

POETRY,
Beauty, &
CONTEMPLATION

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The Complete
Aesthetics of
JACQUES
MARITAIN

JOHN G. TRAPANI JR.

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For
Jacques Maritain
. . . et Raïssa



One philosopher, one contemplative

Two Poets in love with Beauty

Two Saints in love with God

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Preface

In the fall of 1965, a young trumpet player walked excitedly into his philosophy of art course at Boston College. This was not his first philosophy class. However, since Boston College did not then offer a major in music, he saw his time there as little more than a son's obedient fulfillment of his father's demand that he obtain a liberal arts baccalaureate degree. Afterward, he would be free to do as he wished, and he thought at the time that his future would be in music. Moreover, since this paternal requirement was nonnegotiable, he reasoned that he might as well put his time to good use; he enjoyed philosophy because it stimulated many kinds of questions, and because, intuitively, he believed that it held the promise of providing true answers to those questions.

He was an accomplished musician, and his music experiences were many and varied, including an extended opportunity to study with jazz alto saxophone legend Phil Woods. Perhaps the greatest alto saxophone player since Charlie Parker, Woods was an inspiring educator; daily interactions with him over several summers provided firsthand exposure to an artist of true genius. This was artistic inspiration of the highest order, the kind that changes lives. For this young man, it was a portrait of an artist's life that even James Joyce would appreciate.

Overlapping these summer years, his time at Boston College supplied additional sources of musical and artistic inspiration. The aspiring musician would spend his sophomore, junior, and senior years performing with the Harvard-Radcliffe Symphony Orchestra, a group of superlative musicians performing great classical masterpieces. These experiences reinforced the enchanted notion of the poet's charmed life.

Boston College's campus, too, was teeming with intellectual and artistic activity. Composer-in-residence Alexander Peloquin, perhaps

the foremost Catholic liturgical composer of his day, was a professor of music history and conductor of the Boston College Chorale. A passionate, inspirational campus icon, Peloquin taught courses that were always filled to capacity. By joining the Boston College Chorale and taking every course that Peloquin offered, this young student made every effort to be absorbed into an exhilarating world of art and culture, and he befriended those who were similarly enamored. While others of their 1960s-era peers went to coffee houses, “mixers,” and local pubs, these pubescent poets savored their evenings listening to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. When not otherwise engaged, these aspiring aesthetes immersed themselves in the best of Boston’s art and culture.

This artistic and cultural context defined these young friends and it shaped the anticipation of that young trumpet player who was about to take philosophy professor Idella Gallagher’s life-changing aesthetics course. Unbeknownst to this impressionable, truth-seeking sophomore, Idella and her philosopher husband, Donald, were close personal friends of the famous twentieth-century philosopher Jacques Maritain and his wife, Raïssa. Although the course itself, with its rather standard aesthetics textbook anthology, was not particularly noteworthy, its bibliography did require Maritain’s brilliant book, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. Even though he could not have known it at the outset of the course, Maritain’s book would alter the course of this young artist’s life profoundly.

At the time, however, this philosophy student knew nothing about Maritain’s life or philosophy: he knew nothing of Maritain’s conversion to Catholicism, his philosophical insights, his lifelong friendships with leading philosophers and creative artists, or his abiding commitment to the thought and life model of St. Thomas Aquinas. Never having heard of Jacques Maritain, he could not have known of Maritain’s own unique poetic gifts. And yet the youth’s experiences and associations from these college years opened his mind and heart to the great insights that Maritain’s book would soon reveal. His prior aesthetic experiences, many of true depth and inspiration, had already communicated wordlessly the realities now explained by Maritain’s

text. Although he was a philosophical novice, Maritain spoke to him on a deeply personal level and, having been “bitten by Poetry,” the seeds of his intellectual transformation were firmly planted.

That was forty-five years ago. Even though age and experience now cause him to smile at the self-absorption of his youthful idealism, the experiences themselves were nonetheless real and enduring. Fortunately, like God, the Muses too (we trust) have a sense of humor. And even though music performance still remains an active and important part of his life, his happy fate was to become a philosopher, one who would find in Maritain, and the Thomist realist tradition he embraced, a way of life that satisfied those deep intellectual longings of his student days. As it turned out, he was discovering Maritain at the very time that Maritain himself, in the waning years of his life, was becoming a religious hermit. Though he never met Maritain personally, he adopted Jacques as his preeminent philosophical and spiritual mentor.

For this reason, this book, a study in Maritain’s philosophy of art, is a labor of love that grew out of these forty-five years of accumulated aesthetic experiences, nurtured by serious philosophical study and reflection. It is animated by a deep love for Jacques, and by a firm and sustained belief that, at its core, Maritain’s philosophy of art captures and reveals the ultimate spiritual dimension, the true “Poetry,” that is at work in any and all occasions of great art.

This book is also an expression of deep and lasting gratitude to those many named and unnamed poets, artists, musicians, philosophers, teachers, contemplatives, and friends, men and women of true goodness and poetic authenticity who have contributed to an aesthetically rich life, filled with love, friendship, beauty, and the enjoyment of those spiritual treasures hidden and revealed by what Maritain calls “Poetry.”



Beyond those already named in this preface—the Gallaghers, Phil Woods, and Alexander Peloquin—there are many others whose positive influence has contributed to whatever value this book might contain. I would like to extend my thanks to John Rowan, Joe Califano,

Ralph McInerny, and Tony Simon, teachers and friends, for their kindness, encouragement, and direction in the early and ongoing years of my study of Maritain's philosophy. Curtis Hancock and Jim Hanink, fellow Maritain admirers, carefully reviewed my manuscript and made helpful suggestions for its improvement. Jim Hanink went well beyond what is required of a reviewer, and his stylistic suggestions were especially helpful and are deeply appreciated. I thank Richard Jusseaume, president of Walsh University, for his consistent, enthusiastic support of Catholic education, my work at Walsh University, and the American Maritain Association, especially during my years as its president.

And finally, my thanks to Sherry Trapani, my wife, patient partner, and dearest friend, for putting up with a philosopher's abstractions and a writer's preoccupations. Fortunately, love, like beauty, truth, and goodness, transcends all else.

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