

THE ENIGMA OF LEON BLOY

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THE readers of Léon Bloy can be divided, on the whole, into two opposing camps. Those who read his work primarily for its religious content see him as a pious Christian who vehemently protested against the evils of the modern world; and, even if his imperfections are recognised, few critics have attempted to explain or even reconcile the conflicting tendencies of his character. There are others, however, who frankly scoff at his Christian principles, finding it impossible to believe in the religious sincerity of a man who could live, during the greater part of his life, on the generosity of his friends, and could cover his enemies with violent scorn and abuse.

Few writers have penetrated very far into the motives and principles of this puzzling man: he is either dismissed as a literary joke, or accepted unquestioningly for the sincerity of his faith. The complexity of his character is, nevertheless, bewildering. The more we study his correspondence and diaries, the more uncertain we become of what he is setting out to achieve. Bloy seems to have lived his life on two distinct levels. He certainly saw himself as a modern St Francis, an apostle of poverty in a world of materialism, reduced to begging and borrowing from friends to provide his daily bread; yet contemporary records show that he spent a great deal of money on absinthe and amusements, and his poverty could undoubtedly have been mitigated by more careful management and foresight. How can Léon Bloy, fighter and hater of his fellow men, be reconciled with the Christian evangelist he claimed to be? How can the devout Catholic have been attracted by some of the most obscene tendencies in the literature of his day? The answer to all these problems can, I suggest, be found in a deeper penetration into the piety and the religious outlook of Bloy himself.

The keynote of Bloy's religious life is to be found, above all, in his intense love for God. The man who could alienate most of his contemporaries by the vindictiveness of his pen was, at heart, tender and affectionate. Love was the guiding principle of his life and the mainspring of his religion. In his view, the simplicity of

love was all that mattered in religion: none of the achievements of human genius could be compared with the glory of a simple and sincere act of faith. He was opposed to any complicated reasoning on religious questions. He would tell those whom he attempted to convert to religion that the essential thing was to submit one's intellect to what God chose to reveal.

'You have only to learn the questions from the children's catechism . . . then ask for baptism. You have a perfect right to it; and St Philip the Deacon demanded nothing more from the Ethiopian eunuch than an act of faith and desire. The grace of the sacrament will do the rest.'¹

But, in spite of his insistence on the pre-eminence of love which our Lord himself stated was the foundation of true religion, there must have been some 'flaw' in the cohesion of Bloy's religious system. It is to be found largely, I would suggest, in his very insistence on the love of God to the exclusion of every other consideration in his religious life. In his extreme dislike of all ascetic discipline he was surely acting against the traditional practice of the Church, which has always regarded ascetism as having a necessary part in spiritual progress. Bloy, however, tended to regard the discipline which the clergy imposed upon their flock as a hindrance rather than a help to the growth of the love of God within the soul. According to Bloy, the ordinary confessor refuses to recognise a saint even when he sees one, and is all too eager to discourage the repentant sinner with the remembrance of sins which are passed and forgiven. So he calls the Exercises of St Ignatius *un moule déprimant*, and comments on his own spiritual development in writing of Marchenoir:

'His spiritual progress had been in no way affected by the rewards and punishments offered in dreary sermons, in the light of which people are prone to misinterpret the most selfless ecstasy. He had fallen upon God like a wild beast pouncing on its prey as soon as God had revealed himself.'²

Yet Bloy was a man who could ill afford to disregard the need for spiritual discipline. His sensitive nature may have drawn him irresistibly to the love of God, but this very sensitivity made it all the more difficult for him to love his fellows. His love for God may have filled his soul with ecstasy, but not, evidently, with a

1 *Le Pèlerin de l'Absolu*, p. 1755. (All references to Bloy's works are to *L'Oeuvre Complète*. Paris, Bernouard, 1948-50.)

2 *Le Désespéré*, p. 62.

feeling of sacrifice and renunciation. He recognised his sins with sincerity and humility, but he never overcame them. He never got beyond the stage of beating his breast and crying '*mea culpa*'. On the other hand, Bloy had the most ardent desire for sanctity, and since he regarded all ascetic discipline as base and unworthy, he tended to think of holiness as something easily achieved—in fact, almost within his grasp. He spoke rather glibly of the highest mystical experience as though it were a common occurrence. He read writings of the mystics a good deal, and in his letters and journals he adapted their phrases, and (perhaps unconsciously) applied them, somewhat literally, to himself.

'... if only you knew the delights which God bestows and the sweet taste of the Holy Ghost.'³

he writes, quoting Ruysbroek. And when converts are made as the result of his work, he writes:

'It is as though our Lord Jesus were kissing me on my lips with his divine mouth.'⁴

Bloy never got, I think we may safely say, beyond the purgative way, and yet it is clear throughout his work that he imagined he was chosen for something great in the spiritual sphere—'I am certain that something great is in store for me', he says quite openly. Holiness at that stage seemed so easily achieved.

This, it would seem, helps to explain the 'enigma of Léon Bloy'. All those who have attempted to maintain a balanced view in reading Bloy's work have been baffled that so much sin and such intense aspiration to holiness could exist side by side in the same man. The explanation is to be found in his extreme pride, the pride of an artist who saw himself as a man set apart for the spiritual guidance of his fellow-men. Bloy himself recognised this difficulty in one of his flashes of insight which make his work of such value in the spiritual sphere:

'We have to admit that true peace is only to be found in religion. . . . I have found joy in this and in nothing else, and my joy was great even in the most dreadful suffering. But if this joy is to be lasting, one's life must be a holy one, and that is an easier thing for you to achieve than for me. An artist's vocation has its dangers, bringing with it little peace of mind, and my difficulty is just that I am one of the most restless of artists.'⁵

3 *Mendiant Ingrat*, I, p. 189.

4 *Le Pèlerin de l'Absolu*, p. 1778.

5 *Lettres aux Montchal*, p. 309.

This he wrote during the loneliness and the disturbing experiences of his early life, but in 1902 we find him battling with the same problem and certainly not resigned to his unspectacular life as a Christian:

'I am distressed that my life is so second-rate, and I feel as dissatisfied with myself as I could possibly be. Holiness is far, far away, and seems to be moving further from me all the time.'⁶

Nevertheless, we could never accuse Léon Bloy of hollow emotionalism, in spite of his desire for 'quick results' and his somewhat superficial attraction to the mystical life. All through his life, Bloy was known for his daily attendance at Mass. During his stay in Denmark he would walk miles every day to get to church in the depths of a Scandinavian winter, and he saw in Pope Pius X's advocacy of daily communion more than a counsel of perfection. His devotional life was intense, and the impression he made on his intimate friends is significant. Jacques Maritain writes that he could never forget the picture of Bloy saying his rosary at home slowly and quietly, and Raïssa Maritain writes:

'Much will be forgiven of this man, for he loved much.'⁷

The quieter and more realistic attitude with which Bloy faced life after his marriage influenced his religion. The small circle of devoted friends who gathered round him in his old age, and the converts who came into the Church from reading his works were held together by the strength of his religious life.

Yet all consolation seems to have been denied Bloy in his devotional life. The violence of his reactions to his literary opponents, his pride and intolerance, still harassed and disturbed him. It was not that Bloy's character made sanctity wholly impossible. The greatest saints have sometimes been the greatest sinners. But, it seems, Bloy was not chosen for outstanding holiness. St John of the Cross says:

'God does not lead to perfect contemplation all those who resolutely give themselves up to the interior life. Why is that? God alone knows.'⁸

It was just this that Bloy could not accept. He tried to make Chris-

6 *Quatre Ans de Captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne*, p. 937.

7 Raïssa Maritain, *Les Grandes Amitiés*, New York, 1941, p. 178.

8 Quoted by R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation according to St Thomas Aquinas and St John of the Cross*; trans. by M. T. Doyle. St Louis, 1937.

tianity fit into a neat pattern of cause and effect, prayer and ecstasy, and when he found that God does not always work in this way, he seems at times to have lost his confidence in Christ's salvation. Why, he asks, has Christ abandoned the world for two thousand years without leaving any consolation? When will the Holy Ghost descend upon the earth to free man from his struggle with sin and bring the unblemished Glory of God?

It is his struggle with sin, however, and his passionate longing for holiness that give the religious writing of Léon Bloy its appeal among Catholics, and rightly so. He may have been the *mendiant ingrat*, at times the *désespéré*, he may have called his fellow journalists 'cochons' (and, in doing so, apologised to the four-footed pigs in the sty for the insult he was conferring upon them!), but he was also the *pèlerin de l'Absolu*. Though he himself was never permitted to attain to the state of holiness which he so much desired, he was gifted with spiritual insight, and he saw not only the truth but the vital necessity and the inner logic of religion. He realised the dreadful consequences of materialism. He saw avarice and spiritual sloth not only in their daily manifestations, but realised their terrifying consequences in the supernatural sphere. He foresaw, to a considerable degree, the calamities which were likely to befall the men of the twentieth century. Indulgence in sensual enjoyment must of necessity be punished by physical chastisement. 'Suffering is none other than sensuous delight laid bare', he wrote.⁹ Bernanos¹⁰ saw in Bloy a modern prophet who foresaw the consequences of the sins of his age. When Hitler was only a baby, Bloy seems to have seen the horrors of Dachau and Buchenwald. Even during his lifetime he attracted quite a number of converts into the Church, and if his imperfections are seen in the light of his religious outlook as a whole, he may yet attract many more readers in England, as he did in France, to the Church of which he was a devoted member.

⁹ *Le Pèlerin de l'Absolu*, p. 1792.

¹⁰ Bernanos, *Dans l'amitié de Léon Bloy*, in Luc Estang, *Présence de Bernanos*, Paris, 1947, p. xii.