

The Ideology of the French Catholic Revival

Jennifer Birkett

This is a period tormented by its sins. Before it, the triumph of science and the Republic; after it, the revival of materialism, and then preparation for war makes it much less easy to see the forms in which individual and collective despair find expression. Yet this despair is of long standing: its cause even more so, and is not specifically French. To anyone seeking a radical cure the idea must present itself forcibly that . . . the decline of Christianity in Europe has a great deal to do with it.

Robert Bessède's account of late nineteenth-century Catholic culture in France, in his recent study *La Crise de la conscience catholique* (Paris, 1975), is typical of traditional commentaries on this period. A particular stance—an attitude of despair in the face of history—with its origins in a minority group caught in very specific historical circumstances is transformed by special pleading into a universal phenomenon, to become eventually one more symbolic embodiment of the eternal crucifixion of man. If we look, for instance, into Bessède's work, which claims to consider objectively the whole movement of ideas at this period, but has its real centre of interest in traditionalism and in the writers of the Catholic Revival, we find that he wholeheartedly adopts the Revival's own blinkered perspective, refusing even to try to decipher the historical particularity inscribed in their ideology. Ostentatiously dismissing the contribution which the "historian of ideas" can make in such a domain, he prefers to speak of "mysterious" impulses, "feelings", always and universally the same, which are "the basis and motive force of history":

The crisis under discussion in this book—more clearly than any other—springs from a nexus of feelings, every one of which is a feeling of lack; it provokes questions whose scope goes beyond the political and social domain.

Like the Revival, he reduces a variety of distinctive responses to a complex situation to a bland formula which shelves the major problems of a disturbing and contradictory period:

The spiritual themes provoked by the crisis—of dereliction, finitude, exile—are not essentially Christian, despite the 'vale

of tears'. They arise from the idea of the withdrawal of Being from a desperately empty world which constantly appeals for its return.

The weakness of such a sentimental perspective, fudging major political and ideological issues, betrays itself in an attempt to consider in the same terms the lucid despair and revolt of Rimbaud, striving to eliminate from language the stultifying structures of authority and convention, and the desperate confusion of Léon Bloy, a late convert to Catholicism, enamoured of mystifying rhetoric, manipulating language in order to impose on his readers the ultimate in Order.

The reason for such sweeping assimilations is revealed in the book's conclusion, with Bessède's polemical attempt, following the example of the Revival, to show the likeness between the 'true' Catholic and the 'true' revolutionary. He bases this likeness on the call of both for "freedom"; which to him means the restricted bourgeois freedom presented by the Enlightenment *philosophes*, and now the rallying phrase of an established bourgeoisie. His redefinition of freedom as the sense of sin, humility and love shows the same disrespect for language as the Revival showed in its distinction between "politique libératrice" and "politique libérale"—the former Catholic, the latter "socialist" (representing, according to the 1885 encyclical *Immortale Dei*, "free licence for sedition")—and the definition and the distinction have the same effect: to pay lipservice to the majority's desire for freedom, action and change while restricting to the utmost, by obfuscations and mystifications, the possibility of effecting real change, which would destroy an advantageous *status quo*.

The Revival writers' intense and well-documented awareness of their "prophetic" roles, or "literary missions", and their belief in the essential power of the word, derives from their realisation that words are their sole remaining terrain on which to reinvent for themselves a heroic and historic role.

In the Preface to his *Anthologie de la poésie catholique* (1933), Vallery-Radot quotes Claudel's forcefully-stated intention to impose on human thought the old perspectives:

The role of art is all the more important in that what we have been suffering for several centuries is much less a divorce of faith from reason, and far more one of faith from imagination, which has lost the power to harmonise the two halves of the universe—visible and invisible. The entire world-picture (science, art, politics, philosophy) we have made for ourselves over the last four centuries is completely pagan: God is on one side and the world on the other; and there is no link between them. Who could suspect, reading Rabelais, Montaigne, Racine, Molière and Victor Hugo, that God died for us on the Cross? It is this that simply has to stop.

An effective means of achieving this change of perspective is to refuse to consider the real movement of history, giving primacy to feelings and philosophical abstractions and attributing all responsibility to transcendent forces. Despair, fatalism, the sense of impotence—the hallmarks of the Revival's *crise de conscience*—thus stand revealed as social and political options. The interesting question for the critic then becomes to establish for what particular social groups these options became appropriate, and, indeed, necessary.

The writers of the Revival came from a variety of social backgrounds. Though his family was provincial and impoverished, Barbey d'Aurevilly prided himself on its aristocratic origins. Paul Claudel, who boasted of left-handed descent from the Duke of Orleans, belonged to a provincial family of small proprietors and professionals (his father was a civil servant), and he himself worked his way into a diplomatic career through the traditional channels of academic advancement. Having studied at the Institut des Sciences Politiques, he won first place in the Foreign Office entrance examination in 1890, and rose steadily through the ranks of attaché, vice-consul and consul, to ambassador. Joris-Karl Huysmans remained content with a secure but minor post in the Civil Service. On his mother's side, he laid claim to two generations of French Civil Service background; but he was particularly proud of his Dutch ancestry (his father was a miniaturist and lithographer from Breda, who settled in Paris when a young man), and in his autobiography calls himself "an inexplicable amalgam of a Parisian aesthete and a Dutch painter". This ethnically mixed background may have contributed to his sense of interior marginality. Léon Bloy, who came to live in Paris from a poor family of extremely minor civil servants in Périgueux, was the only one to attempt—with remarkable lack of success—to live from his literary production alone. What they all have in common with one another, and with the bohemian avant-garde of the same era with whom they formed a sympathetic alliance, is a sense of actual social standing or even the simple promise of widening horizons being threatened or circumscribed by unexpected social change—the confrontation with, at worst, exclusion, or, at best, marginality.

1870-71 marked the beginning of a period of slow but major social change. With the Prussian defeat of France, the decaying Second Empire finally collapsed. The Commune, the first brief reign of the proletariat, bloodily suppressed by Thiers, cast its shadow over succeeding generations. Hereafter, the comfortably-established bourgeois knew that there were other actors on the stage of history, waiting only—or so in his panic he believed—for one weak move on his part in order to seize power. Zola's *Germinal* (1885) is not an accurate account of the developing struggle between labour and capital under the Second Empire; but what it

does give, in its image of the monstrous, primitive force embodied in the violent and protracted miners' insurrection, is a compelling presentation of the myth of the proletarian threat as formulated in the mind of the bourgeoisie of the Third Republic. By 1882, educational reform had laid the groundwork for the expansion of class-consciousness among the working populace; but the effects of the reforms were double-edged, in that the culture transmitted through the schools remained that of the bourgeois establishment. An indication of the severe limitations still set on the working classes is the fact that there was no legal recognition of trades unions until 1884, and then only against a background of strikes and violence. The main threat came not from the workers themselves but from the system—the long economic depression after 1873, which resulted from sustained underinvestment, extensive speculation, foreign competition and the aftermath of the war with Prussia, involving substantial reparations. (*Germinal* and Zola's novel *L'Argent* (1891) are interesting to read in conjunction here.) This made inroads into the self-confidence of the bourgeoisie, while giving the workers substantial cause for complaint. The first establishment victims to feel the pinch were inevitably the dependent, lower echelons, the civil servants and intellectuals operating the bureaucratic and ideological apparatus. It is into this category that many of the Revival writers fall.

That some of this dependent group should choose a religious rather than secular—and passive rather than active—form of expression for their reactions to this situation depended very much on individual circumstances. Bloy, for example, whose development shows clearly the specifically petit-bourgeois nature of the Revival, moved from an oppressive childhood in the provinces to an unwanted apprenticeship in Paris. There he had his first brief, heady contact with the sense of an alternative on the fringes of the bizarre Catholic-bohemian world of Barbey d'Aurevilly. This contact, marred by his own ineptness and lack of self-confidence, was broken by the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, during which he served under the Right-wing General Cathelineau and wholeheartedly adopted the nationalist "Catholic" propaganda pumped out by the authorities to justify French failures and the ultimate defeat. His letters home are suddenly filled with references to the penitential cult of the Sacred Heart, and his autobiographical novel, *Le Désespéré* (1886), describes the descent of grace in the trenches. After the war he continued to uphold, with absolute conviction, the same dogmas and the same cult which, associating him with larger institutions—the universal Church and the nation—gave him a very special complex of answers to his complex and contradictory private needs. His private sense of inadequacy, like the national sense, found a rationale in a theology of suffering in which the humiliated victim was central. He could bor-

row a rhetoric of opposition, on ethical grounds, to a society which had no place for him in its economic structures. He was offered scapegoats for his own, and his class's failures—the Jews and socialists. Finally, and perhaps most important, he gained a sense of belonging to a group still socially reputable, only recently displaced from its position as moral and intellectual arbiter. The predominantly Right-wing Church, after 1871, offered a structure in which men like Bloy could dissociate themselves from certain aspects of society which had proved inadequate or oppressive without undergoing the traumas of complete rejection. The challenge the Church offered to an inhuman, materialist, bourgeois society was couched in terms which immediately defused it, replacing revolutionary action with patient attendance on grace.

It was a sense of dispossession and abdication which at this period formed the common ground of the French Catholic Church and those writers whose neophyte enthusiasms crystallised and confirmed within it very particular aspects of traditional doctrine. The social eclipse of both individuals and Church was ratified and transcended by a dogmatic revival based on the Cross, the Eucharist and the Communion of Saints, considered primarily as a communion of penitential suffering. Collaboration with an anti-clerical Republic after 1873 was ruled out by mutual suspicion and fear of contamination; despairing of regaining social power by direct political means, the Right-wing Revival in theology and literature tried to achieve the same end by working for the “spiritual” and “moral” renewal of society. The values which the work of the imaginative writers is concerned to protect and promulgate are ultimately a reassertion of a lost position.

The sanctity of individual personality is a major preoccupation. The Revival set the individual in splendid Romantic isolation, to protect him from assimilation or “reduction” to the masses. His “essential” self was carefully separated from the self operating in history, to protect it from the determining forces of the environment or of the “appétences bestiales” (Bloy)—which the Revival, significantly, for its own heroes usually christens the “passions”. (The abuse which Barbey and Bloy heap on the protagonists of Zola's Naturalist novels is illuminating here.) For Bloy, it is an act of faith that the “truly” human survives and flowers in the most unpropitious circumstances with the help of grace. Grinding poverty, seduction, ignorance, leave no mark but the grace of humility on the astounding heroine of *La Femme pauvre* (1897):

The young girl's profound personality continued to exist below the monstrous sandbanks and the desolate marshes of her apparent earthly life, and below the terrifying underground waters of her penitence—like those wondrous crypts concealed in the centre of the earth, which a single drop of light would make as bright as heaven's basilicas.

Saved from the crowd on earth, the truly human rediscovered itself in assimilation to the spiritual community. The historical particularity of a man's actions was incorporated into the single work of co-operative suffering with the Redeemer, through the Communion of Saints. For Bloy:

The complete man, destined, according to the creative Word, to be no more than a likeness or an image, renewed every generation in a billion souls, is compelled to be this always, whatever he does, and so prepare, in the twilight of History, an unimaginable Coming.

There are of course the good and the bad, and the Redeemer's Cross is always there; but both do exactly what has been foreseen, and can do no other, and are born and live only to gloss the mysterious Text, multiplying to infinity figures and symbolic characters. (*L'Ame de Napoléon*, 1912)

This reduction of man and his history to the Romantic symbols of ciphers on a page, mere figures of an imagination (albeit divine) is no accident. The Revival made explicit that awareness of the fundamentally theatrical and fictive nature of the self which had always been a tragic strand of Romantic subjectivity; in these circumstances, the image of Christ cloaks a feeling of real impotence. At the end of the nineteenth century, the question posed by bourgeois society since its first emergence—whether selfhood is created with the active participation of the individual, or imposed on him by forces outside and beyond his control—finally secreted its own answer. The pessimism and passivity of this particular answer is in no way mitigated by the attribution of responsibility to Providence, rather than material causes. The image of an essential Text implies an unacceptable reduction of the agents of the human epic to mere figures, images neatly placed by the organising gaze of God and the poet, which gaze absorbs into itself all the significance of the human activity.

Closely linked with the dignity of the individual is that of “the country”—national revival and national unity. Since the seventeenth century, the doctrine of the Sacred Heart had been a rallying point for the cause of national unity. This took on a new anti-socialist significance under the aegis of the aristocratic and upper middle-class Right in the monarchist Assembly elected after 1871, in the anti-Commune backlash. National pilgrimages and acts of worship were organised, culminating in the Assembly's dedication of France to the Sacred Heart in July 1873. The core of the doctrine, suffering and substitution, expressed the conviction that the present decline of France—punishment for her straying from the old traditions—was merely temporary and destined to be followed with greater glory. It substituted potent actors—Mary and Christ—for the impotent human agents caught up in the decline. This notion of substitution, through individuals or the whole Communion of

Saints, is present in all the Revival's projects for national renewal. Most common is the idea of the single individual carrying the hopes of the whole nation; the Revival longs for a "strong man", a thaumaturge, to transcend the limitations it acknowledges in its own present. In Claudel's play *Tête d'Or* (first version 1889) the hero, self-crowned King, and the heroine, the crucified, dispossessed Princess, restore purpose to the nation through their bloody, protracted sufferings; while the pagan Emperor in *Le Repos du Septième Jour* (1896) descends into hell to seek news of salvation for his people. Other writers point to the example of Napoleon, the "revolutionary" who founded the bourgeois empire, creating present society—"sent", according to Bloy, by God to replace the decadent Bourbon line. Bloy also made a valiant effort to rescue the monarchist tradition in France by providing a rhetoric to transform the pale Bourbon Pretender Naundorff into the nation's Saviour, but had to give up the attempt and present him instead as an inverted image of Christ, symbolising the almost unregenerate mediocrity of a society which could only be rescued from the outside, by gratuitous grace. The change of intention admitted the bankruptcy of the interests to which Bloy had hitched his flag, but at the same time stubbornly refused to look beyond that bankruptcy to other, ascendent, human forces.

The maintenance of order is a priority in the Revival's value-system. Moral order is an obvious preoccupation; an ever-present fear of the anarchic impulses of individual passion produces in many plays and novels glaring contradictions between scarcely-repressed desires and ascetic ideals often harsher than the Jansenist. Images of enforced separation and desire for union abound in Claudel's work. An ascending curve of repression can be traced through Huysmans' novels, after his abandonment of Naturalism, from *Là-bas*, his first flirtation with the spiritual world in the form of Satanism, to the novels of his Catholic period, *La Cathédrale* and *L' Oblat*, where all the resources of ritual and symbolism, exhaustively catalogued, are called upon to exorcise the disruptive presence of the flesh. At an earlier stage of the Revival, Barbey made a virtue of claiming a place for the flesh—after all, redeemed—in any work that professed to be fully Catholic, and therefore fully human. But even he, in his novels, was forced to impose harsh penitential *dénouements* on heroes who transgressed the strict limits set to human passion. Sombreval, *Le Prêtre marié*, who sins against the sacraments of priesthood and marriage is punished by the death of his daughter, fruit of his sin. The Revival's occasional moral generosity is only pseudo-radical; it combines a desire for greater personal freedom with a fear of the effects of this on society as a whole.

Its underlying premise is that the moral order must be maintained to underpin the social order. Impurity, like all acts of dis-

obedience to authoritarian imperatives, has wide-reaching disruptive effects. Self-restraint, humility and passivity are the attributes of the good man and the good citizen. The moral tension between self-expression and self-restraint occurs within a specific set of social tensions; moral and political licence are linked. The political parallel to the ethical transgression is the revolt of the poor and the dispossessed against the possessors; and it is here that a symptomatic reading of the Revival's proclaimed values would disclose its true as opposed to its "ideological" allegiances.

The Church's stance on the "social problem" at the turn of the century is clear. Only rhetorically opposed to a capitalist order to which she was economically committed, her nods in the direction of the masses deceived no-one. Huysmans commented in 1901 on the ineffectiveness of the social encyclicals:

The common man has a simplistic viewpoint. He only sees the priest for births, marriages and deaths--and then he's tricked and cheated. He can see quite well that the priest favours the rich, while the poor man--with rare exceptions--is only just tolerated in the Church. He doesn't like his parish priest, or the curates--and he's quite right. . . . All these encyclicals on boss-worker relations are hot-air balloons, filled with clichés ... From the 1880's, when the Republicans established power, the Church made determined efforts to improve her image. *Rerum novarum* (May 1891) tried to reconcile social justice and the need for order, but made its first priority the protection of individual property rights, and simply restated the doctrine that work was a form of expiation, poverty a vocation, and the class system one which encouraged independence and initiative and offered unparalleled opportunities for the exercise of charity. The Papacy explicitly preferred a reforming framework of private institutions over one based on legislation. *Graves de communi* (January 1901) welcomed the term "Christian democracy" and promptly proceeded to re-define it, emptying it of all concept of popular power, preaching general benevolence, and appealing to the traditional charitable duties of the aristocracy, in a way which indicated little sense of present economic realities. The most practical move was the institution of worker-priests, which failed for lack of preparation and inadequate recruitment. In *Paris* (1898) Zola gives a portrait of one such priest, whose experiences among the city slums rapidly turn him to a convinced atheist and socialist.

Most of the Revival writers, in varying forms, adopted the hierarchy's double vision. First of all, poverty was a scandal, and the poor to be pitied and defended. Bloy, who counted himself for these purposes as one of them, and later Bernanos, said this in a violent anarchist rhetoric: the Church was hypocritical, rich priests and their wealthy congregations were eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the poor, exploiting their labour, keeping them in

moral and intellectual darkness. In *Le Désespéré*, and later *Le Sang du Pauvre* (1909), Bloy prophesied apocalyptic destruction for society, at the hands of masses who could be patient no longer—particularly, he pointed out, given the spread of socialism, depriving them of the hope of compensation in the afterlife. But such statements do not indicate total commitment to the workers' cause; Bloy borrowed his language from the literary anarchists of the 1890's, and his attacks are dictated as much by antipathy to the mediocrity of bourgeois culture as by sympathy for the masses. He revealed his anti-populism in a letter of 1901 to the bohemian slum poet Jehan Rictus (Gabriel Randon), expressing contempt for these "frightful rudimentary beings", creatures of mere animal instinct. In 1884, in a newspaper article, he had already summarily dismissed Clemenceau's appeal for a minimum wage as: "The extermination of all freedom for capital, universal strikes, a fair distribution of famine, and fraternal massacres to finish up with". For him and for Claudel, money was a basic unit of social intercourse. The first version of Claudel's *L'Echange*, written in 1895, already made this plain. Bloy's two series, *Exégèse des lieux communs* (1902, 1913) made the point ironically, contriving to castigate bourgeois materialism but assert at the same time that, until the Apocalypse, money and its abuses were here to stay. Even thirty years later, Bernanos argued that the social problem was insoluble (*Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*, 1938); claiming that the Marxists saw economic inequality as the "invention" of the exploiting classes, he asserted in contradistinction that poverty was the ineradicable product of original sin, and it was necessary to impose that special suffering which alone led to virtue, freedom and dignity. The "asceticism" (poverty) of the masses would be the providential agent of the renewal of France. In all three cases, the dual vision of these writers is an indication of an uneasy, marginal position in their society, which enabled them to see and formulate contradictions which fell outside the understanding of many of their contemporaries, while at the same time inhibiting them from pursuing these contradictions to a logical resolution.

For a neat totalisation of the values at stake for the Revival, and an indication of the way in which these meshed with Catholic doctrine and dogma, a useful text is Claudel's play *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, which began life in 1892 as *La Jeune Fille Violaine*, and was regularly revised by the author until the definitive stage version of 1948. The play presents domestic, social and spiritual planes dislocated by the intrusion of unsuspected physical and spiritual needs—and then reunified and renewed not by revolutionary action, but by submission and suffering. In the last version in particular, with the advantage of the perspective offered by half-a-century of global war, catastrophic social breakdown, and the construction of the first successful "socialist" state, Claudel achieved

an awareness of issues and priorities towards which in earlier versions he was still only groping; and he was able to blend the various elements of the play—setting, situations, character relationships and the ideological frame of reference—into a coherent aesthetic whole which hoped to leave no loose ends, no problems unanswered.

The drama is set in the time of Joan of Arc, in a France torn by civil war and a Europe spiritually divided by the claims of rival Popes. The protagonists are members of a family living in a secluded enclave in a disintegrating feudal society, serving God and the land, united by a spirit of co-operation and a sense of hierarchy. Divisions between them appear and are healed in a context which declares their total enclosure in the will of God; a parallel world is established, in which it is easy to show personal and social catastrophes as mere contingencies, ultimately working for the greater good of those who suffer them. The mediaeval setting already displaces the more difficult problems which a contemporary secular context would have had to formulate; even within this, historical time and space are dissolved into the eternal perspectives of Providence. The operative calendar is that of the Church's festivals and offices; Biblical typology transforms the feudal estate into both Eden and Gethsemane; action is given a liturgical focus, on the Eucharist and the sacrificial altar. Unity is reasserted over the broken body of Violaine, the humble, willing victim; her destitution enables the rest of the world to rejoice in the reaffirmation of God's order—the established hierarchy. The priorities are still those of 1892, but more systematically and emphatically expressed.

The writers of the Revival prided themselves on their theological purity, but theirs was not an innocent theology. Rather, it was the ideology of a particular social group at a particular historical conjuncture. and it speaks everywhere, in its resonances and omissions, with the voice of its historical complicity.