

LEON BLOY

MARCHENOIR in *Le Désespéré* is generally taken as the prototype of the writer. In this character Léon Bloy draws the portrait of a man of intense and burning faith, but given to passion and governed not by reason, but by feeling; he gives the picture of an unrecognised and embittered artist, of one who with the vision of a saint could not practise even ordinary virtue, and who, driven to despair by the consequences of his acts, becomes almost insane through his capacity for suffering. This portrait, however, is neither exact nor complete; Léon Bloy himself was far more of a Christian and far less of a lunatic than Marchenoir.

Round this *saint manqué*, this *vagabond accompli*, this grotesque figure surrounded by poverty and degradation, the prey of passion, and yet dispenser of spiritual gifts, a peculiar interest centres to-day. To deny Léon Bloy's spiritual influence would be not only injurious but unjust. He was responsible for some of the most remarkable conversions of the last fifty years, those of Jacques Maritain and de la Meer Walcheren among others.

A prophet of chaos, lawless, paradoxical, outrageous, Bloy had in himself the germs of the disruptive elements in the midst of which we live. It is probably this fact that recommends him to the modern mind, and is the reason why his books, passed over in silence in his lifetime, are now read with avidity. To the chaos which he saw and foresaw in the world, he opposed Christian faith. His power over others and the influence of his books—apart from their art—lies in the intensity of this faith and in his power of projecting it. This faith is his spiritual appeal. 'How is it,' he exclaims, 'that violently tempted as I am, and often falling, I can yet inspire others with courage?'

If this intense faith be his spiritual appeal, a natural appeal to modern taste can be found in his cry of despair,

in his talent for grotesque imagery, in his outrageous frankness, and in the very definite carnal background against which he tries to raise a religious structure. Contrast, violent contrast, is the law of his art as it was of his life. His books present pictures of mud-bespattered gargoyles, but with the light of heaven falling on them.

Extravagant in his writing, in his way of living, in his person, in his extraordinary loves, exaggeration is the stamp that marks every page of his writing and every phase of his life. Detractor of the clergy, defamer of the bourgeois, violent critic of his fellow writers and workers, all the venom and gall of his pen was directed against mediocrity, and his compassion for the prostitute was no less exaggerated than his diatribes against the priest. His sympathy went out only to the fanatical or heroic, and his pity only to the fallen and degraded. There was no place in his scheme for reason or common sense, no room for ordinary virtue. It had to be a case of saint or sinner, of all or nothing. He himself needed a religion that would give all, that would accept all that torment of love which digs deep into the human heart in order to make place for God.

Yet he himself did not become a saint. This was the tragedy of his life. Humble and selfless in his love of God, he never attained to charity or humility with regard to his fellow men, and if he referred all the rays of the universe to the Almighty, it was from the pen of Léon Bloy that these rays had to be projected. Gentle and kind to all who agreed with him, his ferocity towards his opponents knew no bounds. His charity could go out only to the poor and suffering. 'You suffer, therefore you represent God.' He made himself the patron of the fallen and degraded. 'I feel myself in communion with all the rebels, all the disappointed and misunderstood, with all those damned by this world.'

Léon Bloy was born in Périgeux in 1846. From his mother, who was partly Spanish, a woman of ardent faith,

he inherited many characteristics. When he was about fifteen he lost his faith, but recovered it 'in a tumult of joy' in Paris in 1866. He says himself of his youth that he needed some one to love blindly and without measure. His mother understood. 'It is God, it is the Infinite that you need,' she wrote him on one occasion. 'It is towards God that your aspirations are urging you.' Her words fell on deaf ears. Years passed, years in which, as he says, 'pride, sensuality, sloth, envy, contempt and hatred accumulated. There were even moments when hatred of Christ and His Church was the unique sentiment of my heart.'

It was at this juncture that he met Barbey d'Aurévilly, of whom Bloy was ready at once to make an idol. D'Aurévilly used his influence to re-Christianise Bloy, and succeeded in an unhoped-for manner. From that time, as his mother had predicted, Jesus Christ became the object of Léon Bloy's capacity for love. This love was never again completely quenched, in spite of his many subsequent sins. The real conversion took place in the church of St. Gèneviève (the Pantheon) during a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, at which Bloy assisted bathed in tears. With this conversion he passed from one extreme to another. He gave himself to a life of prayer and penance and received extraordinary graces. 'Il m'est arrivé les choses les plus extraordinaires, les plus incroyables, les plus heureuses.' One can imagine what these first spiritual experiences were to a temperament like Bloy's.

Fortunately or unfortunately his destiny as a writer declared itself about the same time, though, as he says, 'I knew nothing of literature, did not even know that my contemporaries existed, walking as I did, weeping with love, on the golden carpets of Paradise.'

Exalted by his first religious fervours and looking for the first time at everything in the light of faith, Bloy was horrified at the lives of mediocre Catholics and at the failings of priests. Without being a saint, he had the saint's outlook on the subject of tepidity, and unfortunately aired

this view in his early writings. This damned him with the Catholic press. To a born writer, a man of genius, this meant only a temporary ill-success. Bloy might have gone on quietly with his life as a writer, with his life of piety, and his life of humble employment as a clerk, had it not been for a woman. And what a woman! The story is told in the *Désespéré* and in the *Lettres à Véronique*, one of the most human if one of the most extraordinary records. About the same time Léon Bloy, by giving up his ordinary employment, entered upon that period of poverty (poverty that might have been avoided) and destitution which covered the greater part of his life.

This Véronique, Anne Marie Roulet, was the first woman with whom he had a liaison—in the *Désespéré* the times and characters are transposed. He was at that time over thirty. Anne Marie was a 'fille de joie,' but had carried on this profession only for two or three years, and cannot be identified with the prostitute whom Bloy portrays with such cynical lyricism in *Le Désespéré*.

He succeeded in converting Anne Marie, but the process of conversion, with its long hours of mutual prayer and its long days of religious instruction, did not preclude lapses into their earlier relationship. Bloy's first feeling with regard to this woman had been one of pure pity and desire to lead her to better life, but other emotions soon supervened. Nevertheless, these lapses from the strict line of virtue were bitterly repented of, and for the long subsequent years during which they lived together, their friendship was wholly spiritual. Anne Marie soon outstripped her master in piety, gave herself altogether to prayer, had real or imagined visions and revelations, in which Bloy implicitly believed. With time she became more and more exalted and visionary. This led to religious mania and finally to lunacy of an aggravated kind.

Broken-hearted and reduced to despair by the horror of this ending, Bloy gave himself up to a life of debauch, seeking at the same time a refuge in his art as a writer.

But he no longer frequented his former literary friends, Barbey d'Aurévilly, Ernest Hello, Paul Bourget, but rather the literateurs of the Boulevards and the Chat Noir. The story of the liaisons which he formed with two women, both prostitutes, at this period forms the subject matter of *La Femme pauvre*. Writing later of this time, he says: 'When I saw myself forced to look in the face all the abomination of the world, after having been saturated with the splendour of God, how can my writings, aided by my nature, be anything else than what they are, a vomiting and anathema. I had entered the literary world as one flagellated by the Cherubim might enter a hell of darkness and filth.'

From 1890, when he married Jeanne Molbeck, whom he had converted from Protestantism, Bloy's life was not only regular but saintly. Through all his errors his faith had remained intact. He was not only a sincere but an orthodox Catholic. His zeal and humility can be gauged by the simplicity and ardour of his devotion. A daily communicant, always to be seen at early Mass in these later days, hidden in some corner weeping over his sins, rising in the night to say the Office of the Dead, and spending the whole day of the Portiuncula trying to gain indulgences, his piety was as simple as a child's. But he was lonely, always lonely, in spite of having a wife and children. Possibly this loneliness was the result of his experience of the nearness of God's presence. 'The nearer one approaches to God the more one is lonely; it is the infinity of loneliness.'

In his art Léon Bloy was a master. For him language was the festive garb of thought. He demanded that writing should be splendid and cadenced, sonorous and monumental. His own writing fulfils in a measure these conditions. In the art of imagery he is unsurpassed, but he often strains his images to the verge of the grotesque. It is a pity, too, that he often draws his conclusions under the influence of passion or feeling, and that these conclusions,

even when of a religious order, spring from pictures of moral corruption, pictures often so overladen with filth and vulgarity that even the liberally minded reader may be repulsed by what can be summed up only in the word 'ordure.' On the other hand, Léon Bloy could write of divine mysteries even as the saints write of them, with a power that is seldom given even to the saints. Rémy de Gourmont has a witty word about Bloy's books: 'They appear to have been written by an Aquinas in collaboration with Gargantua.'

His works are the result of his own dearly bought experiences. They are the story of the war waged between his mind and his heart, between his soul and the world. Salvation for him lay in the way of feeling, and the force of his own personality was such that it had to stamp itself on all that he wrote and did. Whether writing a chapter of exegetics or a business letter it is always his own temperament that is projected—exaggerated, hyperbolic, overflowing with emotion. Bloy wrote much, seven volumes of a sort of journal, not to speak of the *Désespéré*, *La Femme Pauvre*, *Le Salut par les Juifs*, *Celle qui pleure* (Our Lady of la Salette), *Le Mendiant ingrat*, etc.

To enter into Léon Bloy's religious ideas would take too long. They all find expression in his writings. They are original and, if peculiar, deeply thought out. His interpretation of the Old Testament, his penetration of the problem of the Jews, his outlook with regard to the Holy Spirit, his complete abandonment on the subject of la Salette, show how much he had meditated on these subjects. What is deepest perhaps in his work is his interpretation of suffering. It might be said that he had worked out a metaphysic of suffering.

His religious influence sprang probably from his understanding of suffering. He seems to have been appointed to withdraw from error beings like himself, filled with passions and desires, victims of joys forbidden or lawful, who need a refuge in faith but cannot enter the Church by the

ordinary door. For these Bloy provides another door. He personally knew the heights and depths, and out of his own experience could help others. Maritain has a fine sentence on this subject: 'To some who would turn giddy at the thought of an abyss, of heights and depths of which they know nothing, Bloy remains an enigma. But there are souls, souls in imminent danger of perishing, who seek beauty in the abyss, and upon whom milder apologetics would have no effect, souls whose reason is so impaired by error that theology cannot act on them. They imagine that obedience to faith is incompatible with the daring of intelligence, or with the play of art and beauty, or they are overcome by the mediocrity of many Catholics. Bloy inspires such starving souls with a presentiment of the glory of God.'

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REUNION IN CATHOLICITY

THE unity of Christians, Our Lord implies, is a necessary condition if the world is to accept His mission from His Father; He prays that His followers 'may be one . . . that the world may believe that thou hast sent me' (Jn. xvii, 21). The scandal, the futility, of the continuance of Christian divisions whose origins and meaning have been long forgotten is plain for all to see. Yet nobody with any sense of realities can be blind to the immensity of the obstacles which hinder Christian reunion, nor to the theoretic unsoundness and the practical hopelessness of the various well-meaning but man-made solutions that have so far been offered to the problem. Meanwhile, with bewildering rapidity, the alignments for what looks like becoming the final struggle between Christ and secularism for the soul of civilised man are being formed, leaving those who profess the name of Christ hopelessly divided among themselves.