

WAS THE PEASANT OF THE GARONNE A MISTAKE?

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Aristotle's supposition that human beings could lose their happiness after death could certainly be applied to the fate of Jacques Maritain. To his friends and admirers it is clear that *The Peasant of the Garonne*, published in 1966 (Eng. trans. 1968), cost Maritain a great deal – if not his earthly happiness then without doubt much of his reputation. Having returned to Europe from the United States in 1961, following the death of his wife Raissa, Maritain, an acclaimed champion of democratic liberalism, of international cooperation and human rights, of social reform, of an increased role for laity in the Church, of progressive movements in art and culture, would die in 1973 branded a "reactionary."

In France, where the controversy erupted, the *Peasant* was the bestselling book of non-fiction in January 1967. Within four months of its publication seventy thousand copies were sold in seven printings.¹ As Bernard Doering recounts, the book at first received positive notices, but then its success began to stir opponents on the right and the left to action.² The subsequent attacks, as Henry Bars argued, were not entirely spontaneous but were orchestrated by his old enemies, the rightwing integralists. Taking advantage of leftwing indignation, the integralists joined the protest, ganging up on Maritain in an effort to make him appear inconsistent and, thereby, throw doubt upon his entire career.³ Maritain stood accused by both sides of turning against his friends, of treason, "disloyalty," "injustice," and of just having lied too long.

In the United States anticipation of Maritain's book was so intense that translated excerpts of the *Peasant* were being circulated before the complete translation as available in early 1968. Prior to its publication, Thomas Merton predicted that the book would be dismissed without being read due to the negative hearsay from abroad.⁴ In fact, Merton proved to be at least partially right. The stateside critics for the most part panned the *Peasant*. Robert Graham, representing the consensual view, wrote in *America* that Maritain was being "cast...as a Brutus who stabbed aggrornamento in the back."⁵ *The Peasant of the Garonne*, he agreed, had repudiated what its author had spent his whole life defending, and concluded that "Maritain is now afraid the fire he helped to kindle is getting to of control."⁶

Whether or not the book was reviled without being read, like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, we can only guess, Joe Cunneen, Maritain's editor at Holt, Rinehart & Winston, remembers that the book did not do as well as expected, selling only about 16,000 hardback copies. Yet, it certainly was reviewed, and the passionate opinions about the *Peasant* are still encountered when Maritain's name is mentioned. References to *The Peasant of the Garonne* at a meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association can provoke furious glances.

Of course, what Maritain's critics had to say about the *Peasant* tells us a great deal about the mood of Catholic intellectuals in the mid-sixties at the close of Vatican II. This was a mood shaped, at least in the United States, by the reports of "Xavier Wren" in his famous series of *New Yorker* articles on the Council. Wren had portrayed a wholesale defeat of the Thomism contained in the initial conciliar documents drafted under the guidance of Cardinal Tardini. Both the triumph of the "new theologians" and the replacement of Thomism with phenomenology

were heralded as befitting the Council's pastoral purposes. Maritain's warning that the appeal to the efficacy of a more "pastoral" tone signalled a metaphysical and spiritual sell-out was shocking for many. Needless to say, those who were enjoying the fresh breezes of *aggiomamenro* were in no mood for straight talk from an angry old man. The pre-conciliar liberalism that Maritain had represented is obviously a different animal from that which emerged after the Council, and Maritain refused to be dragged along by it. - In fact, much of the criticism of the *Peasant* focused on the polemical tone of Maritain's writing. Supposedly, it was beneath him to employ such a trenchant style. People were particularly angry with Maritain's objections to the "theology-fiction" of the much-beloved Teilhard de Chardin and his disciples. Reading back through the reviews now, from a distance of twenty-five years, this reaction to Maritain sounds tinny and disingenuous. Indeed several of Maritain's critics rivaled his vituperation: for example, Daniel Callahan wrote in *The New Republic*, "If that is the kind of humility one picks up while living with the Little Brothers of Jesus, he might have been better off had he retired to the plush quarters of the New York Chancery office." It now seems that these tactics, which have always been a mark of effective journalism, were more a way to avoid the substance of Maritain's criticism than a way offer an honest assessment. The poet Kenneth Rexroth spent most of his review complaining about Maritain's "vulgar" attitude but, then, admits he basically agrees with him.⁸ There is similar avoidance, I think, behind the gibes about Maritain's rambling, his self-quotation, and his use of passages from Raissa's writing. The intent of the book was clearly stated in its subtitle, *An Old Layman QW!Stions Himself About the Present Time*. It is not unusual for a renowned figure at an advanced age to leave us a very personal testament, a book in which scholarly manners are

eschewed in favour of a more prophetic and angular utterance. That Maritain's hand was slapped so loudly for this indulgence should be interpreted as just another ingratitude of a decade in which youth was losing its respect for age. 1967, after all, had been the year Mike Nichol's movie *The Graduate* whose lumping of the adult world under the symbol of "plastics" haunted young - minds for years to come. The next year, for reasons both well-known and too numerous to mention, student riots would ensue worldwide. As François Biot wrote, "That a man retired to his hermitage and already well advanced in years cannot understand the development of the very thing he helped set afoot should not surprise us."⁹

But the severity of the reaction to Maritain's book also raises questions about how well his life and work were understood. Several of the reviewers, including Michael Novak, who gave it one of the few positive notices, rightly noted his return to an earlier style, the one he learned at the feet of Léon Bloy.¹⁰ Perhaps Maritain had been gone so long from France, as Doering suggests, that they knew him only as one of the men who had "established the tone of the new Catholic left."¹¹ Perhaps, also, as one critic surmised, the American public was only familiar with the works of Maritain written just prior to and during WW II, such as *Integral Humanism* and *Man and the State*.¹² Could it be that so much of Maritain had been forgotten? The man who was Bloy's godson? The man whom Julien Green, a friend of forty-seven years, described as "the irascible"?

Maritain's tone was not inconsistent. All the major works of Maritain's first decade as an author employ an adversarial tone against opponents of Thomistic realism: from the 1914 critique of Bergson's intuitionism, to *Art and Scholasticism* in 1920, which takes aim at Renaissance shelfhood and the decadence of so-called "religious art", followed in order by

Theonas (1921), his *General Introduction to Philosophy* (1922), *Antimoderne* (1922), *St Thomas Aquinas, Apostle of Modern Times* (1923), *Reflections on Intelligence* (1924), all culminating in the still controversial *Three Reformers* of 1925. Although Maritain's rhetoric does become less abrasive with age, many of his later works contain strongly-worded polemics: think of the lectures on the *Philosophy of History* and the philosophy of education, *Education at the Crossroads*, with their attacks on Hegel and Dewey; think also of the treatment of immanentism and fideism in *Integral Humanism*; the books on anti-semitism, on the Nazi and the Communist threats; the response to Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard in *Existence and the Existent*, and the chapter on Kant in the published lectures on *Moral Philosophy* given in 1951, during his last year of active teaching.

No, the harsh words Maritain spoke toward his opponents were not at issue – Maritain never shrunk from a fight. The issue, rather, was that these opponents were in fashion. And whereas Maritain as democrat, as liberal, as humanist was still acceptable, Maritain as Thomist was not. Maritain's criticism struck too close to the bone for those Catholics who had struggled alongside Maritain to get Catholics involved in culture and politics. Maritain had helped people to break loose; to claim their intellectual and political freedom and now, it seemed, he was admonishing them to give it up. This symbol to the world's Catholic intellectuals, so designated by Paul VI at the end of the Vatican Council, was sounding as if he wanted to bring back the bygone days. But the truth is that Maritain in the *Peasant* was not saying anything different; the intelligensia had simply left him behind. The offhand comment made by reviewer William Clancy is telling: there was no change in Maritain's point of view, he said, "The trouble is: who wishes to hear these things now?"¹³

However, from the same chorus of angry reviewers we are told repeatedly that Maritain was the Catholic layman most responsible for setting in motion the progressive impulses that led to Vatican II. Surely as a friend of Maritain one wants to accept the praise accorded to Maritain the "progressive," "the humanist," the "democrat." But have we understood Maritain fully when we cast him only in this light? Are we then able to understand the Maritain who in the *Peasant* point his finger at our consumption of intellectual fashion "with all the glamor and happy arrogance of a reason maddened by frenzy for novelty"?¹⁴

We must ask this question: just how much of a progressive was Maritain? Maritain himself was always touchy about this issue, e.g., he insisted in the *Letter on Independence* (1935) to be neither right nor left." As he says in the *Peasant*, the terms left and right have come to represent a complicated jumble of meanings. But let me risk answering this question by simply endorsing Maritain's own self-characterization in the *Peasant*. As you know, he distinguished between the "Sheep of the Panurge" on the left, whom he identifies with political matters, and the "Ruminators of the Holy Alliance" on the right, who represent his view of theological and ecclesial matters.¹⁵ The contrast here is between politics and religion, but most would agree that in his philosophy, especially his metaphysics and epistemology, Maritain was basically a conservative, albeit a creative one. His development of themes such as the intuition of being and knowledge through connaturality proves not only that he went beyond the standard manualist interpretations but also that he was deeply interested in exploring the spiritual recesses of human subjectivity, an emphasis that returns again in his philosophical anthropology, his ethics, and his aesthetics of the creative intuition. Bergson no doubt left his mark on Maritain, but his constant quarrels with the great prophets of modernity leave little doubt that from the

start he was swimming in a current different from the philosophical mainstream of this century. Thus, it should have come as absolutely no surprise that Maritain, although a political progressive, would find little in either Teilhard or Husserl to recommend!

Indeed, what still seems to me one of the most powerful and prophetic aspects of the book is its depiction of "logophobia."¹⁶ How much more we have learned about the hatred of reason in the postmodern world of deconstruction and gender/race epistemologies since the heyday of mere existentialism. The question of restoring the ordinate relation of intelligence to being was always Maritain's major concern as a philosopher. Although I would not push it to the extreme of essentialism, a logocentric world where being is fundamentally intelligible is what Maritain sought to explain and to defend. The decentering threat to this intelligible universe represented by Bergson's intuition of duration gave Maritain the theme for his first book. Maritain would apologize for the tone of that book sixteen years later, but not for his defense of the concept. It is the same concern with restoring the intellect that motivates his last critique of idealism, or the *ideosophy* as he calls it in the *Peasant*.¹⁷ Ideosophers, according to Maritain, are not philosophers because by grasping first at mind they miss the true *starting point* for knowledge which is the encounter of the mind with the reality external to it.

Here is one place, however, I agree with some that Maritain probably went too far. I am not in position to judge whether Husserlian phenomenology, early or late, is an idealism of the sort that represents an offence to St. Thomas. But when he said as a matter of "axiomatic truth" that a Christian cannot be an idealist" and "Nor can a philosopher be an idealist,"¹⁸ then I begin to see the point of James Collins in resisting Maritain's dichotomizing. Collins asks whether Maritain's attitude does not cut off Thomism from profiting in philosophical

development. He also rejects the implication that all the teaching of metaphysics and epistemology should be left in the hands of only Aristotelians and Thomists.¹⁹

Maritain's blunt distinctions in the *Peasant* betray two of his fundamental convictions. The first is his own clear statement on philosophical cooperation as eloquently set forth in his essay on the subject from *The Range of Reason*. Here he chastizes Thomists in particular who

use the formulas they have been taught in order to save themselves from regarding the thought of others, and to criticize it all the more peremptorily because they expect it to display only error. The universe of intelligible objects, to which first and foremost we owe our loyalty, is not that universe of verbal conclusions which serve all too often as material blinders which keep a man from gazing into the eyes of other men.²⁰

In the *Peasant* Thomists once again come under fire for their closedness, for their succumbing to a manual style, for their not maintaining their starting point in experience, and for their making an idol out of the texts of St. Thomas. But Maritain's efforts at qualifying his attack fail to erase the overall tone of dismissal.

Statements that exile idealism from the kingdom of philosophy also bear the traces of rationalism. Maritain's rejection of rationalism was a corollary of his own commitment to philosophical cooperation. For example, he suggested, in the *Peasant*, that professors should "every now and then [go] and refresh their experience of reality by milking cows or by pushing a plow."²¹ Remarks such as this underscore Maritain's respect for common sense, for ordinary experience, and his repudiation of the kind of propositionalizing often put forth as a litmus test for appraising Christians as well as philosophers. But once again these qualifiers are too few

and far between in the *Peasant* to comfort any but the most sympathetic reader. Maritain knew well the meaning of mystery and normally respected its limits. Here I find myself more at home with his qualifiers than his one-sided assertions.

Other of Maritain's mocking phrases such as epistemological "time-worship" or "chronolatry" seem perfectly suited to the influences he was seeking to counteract in the wake of Vatican II. Those tempted to say he lacked "historical-mindedness" should notice that Maritain starts from an historical analysis of modern manicheism in seeking to understand the mania in the sixties for "up-to-dateness." For one hundred and fifty years, a pervasive Christian pessimism toward the world, he argued, not only subverted the Church's understanding of its temporal mission but also suppressed its appreciation of secular progress. What we are witnessing in the present age, he said, is the over-riding compensation for that suppression. Why be astonished that at the very announcement of a Council...the enormous unconscious weight...burst open in a kind of explosion that does no honor to human intelligence?"²²

Maritain did not belong to progressive movements simply because they were new. For example, it was because he affirmed the dignity of human persons in the light of their final end that he advocated human rights to the extent of seeking practical cooperation among nations in spite of cultural differences. He encouraged the revolt against entrenched social structures both in Europe and Latin America because they were obstacles to the rightful access of persons to the basic goods of life, and, implicitly, to their ultimate destiny. The inherent dignity of the person cannot be grasped fully apart from the fact of that supernatural destiny.

The validity of the Church's temporal mission was for too long either buried under pessimism or compromised by illicit compacts with temporal powers. But now the Church's

mission was in danger of becoming exclusively this-worldly. The Cross, Maritain warned, has been lost with the prevailing attitude that this world "hasn't the slightest need to be saved from above, nor to be assumed and finally transfigured in Another world, a divine world."²³ Maritain's protest was obviously not against Christian solicitude for temporal structures but against the thoroughly immanent Christ placed within the historical world and subjected to a law of necessary progress from Alpha to Omega. Here, as elsewhere, Maritain insisted on a clear distinction between the natural temporal ends of history and the supra-mundane, supra-temporal final end.

This is not the first time Maritain has reminded his reader of the *finis ultimus*: we find it repeatedly at work in his views on the person and the common good, in his arguments for a Christian philosophy, at the summit of *The Degrees of Knowledge*, and in his controversial position on moral philosophy "adequately considered."

Maritain knew that the problem was not simply a loss of belief in eternal life. It was also an issue of philosophical starting points and ends. What had begun in the name of a pastoral emphasis at the Council was being used by fideists and pragmatists to overthrow the perennial philosophy. Since the fideist assumes that theology should have nothing whatsoever to do with philosophy, and since *the* philosopher of moment in the Church was Aquinas, the fideists overthrew Thomism in favor of a more user-friendly approach, one that opened the door to this century's idiom, psychologized, historicized, and purged of all the old speculative hang-ups: "My only regret is that I am too old to look forward to being comforted by the young generations who are being prepared in this way to dedicate themselves to the Lord-fully flowered in their nature, poised, de-complexed, socially conditioned, spontaneously adapted to

group reflexes, and, at last, happy to be alive."²⁴ Maritain, like his friend Yves R. Simon, foresaw the failure of psychology to deliver on its huge promises, and he also knew how important the ascendancy of the social sciences was to understanding the post-conciliar church of the sixties. It is noteworthy that in 1966 Philip Rieff published his brilliant and highly regarded polemic *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* with its chapter entitled "The Impoverishment of Western Culture."²⁵ Rieff was a Freudian and a sociologist, Maritain the champion of a medieval philosopher. Perhaps Maritain's mistake was not living too long but not living long enough for a philosophical appraisal of modernity to become acceptable again, as we now witness in the work of Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. And, at the same time, as we are beginning to acknowledge the limitations of the therapeutic approach to human problems, we are confessing to the speciousness of the sixties decade that secured its triumph.

Out of the *Peasant* controversy we can conclude with two points that emerge clearly: 1) the figure of Jacques Maritain had been cut by many to suit themselves, particularly regarding modernity and the role of the Church in politics, and 2) these semi-disciples of Maritain were fundamentally confused by or at odds with Maritain's simultaneous commitment to both a temporal and an eternal end. These are the reasons why his critics from the left considered the *Peasant* a betrayal: his reassertion of Church authority, in particular his express confidence in official Thomism, sounded like a turn-around from his earlier advocacy for individual freedom and tolerance of pluralism.

For example, one of his critics voiced the suspicion that Maritain had been a reluctant democrat all along, that he had only been paying lip-service to pluralism. Maritain's "social ideas," Frederick Busi wrote, "are essentially a compromise with, not an advocacy of, modern

democracy."²⁶ Of course nothing could be further from the truth, unless Maritain is an out-and-out liar in books such as *Christianity and Democracy*. Here he argues that the emergence of modern democracy in Western civilization is largely the result of the Gospel and its leavening of history.²⁷ Maritain wrote in 1945, "that the energies of the Gospel must pass into temporal life; that the good tidings heralded as throwing open heaven and eternal life ask also to transform the life of earthly societies in the very midst of its woes and contradictions, that there are in the message of the Gospel political and social implications which must at all cost be unfurled in history."²⁸ For Maritain, the weight of glory was not so overwhelming that we can countenance oppression and injustice. The very dignity of life created by God and destined for eternal happiness with God demands a free and democratic society.

On the other hand, there are ruminators like Thomas Molnar who accused Maritain of utopian aspirations in assigning the Church any temporal mission at all beyond the sacramental care of souls. He calls Maritain the seed to the plants named Rahner, Kung, Metz, Cardonnel, Chenu, Adolfs, whom he calls "the priestly phalanx of the Church's merciless persecutors."²⁹ Molnar espied an inconsistency in Maritain's applauding the demise of integralism and his imagining a "third way," the formation of a "new Christendom."

In Maritain's defense someone might mistakenly allude to an evangelical *tension* in his thought between the two ends. As John Cardinal Wright has shown, Maritain does not attempt a balancing act, a sort of neutral mediation between the just claims of civil societies and the authority of the Church.³⁰ An *infravalent* end, as Maritain often called it, is an end that falls under, and is required by, the willing of a final end. For Maritain it is an end caught up in the same evangelical passion he holds for eternity. Thus, Cardinal Wright rightly explains that one

of the central concerns in Maritain is the first commandment to love God above all else, and that this love "is absolutely required, initially and overridingly, and is in any case the only sound basis for a love of neighbor that hopes to remain uncorrupted."³¹ The *Peasant of the Garonne* is a protest against a reversal of this basic priority, a "kneeling before the world," or putting it abstractly, a reversal of ends.

So for Wright it would be "tragic" if the *Peasant* should be construed to give comfort to the right.³² To this I would add that it would be equally tragic if those generations of Catholic activists who found inspiration in Maritain's example, the Thomistic metaphysician who recommended his friend Saul Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals* to the Divine Office, should fail to see in the *Peasant* an aged philosopher beckoning us toward the source of brotherly love.

By now I think it should be clear that I consider *The Peasant of the Garonne* to be representative of Maritain's lifelong ambivalence toward modernity, an attitude arising from both the sheep who graze and the sheep who ruminate in Maritain's mind. I see no reason why admirers of Maritain should be ashamed of it. The book has nothing of the nature of a deathbed retraction about it. If the *Peasant* was a mistake then in some fundamental sense Maritain's entire intellectual and spiritual project was a mistake.

NOTES

1. See John L. Hess, "French Catholics Shaken by 2 New Books on Church Reforms," *New York Times* (March 24, 1967), Sec. C, p.14. See also the bibliography of reviews and articles concerning this controversy in Brooke W. Smith, *Jacques Maritain: Antimodem or Ultramodem* (New York: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Inc., 1976).
2. Bernard E. Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 226-27.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 229-230.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, sel. and ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1985), p. 198; letter to Sister M. Emmanuel, May 4, 1967.
5. Robert Graham, "Jacques Maritain on Aggiornamento," *America* (March 11, 1967), p. 348.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
7. Daniel Callahan, "Maritain on 'Frenzied Modernism,'" *The New Republic* (March 2, 1968), p. 35.
8. Kenneth Rexroth, "Two Views: *The Peasant of the Garonne, Commonweal*," (April 12, 1968), p. 106.
9. Quoted in Graham, p. 348; original source was Biot's "Le Paysan de la Garonne," *Témoignage Chrétien* (January 5, 1967), pp. 15-16.
10. Michael Novak, "The Last Word," *Commentary* (September 1968), p. 92.
11. Doering, p. 232.
12. Frederick Busi, "The Sadness of Jacques Maritain: Aggiornamento Ma Non Troppo," *Religion In Life* (Autumn 1970), p. 407.
13. William Clancy, "Two Views: *The Peasant of the Garonne, Commonweal* (April 12, 1968), p. 109.
14. *The Peasants of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968) p. 50.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
19. James Collins, "Maritain Asks Some Questions," *America* (January, 1968), p. 32.
20. Jacques Maritain, "Philosophical Cooperation and Intellectual Justice," *The Range of Reason*, (New York: Scribner's, 1952), p. 47.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
25. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), ch. 2.
26. Busi, p. 410.
27. *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945) p. 25.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
29. Thomas Molnar, "Seed and Harvest," *Modern Age* (Summer 1968), p. 319.
30. John Cardinal Wright, "'Vigor in Arduis': Maritain's Two Most recent Books," *New Scholasticism* 46:1 (winter 1972), p. 91.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 91.