

PART III

The Reception of the Maritain Medal

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The reception of the Maritain Medal moves me more than I can say. I do not consider myself a great Maritain scholar. Nevertheless, for a number of years I have read and reread his writings with personal satisfaction and have endeavored to communicate my knowledge to others. I believe something of his spirit has entered me. In speaking of Jacques Maritain I employ present and not past forms of speech. I hold that his spirit is still *present* among us in the same way that Gabriel Marcel once spoke of his mother, who died when he was very young, as a *presence*.

Over many years, I have gone again and again—I would say I pondered did not the term sound ponderous—to the writings of Jacques Maritain. During my teaching career, I taught at Marquette University (1939–1958), Villanova University (1958–1962), Boston College (1962–1969), and the University of Ottawa in Canada (1969–1973). Since that time, I have been visiting professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Niagara University in Niagara Falls, New York, and Mount Genario College in Ladysmith, Wisconsin. Over the teaching years (especially 1939–1973), the influence upon me of Étienne Gilson was pervasive. This was due to some extent because I was teaching courses in the history of philosophy and appreciated Gilson's emphasis upon the *philosophical* history of philosophy. (Any other kind, he held, was not philosophical history.) In this great French Catholic figure were harmoniously united philosophy and the history

of philosophy. Our students at the time needed, I thought then and believe to this day, the objectivity with which Étienne Gilson approached philosophy and philosophers. At the time, Jacques Maritain's dismissal of some great minds as Ideosophers (though that particular term did not occur in Maritain's writing until later) seemed unsuitable. The greatness and even consistency of those minds eminent in philosophy were stressed by Gilson. In that earlier day, at Catholic institutions of higher learning all too many students (and teachers as well) were blunt in their rejection of anybody viewed as not Catholic. Everybody but Aquinas (as least as they thought of him) was definitely wrong. Philosophers were condemned before they were fully understood.

During this period, I read Maritain for knowledge and inspiration. The reading of his work developed in stages and became more and more a joy and not merely a task. It was "task" only insofar as I considered that absorbing the great philosopher was necessary if I were to teach my courses properly. More and more fully did I discern that the severe treatment Jacques Maritain accorded to the gigantic idols of the age was justifiable. Furthermore, it was necessary to restore sanity and to maintain harmony and balance in our Catholic synthesis. I learned that one should not run willy-nilly after eminent figures simply because they were great minds and had a timely message. In the past, it is true, Catholic scholars were at the opposite extreme, too much in the eternal and not aware enough of their own times. The contemporary was often regarded as the evening of the eternal. In reaction, a few Catholic scholars had begun to idolize the timely as though it had something eternal about it.

The Need for a "Protophilosophy"

More and more I discerned that it was necessary to develop and expound what I came to call "protophilosophy." This is the endeavor to lead into some form of philosophy those who are experts in their own fields. Those leaders need philosophical or proto-philosophical leadership, this is not so much by demonstration as by what I call *monstration*. This duty—I came to see it more and more in such terms—appeared all the more necessary inasmuch as one could observe Catholic leaders, and some of their practical enterprises, saturated (without their realizing it) in what Maritain calls Ideosophy.¹

¹See *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), chap. 5.

It is imperative to bring these practical leaders to a balanced point of view, not through philosophy with its severe demands and its insistence on demonstration, but rather through protophilosophy. The latter approach teaches the same truths as philosophy but in a more rhetorical way. The advancement and the deepening of philosophy by lofty vision and by austere technical methods is necessary. As part and parcel of this aim, it is necessary to study the great figures objectively and with an eye to their positive contributions before any evaluation is undertaken. These views I hold firmly. To abandon this high calling would mean the abandonment of high philosophy, let us say simply, of philosophy itself. Nevertheless, I consider it my duty to pursue and to broadcast protophilosophy. I consider such an effort essential for a proper philosophy as well as for balanced leadership.

With the personal recommendations of Jacques Maritain, I went to Europe in 1952 on a Fulbright scholarship. The first year I attended the Catholic University of Louvain. At Louvain's Higher Institute of Philosophy, I studied contemporary French philosophy. I then studied a second year at the Sorbonne. Among other contemporary figures I became familiar with the works of Gabriel Marcel and Jean-Paul Sartre. I had the opportunity to hear lectures and meet personally with a number of philosophers. I attended the *séances* at the residence of Gabriel Marcel regularly. I owe homage to Gabriel Marcel, from whom I learned many things, above all what it means to pursue philosophy personally. At the age of thirty-eight I had a mature philosophy but was still seeking expansions and intensifications of it. I derived much profit from these studies and encounters but I still did not find what I was questing, a comprehensive philosophy.

Upon my return to the United States, I took up the work of Jacques Maritain and in its fullness or comprehensiveness I found what I was seeking.

I came to the writings of Jacques Maritain in various phases. In the early period (the 1930s) there was a time when I read the theocentric philosopher for knowledge and inspiration. (By inspiration I mean the intensification of the desire to pursue philosophy in a personally devoted way.) During this period, I recall reading *The Degrees of Knowledge* in French before it appeared in English. (In graduate courses and my first year of teaching, the book appeared difficult but inspiring. It prompted me to devote my life to philosophy.)

There followed a period in which I perused texts in preparation for graduate courses as well as undergraduate ones. I taught *The Degrees of Knowledge* for a graduate course on Thomism, and used the *Logic (Petite Logique)* as a text for the first course in philosophy. Upon the completion of full-time teaching, I began a phase in which I read Maritain for the sheer joy of it. It was no longer duty but adventure.

This period, which I have merely mentioned because of its significance for my intellectual life, should be divided into two phases. The first was more methodical, the second more personal. Following the methodical approach, I began reading Maritain systematically beginning first of all with the earlier works. I utilized the *Oeuvres Complètes* (of which I possess all the volumes so far published) and the *Oeuvres* (in two volumes) edited by Henry Bars. In this fashion, I read entire works, beginning, as I have said, with the earlier and proceeding to the later. Frequently, I took one volume or another along on trips and read assiduously. Without any definite purpose in mind, such as gathering texts for a lecture, but reading Maritain as it were for himself and in terms of what he offered to the philosophical world.

In the next phase I obtained insights of a more personal nature. By this expression I mean that perusal of Maritain led to his insights becoming my own and I attempted to express them in my own language. By perusal I mean attentive and personal reading whereby one appropriates the thought of his companion (the book) and makes it his or her own. Should not every reading be perusal? Reading that lacks attentiveness is incomplete; it is a sham. Besides, I undertook to incorporate certain of the thoughts of the philosopher into my own effort to express truths in the language of protophilosophy.

I observed things of interest for the development of the intellectual life of Jacques Maritain. There were ideas fully articulated in the great *opera* of the later period that were already adumbrated in the early writings. It was as though his younger mind was teeming with ideas, and little by little he was able to put them forth in their fullness.

The perusal of Jacques Maritain has not ended nor will it ever be while I remain here below. I do not know whether there will be another distinct phase. I believe I have already traversed the major stages. I look forward to an intensification of what I have called the personal phase and continuation of the methodic. The two ways may blend. Whatever it be, it will occupy an indispensable place in my intellectual, even, I venture to say, my spiritual life.

Two Principal Approaches

Inspired by this personal probing of being and truth through the meditation of Jacques Maritain, I have laid out plans for studies upon his thought. Among these, two are, in my view, preeminent. One concerns distinction-in-unity, the other *la prise de conscience*.

Distinction-in-unity inevitably brings to mind the great work of Jacques Maritain, *Distinguer pour Unir, ou les Degrés du Savoir* (1932) (*Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, 1959 edition). The theme itself of distinction-in-unity runs all through his writing. Is it unusual that Maritain commences by saying *pour*. He says let us distinguish *in order* to unite. It is not difficult to grasp the general idea that we do not *separate* but *distinguish*, and the complementary idea that we should not *confound* but should *unify*. The watchwords are distinction not separation, unity not confusion. Nevertheless, philosophers and scholars often fail to observe the philosophical rule. All too frequently they separate and do not distinguish. They confound and do not integrally unite.

We are surrounded by beings (considered as *being*): we are, that is, environed by the many. We should commence with beings and proceed to unity. To elucidate these conceptions in terms of protophilosophy is one of my most fervent aims

Closely related to this theme of distinction-in-unity is that of *la prise de conscience*. The French expression is difficult to translate. In the English-speaking world we are not accustomed to talking in such a way. The French expression is frequently used in spoken as well as written language and appears to be part of the French mentality. Jacques Maritain, as is his want, has raised the expression from a common usage to something of universal significance. *Une prise de conscience* occurs when something known implicitly becomes known explicitly. It is not simply self-awareness, or not confined to the basics of awareness. It takes place when such fields as poetry and labor become conscious of themselves, when they know themselves as such. They are like extrapolations of self which are at one point dormant or half-conscious and now rise to the heights of self-awareness. In this heightening each "field" becomes more fully itself and new possibilities open before it.

Jacques Maritain maintained that culture should be *aware* not only of itself but of other cultures as well. Despite the self-absorption mirrored in excessive self-awareness, he holds that awareness-of-self

in the entire process of knowing is something of great value and should be developed in Thomistic philosophy.

I render *la prise de conscience*, realizing that it is extremely difficult to translate the expression into English, as *explicit* and *heightened awareness*. It is more than the self-awareness each person has of himself or herself. It is awareness of awareness. It is awareness of self, of other selves, of the world of nature and of God, all in a reflective *ontological* approach, one which begins with the vast world of nature.

It is my hope to produce a reflective work which will do justice to this lofty conception. I regard *la prise de conscience* as fundamental in the theocentric philosophy of Jacques Maritain. I see a relationship between it and *distinction-in-unity* in that *la prise de conscience* enables us to distinguish more exactly, to know what distinction really is and in this way to lead to unity as more fully appreciated. These illustrations of the philosophy of Jacques Maritain and display something clamoring for expansion. They attest to our philosopher being not of the past, however glorious, but of the future.

“Woe Is Me” and Vocation

On the occasion of receiving the great honor of the Maritain Medal, it is fitting to comment on what I call the “woe-is-me” text. The full text is inscribed upon the Medal. The proclamation of Saint Paul, “Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel” inspired the exclamation of Jacques Maritain when he cried out in youthful enthusiasm, “Woe is me if I do not teach Thomistic philosophy.” *Vae mihi si no thomistazavero*. The cry is enthusiastic and in it Jacques Maritain lays bare his very soul. Perhaps it is even embarrassing to us. I believe, however, that there is deep meaning here. The “woe-is-me” cry teaches us that our vocation is duty as well as fulfillment. When we discern our true vocation, it is as though we discovered our true name. Vocation as expansion of our potentiality confers autonomy and fulfillment. At the same time, the thing we are called upon to do signifies duty. When one spurns one’s true vocation, it is as though one surrendered one’s true name. Vocation is what each person is *called* to do. As Cardinal Newman said, God has ten thousand posts of service. Each one, rightly considered, is an apostolate, even though the task may be secular.

The “woe-is-me” text enjoins us to see that our vocation is dutiful. Acceptance of the call fulfills our being, for it is what we are meant

to do. It is, as it were, connatural to us. Acceptance of the call means that our obligation is to follow steadfastly the path before us. In the “woe-is-me” clamor of Jacques Maritain, I behold Jacques Maritain beckoning to each one of us. I behold him asking each of us to accept our vocation, or, for those of us old enough to have already embraced a way of life, to renew it fervently.