



ARTICLE

‘Abîme Inconnus’: Raïssa Maritain’s Poetic and Mystical Gifts

Emma Mason 

English and Comparative Literary Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
Email: emma.mason@warwick.ac.uk

(Received 23 January 2026; revised 23 January 2026; accepted 28 January 2026)

Abstract

Raïssa Maritain is one of the most compelling Catholic poets of the twentieth century, and yet her work is largely overlooked by literary critics. This short essay explores her mystical reading of darkness as a place of spiritual discernment, intuition, and kenosis and the poetic night vision she developed to negotiate it. The essay reads her as a fire-thief intent on stealing from poetry a light able to illuminate God’s dazzling darkness and the ruinous gloom of war.

Keywords: Catholic modernism; contemplation; poetry and mysticism; Raïssa Maritain; war

In her 1939 essay, ‘Message aux poètes qui sont à la guerre’ (‘Message to poets who are at war’), Raïssa Maritain described poetry as the exteriorization of the artist’s intuition of and testimony to the sacredness of reality. Mired in war, conflict, bloodshed, and terror, reality remained sacred for Maritain because it was material and felt: its horror and distortions do not invite the poet into a moralizing politics or series of didactic claims about the moment; rather it is the poet’s task to register the dark reality inclusive of both the everyday and the ‘unknown depths’ of the spirit.¹ The moral and political are accessible to the poet only through a powerful silence in which to speak the ‘bitterness’ of the age and to hear its haunting murmurs. Those who retreat in contempt, Maritain claimed, end up caught in a sterile loneliness. The poet and the contemplative, however, are mysteriously tuned into the world and can become the ‘voice’ that bears the ‘burden’ of salvation like the ‘poor saint who once carried Christ and the whole world upon his shoulders’ (‘Vous serez la voix de tous ceux qui sont aujourd’hui chargés de notre salut, comme le pauvre saint qui porta le Christ et le monde entire sur ses épaules’).² Poetry thus appears from the artist’s inner life, the ‘unknown abysses’ of the darkness of the metaphysical and ontological reality of her

¹Raïssa Maritain, ‘Message aux poètes qui sont à la guerre’, in *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques et Raïssa Maritain*, eds. by Jacques Maritain and Raïssa Maritain, 17 vols (Freiburg: Éditions Universitaires, 1993), vol.14, p. 1136 (further references abbreviated to *OCJRM*).

²Maritain, ‘Message aux poètes’, *OCJRM*, vol. 14, pp. 1136–1137.

time ('On s'est laissé d'abord couler à pic dans ces abîmes inconnus'). In her compelling book on Maritain, Brenna Moore translates 'abîmes inconnus' as 'nocturnal navigations', a phrase that captures the mystical undersong of Maritain's essay – John of the Cross and his dark night of the soul, for example, and Paul Claudel's maritime mysticism in which the sea invokes the totality of God's presence. For Maritain, their mystic intuition about the world can only reach and give expression to the materiality of a world scarred and eroded by violence and power in the form of the poem. As her friend, the poet Czesław Miłosz, claimed, the first half of the twentieth century was 'not hell's first circle, but a much deeper one' in which poetry was 'as essential as bread'.³ A statement that for some might seem facile, Miłosz stressed that poetry was an 'inner synthesis' of new knowledges armed with patience, and as such was the 'opposite of didactic art' and warfare.⁴

Maritain's unknown abysses and nocturnal navigations are moments in which she ascertained how to journey into and become immersed by a poetic and mystical discernment, intuition, and kenosis. In 1918, she wrote of the challenges of feeling submerged by darkness and claimed that God had called her to 'sacrifice', 'self-giving', and 'vigilance over all my intentions. Everything grows darker. The time of childhood is over'.⁵ By 1922, she directly framed the painfulness of being in darkness in relation to John of the Cross, and called on his own experience of the dark as a 'purifying Night, infinitely painful, which ceases when the soul has attained the degree of purity and holiness willed by God' ('L'obscurité que décrit saint Jean de la Croix [ou du moins celle sur laquelle il insiste le plus] est la *Nuit purificatrice* et infiniment douloureuse, qui cesse lorsque l'âme a atteint le degré de pureté et de sainteté voulu par Dieu').⁶ The light that emerges from this initial state of darkness is not illuminating but terrifying and scorching, a 'flame of eternal life' that sets the soul on fire. Such fire is not the consuming fire of Hebrews 12.29, but the fire in Exodus 13.21 wherein 'By day the Lord went ahead of [the Israelites] in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light'. From this fire, Maritain shaped a different kind of night vision, a way to see through the darkness and gain a clarity that could be translated into the poem. In her essay 'Sense and Non-Sense in Poetry', for example, she described poets whom she considered able to offer clarity through mastery as fire thieves or fire takers:

Everything burns with these 'fire-thieves' and everything takes the form that Poetry's good pleasure requires. Here we find both unheard-of discoveries and poetry, the light of intuition and of intelligence. And this poetry persuades us that the mystery of the sun and of radiant daylight is not less than that of the dark night.⁷

³Brenna Moore, *Sacred Dread: Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival (1905–1944)* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), pp. 124–125; Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 31.

⁴See David Orr, 'The Great(ness) Game', *The New York Times*, 19 February 2009.

⁵Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, p. 213 (Deuxième Carnet: 1918–1919).

⁶Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, p. 481.

⁷My translation; but see also James Matthew Wilson's translation: 'Everything burns [with] unheard-of discoveries, and poetry, the light of intuition, and that of intelligence. And this mystery persuades us that the mystery of the sun and of radiant daylight is not less than that of the obscurest night', in *Poetry and Mysticism*, ed. by Raïssa Maritain (Milwaukee, WI: Wiseblood Books, 2022), p. 14.

These poets include Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Racine, Goethe, Pushkin, and Baudelaire, but the role of fire-taker was assumed by Maritain too, another mystical fire-thief who kindled a poetic heat in her poetry and prose, journals and letters to emphasise the urgency of creating light dark times (a task that, as Milosz wrote, was as essential as the provision of bread).

This reading of Maritain comes out of my current book project on Catholic women mystics writing at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century (women such as Thérèse of Lisieux, Gertrud von le Fort, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein, Gerda Walther, Caryll Houselander, as well as Raïssa Maritain). All devout Catholics who also became writers and poets, these women did not seek to accommodate or appropriate modernity, nor did they challenge or oppose it. Rather they turned to poetry and philosophy to express their faith in the Catholic Church as the mystical body of Christ, a description that was underlined by Pope Pius XII in his 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*. So often in secular literary criticism is the modern religious imagination consigned to the category of oceanic modernism, or what Mina Loy called 'the obsessions prescribed by the Holy Church of Rome ... re-edited by the Psychoanalyst'.⁸ But Maritain did not edit her faith, and embraced the Church and its doctrines as the foundation of her poetic imagining, embodying, and bringing about of God's kingdom. She received Holy Communion at least once a day and avidly followed Aquinas' recommendation of frequent liturgical exercise.⁹ When she was too ill to travel, she sought and was granted permission to have Mass said at the home she shared with Jacques in Meudon, where from 1923 they were given permission to install a private chapel.¹⁰ From the point of her reception into the Church in 1906, Maritain redefined her relationship to God's darkness in silent, contemplative prayer, an active state of deep and intense meditation she described in her *Journal* as 'quiet absorption'. Quiet absorption was 'an inner state' rather than a condition of 'concentration', a 'gift received' in which the soul is secretly and dynamically unified with God.¹¹ In a journal entry from 1917, she explained that there are two 'distinct kinds' of absorption:

I have observed two quite distinct kinds of *recueillement* (absorption in God).

In the first, the eyes remain open, the intellect is enlightened and the soul is in a kind of ecstasy.

In the second, the eyes are closed, the intellect receives nothing, all the affections of the will are, as it were, focussed in a single point and united to God. A union which is ardent, often delightful, but takes place in a kind of darkness.¹²

⁸Mina Loy, 'Conversion,' in *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, ed. by Sara Crangle (Champaign, Dublin, and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), see section III: 'Essays and Commentary', p. 227.

⁹Judith D. Suther, *Raïssa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), p. 44.

¹⁰Suther, *Pilgrim, Poet, Exile*, p. 44.

¹¹Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, p. 181; and see Raïssa's *Journal*, presented by Jacques Maritain (New York: Magi Books, 1974–1975), p. 31, fn. 3.

¹²Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, pp. 190–191.

A few months later, she found herself unable to sing in Mass so caught up was she in her prayer. She sought to 'plunge' herself into the 'darkness of faith' where she wrote that she would find the 'splendour of divine light'.¹³ From this silent darkness, she received poetry and music through a sudden flame of grace, a process her friend, Jan Kott, described as a 'metaphysical flash: a flash full of the beauty of metaphysics'.¹⁴ Her experience of grace was thus a lighting of the lamps amidst the gloom, a wave of energy that caused in her a physiological as well as emotional shift. Her nocturnal meditations were thus essential to her navigation into the light. She called the 'best part' of her life her mornings, from which, she wrote, 'I draw all my energies; I must at all costs preserve the solitude, silence and stillness of it'.¹⁵ An entry following her description of *recueillement* reads simply: '*Monday in Holy Week*.—Long silence with God in the morning and afternoon'.¹⁶ Finding and intuiting grace in the light of the early morning was thus a training in Christian formation for Maritain, and her poetry a response to her time with God. As she wrote in a journal entry from 1939:

29th July 1939.—Long time of absorption in God. The soul asks itself if it must still go on for a long while beating its wings against the bars of its cage.

Shall I write any more poems?

With me, poems are not made in the midst of a continuous clamour of the imagination – but in the heart of the most naked silence when it has attained a sufficient degree of depth and purity ... I have spent so many years in mortifying the imagination to create in myself the silence propitious to being alone with God.¹⁷

Maritain did not conflate poetry and mysticism, however. She intimated that both the poet and mystic can only intuit reality by withdrawing into silence to kenotically empty themselves. But where the poet's silence was one of catharsis and the making of art from mystery, the mystic's silence was one of intensified love for God and his creation. Neither the poet nor the mystic hides from the world in this withdrawn state: as she emphasised in the essay with which I opened, the poet, the mystic, the solitary, the contemplative are all connected through the mystery of their faith to the work and hope of real people and the lived community of the church.

The poet and the mystic also promote a mystical realism in which believers are gathered in the universal, knowable, and comprehensible reality of God and not in what Paul Tillich called a 'second reality behind empirical reality'.¹⁸ They do so by bringing to life what she called 'Catholic doctrine luminous and total', an assent to the ontological reality of the incarnation, eschatology, revelation, and theodicy. Her mystical realism is thus a commitment to a dimly lit God glimpsed in written ignitions of 'the thick darkness where God was' (Exodus 20. 21). I use the phrase 'written ignitions'

¹³Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, p. 206.

¹⁴Moore, *Sacred Dread*, p. 36.

¹⁵Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, pp. 406–407.

¹⁶Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, pp. 190–191.

¹⁷Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, p. 407.

¹⁸Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three volumes in one* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), vol I, p. 178.

to refer to her own poetry and the mystical verse of others (John of the Cross, Claudel, Dante, Péguy), poems that offered fleeting but dazzling sparks of light through which to navigate the darkness. Maritain did not seek to escape the nocturnal but rather sought to wade into it, and, immersed in its depths, find fragmentary sparks of vitality and life. As she wrote her journal entry for 11 November 1937:

Identity of death and life – Identity
of opposites:
‘Blessed are they that mourn...’

O death where is thy sting?

The road of death and the road of life Are
one road to the footsteps of love.

‘He who wishes to keep his soul, shall lose it.’
He who shall give his life shall be reborn more living.

From stage to stage and from form to form
The whole creature is transformed
Through death after death till
life everlasting.

At the core of holy death is a higher life.

In thee darkness of human life
A faint light glimmers
Like a star sending down its rays
From unimaginable distance:
Only with footsteps of death
Can we mount the ladder of life.

By imagining the darkness, Maritain conjured a vision of light that precisely because it was faint, glimmering, and abstruse illuminated her participatory relationship with God.¹⁹ By becoming completely absorbed into the darkness of the night and trusting that guidance would appear, she found herself in what she and Jacques called ‘subsistent Love’. As they wrote in Jacques’ 1932 book, *Degrees of Knowledge* (*Distinguer pour unir, ou, les degrés du savoir*), mystic contemplation exists only ‘for the union of love with God’, a ‘form of knowledge by love, a “loving attention to God”’.²⁰

Many of Maritain’s poems underscore her desire to transform herself into a fire thief who stole from the pillar of fire in which God is hidden: examples include ‘Meditation’, ‘Night Letter’, and ‘All is Light’. I will end, however, with her spellbinding dream sequence, ‘The Restoration of the Pictures’, in which the Hasidic mysticism of Maritain’s Russian family is wedded to the Roman Catholicism she embraced in Europe. From the darkness light comes and goes but the grace that comes through her recollection of the vision sustains a memory of joy as well as her faith:

¹⁹Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (Glasgow: The Centenary Press, 1937), pp. 394–395.

²⁰Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 398.

We were in Rome not far from the Piazza di Spagna in the midst of a thick and restless crowd, and we too were anxious. Was war coming? Then, to the left in the sky, appeared a mass of light. Amid the clearness of daylight it came forth quite distinct. As it came, it looked at first like a mass of stars. The stars gradually increased in size and we saw they were a cohort of angels. And all at once the angels were among us. They marched in closed ranks like an army of young men clothed in black and white. Grace and joy spread everywhere as they passed. Everything became beautiful with a resplendent beauty, extremely well defined... .

After a fairly long time the angelic cohorts began to leave us and the joy began to pass from our souls. When we had traversed with the angels the rooms in which we lived we felt their presence without seeing them. We saw them once again as they took their leave. They comforted us by saying: we will be back again soon. I awoke happy, sorrowful with my regret at the departed light, fortified by the grace of the dream.²¹

Here Maritain presents an image of priestly troopers, their black and white vestments signalling their fidelity not to conflict but to the love of God and his creation. We hear in the passage Elisha's prayer in 2 Kings 6. 16-17 wherein he entreats God to open the spiritual eyes of the King of Israel. Caught amidst a sea of fire, Elisha cries 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them'. Maritain's angels offer her and her reader a bridge 'between God and man' as Aquinas suggested they would, and so to dismiss them as anything other than real in her writing undermines her belief that God is both transcendent and immanent. Her vision of angels is thus neither fideism or fantasy, but acknowledgement of the existence of the invisible world.

At the same time, Maritain insists on the reality of these angels to suggest that despite their presence, the world is not easily spared from horror. Like Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Duino Elegies* (1912-1923) wherein the angels consume him in their 'overwhelming existence', so, too, Maritain's angels reveal to her that there is no escape from the hatred, suffering, and death of her time.²² As she wrote in the short essay 'The poetry of our time': 'Our time of blood and death; of tortures, of despair, of chaos, of disconsolation, of misery, of famine, of anguish, of accursed discoveries; time of irremediable and boundless calamity, drowning every heart which cruelty has not yet devoured'.²³ Her embrace of darkness is at once terrifying and redemptive, then. Yet its illumination by poetry, she argued, can offer saving absolution:

- God alone, He alone can receive our acceptance the silencing of our complaint, through arid, naked faith in His mercy, in His wisdom unspeakably betrayed by the appearances which are our reality,

²¹Raïssa Maritain, 'The Restoration of the Pictures', trans. Thomas Merton, in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 111.

²²Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), p. 331.

²³Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, pp. 717-718.

- then, poetry! let poetry do penance, let her be silent, because she has not words for the reality of our time; let her veil her face; let her stop flirting with our sorrow; let her forget flowers, games, graces, rhetoric and eloquence; let her strip herself and humble herself if she wishes to survive the unimaginable, the indescribable, the mortal darkness of our time.²⁴

One of the last poems in the 1965 edition of Maritain poems, *Arbre Patriache / Patriarch Tree*, translated into English by the Benedictine nun Marcella van Oosterwijk Bruyn, is ‘All is Light’, its stripped back simplicity at once penitent and redemptive. The final image embodies a brightness that comes only from a dark wayfaring out of the nocturnal and the diurnal into God. I close this note on Maritain’s work with the poem in full:

All has been given. The anguish is stilled,
Death fulfilled.

How my soul weighs light.

My spirit is given to God, in His care,
My heart is pure as mountain air.

Everything is bright.²⁵

²⁴Maritain, *Journal*, in *OCJRM*, vol. 15, p. 718.

²⁵Raïssa Maritain, *Thirty Poems by Raïssa Maritain: Patriarch Tree*, trans. a Benedictine of Stanbrook (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey Press, 1965), p. 81.