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ARTICLE

De la souffrance où nous joint l'infini: Raïssa Maritain's Poetic Theodicy and Metz's Suffering Unto God

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Abstract

This article examines the poetry of Raïssa Maritain as a distinctive form of theodicy shaped by prayer, suffering, and the catastrophic violence of the twentieth century. Situating Maritain's poetic work within the context of debates on suffering, this article places her in dialogue with Johann Baptist Metz's concept of *Leiden an Gott* ('suffering unto God'), as well as with the challenges to theodicy articulated by Elie Wiesel and Emmanuel Levinas. While Wiesel's refusal of theology after Auschwitz and Levinas's ethical critique of teleological accounts of suffering underscore the crisis of theodicy, Metz offers a theological response that centres on prayer as anguished address to God rather than rational explanation. I argue that Maritain's poetry anticipates, embodies and extends this insight by functioning as a form of poetic prayer that confronts evil without aestheticising or prematurely redeeming suffering. Through close engagement with poems written before and during the Second World War, I show how Maritain's poetic language gives voice to accusation, lament, and solidarity with the suffering other, while nonetheless holding open the possibility of redemption. In doing so, her work offers a humane poetic theodicy that both complements and critically deepens Metz's political theology.

Keywords: Holocaust; Jacques Maritain; Johann Baptist Metz; poetry; Raïssa Maritain; suffering; theodicy

Raïssa Maritain's life was marked by an intense experience of a wordless, intuitive, and simple prayer which she called *oraison*, formed in a disposition of *recueillement*.[1] Sometimes this prayer would flood her whole person, at other times it would entirely abandon her. Her life was marked by prayer and suffering; both the pain of long term

[1]The word *oraison* refers to a king of silent prayer of the heart, a wordless, intuitive expression of the love of the heart. *Recueillement* is not straightforwardly recollection or meditation in Raïssa's usage, but almost a kind of spiritual work going on unseen which speaks to the action of collecting together, or unifying.

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illness, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, the violence of the twentieth century, all of which was recorded in her journal.[2] Stymied by illness, Raïssa did not have the voluminous output of her husband, Jacques, although Jacques was quite clear that it was Raïssa's self-oblation through prayer that made his work possible. Still, Raïssa did publish two volumes of memoirs, some essays on poetry, and poems.

In this short essay, I will look at Raïssa's poetry, suggesting the ways that it offers what we might call a poetic theodicy in line with Johann Baptist Metz's idea of *Leiden an Gott*, or 'Suffering unto God'. Raïssa's poetry becomes a key place where she confronts the evil that surrounds her and also anticipates the challenge to theodicy found in post-Holocaust thinkers such as Elie Wiesel and Emmanuel Levinas. I will conclude by arguing that Raïssa's poetry offers a humane theodicy, which does not try to easily or cheaply redeem suffering experienced, but which does open up the possibility of redemption in suffering, a dimension absent in Metz's political theology.

1. A poetic theodicy after Auschwitz?

The scale of death and destruction in war combined with the sinister evil of planned mass extermination brought a new perspective to later twentieth-century philosophy and theology. Raïssa was obviously shaped by these experiences, and, indeed, her journal records her anguish over Jacques' conscription towards the end of the First World War, as well as the later evils of National Socialism and the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War. But her life was not shaped in a passive way by these experiences, something which comes across very strongly in her poetry which she writes in the course of the war.

For those writing after the horrors of War and Holocaust, no language seems adequate to encapsulate the mystery of this iniquity. The Romanian-born American writer and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, is clear that after Auschwitz there can be no theology:

> There can be no theology after Auschwitz, and no theology whatsoever about Auschwitz. For whatever we do we are lost; whatsoever we say is inadequate. One can never understand the event with God; one cannot understand the event without God. Theology? The Logos of God? Who am I to explain God? Some people try. I think that they fail. Nonetheless, it is their right to attempt it. After Auschwitz everything is an attempt.[3]

For Wiesel, theology offers an attempt to distance the experience of suffering from theological explanation, thereby distancing God from suffering and avoiding the difficult questions that could legitimately be addressed to God. Moreover, the sheer disproportion between the suffering inflicted in a place such as a concentration camp, and the possible explanation for the permission of such suffering is far too great.

[2] Raïssa was not a systematic diarist, and what we have was recorded in a series of journals, and later on loose leaves of paper. The diaries begin more formally in 1915, but the notebook begins with a list of dates important to Jacques and Raïssa going back to their first meeting with Lon Bloy on 11 June 1905. These journals were hidden away until their discovery by Jacques after Raïssa's death.

[3] Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig (eds), *Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel speak out on the Holocaust*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 93.

For Emmanuel Levinas such a disproportion makes theodicy impossible, requiring not an abstract response from theology but an ethical response on the basis of the encounter with the Other. For Levinas, all suffering is useless, and the greatest problem with the enterprise of theodicy is the attempt to impose a teleology on something which is essentially dysteleological. There is no end in suffering; it merely opens up the possibilities of suffering for others in the call made upon us by the sight of suffering.

> The suffering for the useless suffering of the other person, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon the suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-human .... It is this attention to the Other which, across the cruelties of our century – despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties – can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle – the only one which it is not possible to contest – a principle which can go so far as to command the hopes and practical discipline of vast human groups.[4]

This supreme ethical principle, Levinas argues, is found in our response to the face of the other who cries out to us and calls us to an ethical response. As Levinas puts it in an interview with Jill Robbins,

> In the innocence of our daily lives, the face of the other or the neck or the back signifies above all a demand. The face requires you, calls you outside. And already there resounds the word from Sinai, thou shalt not kill, which signifies you shall defend the life of the other .... It is the very articulation of the love of the other.[5]

Theodicy contains a kind of tension of distance. Some distance is needed in order to offer a reasoned account of suffering, but such a distance is precisely the problem for the likes of Levinas and Wiesel. So where do we go from here? While Wiesel's argument is a much more straightforward dismissal of the possibility of theology after Auschwitz, from the philosophical perspective, Levinas argues that suffering makes an ethical demand. Levinas does not offer a straightforward denial of the possibility of theodicy but rather articulates an ethical demand based on the sight of the suffering other in order to close the gap. This tension of distance also opens up questions around language. A distanced, rational account often uses a kind of abstract language in order to convey its point. While I would argue that this kind of language remains a necessary part of offering an account of evil, it cannot form the only response to evil.

One way forward is offered by another post-War, post-Holocaust writer, Johanne Baptist Metz. Metz offers a theological critique of post-Enlightenment progress and of a theology that is unable to make space for anguished cries, preferring instead to offer neatly packaged answers for difficult questions. In this way, Metz stands alongside the likes of Wiesel and Levinas where the idea of progress and tidy theology is impossible in a world after Auschwitz. But where Metz differs is that his response to

[4]Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 159.

[5]Jill Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous to Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 192.

the experience of suffering is not to abandon theodicy but to make theodicy the centre of his theological enterprise through his concept of *Leiden an Gott*, or 'Suffering unto God'. Suffering does not produce a primarily ethical response as it does for Levinas, but rather a practical response in terms of prayer. Writing in conversation with Elie Wiesel, Metz writes

> Not even theology has an answer to every question; it really is not just a game of question and answer. Rightly understood, theological answers are of the sort that the questions and cry are never forgotten. There are questions for which there are no answers, but theology has a language, a language which turns the questions back toward God. This is at any rate how I understand the so-called theodicy question.[6]

Metz identifies the cry of prayer as a key locus of theological reflection. Jesus's cry of dereliction on the Cross is but one in a series of cries which come through the Scriptures from Job to Jesus, but which includes the anguished cries of the Prophets and Patriarchs. Prayer forms the jagged edge of theological discourse, wrestling with pain, for the

> ... language of prayer is itself a language of suffering, a language of crisis, a language of affliction and of radical danger, a language of complaint and grievance, a language of crying out, and, literally, of the grumbling of the children of Israel. The language of this God-mysticism is not first and foremost one of consoling answers for the suffering one is experiencing, but rather much more a language of passionate questions from the midst of suffering, questions turned toward God, full of highly charged expectation.[7]

In Metz, we find a mode of language that might well go some way to providing a fuller theodicy, and it is in this context that we can situate poetry, and in particular Raïssa's poetry, which is so closely linked to her spiritual life.

But before looking at Raïssa's poetry specifically, I will outline the significance of poetry for theodicy more generally. In a world after the sufferings of the twentieth century it might seem, at first glance, that poetry fares no better than theology; after all, Adorno claims that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.[8] However, at the heart of Metz's desire for a serious theology which is unafraid of asking questions of God in the mode and idiom of biblical language and prayer is a demand for the poetic. While Metz himself was concerned about the ways in which suffering is all too quickly internalised into the Godhead, mythologised, or aestheticised,[9] it is clear that the language of prayer which is at the heart of *Leiden an Gott* actually amplifies the suffering

[6] Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig (eds), *Hope Against Hope*, p. 44.

[7] Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, J. M. Ashley (trans.) (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 66.

[8] Theodore Adorno, *Prisms*, Samuel and Shierry Weber (trans.) (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 34.

[9] Metz, *A Passion for God*, p. 70.

through the kinds of language used: 'Prayer does not restrain or constrain the language of suffering; rather it extends it immeasurably.'[10]

The fear of aestheticising suffering through poetry is certainly something to be cautious of, but at the heart of prayer, particularly that framed around suffering, is poetry and an obvious example in this regard is the Book of Job, where poetry allows the author(s) to do things that prose is not able to. What I mean here becomes clearer when we consider the work of Eleanore Stump, who has sought to offer a way forward for a kind of complementary relationship between abstract and intuitive knowledge. This becomes clearer with an example she uses from sacramental theology, contrasting St Thomas Aquinas's knowledge *that* Jesus is present in the Blessed Sacrament, with the accounts we have of the way in which St Thomas knew Christ to be present in the Blessed Sacrament. This second form of knowledge is characterised as personal, relational, and intuitive.[11]

Rather than fearing poetry as simply aestheticising suffering, poetry is a necessary part of theodicy, just as it is a necessary part of theology. When we encounter a mystery we need a language that has the strength to be stretched to its limits, as in the case of the Eucharist. But such a process is also important when encountering evil, the mystery of iniquity; we need the language of poetry to adequately confront such a mystery. Stretching language does not mean that we encompass the mystery or, one of Metz's chief concerns, come up with a neat theological answer rather than dealing with the tension of difficult questions. It means that our capacity to suffer unto God is immeasurably extended, and it is this that we see at the heart of Raïssa's poetry.

2. Raïssa's poetry

Although Raïssa's literary output seems to have been stymied by her sickness, she did publish poems and essays on poetry, as well as two volumes of memoirs. Raïssa's contribution to the thought of Jacques Maritain is sadly still neglected, but part of the difficulty would be to attempt to unpick the strands of Jacques and Raïssa's combined efforts, especially as Jacques makes clear that so much of what he himself produced was owed to Raïssa.

Much of Raïssa's published work is co-authored with Jacques, and this includes an introduction and guide to prayer prepared for their Thomistic Circles, published in English under the title *Prayer and Intelligence*, and some essays on poetry published in English under the title *The Situation of Poetry*.[12] I would argue that Raïssa's poetry is a kind of companion to her prayer journal, and the relationship between her journals and poetry suggests that poetry offers Raïssa the right kind of language to *Suffer Unto God,* in Metz's terms. A poetic theodicy is as much a spiritual technique as an artistic expression. In what remains I would like to give an account of Raïssa's poetry around the lead up to the Second World War, and the War itself, showing how her poetry offers an expansive language to describe suffering, which she renders to God as a series of searching cries. For Raïssa, suffering is always an opportunity of compassion, an

[10] Metz and Rahner, *The Courage to Pray*, S. O'Brien Twohig (trans.) (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), p. 13.

[11] Eleanor Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p. 57.

[12] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence & Selected Essays*, translated by Algar Thorold, Joseph W. Evans, and Julie Kernan (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2016); *The Situation of Poetry*, translated by Marshall Suther (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955).

opportunity to look upon the face of the other in Levinas's terms, but also a serious accusation to be brought to God, a moment that does not admit of any straightforward or cheap redemption.

If there is one word which encapsulates Raïssa's experience of the years leading up to the Second World War and the War itself, it is darkness. She writes in numerous letters and in her own journal of this experience of darkness, and a general feeling of sharing in the Lord's Passion and death. Writing at the beginning of Lent in 1934, she describes herself as being stretched out as if on the Cross, her heart transfixed with the lance.[13] The 1930s saw the rise of the Nazi government and its gradual solidification of power. Raïssa experiences this as a deep wound, and it appears to be this that gives her the particular pain I noted above from her journals. Much of this pain can be understood in spiritual terms and seems to admit of some kind of transformation in grace. So, for example, in *Mditation*, Raïssa has a kind of optimism that, despite humanity's meandering steps on the byways of iniquity, the evils of today serve to build tomorrow's truths (*Et 'humanit chemine vers la justice/Par les dtours paresseux de l'iniquit/L'erreur d'aujourd'hui est au service/De la vrit à venir*).[14] Despite the encircling evils, some good can still be found.

Yet with the start of the Second World War in 1939, Raïssa Maritain's perspective shifts. Her poem *Aux Morts Dsesprs* or *To the Despairing Dead* offers a cry to God for the suffering endured by the populations of Poland from the German attacks at the very beginning of the War. The possibilities of light that can shine through the darkness in her earlier poems are no more. In its opening line, Raïssa speaks for the reader, saying that our grief is so great that the sun astonishes us (*Notre deuil est si grand que le soleil m'tonne*), so alien to the current state of the world, it seems to have originated from some past world (*De quel pass candide et lgendaire/Descendent ses rayons?*). While much of the darkness she had related in her poetry in the 1930s focused on the darkness of an apophatic cloud,[15] now the darkness is that of war and suffering. The desperate dead who have been the victims of war are housed within the hearts of those like Raïssa, capable of compassion, and their blood cries out with an eternal roar (*Tant de morts sans repos en nos cœurs accueillis/Avec la clameur ternelle de leur sang*). Raïssa ends the poem with a set of contrasts, an old way of life, an old world, against a new one. The old life of the world certainly had its difficulties – grief, calamity, and dying – but now the causes of pain are injustice, cruelty, and, above all, what Raïssa describes as the desolation of a dread silence of complicity (*... mais d'être inconsol/De formidable silence complice*). This focus on complicity highlights how Raïssa's experience of anguish is no longer limited to her own suffering, but her own personal suffering has now taken on something of the suffering of others as her mind moves to complicity, injustice, and cruelty. Although not articulated in quite the same way as Levinas, with his focus on

[13] Raïssa Maritain, *The Journal of Raïssa Maritain*, edited by Jacques Maritain (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2020), p. 188.

[14] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Œuvres Complètes de Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, (*OCJRM*) Volume 15 (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), p. 612. A poem undated in *OCJRM* but placed in with a collection of poems from the late 1930s in an English translation by a Benedictine of Stanbrook. See Raïssa Maritain, *Patriarch Tree: Thirty Poems by Raïssa Maritain*, trans. A Benedictine of Stanbrook (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey Press, 1965).

[15] See for example *Mditation* and *De Profundis* in *OCJRM*, 15, p. 612 and p. 529, respectively.

the human face, the ethical dimension is present as the line between personal and communal suffering has been blurred.

This movement in Raïssa's poetry comes to its height as the War progresses. Jacques, Raïssa, and Raïssa's sister, Vra, were able to make their escape from France and spent most of their time in exile in New York. This was certainly a fortuitous escape, saving them from almost certain death at the hands of the Nazi regime, but these were difficult days for Raïssa as she and Vra had to set up home in New York. It was during the darkest days of their exile that Raïssa wrote perhaps her greatest poem, *Deus excelsus terribilis* dated 28 November 1943.[16] Here we have a much clearer sense of Metz's idea of Suffering Unto God, and the ways in which the language of suffering forms a kind of prayer to God.

The poem itself is formed in a kind of prayer, making a direct plea to God, and God is addressed as '*Vous*', highlighting its direct and personal form. The poem also reads somewhat like a Psalm, especially those Psalms that seem to despair of God's promises because of God's apparent inaction. The darkness of this period seems to imperil God's promises, putting the entire idea of Divine Goodness and the meaning of our existence in doubt. While Divine Revelation reveals a tender and loving God, who reaches out across the chasm of our sinfulness, current events cast doubt on this.

The poem begins with the frank admission that we did indeed know pain and suffering in the past, but that this suffering could always be placed in a context where God's presence assured us that happiness existed (*Nous avons souffert il est vrai/Dans le corps, dans l'âme et l'esprit/Et nous avons connu l'angoisse/Mais toujours nous avons pu situer notre souffrance/Et connaître qu'ailleurs le bonheur existait*). While at first God's Word was received in all gentleness, all of this is now abolished, all was before (*Tout cela est aboli/Tout cela qui fut avant*), and with the planned extermination of the Jews (*Avant le massacre innombrable des Juifs*), all has changed.

This change is not limited to the world of geopolitics and the experiences of suffering of so many, the more fundamental change is that the very promises of God have seemingly come to an end. This is taken up in the third part of the poem:

> If we cry out: *Abba! Father!*
> You do not welcome our cry—
> It comes back to us like an arrow
> That has struck the impenetrable target,
> You plunge us back into the night.[17]

For Raïssa, this is much more than an unanswered prayer; the assurance that we have of God's power working in us no longer holds, and our cries for help simply come back from the darkness and silence, striking us harder than the original pain that inspired the prayer. The phrase 'Abba! Father!' is especially telling, for St Paul tells us that the Spirit speaks within us, the Spirit of Adoption, which cries out to God for us. Moreover, it is the Spirit who prays in us when we do not know how, giving voice to our anguish.[18]

[16] *OCJRM*, 15, p. 625*ff*.

[17] Si nous crions *Abba! Pater!*/Vous n'accueillez pas notre cri/Il nous revient comme une flèche/Qui a frapp la cible impntrable,/Vous nous replongez dans la nuit.

[18] See Romans, 8.

God's promised Spirit, which is God's presence in the soul and which allows us to call on God tenderly, has perhaps abandoned us.

The poem is redolent of the images of Psalms 44 (43) and 76 (77), both of which seem to deal with God's apparent forgetfulness in the face of the people's remembrance of past faithfulness. While much of the biblical trope focuses on God's faithfulness and the people's unfaithfulness, the experience of abandonment means that the people put God, in some sense, on trial with a plaintive cry, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'[19] While it was the work of Incarnate Word to form a bridge over the chasm between God and sinful humanity, this work has been undone, the chasm has opened once more (*Un abîme s'est ouvert entre la Misricorde et la Misère/Et vous ne voulez pas le franchir*). In the darkness of earth's degradations, pity is in vain, justice is dead, and men wish that they had never been born (*Parce que vaine est la piti,/Que la justice est morte/Et que les hommes voudraient n'être pas ns*), a cry that is similar to that is Psalm 79 (80), a plea for mercy for Jerusalem where the Psalmist laments that '... [the nations] have poured out [the blood of God's servants] like water round about Jerusalem and there was none to bury them'.[20]

In this poem in particular, but with many others across Raïssa's œuvre, we can hear the way that the language of prayer cracks open the possibilities of theodicy into a real cry to God, one that does not admit of easy answers, and which asks searching questions of God. Poetry can open up this language of prayer, offering a mode of expression that stretches language so that it can approach the mystery of evil, but also address words of outrage to God. This poetry is a distinct echo of Metz's concern that there is '... too much singing and not enough crying out in Christianity'.[21] Raïssa's poetry complements Metz's mystical-political theodicy when she says that the agony that she and the world around her has experienced cannot be easily or cheaply healed. She speaks of the way in which those who suffer will never forget the agony they experience, remembering both on earth and in eternal life. The mark made by suffering has an eternal character, for it has made its mark on their soul, where we are joined to infinity (Nous n'oublierons jamais notre agonie / Nous nous en souviendrons sur la terre / Et dans la vie ternelle / Car nous avons t marqus du caractère / De la souffrance – où nous joint l'infini). But Raïssa also challenges Metz's account, as her poetry holds out the possibility and hope of redemption, something that is missing in the idea of Suffering Unto God. In his assessment of the Christology of political and liberation theologies, Rusty Reno sees a particular deficit in their accounts of salvation, which seems stuck in the *memoria passionis*, refusing or omitting the Resurrection.[22] Raïssa's poetry is clear that redemption cannot be easily or cheaply found, but this does not mean that it cannot be found, an intuition which is found in the long tradition of crying out to God from Job to Jesus which is central to Metz's mystical-political theodicy. Indeed, Raïssa's is not stuck in a cry of desperation, suggesting that the poetic theodicy I have tried to sketch in Raïssa's work is something of a spiritual technique for dealing with suffering, rather than a default position for Christian life as we might see in Metz.

[19]Psalm 76(77):10, RSV.
[20]Psalm 79(80):3, RSV.
[21]Metz, *A Passion for God*, p.125.
[22]Russell R. Reno, 'Christology in Political and Liberation Theology', *The Thomist* 56 (1992), pp. 291–322.

3. Conclusion

In this short essay on Raïssa Maritain's poetry, I have tried to sketch out what we might call her poetic theodicy. Such an approach has much to offer a contemporary context that is distrustful of the whole enterprise of theodicy because of the distance it places between the explanation of suffering and the experience. Metz is clear that prayer amplifies language and creates solidarity, but his concerns about aestheticising pain perhaps make him less strusting of poetry. Raïssa shows us the way in which poetry is central to our attempts to create a humane theodicy, one that gives voice to suffering, and offers a hope of redemption, remembering that a key part of offering a humane account of suffering is to offer hope. Poetry in general offers us another form of language to complement abstract arguments, reminding us that just as when we encounter a mystery of light, when we encounter the darkness of evil, we need a mode of language with the tensile strength to approach the mystery, even if we can never hope to encompass it. In a poetic theodicy, no teleology need be imposed on what is dysteleological, and it has a capacity to admit of the ways in which we can be drawn down, through suffering, into the darkness of evil. This should not be seen as a failure of faith, but rather a proof of faith's power to voice anguish, and in the midst of it, to offer hope.

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