influence was not only personal and spiritual in nature but also directly literary. In a personal interview in the seventies, Fergusson told me it was through Maritain that Tate read Aquinas. He added that “The Seasons of the Soul” was perhaps the clearest example of a direct literary influence. And Tate himself, in “The Symbolic Imagination” and “The Angelic Imagination,” acknowledges a great debt to Jacques and Raïssa in his thinking on the angelism of such poets as Edgar Allan Poe.

Fergusson’s own writings did not escape Maritain’s influence. The major thrust of his criticism and art theory was a basic revitalization of the modern perspective on art through the use of Aristotle, Aquinas, Plato, and other ancients who seemed to have been too often neglected. The other writer in this group at Princeton was Tate’s first wife, Caroline Gordon, whom I shall discuss in a moment.

T. S. Eliot had considerable contact with Maritain at Princeton, but although he called Maritain “probably the greatest force in contemporary French philosophy,” Maritain’s Aristotelianism and Thomism were too rigidly systematic for Eliot’s taste. John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*<sup>10</sup> was what he called a living out of Maritain’s ideas on racism, and his friend Thomas Merton attributed his conversion to Gilson and Maritain. *The Seven Storey Mountain* gives an idea of the immense importance of Maritain’s aesthetics and his thinking on the relationship between art and morality for the late Trappist poet.

9. Letter to the author, dated 4 May 1976.

10. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).



When Sally Fitzgerald came out with *The Habit of Being*,<sup>11</sup> I learned of Flannery O'Connor's great debt to Maritain. And I had attended the 1980 American Maritain Association conference in Louisville, where Father Daniel Berrigan, as one of the principal speakers, mentioned how much he too owed to Maritain. I proceeded to add the following names to my list: Robert Penn Warren, William Styron, Reynolds Price, Peter Taylor, James Dickey, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and Walker Percy.

In the case of those who were still living, I simply wrote directly to them. For Jarrell and Lowell, I wrote to their biographers and critics. The results were as follows: Styron replied that Maritain is "terra incognita to me, despite my fairly good acquaintance with modern French literature."<sup>12</sup> I quote Percy's note in its entirety, since it was short:

Art and Scholasticism: Valuable to me in setting forth art as a Cognitive enterprise, e. g.—"art as a virtue of the practical intellect." J. M.'s writings on Descartes: Valuable in clarifying for me, both as a novelist and an amateur philosopher, the radical and enduring effect of Cartesian philosophy on Western thought (e.g., my novel *Love in the Ruins*).<sup>13</sup>

Lowell and Jarrell, too, appear to be dead ends. I did not get responses from Berrigan, Warren, Price, Taylor, or Dickey, but I believe the most likely directions for further study most probably would be Berrigan and Warren.

Caroline Gordon felt greatly indebted to Maritain as both a personal and a literary influence. Her novel *The Malefactors*<sup>14</sup> is dedicated to him, and *The Glory of Hera*<sup>15</sup> was based largely on *Art and Scholasticism*, in which she found "the most profound and complete aesthetic of the novel."<sup>16</sup> In a letter to me, she said she was persuaded that many of Maritain's ideas were in circulation without being credited to him. "One of the things," she wrote, "that most impressed me about Jacques was that he read novels as if he were a novelist, read poetry as if he were a poet and looked at pictures as if he were a painter. . . . Maritain knew more about the novel, I think, than anybody I have ever known."<sup>17</sup> The letter I'm quoting here was four pag-

11. Flannery O'Connor, *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

12. Postcard to the author, dated 3 July 1984.

13. Note to the author, undated.

14. Caroline Gordon, *The Malefactors* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956).

15. Caroline Gordon, *The Glory of Hera* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

16. Letter to the author, dated 25 July 1976.

17. Ibid.



es long. Miss Gordon [this is how she told me to address her] wrote with boundless enthusiasm about her respect for Maritain and the impact his ideas had on her life, declaring herself one of his most dedicated disciples. She enclosed a copy of the letter that Maritain had written to her in 1955 after having read *The Malefactors*. Interestingly enough, Flannery O'Connor, who corresponded with Gordon and admired her work, was also aware of this letter from Maritain. In *The Habit of Being* she not only mentions it but discusses the strengths of *The Malefactors* in practically the same terms Maritain used.<sup>18</sup>

Caroline Gordon's *How to Read a Novel*<sup>19</sup> contains several references to Maritain's special conception of the novel as having to do with the conduct of life, a point we shall discuss below in relation to Flannery O'Connor. And I believe Maritain's idea of the *roman à clé* must have been a favorite of hers. It was not her own image, but I think Miss Gordon might have agreed that a good *roman à clé* is a little like a chef's casserole, whose ingredients are a carefully guarded secret. In her letter to me she wrote of Henry James's understanding of the matter: "Henry James has treated the subject more explicitly than any other author when he refused to again receive a young novelist, Vernon Lee, who had satirized him in a novel. 'I do not care to care,' he wrote his fuss budget of a brother, William, who was all for 'taking steps.' 'But I will not see her again. She has committed two crimes. She has invaded my privacy and she has put a human being into a novel without re-imagining him.'"<sup>20</sup>

Gordon's *The Malefactors* is replete with Christian imagery; the story is even haunted, I would say, by the aspiration to sainthood. The canonized historical figures that appear in it include Saint Eustace, Saint Ciannic, and Saint Catherine of Siena. And their contemporary counterpart is Catherine Pollard, who is patterned after Dorothy Day. The principal action of the novel is the slow and mysterious movement of the main character, Tom Claiborne, from a detached skepticism to the all-transforming light of grace. One of the most intriguing interpretive questions concerning Maritain's influence on *The Malefactors* is the rather mystifying epigraph chosen by Miss Gordon. It is a quotation from Maritain: "It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears."<sup>21</sup> Frederick McDowell suggests that these words refer to "Claiborne's

18. O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 157-160, 166.

19. Caroline Gordon, *How to Read a Novel* (New York: Viking, 1957).

20. Letter to the author, dated 25 July 1976.

21. Maritain, *The Frontiers of Poetry*, 141.



failure until the end to bring his mind into a fruitful relationship with intuition."<sup>22</sup> Another possibility is that they have to do with a traditionalist understanding of the spiritual authority vested in the husband and his responsibility to judge the prophetic visions that come through his spouse.

It is always difficult to write a novel about a religious conversion without allowing it to stray off into hagiography or sentimentality. Maritain, however, declared in *Art and Scholasticism* that only a Christian, indeed a mystic, could become a complete novelist, "un romancier complet," because one would need to know first-hand all that is within the human heart.<sup>23</sup>

Other than Gordon and Flannery O'Connor, one might think of Julien Green, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, and Vladimir Volkoff as examples of this kind of novelist. Maritain himself believed that Green was the best exemplar of that model in France. O'Connor, in a letter in *The Habit of Being*, comments rather strongly on a novel she especially disliked, specifically because it appeared to her to be "just propaganda and its being propaganda for the side of the angels only makes it worse. The novel," she goes on, "is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art, you pervert it. I didn't make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (via Maritain) who allows that art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end. If you do manage to use it successfully for social, religious, or other purposes, it is because you make it art first."<sup>24</sup>

Here is the reason, I believe, that both Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor found such enlightenment in Maritain. First, he saw that the novel has to do with the very conduct of life, and that in this respect the novelist is different from all other artists. For the end that is served by all the means at the disposal of the artist is the work to be created, but with the novelist, the work to be created is a world in itself, and her relationship to this fictional world is analogous to God's relationship to his creation. The multifaceted interrelations among the characters are to be handled with utmost care, one should even say with compassion.

This is why Maritain admired Bernanos, who was said to have identified so deeply with his characters that he prayed for them. A second of Maritain's insights on the novel that seems to have especially impressed Gordon and O'Connor grows directly out of the first. Since the novel has to do with

22. Frederick P. McDowell, *Caroline Gordon* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 41.

23. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 266.

24. O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 157.



the very conduct of life, and since the characters are autonomous, the novelist must never consider them as puppets to be manipulated. Julien Green said that for this reason he never made a preliminary outline of the action and never put words in his characters' mouths. He preferred to write down what he witnessed them doing and saying of their own volition.

To quote again from *The Habit of Being*:

Maritain says that to produce a work of art requires the "constant attention of the purified mind;" and the business of the purified mind in this case is to see that those elements of the personality that don't bear on the subject at hand are excluded. Stories don't lie when left to themselves. Everything has to be subordinated to a whole which is not you. Any story I reveal myself completely in will be a bad story.<sup>25</sup>

The third major idea of Maritain that especially influenced novelists is a bedrock-fundamental principle of art that he got from Saint Thomas, one that underlies the other two notions discussed above. Art is a virtue of the practical intellect, says Maritain, first in *Art and Scholasticism*, and then throughout his aesthetic writings. As such it must always be distinguished from prudence, another virtue of the practical intellect. "Prudence works for the good of the one acting. . . . Art works for the good of the work made."<sup>26</sup> Prudence belongs to the sphere of doing (*agibile*), that is, the pure exercise of our free will. Art, on the other hand, operates in the domain of making (*factibile*), where an action is good only insofar as it conforms to the work to be made. Hence the absolute purity and independence of art in relation to morality. Brenna Moore has recently suggested that this strong refusal to allow art to serve morality not only made the Maritains particularly appealing to avant-garde artists in interwar Paris; it also was the occasion of some concern and even disfavor from ecclesiastical authorities.

Yet Flannery O'Connor agreed with Maritain that, in the Thomistic conception of art, there is an intimate analogy between the vocations of artist and saint. "Art is a virtue of the practical intellect," she says in *Mystery and Manners*, "and the practice of any virtue demands a certain asceticism and a very definite leaving-behind of the niggardly part of the ego."<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Maritain's philosophy of art was formative to Flannery O'Connor and to her view of the fiction writer's special role. I have quoted from *The Habit of Being* and also from *Mystery and Manners*. This latter book is

25. *Ibid.*, 15.

26. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 15.

27. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 81.



composed of talks and essays on writing that O'Connor composed for various occasions during her brief career. In a 1957 letter, O'Connor wrote that *Art and Scholasticism* was "the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on."<sup>28</sup> And of course, the very title of Fitzgerald's collection of letters is explicitly derived from Maritain. The *habitus* of art, as Maritain termed it in *Art and Scholasticism*, was a notion that was rich in meaning for O'Connor. She used it several times in the essays of *Mystery and Manners*. It refers not to mindless routine practices we call habit, but rather to a mental or spiritual attitude that must be trained and cultivated through rigorous discipline. According to Ms. Fitzgerald, we may not only find a luminous example of the habit of art in Flannery's fiction; her letters amount to a striking example of the equally rare habit of being.

In a favorable review of Maritain's *The Range of Reason*, O'Connor called him "one of the major voices in modern philosophy to reassert the primacy of reason."<sup>29</sup> And one O'Connor scholar notes that Maritain was one of the seven religious writers whose works appear most prominently in her personal library. In a 1960 letter to Robert Giroux, she requested that he send a copy of *The Violent Bear It Away* to Maritain because she had heard that he had been quite taken with *Wise Blood*.<sup>30</sup>

Frederick Asals's interpretation of *Wise Blood* is an excellent example of the intimate link between O'Connor's fiction and Maritain's philosophy. In *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, he claims that Hazel Motes "compellingly illustrates Maritain's notion of post-Cartesian man as 'an angel inhabiting a machine.'"<sup>31</sup> His analysis of the dualisms in *Wise Blood*, especially in the movement toward pure body in Enoch Emery and pure spirit in Hazel, makes extensive use of Maritain's *Existence and the Existent* as a gloss.<sup>32</sup> He also points out that two chapters of Maritain's latter book were earlier published in the *Sewanee Review* in the same issue in which O'Connor's story "The Train" appeared.<sup>33</sup>

28. O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 216.

29. Lorine M. Getz, *Flannery O'Connor: Her Life, Library and Book Reviews* (New York: The Edwin Miller Press, 1980), 72.

30. See O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 417.

31. Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982; reprinted in 2007), 4.

32. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, translated by Lewis Galantière and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Pantheon, 1948).

33. See Jacques Maritain, "From Existentialist Existentialism to Academic Existentialism," *The Sewanee Review* 41 (1948): 210-29, and Flannery O'Connor, "The Train," 261-71.



Maritain students will find a wealth of material in the issue of *Renascence* which was devoted entirely to the topic of Maritain's aesthetics. Published in commemoration of his centenary in 1982, this volume features an excellent article by Neal Oxenhandler. Oxenhandler believes that Maritain's most significant contribution to literary theory was in this country rather than France. His case study is the New Criticism of Ransom, Brooks, Warren, and Tate. He suggests that it was Maritain who provided the philosophical framework for their movement, specifically in their emphasis on the autonomy of the text. This central tenet of the New Criticism may indeed be perceived as arising out of Maritain's emphasis on the sovereignty of the work to be produced by the artist, since art for Maritain is a virtue of the practical intellect to be distinguished from prudence. "There can be little doubt," concludes Oxenhandler, "that Maritain's presence in this country and his writings on literature and art had a powerful influence on the members of the New Criticism."<sup>34</sup>

This essay would not be adequate without mention of Dana Gioia. Author of the seminal *Can Poetry Matter?*<sup>35</sup> and of course a growing corpus of brilliant poetry, as well as President George W. Bush's hand-picked Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia gave an extended eloquent testimony of his debt to Maritain at the American Maritain Association's 2001 conference in Boca Raton, Florida.

To assess the influence of one writer on another is, of necessity, rather speculative. Often it is more a case of a meeting of like minds. Yet in Jacques Maritain we find a man with a mission, a man whose calling was characterized by an effort to reinterpret modern problems—whether political, theological, or literary—in the light of half-forgotten truths. His return to the wisdom of the ancients was a philosophical program that he consciously sought to disseminate, a revival for which he deliberately sought adherents from the days of the literary gatherings at Meudon right down to his last years of solitude along the banks of the Garonne. And it is in American writers like Gordon, O'Connor, and Gioia that we see perhaps the most far-reaching effects of a truly profound literary influence.

34. Neal Oxenhandler, "Maritain and Recent Critical Thought," *Renascence* 34, no. 4 (1982): 263.

35. Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1992).