

Showing Charity & Léon Bloy

“You have been told, I suppose, that my violent writings offend charity. I have only one thing to reply to those theologians of yours. It is that Justice and Mercy are *identical* and consubstantial in their absolutes.”—

“Marchenoir” (100)

“What is one to think of an admiration which would extend only to the outer form of my thought, while rejecting my thought itself? That would be to put me on the level of cheap phrase makers.”—“Art and the Pilgrim of the Holy Sepulchre” (119)

“To say something worth while, as well as to give an impression of the beautiful, it is essential to seem to exaggerate, that is, to carry one’s scrutiny beyond the object, and then one arrives at exactness itself devoid of exaggeration, something which can be verified in the Prophets, who all were accused of exaggerating.”—“Art and the Pilgrim of the Holy Sepulchre” (121)

“The Prophet is above all a Voice to call down Justice. If one is absolutely determined, with or without irony, to bestow this magnificent name upon such a hurler of curses as I am, one must at once accept the consequence, drawn from the very nature of things, that my shouts will have the power to accelerate devastation. In this sense shall I be a prophet, as much as it is possible to be one without divine inspiration, precisely as a man of prayer is a worker of miracles.”—“The Hurler of Curses” (201-02)

Overview

In studying a collection such as *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, one has to keep in mind that the editor’s choices tell us something important about the editor, as well as a judgment about the important themes or genres of the author. Raïssa Maritain’s section headings focus on biographical material, on Bloy’s views of art and poetry, on his scathing judgments about poverty and riches, on his prophetic denunciations, on his devotion to Mary (particularly Our Lady of Salette), on his view of sacred history, and his understanding of mystery.

Maritain’s own mysticism, suffering, and Jewish heritage perhaps tell us something about her selections. They also tell us about what Bloy had come to represent for many in the French and English Catholic Renaissance. Bloy was an example for them of a radical prophetic writer, one who could awaken the modern era to its sinfulness, who could make sense of the world’s pain, at least mystically, and who could offer a model of a literary style intent on radical honesty with wide, expressionist gestures.

Her assessments of Bloy’s importance in her and Jacques’ life can be found in chapter 5, “Léon Bloy” (and pages 117-120 in chapter 6) in *We Have Been Friends Together* and chapter nine, “The Last Years of Léon Bloy” in *Adventures in Grace*. In both places, she admits that at times Bloy could be repugnant and was guilty of statements that are unacceptable. However, in general, she travels a long way to defend him, especially his character. She portrays him as an impatient prophet who desired to see justice upon the earth. In particular she examines closely his work on the mystery of Israel, and finds therein a man who truly loved Jews, including the Jewish Jesus. She writes of him, “We pardoned him his dross by virtue of the grandeur of his intentions and the magnificence of his language” (*We Have Been Friends Together* 102).

Bloy’s expressionist style explains, in part, his often strange, almost heterodox statements. With Bloy, one is not dealing with precise theological dogma, but with hyperbole. He is like a drunken fighter whose unbalanced swings often go wide of the mark, yet when they do land, they land with power and violence. Attempting to systematize Bloy is bound to be a futile task. One can classify his views for pedagogical purposes, but one always has to remember that he may make opposite claims in another

work, that when measured against one another, nonetheless give some sense of the truth by which he is trying to live. His narratives, including those historical ones, are big and breathless—as if he were a French Catholic Carlyle, though with profounder concern for the poor than the great. He is also comparable to G. K. Chesterton, though a more melancholic version by far. Bloy and Chesterton both write with broad sweeping storylines, not worrying to control the minute details except in so far as they assist the wide landscapes.

In *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, the opening two sections, “The Thankless Beggar” and the ostensibly fictional selections in “Marchenoir,” are autobiographical and help to have in view the character of Bloy. Selections from Bloy’s diaries and letters are full of dramatic, even excessive gestures. His emotions run from love for family to rage at the world, and his spiritual consolations and disconsolations can be surprising for some. He is unable to take consolation in Easter, yet he finds deep comfort in the scriptures. We cannot forget that the self-presentation of Bloy may not tell us entirely who he is. As he insists, “My most vehement pages were written *out of love* and often with tears of love during hours of unutterable peace” (51). Some of the selected passages show that he can even be reflective about his public persona and how others judge him, even desire him. The theme of witness is particularly important in several places.

“Art and the Pilgrim of the Holy Sepulchre” is gathered from a number of different books. These selections provide some clues to Bloy’s style and aesthetic, as well as the tension he holds in his own thought regarding his writing. Bloy seems to be saying that the aesthetic demands of art cannot be allowed to overtake the faithful demands of truth-telling. Art is not a kind mistress; she is even a corrupt succubus, which Bloy nonetheless dares to bring to the cross. This is the case because human imagination is anarchic, moreover demonic, a decadent force that operates out of its own impulses, rather than that of the sacred. There is no sacred art, only art that is more self-aware about its temptations and corruptions. And Christians who employ art can only do so by taking this warning to heart.

“The Wisdom of the Bourgeois” is a good study in Bloy’s use of the Juvenalian. Each excerpt responds to a French proverb and reduces many of them to absurdity. In particular, he uncovers the rationalizations that the rich often use in their unacknowledged exploitation of the poor. The following section, “The Poor Man” is more varied in material and acts as a companion to “The Wisdom of the Bourgeois” in its exploration of poverty. Pages 169-171 and 174-176 in particular stand out. The first is a strong example of Bloy’s employing Decadent style for a truthful examination of the extremes of poverty, while the second explores Bloy’s distinction between poverty and destitution or dereliction. There is also important material in the wider section that contrasts voluntary and involuntary poverty, as well as apocalypse and poverty and a Girardian insight into the scapegoating of the poor.

The gathered materials in “The Hurler of Curses” opens with a fascinating personification of Fury as a kind of spiritual force in the world. There are also meditations on being the one hunted by others, on a famous fire at a charity event (196-201), as well as prophetic calls for justice and the story of a mad gypsy. “Modern Christians” focuses on the hypocrisy of both laity and priesthood, especially in regard to the problem of poverty. Pages 221-225 contain Bloy’s meditations on the infinite nature of the supernatural Church and the meaning of sainthood, though these must be weighed against other reflections in later sections.

“She Who Weeps” contains material focused on the apparition of Mary at La Salette to two children and her message to the modern world, in particular France. Bloy believed in their visions, and the popular piety surrounding La Salette form the basis for his meditations on Mary’s Immaculate Conception and on

the honor due her. Pages 242-244 reflect on her tears and their meaning in Bloy's life. "The Mystery of Israel" is a section that shows Bloy not only as a defender of the Jewish people, but as a Catholic arguing for their continued place in the salvation of the world. Pages 262-269 set out a vision of the Elder People suffering for the world and as still held by God's promise to them, and Bloy also stresses the Jewishness of Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and the early church.

"Suffering, Faith, Sanctity" is an important section that gives us a window into some of Bloy's general spirituality. These three themes operate as nexus points for much of his life's mission and writing. They also reveal Bloy's ability to wildly proclaim seemingly opposites. He holds human freedom to be "the respect God has for us" (274), yet he also declares that "all that happens is divine" (284). Suffering is a sign of love, even divine beauty, yet it is also profound injustice and horror. Sanctity and sorrow are essential to spiritual growth, to knowing Christ fully. Prayer and suffering are deeply intertwined, too. Bloy also embraces an eschatological vision of all the saints in union with God (cf. 274-278, 284-291, 302-303).

The final section (other than "Random Thoughts"), "The Sense of Mystery," explores Bloy's views of history and the future. He opines about the angelic orders, the cosmic Woman who is all women, the justice of animal pain, as well as the wide-spread nature of human pain throughout history. He finds in history an apocalyptic code, and wonders if there is a global history or apocalypse of the poor. He compares the Modern Age's apostasy to an idealized medieval past, and even proclaims that there can be no insignificant event in history. This section provides excerpts from his meditations on Christopher Columbus, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Joan of Arc. He also has musings on the special providential nature of France and on the divide between appearances and the true meaning of history. Another strong example of his contradictory juxtapositioning is here: we all are solitary and will stand solitary before the judgment of God, and yet he all stand together as the communion of saints and all will be judged together and saved together.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Léon Bloy

Raïssa Maritain's inclusion of a section of "Random Thoughts" reminds us that the particular power of Bloy is in his arresting images and symbols. He is quotable because of his strong generalities. At the same time, to reduce Bloy to aesthetics is to do him a disservice. Here are some various ways to consider what he is about:

1. Bloy as Anti-Modern
2. Bloy as Social Critic
3. Bloy as Witness
4. Bloy as Poor Man
5. Bloy as Fanatic
6. Bloy as Madman
7. Bloy as Decadent Writer
8. Bloy as Lover
9. Bloy as Mystic
10. Bloy as Prophet
11. Bloy as Apocalyptic Writer
12. Bloy as Martyr-Saint
13. Bloy as Memoirist

At the center of his vision and life is an opposition to Modernity, which he considers a great apostasy. And while poverty is not confined to the modern world, Bloy does see the current treatment of the poor as emblematic of spiritual malaise. His social criticism always has economic injustice in view, though he is as often a general witness against its ravages, as having any particular social platform to advance. His own poverty makes his railings and compassion personal rather than invoking pity per se. Of course, his extremes of approach can be read by some as the pronouncements of a crank or a religious fanatic, even those of someone mentally unstable. He can be judged as paranoid, suffering from a persecution complex, and a streak of masochism. Yet his approach obviously has indebtedness to the fin-de-siècle French Decadent movement of which he was apart. The extremes of emotion, the puerile subject matter, the Gothic sensibilities, and horrific evil are all aesthetic lessons from the Decadents, and they need not be reduced to actual mental states.

Bloy obviously deeply loved the people to whom he was loyal, especially his wife and children and his few close friends, as well as, earlier in his life, the common-law relationship he had with Anne-Marie Roule. He also loved France, the Jews, aspects of the Church, as well as the saints, Mary, and the Triune God. His mysticism, with its strong language of rapture and ecstasy, has a strong emphasis on suffering, in part because he believed that his suffering could participate in that of Christ. Bloy has been labeled by others as a prophet, an apocalyptic writer, and a martyr-saint. Bloy would have likely denied all three, though he certainly evidenced aspects of each role. His strong call for justice and his strong condemnation of Catholic hypocrisy matched with the role many associate with the biblical prophet. Likewise, his predictions about a coming global disaster and his spiritual interpretations of history were in a language he learned from biblical apocalypse. Bloy himself desired to be martyred, even believed that he would be, and perhaps he was if one considers the suffering of his life as being a form of “white” (i.e. living) martyrdom. And while Bloy wrote fiction, he is finally remembered for his autobiographical and topical writings, and these best illustrate his sensibilities as a writer.

Pilgrim of the Absolute. Ed. Raïssa Maritain. Trans. John Coleman and Harry Lorin Binsse. NY: Pantheon, 1947.

We Have Been Friends Together & Adventures in Grace: The Memoirs of Raïssa Maritain. Trans. Julie Kernan. NY: Image, 1961 (1942, 1945).