

LEON BLOY, THE CHURCH AND THE BOURGEOIS

Léon Bloy, who fought in 1870, suffered great poverty all his life, and died in 1916. He knew, as a matter of personal experience here on earth, that the absence of God is Hell.

Le Pèlerin du Saint Sépulchre, as he called himself, he lived at the foot of the Cross, with infinite longing; seeing in History the great span of God's holy Will ('I am going to write a History of the Will of God') stretching from the Fall to the Incarnation and from the Incarnation to the still unrealised reign of the Spirit; and underneath, the horror of godless man, 'la hideur plus qu'effroyable d'un monde qui a cessé de ressembler à son Créateur' (*La Femme Pauvre*, p. 214). His meditation was all in depth, taking this form:

'When the ruffians came down from Calvary, they brought to all people the great news that mankind had come of age. In a single bound, Suffering crossed the infinite abyss separating Accident and Substance, and became NECESSARY.

'Then the promises of joy and triumph in which the Scriptures are soaked, appearing in the new law under the brief heading "Beatitudes," coursed through the generations, cutting across them like a whirlwind of swordblades. In a word, humanity set about suffering *in hope*, and that is what is called the Christian era . . . Great souls, Christian or not, long for the outcome of it all . . .' (*Le Désespéré*.)

Out of his need for God came his devotion to the canonical prayers of the Church, with their universality and their virtue of referring all reducible human feelings to the absolute (*Désespéré*, p. 375); and above all to the Mass itself, reiterating unceasingly the Passion of our Lord still crucified. At High Mass he imagines this colloquy of our Lord:

' . . . Here we are, you and I, for nearly two thousand years. But the day of deliverance is coming, . . . the event which will unfurl into the remotest crannies of the human soul: that is, the translation of figures into reality . . . I, the author of Faith, will make you blind; I, the first-born of Hope, will make you despair; I, Charity itself, will consume you . . . My scorned Cross will shine out in splendour, like a great fire on a dark night . . . and the whole world shall learn . . . that this Sign was my Love Itself; it was, unthinkably disguised, the HOLY GHOST . . .'

Then at last, suffering and delight will be seen to be one and the same: for all depends on whether they are seen from inside or outside the Earthly Paradise. And Mary, who is Suffering itself, is also our Joy: she is the Earthly Paradise. Her *Fiat* opens the gate which closed behind Eve. Suffering is the *proof* of Love. The God of surprises is the Holy Ghost, hidden in multifarious symbols, traceable anywhere, for there is nowhere he cannot be, working on the underside of things for the glory of God. The more shameful his token (witness the Cross) the more glorious will it be revealed. And Mary is the *reign* of the Holy Ghost in glory; 'for glory, I read Holy Ghost or Mary,' says Bloy.

Though the world has been topsy-turvy since Adam's Fall, the tissue of history is all of a piece, and Bloy notes the immense supernatural identity of events, man giving himself away as having always done the same thing in perpetually analogous circumstances.

Expectans expectari: so sang the thousand years of the Middle Ages; and the Church has gone on doing so, though the Middle Ages were 'murdered by the would-be wiser bourgeois of the Renaissance.' But it is one thing to wait fifty centuries at the illuminated margin of a Book of Hours, says Bloy, and quite another to wait on this present footpath from Sodom, in the thick of an electioneering campaign, outside *Tortoni's* or *l'Américaine*, (*Désespéré*, p. 37).

This immense hold-up just has to be endured, identities remaining hidden, and identical things, like Suffering and Joy, Justice and Mercy, held forcibly apart. Bloy found the waiting almost unbearable, but he had no doubts about the Church: 'nothing shall prevail against it, not even the imbecillity of its children, which is its greatest danger.' He inveighs against the too-easy accusation of intolerance fastened on 'anyone who would stand to the defence of our old Mother' (*ibid* p. 285). And here lies the cause of his impatience with tepid Christians and easy-going priests, in fact with anyone or anything that weakened the Church in action. His excellent pages on so-called Church Art should be read in this context (*La Femme Pauvre*, p. 221). He sees the XVIth Century as an

'historical equinox, where the Ideal, tossed in the storms of sensualism, crashed to the ground, with its roots in the air . . . Christianity, which had neither conquered nor died, had to admit itself beaten, and behaved accordingly: in order to survive, it made itself agreeable, oily, tepid . . .'

But it was clear to Bloy that a doctrine that proposes as its supreme end the Love of God must be strong, or it will unwittingly

sanction all the illusions of self love and carnal love. It is too easy to teach souls the love of our brothers and keep other precepts hidden. Christ himself was not so cautious. In fact, he is alarmingly precise. And indeed true love is relentless, of its very nature. Christians have listened to the teaching of their mortal enemies, or they would know that nothing is more just than mercy, *because* nothing is more merciful than justice (*Désespéré*, p. 293). Christ declares 'blessed' those who hunger and thirst for justice, but the world, which hates Beatitude, has rejected this statement.

Where is God to be found. Deep down in that Abyss which, Bloy says, raises its arms in each of us. How to find it. Only, it seems, Suffering and Poverty can bring man to the brink of this abyss. To that extent, all suffering and all poverty have the property of making a man holy. Any man attacked by the crowd is, more or less flagrantly, the image of the Redeemer. Jesus is at the heart of things; he it is who takes upon himself to suffer all that is suffered. None is hit but he is hit, none humiliated but he is humiliated, cursed or killed but he is cursed and killed. The worst criminal is bound to assume the Face of Christ to be struck: or the blow would never reach him, but would remain suspended among the planets for centuries, till it found the Face that Pardons (*Le Mendiant Ingrat*). Poverty automatically places a man under the direct influence of God; his lack is the measure of his need; his is an emptiness that God can fill. Poverty is the normal condition of man in relation to God; anything else is more or less monstrous.

The criminal himself is always interesting, being a potential recipient of Mercy, a recognisable unit in the great herd of forgiveables. He belongs to those for whom Christ died. Far from cutting across the divine plan, he confirms it and gives it a sort of experimental verification by the display of his terrible misery.

But the mediocre man, the 'innocent' mediocrity, upsets everything. 'No doubt he was foreseen, but only just, as the worst torture of the Passion. . .' He may be inside or outside the Church.

His name is the *Bourgeois*, that is, according to Bloy (with no reference or apologies to Marx or anyone else), 'in a modern and very general sense, the man who makes no use of the faculty of thought and who lives, or appears to live, without ever having the least inclination to understand anything at all.' Bloy paints his portrait with great pains and some glee. In *La Femme Pauvre*, for instance:

'You owe no one anything; your books are in order; your fortune, large or small, was acquired with great honesty; all the laws

are in your favour; . . . you don't keep idols . . . you don't blaspheme. The Name of our Lord is so far from your thoughts that the idea of "taking it in vain" is unlikely to come to your mind. On Sunday you honour God with your presence in Church. It looks well, it is a good example for the servants, and it is of no great matter in any case . . .'

The portrait studies are in *Sueur de Sang* of the 1870 war, in *Histoires Désobligeantes* and in the two books called *Exégèse des Lieux Communs*, the Bourgeois' book of daily platitudes. But it is not so simple as that, for the Bourgeois himself is a symbol, and that is the only reason for bothering about him at all. He is 'the stupid but true echo of the Word of God sounding in low places; a dark mirror filled with the downward-looking Face of this same God, stooping over the waters of death' (*Introduction*, Ex. I). Here are some examples of this apotheosis of the cliché (in paraphrase):

Je suis comme Saint-Thomas. Any man of sense can see that St. Thomas is the patriarch of positivists. It remains to be shown that the disciple is greater than his master, for he does not believe even *after* he has seen and touched. In fact his disbelief is such that he cannot see or touch at all . . .

On n'est pas sur la terre pour s'amuser. But surely you would not say that one is here to suffer?—Not to suffer oneself, but to inflict suffering, certainly, to degrade souls and bring them to the brink of despair . . .

La crème des honnêtes gens. Those who owe no one anything, not even the Three Divine Persons of God.

L'honneur des familles. To-day, it's matter of keeping clear of the police. In the old days, it concerned the Saints and Heroes the family might produce. In spite of the Church's homage to Martyrs, to the bourgeois they are awkward people who got caught. A niece of St. Laurence would not be able to find a husband, and a cousin of the great-grandson of the Good Thief would hardly expect a well-paid post in the Civil Service. It is largely on account of Honour that the bourgeois is put off Christianity. He can't get on with a religion whose 'founder' suffered disgraceful punishment and then rose again on the third day to aggravate the dishonour of his family eternally.

Elsewhere, Bloy imagines the Bourgeois let loose in the Earthly Paradise and setting out to exploit it. 'By nature a hater of Paradises; as soon as he sees a lovely bit of land, his one idea is to cut down the trees, dry up the springs, make roads and set up shops and conveniences . . .'

Faire fortune. It is just a matter of keeping a close eye on oneself, never allowing oneself to do anything useful to others or likely to make people suspect one of disinterestedness: money comes like flies and maggots to fallen fruit.

Faire son chemin. But the way never to be taken is the way to Paradise by Calvary; only lovers and sufferers pass that way.

Faire de son mieux. The great refuge of consciences.

La conscience. To be conscious of oneself, a usually agreeable feeling. An inner voice frequently praising one's good actions, and occasionally, very tentatively and with all due regard for extenuating circumstances, uttering reproaches. It is, however, a fact that no one wishes himself any harm. And of course it differs in different conditions.

Le temps, c'est de l'argent. By a sort of accident (if anything were really accidental) ('le hasard: ce blasphème') the bourgeois is always unwittingly crashing through the obvious into the infinite . . . How horrified he would be if he knew! Time and money are equivalent in eternity. When Our Lord allowed Himself to be sold for thirty pieces of silver, he was in the very middle of time, and all times were contracted in Him in the most astounding manner.

L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur, mais . . . Sordid bourgeois, (says Bloy) would-be Christian, upon whom the symbols of Divine Life meet to die, like pearls on a leper: you are convinced, are you not, that the five-franc piece is beatific, so why not say so? You are not one to be afraid, when you invoke money, of seeing the Blood-Stained Face appear!

'The trader makes war on the poor, the Bourgeois is the successful trader . . . ' 'Giving help to the poor is not compatible with the rudiments of bourgeois economy . . . ' 'A friend in danger entreâts him: no answer; the Redeemer in His agony says He is thirsty: no answer; the Mother with the Seven Swords begs him to have pity on himself: no answer . . . '

Money is the blood of the poor. It is power and glory; justice and injustice; torture and delight; flagrant symbol of our Lord and Saviour. If it is valuable, it is because it is blood running through bruised and tortured limbs. Christ *bought* all things by his Blood. Money kills and gives life, like the Word. So the importance of money is no illusion. And it is no accident that the less there is of God, the greater is the frenzy for money. Men *hunger* for it like the Eucharist. *La Femme Pauvre* (p. 100) shows the terrifying power of money, not only for evil, but in friendship, for instance; it is 'more formidable than Prayer, more conquering than Fire.'

And read the parable of M. Pleur, in *Histoires Désobligeantes* : the rich man who lived in vile poverty, never touching money, because, he said, 'Money is God.'

So in the immense symbolism in which the world is locked, the Bourgeois plays his part : worshipping money, he bears witness to Christ, he pays homage to him whose Absence is thus incarnate in pale metal. 'They know not what they do.'

Lazarus and Dives, infinitely apart, are none the less inseparable. The man of means has not an inkling of the nature of poverty, but he has an instinctive horror of it : his own misery, so carefully and ornately concealed in the depths of his being, might, he fears, break out at the approach of Poverty, and run to meet the chosen companion of the Son of God. Under all his enjoyment lurks that fear of coming face to face with Christ, and having demands made upon him, and being forced to SEE.

So at the end of the century of Positivism and Materialism, Bloy came to remind men that all things speak of God (admirably shown in Stanislas Fumet's *Mission de Léon Bloy*). The great writers of the century had, one after another, been preoccupied with the idea of the symbol, of correspondences, of the tension between opposites. And here is Bloy, showing which way it was all pointing : to Christ himself, Way, Truth and Life. So many to-day know the taste of Hell who have no inkling of Heaven ; many, to whom the Church was otherwise hidden ; have responded and are still responding eagerly to Bloy's indications ; and in devotion to the Blessed Sacrament they find the home-coming and re-ordering of all the high-flown desires of a century. In our days of unspeakable suffering and horror, Bloy reminds us that complacency and self-sufficiency may show God absent, but shame and degradation, far from doing so, are more likely to be the instruments of the 'surprising,' 'sudden' Holy Ghost Himself, who will one day reveal their glory.

First and last, Bloy has a sense of the immense togetherness and interaction of things. In a letter to a *protégée* (quoted Fumet, pp. 368-9) he says :

The Communion of Saints, which is the anti-dote and counter-part of Babel, witnesses to a solidarity between all humankind so holy that we all depend on all the others whenever they lived, are living or shall live. The least of our actions resounds to infinite depths and touches all the living and all the dead ; so that each of the billions of human beings really is alone before God.

Our liberty is one with the equilibrium of the world to-day, he had said in *Le Désespéré*. If a man gives a penny grudgingly,

that penny pierces the poor man's hand, falls, pierces the ground, makes holes in the suns, streaks across the firmament and compromises the universe . . . One charitable act, one movement of pity, sings the divine praises from Adam to the end of time; it heals the sick, comforts the despairing, quells tempests, redeems captives . . .

RUTH BETHELL.

A 'COMMUNITARIAN' STATE

DURING 1942 a treatise, written, printed and edited in a French prisoners of war camp in Germany was then circulated in France through the agency of repatriated compatriots. It was the first of a series to be known as *Les Cahiers des Captifs* composed by Frenchmen whose enforced captivity had led them to alter or modify their pre-war views regarding government. One of these volumes is entitled *Les Fondements de la Communauté Française*—an attempt to outline the composition, function and powers of a State based on what may be called 'communitarian' principles. The treatise is divided into two sections, the first part dealing with basic principles and the second part with their organic applications.

In this article I make no attempt to transcribe the detailed working out of the plans proposed, but only to give the main reflections of this prisoner of war who believes firmly in the resurgence of his country provided she can achieve that national solidarity and cohesion she came so near losing.

To-day France is ripe for a new venture, and yet what she needs is to restate the old ideal which at bottom has always been treasured by the French people in all epochs of their history, at first instinctively, and then consciously—the 'Communitarian ideal.' In the 19th century France made the mistake of trying to restore a merely traditional past followed by the other mistake of transposing on to her soil institutions which were alien to her history, her national temperament and her genius.

The Individualist and the Collectivist corruptions of the Communitarian ideal have played havoc in society, upsetting the balance of the State. Though the individual must not be looked upon as merely a cell in the human collectivity, it must be borne in mind that a