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# Fiction, Reality, And Prophecy In The Novels Of Leon Bloy

Svetlana Sotiroff

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FICTION, REALITY, AND PROPHECY IN THE  
NOVELS OF LEON BLOY

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Graduate Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
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1973

## ABSTRACT

Many Bloyen studies would lead us to believe that Léon Bloy's two novels, Le Désespéré and La Femme pauvre, are primarily autobiographical in nature. Our readings of these works, his journal, and his biography, soon revealed, however, that there exists a marked discrepancy between historical facts as they are purported to have occurred, Bloy's account according to his journal, and events in the novels said to be based on the same historical data. This is not because Bloy deliberately falsified facts, but rather because, in his novels, he used his right as "literary inventor," to select his material where he chose, and to use it as he chose. It appeared to us that to date too much emphasis had been placed on the factual and historical aspects of his novels, with little attention being devoted to the creative side of Léon Bloy's work.

The thesis adopts three kinds of critical approaches. First, the characters are examined from a historical-biographical point of view, in line with earlier texts devoted to the novels, but going beyond a mere study of



historical models. These are related to their fictional counterparts when they exist, but other sources are also discussed, as well as elements which appear to stem directly from the author's creative imagination. The thesis continues with an evaluation of the weaknesses and strengths of the novels according to classical criteria, and concludes with a study of Bloy's novels as prophetic literature.

The examination of the characters and of the dramatic structure of the two novels establishes that there exists a gradual but undeniable evolution in the author's work. The most significant difference between the two works, however, is revealed when the thematic aspect of each novel is studied. It is in this that may be found the essential distinction between Le Désespéré and La Femme pauvre.

Our study leads us to the conclusion that Bloy wrote as a prophet, and that his novels must be read in the light of this fact. Bloy's own wavering personal assurance of his vocation as a prophet is reflected in his work. Each book holds a number of individual messages for the reader, but it is only his second novel which contains a universal theme such as that found in all outstanding works of literature. Because, like the central character in La Femme pauvre, every human being is embarked on his own search through life, the allegorical story in this novel presents a universal view of man.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before beginning our own examination of Léon Bloy's Le Désespéré<sup>1</sup> and La Femme pauvre<sup>2</sup> let us turn our attention to earlier studies of these texts. Only three works exist which are devoted exclusively to the novels of Bloy.<sup>3</sup> Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre"<sup>4</sup> by René Martineau is of special interest because of its author's personal friendship with Bloy, and his knowledge of the milieu in which Bloy lived and produced his novels. "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy<sup>5</sup> and Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre"<sup>6</sup> are by Joseph Bollery. Though Bollery never knew Bloy, he did, with an extraordinary devotion lasting over more than forty years, establish himself as the foremost living authority on Bloy until 1968, the year of his death.

Of great importance also is the unfinished series of articles by Fam appearing in the Cahiers Léon Bloy between

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<sup>1</sup>Oeuvres de Léon Bloy, III (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964).

<sup>2</sup>(Paris: Mercure de France, 1937).

<sup>3</sup>In addition to the studies which we shall discuss, mention should be made of Hubert Colleye's L'Ame de Léon Bloy (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1930). This earlier work provides much unpublished material but while Colleye claims to give an exegesis of Le Désespéré, he, in fact, tends to give a biographical presentation of Bloy.

<sup>4</sup>(Paris: Mercure de France, 1933).

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Bollery (Paris: Malfère, 1937).

<sup>6</sup>Bollery (Paris: Les Lettres Modernes, 1969).

1932 and 1938.<sup>1</sup> While not devoted exclusively to the novels, these articles contain much detailed information which is relevant to both Le Désespéré and to La Femme pauvre. We shall, therefore, after an examination of the above works, attempt to evaluate the importance of these articles for our subject.

\* \* \*

Joseph Bollery's "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy contains a wealth of information. He discusses Bloy's writings before Le Désespéré<sup>2</sup> giving an idea of Bloy's background and experiences up to the time he began his first novel. Included in the study is the text of Bloy's first abortive attempt at Le Désespéré.<sup>3</sup> Bollery also briefly discusses various factors influencing Bloy to write his first novel: Huysmans and Pierre-Victor Stock, Bloy's publisher, both persuaded Bloy to write such a work.<sup>4</sup> Bollery then gives a biographical sketch of Bloy and discusses some of the influences on the author during the time he was actually

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<sup>1</sup>Fam is the pseudonym for Dr. A. M. Fauquet. "Anne-Marie Roulé. La Véronique Cheminot du Désespéré," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Nov., 1932-Apr., 1933; "Exégèse de la Femme pauvre," Sept.-Oct., 1937; "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Jan.-Feb., Mar.-Apr., May-Aug., and Sept.-Oct., 1938.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, pp. 9-21, 56-72.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-25. This text, which had earlier appeared in Colleye's L'Ame de Léon Bloy, pp. 269-275, is also reproduced in the Mercure de France's 1964 edition of Le Désespéré, pp. 7 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Bollery, op. cit., p. 21.

writing his first novel. He speaks at some length of Berthe Dumont whose help and encouragement enabled Bloy to realize Le Désespéré<sup>1</sup> and he gives us vital information about the friendship of Bloy and Louis Montchal. Bollery's main concern was, "de rechercher dans quelles circonstances Léon Bloy a réalisé son oeuvre, comment elle fut écrite et publiée et le récit de la vie de l'écrivain pendant les deux années qui séparent la rédaction des premières pages de l'apparition en librairie."<sup>2</sup> While he accomplishes this quite successfully, Bollery does restrict himself to the historical aspect only, never dealing with Bloy's departure from his historical model.<sup>3</sup>

In Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," René Martineau indicates through his title alone that he is not necessarily examining La Femme pauvre as a novel but rather writing about Léon Bloy in relation to this work. Martineau's book is, in fact, divided into two parts, the first of which does not deal with La Femme pauvre at all. Entitled "Avant La Femme pauvre," it discusses Bloy's nineteenth century predecessors, Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly, and also

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, pp. 52, 54, 107, 146.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>One of the useful features of this study is the inclusion of many letters which throw light on the complex events surrounding the publication of Le Désespéré. Bollery's appendix provides several critical reviews which give an indication of public reaction to Bloy's novel. The appendix also shows the textual differences between the Stock and Soirat editions of the novel.

his contemporaries, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Huysmans; little attention is given to Léon Bloy and even less to La Femme pauvre. Martineau states his belief that Bloy wrote in the Baudelairian spirit and not in the wake of Barbey d'Aurevilly whom he places in the same literary school as Balzac. It seems that Martineau is endeavouring to show the existence of similarities between Baudelaire and Bloy and the fact that these two writers appealed to the same readers.<sup>1</sup> Had Martineau documented his statements they would prove to be both interesting and useful by revealing an element in Bloy's work hitherto ignored. However, his statements are of a very general nature, alluding to Bloy's life without mentioning specific incidents of Bloy's activity. And, in fact, Martineau seldom refers to Bloy's works. His text, therefore, cannot be said to deal with the literary aspect of Bloy. He remains vague, as may be seen from the following excerpt:

Le ton baudelairien ne peut apparaître, dans Le Désespéré, aussi nettement que le pamphlet ou le récit mystique, même au lecteur attentif, si celui-ci s'est grisé des saines extravagances qui composent obligatoirement le langage de l'amour ou s'il a trop savouré les vengeances que le pamphlétaire offrait en pâture à son indignation.

Et pourtant, cet art baudelairien, cette conception classique et romantique à la fois, simple dans sa construction et compliquée de néologismes, d'une magie irrésistible, caractérise mieux que n'importe quelle exégèse religieuse, et mieux surtout que les pamphlets les plus vigoureux, le<sup>2</sup> style de Léon Bloy et par conséquent son humanité tendre.

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

Instead of a literary evaluation of Bloy, Martineau appears to be using his intuition in explaining the author's humanity. For example, in his section entitled "Le Trouveur d'Enigmes" he compares Bloy to Oedipus and to Hamlet.<sup>1</sup> It may be, indeed, that Martineau was drawing on his personal recollections rather than basing his statements on specific literary passages but his original, intuitive ideas nonetheless remain without documentary support. In the second part of Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre" the discussion of the novel is limited largely to biographical facts: we are told where Bloy actually began writing,<sup>2</sup> that the author's change of perspective was a result of his marriage,<sup>3</sup> and we are given a glimpse of Bloy's original plans for this novel.<sup>4</sup> Although some of these facts are of crucial importance for the development of La Femme pauvre, Martineau is rather laconic. Lacking apparent organization to guide the reader through the series of steps leading to the completion of Bloy's novel, Martineau's work drifts into the extended period (1887-1897) during which Bloy was writing his second novel.

Even when Martineau discusses the text of La Femme pauvre in the section entitled "Personnages de La Femme

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 82-97.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 62-67.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 64.



pauvre," we encounter the weakness which exists in much Bloyen criticism: the author moves from fact to fiction and from fiction to fact as if these two worlds blended imperceptibly with each other. When he wishes to elucidate known facts he makes reference to the novel and, with equal ease, he turns to known facts to elucidate the novel.<sup>1</sup> When Martineau speaks, the creative talent of the author and the essential role of Bloy's imagination in writing his novels seem to fade away. Thus for example, in his discussion of Clotilde, the heroine of La Femme pauvre, he merely writes that in the second part of the novel her model is no longer Berthe Dumont but Jeanne Molbech, Bloy's wife and female ideal.<sup>2</sup> This summary treatment of the heroine of La Femme pauvre leaves a major gap in a work devoted to that novel.

As for Marchenoir and Léopold, both of whom portray fictionalized aspects of Bloy, Martineau dispenses with them both in five brief pages.<sup>3</sup> He says simply that Marchenoir, the hero of Le Désespéré and of the first part of La Femme pauvre, is no longer suitable as Bloy's hero once the model for Clotilde changes from Berthe Dumont to Jeanne Molbech. Bloy was, therefore, Martineau thinks, obliged to replace his leading male character, to dispose of Marchenoir and to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 120-124.

bring in Léopold.<sup>1</sup> Yet Léopold is, according to Martineau, also partly a representation of a man called Camille,<sup>2</sup> though this fact and its implications for a fairly complex process of fictionalization are not developed. Martineau writes:

Léon Bloy me disait: "Je suis mal satisfait de mon personnage de Léopold!"

Il avait raison en parlant ainsi. Le contraste entre les deux physionomies profilées à côté de Clotilde est trop en faveur de Marchenoir, qui, dans les premiers chapitres, s'est imposé fortement à l'attention du lecteur et l'a subjugué.<sup>3</sup>

The remainder of the section is given to a portrayal of the historical Camille and no more is said about Léopold.

The complexity of certain secondary characters is also passed over by Martineau. Having stated that Gacougnol is the artist Zacharie Astruc,<sup>4</sup> Martineau devotes the rest of the respective chapter to details concerning the real Astruc. But, one may ask, is Gacougnol no more than a mere fictionalization of Zacharie Astruc? Again, Martineau makes an effort to give sympathetic information about Alcide Guérin, the model for Hercule Joly but, as earlier, he restricts himself to a discussion of the historical model with no concern for the non-historical aspect of this fictional character.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

Because of its lack of supporting evidence, Martineau's work tends to be of a very general nature and even somewhat superficial at times. This becomes particularly apparent when his early Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre" is contrasted with Bollery's more recent Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre." The documentation in Bollery's work makes Martineau's book appear flimsy by comparison. It is regrettable that Martineau, as a personal friend of Bloy, did not take advantage of this relationship. Latter-day readers of Bloy frequently can do no more than hypothesize as to actual events, sources or influences in Bloy's life. In fairness to Martineau, however, we must recognize the fact that he may have limited his own comments at least in part, from a consideration and respect which grew out of his friendship with the Bloy family. One is led to the conclusion that though Martineau's text is basic for establishing historical data, it falls short of an analysis of the novel as a literary work; nor does it help us gain insight into the creative imagination of Bloy.

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Joseph Bollery's booklet, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre" mentioned above, was originally intended to be an introduction to La Femme pauvre in the Mercure de France edition of the works of Léon Bloy. Bollery had accumulated so much material that, at the time of his death, his successor as editor of the Oeuvres, Jacques Petit, felt

that this introduction merited publication as a separate work. Although there is much new information in Bollery's small volume, Bollery still tends to view even the major fictional characters as composite ones and does not discuss the essential role of Bloy's creative talent. A surprising omission in this text is a section devoted specifically to Clotilde.

In Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"

Bollery seems to have been caught between two conflicting purposes. On the one hand he appears to have been trying to compile, in an organized fashion, all the significant findings related to La Femme pauvre; on the other hand, probably as a result of his attempt to stay within the limits imposed by his goal of writing an "introduction," he fails to include everything known. Thus, Bollery briefly mentions that, although using the same subjects and sources as those used by other writers, Bloy succeeded in creating a different and unique work.<sup>1</sup> Bollery also devotes several pages to the historical models used for Léopold, again without dwelling on Bloy's originality. Bollery was aware of the most minute details of Bloy's work, as well as of its prophetic aspect, but in the manuscript, left at his death to be completed by his successor, these matters are not

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<sup>1</sup>Thus, on p. 13 Bollery refers to Bloy's use of Denis Poulot's Le Sublime (Paris: A. Lacroix, Verboeckoven & Cie., 1872) in his creation of Isidore Chapuis. Zola also used Poulot's book as a source for L'Assommoir, cf. Zola, Les Rougon-Macquart (Paris: Pléiade, 1961), II, notes.

dealt with.<sup>1</sup> Although Bollery did, on occasion, recognize that certain of Bloy's characters--Marchenoir, for example,--were inspired by several historical models, his primary preoccupation nonetheless lay outside a thorough consideration of the more literary side of Bloy's novels.

It is, however, fitting that we recognize Bollery's contribution to the study of Léon Bloy. Jacques Petit's own enthusiasm is evident in his praise of Bollery's work: "Une telle étude ne conduit donc pas seulement à enrichir notre connaissance anecdotique de l'oeuvre, à mesurer la part de la réalité et le travail de l'imagination... Elle fournit les seules bases sérieuses à toute interprétation."<sup>2</sup>

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The series of articles by Fam appearing in the Cahiers Léon Bloy serves to enrich our knowledge of historical data. Fam did considerable research into the background of a number of Bloy's works; he presents us with unpublished documents which substantiate many of his conclusions and clarify a great number of aspects of Bloy's life and work.

It was Fam's research on Anne-Marie Roulé which brought to light most of what is now known about her. The

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," Bollery briefly draws a parallel between the spiritual hunger of Jeanne Molbeck and the physical hunger of Clotilde, pp. 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 2.

lengthy article on Anne-Marie was also published separately as a booklet, testifying to Joseph Bollery's (the publisher's) respect for the work. In 1937 Fam published his findings on La Femme pauvre beginning the article as follows: "Précédant une étude plus poussée des personnages du roman et à la recherche d'autres prototypes, un historique de la Femme pauvre aura l'avantage de préciser certains points et de révéler des intentions inédites."<sup>1</sup> We cannot but admire Fam for his tenacity in his research into historical prototypes and his admirable success, yet we are forced to ask if indeed Bloy's only intention was to portray historical persons and events. Fam, however, writes:

Il [Bloy] tance vertement un autre correspondant: "La pensée que toutes mes lignes peuvent être étudiées, dit-il, commentées, discutées comme les lignes du Texte sacré, m'indigne profondément et me porterait à détester mes propres œuvres, parce que c'est trop bête." (Journal, Jan. 2, 1903). Peut-être, mais, en vérité, s'il se dérobe, s'il défend avec tant de véhémence de scruter ses ouvrages, c'est que sous une forme amphibologique, dont j'ai donné déjà de multiples exemples, et étroitement apparentée à celle des Textes saints, il y a mis toute sa vie, toutes ses pensées les plus intimes, ses sentiments les plus secrets et les plus chers désirs de son coeur. Il craignait donc qu'une révélation, la plus minime, conduisit à des découvertes intempestives, et prendre avantage de sa très légitime circonspection pour l'accuser d'une dissimulation maladive serait un pur contresens.<sup>2</sup>

While we do feel that the prophetic element of Bloy's

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<sup>1</sup>"Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Feb., 1938, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Fam, "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," in Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1938, p. 170.

work is of great significance,<sup>1</sup> the reference to the Scriptures here seems to us to be out of place. Similarly, a study such as that advocated by Fam completely disregards both Bloy's ability to create a literary piece of work and his conscious aims in writing. Fam seems unwilling to accept anything at its face value. He seems intent on searching for the source of inspiration, forgetting that the source of inspiration might actually be a creative factor quite independent of historical events.

The works just discussed have a common failing: they fail to underscore Bloy's originality as a writer of fiction. Although his novels consist of a rich mixture of fact, fiction, poetry and symbolism fused together to make a cohesive and unified work, it is only the factual evidence which is discussed in all these studies. The establishment of the historical background of a work of literature is, to be certain, an important aspect of any study relating to that work. We must, however, recognize the limitations of such studies when they are restricted to only biographical research and factual evidence.

In the creation of a work of art, a writer must be at liberty to use actualities when they serve his purpose and to discard them when they do not.

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<sup>1</sup>See our discussion pp. 238 ff.

The relationship between art and life is much more complicated, then, than anything that can be expressed in a formula. Art is, in the larger sense, "true to life," but it is not bound, in any literal sense, to the "facts" of experience. Neither is it a form of lying upon this account. . . . The trouble with people who do not realize it is that they have never learned how to distinguish between truth and fact. A sufficiently great book may sum up the meaning of an age as history itself cannot do it. And life itself, in any age, is so multi-sided that books which are not at all like each other may offer very different summaries or interpretations, all of which may be equally true.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between fiction and fact, or "art and life" to use Wagenknecht's phrase, is a complex one indeed. As we have pointed out above, the studies to date have been oriented towards the historical aspect only, perhaps because of the material available.

Those who study the writings of Emile Zola, for example, are able to make use of the copious ébauches and notes préparatoires which he left. For Léon Bloy's novels, such preliminary sketches do not appear to exist. When speaking about Le Désespéré, Bollery, even in his thoroughness, speaks only of the texts to which we have already referred;<sup>2</sup> no mention is made of unpublished material pertaining to that novel. In the case of La Femme pauvre, there seems to be a similar absence of such preliminary notes. However, for both novels we are able to reconstruct events to some extent, with the help of Bloy's correspondence,

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, Preface to Literature (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1954, Kraus Reprint, 1969), pp. 42-43.

<sup>2</sup>See p. 3, note 2.



his journal and publications other than Le Désespéré and La Femme pauvre. In our study we shall, therefore, have recourse to these materials.

Let us now consider what Bloy himself tells us about how he wrote his novels. He admitted to his friend Louis Montchal that he drew on his own personal experiences. "Le fait est que je suis incapable de prendre ailleurs que dans mon expérience pour écrire un roman et, même je ne conçois pas un autre procédé."<sup>1</sup> Thus, certain specific facts and incidents in the novels may easily be traced to their historical sources. In Le Désespéré, for example, Leverdier, confidant to the hero Marchenoir, was supposedly based on Montchal. In a letter to the latter Bloy wrote, "Je recommande à Adèle [Madame Montchal] très spécialement le portrait de Leverdier page 194. Elle me dira s'il est ressemblant."<sup>2</sup> With reference to his tragic love affair with Anne-Marie Roulé, which ended with her incarceration for schizophrenia, Bloy wrote:

Si j'étais plus religieux par mes pratiques, je serais sans doute plus fort et je l'avoue avec une tristesse profonde mon équilibre moral est fort ébranlé depuis la très véridique catastrophe arrivée en 82 et racontée dans la grande lettre finale du Désespéré. Jamais je n'ai pu me remettre complètement de cet horrible malheur.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Bloy, Lettres aux Montchal in L'Oeuvre Complète de Léon Bloy (Paris: Bernouard, 1947), 3 vols., Mar. 19, 1886.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Jan. 19, 1887.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Jul. 23, 1887.

Similarly, La Femme pauvre also contains events based on personal experience.<sup>1</sup> The most outstanding example is the description of the death of the infant André. Bloy's journal refers to the event in the following way:

Réveillé, à 4 heures environ, par les cris terribles de Jeanne; je me précipite pour assister au dernier soupir de notre fils André. Moment effroyable. Nouvel épisode à mon effroyable vie!

Les incidents qui précédèrent cette mort et les circonstances horribles qui l'accompagnèrent et la suivirent, ont été racontés dans la Femme pauvre. On ne recommence pas un tel effort. C'est assez et trop d'une fois. Donc, silence.<sup>2</sup>

But, on the other hand, we also find proof that Bloy claimed that he did not merely write autobiographical novels.

Le Désespéré n'est pas précisément une "autobiographie". Je n'avais point à raconter au public mon affreuse vie qui a été, qui est encore, plus épouvantable que celle de ce Marchenoir.

Tous les faits sont exacts, à peu près, sans exception, mais transposés, dénaturés, agrandis ou rapetissés. Rapetissés surtout.<sup>3</sup>

Cependant mon livre ne sera pas une autobiographie. Dieu m'en préserve. Marchenoir est moi spéculativement, mais sa vie n'est pas ma vie. Je prends à pleines mains dans les souvenirs de mon passé, bien autrement dramatique, mais je romps l'ordre des faits, et je les dénature complètement, par addition ou retranchement de circonstances.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Jun. 1, 1887, cf. La Femme pauvre, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup>Le Mendiant Ingrat, Jan. 26, 1895.

<sup>3</sup>Georges Rouzet, Léon Bloy et ses amis belges (Liège: Editions Soledi, 1946), Feb. 18, 1887 in a letter to Emile Verhaeren. See also Lettres aux Montchal, Jan. 19, 1887.

<sup>4</sup>Isabelle Debran, "Mon Oncle, Léon Bloy," in Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Apr., 1934. See also Lettres aux Montchal, Dec. 31, 1885.

And, with reference to La Femme pauvre: "C'est bien autre chose que Le Désespéré. Mon Dieu; que ce serait donc beau, si je parvenais à me hausser au niveau de ma conception! Peut-être y parviendrai-je, car je n'écris pas de moi-même."<sup>1</sup> Nowhere did Bloy express his methods more clearly than when he told René Martineau, prior to the publication of Un Vivant et deux morts:<sup>2</sup>

Aspects autobiographiques de mes romans. Il est tout-à-fait important de dire que, si la plupart des scènes douloureuses de mes romans sont des souvenirs de ma vie, ces romans ne sont pourtant pas des confessions. J'ai usé simplement de mon droit d'inventeur littéraire qui consiste à prendre mes matériaux où il me plaît et de les arranger comme il me plaît.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the ambiguity in Bloy's own statement about his work, the tendency has long been to emphasize the historical and biographical element of his novels while ignoring the creative and literary side, the side of the "inventeur littéraire."

Because historical and biographical data are relevant to the study of any writer and his works, the texts mentioned above have an important place in studies involving Bloy's novels. We shall, therefore, have recourse to them since they do establish pertinent facts and help to clarify many miscon-

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Feb. 6, 1887.

<sup>2</sup>Martineau (Paris: Bibliothèque des lettres françaises, 1914).

<sup>3</sup>As quoted by Fam, "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1938, p. 170.

ceptions. In our first section we shall examine the characters in the two novels using a historical, biographical approach drawing from earlier works on the novels, but showing that Bloy went beyond the writing of autobiography. We shall continue, in the second section, with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses which may be seen in the novels when using "classical" criteria. Finally, the novels will be examined as prophetic literature, for it is in the prophetic element, we believe, that may be found the essence of Bloy's originality as a novelist.

PART I

CHAPTER I

CAIN MARCHENOIR

His Life and his Death as Portrayed  
in Le Désespéré

In December, 1885, when Bloy had been working on Le Désespéré for about seven months, he wrote to Louis Montchal, "Marchenoir est moi, spéculativement."<sup>1</sup> We may say, therefore, that into this fictional character Bloy would put his hopes, aspirations and visions; he would, to a certain degree, express his hostilities through Marchenoir; Bloy would fashion his hero as though Marchenoir were clay in his hands.

There is, however, another side to the question. Though Marchenoir may represent Bloy "spéculativement," Bloy also plainly stated to Louis Montchal in January, 1887: "sa vie n'est pas ma vie," a fact further emphasized in the same letter where we read: "Gardez-vous cependant de croire à une autobiographie. Je ne raconte pas ma vie au public. Seulement presque tous les faits sont exacts, quoique dénaturés, transposés ou amoindris."<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, he was to repeat this to Emile Verhaeren.<sup>3</sup>

Bollery has correctly observed that there are other

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<sup>1</sup> Lettres aux Montchal, Dec. 31, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Jan. 19, 1887.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 15.

influences in the shaping of the character of Marchenoir, a point of view with which we fully concur. "Cain Marchenoir . . . représente bien l'auteur, mais sa personnalité, sinon ses traits, sa position dans le monde littéraire sont renforcées de celles de Huysmans et de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam."<sup>1</sup> There is, moreover, considerable difference to be noted between the man and the writer in Bloy. Emile Baumann expresses it thus: "La conversation de Bloy, je le constatai aussitôt, n'avait en général rien de commun avec le style de ses livres . . . Je ne fus pas déçu de le découvrir très différent de sa littérature."<sup>2</sup> The same thought is echoed by Martineau. "L'homme était chez Léon Bloy infiniment moins sévère que l'écrivain."<sup>3</sup> This severity is, we feel, reflected not only in his style of writing, which is dogmatically scathing, but also in his portrayal of characters, specifically Marchenoir.

The Lettres à Véronique,<sup>4</sup> a collection of letters Bloy wrote to his mistress, Anne-Marie Roulé, during his absences from her, reveal a sensitivity completely absent from Le Désespéré. A comparison of the Bloy of the Lettres à Véronique with the Marchenoir of Le Désespéré shows a marked

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<sup>1</sup>"Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>Mémoires (Lyon: La Nouvelle Edition, 1943), pp. 365-366.

<sup>3</sup>Martineau, Léon Bloy. Souvenirs d'un ami (Paris: Librairie de France, 1924), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>Bloy, Lettres à Véronique (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1933). This correspondence remained unpublished during Bloy's lifetime.

contrast which definitely suggests that Bloy and Marchenoir are not identical. Further support for this opinion comes from Isabelle Debran, daughter of Madame Henriette l'Huillier, one of the recipients of the Lettres aux Montchal. In her recollections of Léon Bloy she tells of the revulsion she felt on reading the opening pages of Le Désespéré and how she found it impossible to reconcile the Marchenoir of the novel with the gentle man whom she had come to call "uncle."<sup>1</sup>

Bloy's Journal d'Enfance (1861-1864)<sup>2</sup> also belies much of the narrative attributed to Marchenoir in the novel. There can be no doubt that Bloy was a sensitive child and that he suffered as a result, yet even his own account of his early life suggests a fairly common type of development. Thus, although Bloy probably experienced the acute feelings which he relates, they evidently formed only a part of his total experience and the great emphasis placed on them is solely for the benefit of his readers. In both Léon Bloy, essai de biographie and the issue of the Cahiers du Rhône devoted to Léon Bloy, Bollery quotes from a letter written by Bloy when he wishes to verify the authenticity of the facts

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<sup>1</sup>Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Apr., 1934.

<sup>2</sup>This journal was begun on Jan. 1, 1861, and continued throughout 1861 and 1862. There is a single entry in 1864. See Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 51, 64. Portions of the journal appeared in Cahiers Léon Bloy, 1924-26. See also Marie-Joseph Lory, L'Enfance et l'adolescence de Léon Bloy (thesis, University of Paris, 1953), and the section entitled "Le Journal d'Enfance" in Jeanine Bohet's Léon Bloy, essai d'étude psychobiographique (thesis, University of Paris, 1961), pp. 19-42.

put forth in Le Désespéré.<sup>1</sup> The letter referred to dates from August, 1874, when Bloy had already embarked on his literary career as a journalist for L'Univers.<sup>2</sup> Bloy has apparently heightened or intensified the facts so that while they may technically be true, they are somewhat misleading; one suspects that already at that early date Bloy saw himself as different from others. As Stanislas Fumet has observed, "Nous avons à faire à un Journal travaillé. Travaillé comme l'est aussi bien la Correspondance de l'écrivain qui, le jour où elle aura été réunie en son entier, constituera un monument littéraire de premier ordre."<sup>3</sup>

However, if we examine Bloy's life prior to the writing of Le Désespéré, we find that there are some undisputed facts. He was born in 1846 in Périgueux where he attended primary school and began, but never completed, studies at the lycée. From an early age Bloy showed an interest in writing; not only did he keep the Journal d'enfance to which we have already referred, but he also wrote a tragedy entitled Lucrèce. In 1864 Bloy arrived in Paris where he found work in an architect's office. This move marked the temporary cessation of religious practices

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy (Paris: Albin Michel, 1947), I, pp. 49, 199, and Léon Bloy, Cahiers du Rhône (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1944) ed. du Centenaire, augmentée, 1946, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Bloy's first publications appeared in L'Univers and date from Jan., 1874.

<sup>3</sup>Léon Bloy, Captif de l'absolu (Paris: Plon, 1967), pp. 101-102.



for Bloy. The following year he left his employment and undertook the study of painting at the studio of Pils. Although Bloy soon gave this up, his artistic ability was exhibited throughout his life in the very fine enluminures which he made. During his first stay in Paris, Bloy met Georges Landry who remained his friend for over thirty years, and Barbey d'Aurevilly, who exerted considerable influence on Bloy. It was through Barbey d'Aurevilly that Bloy regained his religious faith in 1869, a faith which was to play a significant role in his future. Bloy participated in the Franco-Prussian War as a franc-tireur in Cathelineau's corps and at the war's end he returned to Périgueux. Unhappy in his parents' home, he felt the lure of Paris and went back to the French capital which would thus attract him all his life. In Paris he was briefly employed by L'Univers until he quarrelled with its editor, Louis Veuillot. Other disappointments followed but in 1875 Bloy did write La Méduse Astruc, a sort of poem in prose in which he praised both Barbey d'Aurevilly and Zacharie Astruc, who had been subject and sculptor respectively of a bust which Bloy particularly admired. Bloy also made the acquaintance of such persons as Paul Bourget, Jean Richepin and Ernest Hello and through the latter he met the abbé Tardif de Moidrey (with whom he was closely allied until the abbé's sudden death in 1879). Finally, in February 1877, he met Anne-Marie Roulé and formed a relationship which significantly affected the remainder of his life and which played a direct role in his

actions during the next five years.

Keeping the above biographical sketch in mind, we shall now turn our attention to Cain Marchenoir<sup>1</sup> as he is depicted in Le Désespéré. The most outstanding characteristic of this central figure is his solitude. Bloy makes every effort to show Marchenoir as having no friends, with the exception of Leverdier, and, because he has no employment, he is isolated from his fellow men even in this routine and impersonal relationship. Yet here there is an evident difference between Marchenoir and Bloy. At no time in his life was Bloy totally alone and certainly not during the time represented by the novel. During these years (1877-1886)<sup>2</sup> he was in the company of Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, J.-K. Huysmans, Georges Landry, Gustave Guiches, Lucien Descaves and Ernest Hello, to name only his closest friends. He corresponded with others, notably Louis

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<sup>1</sup>We should note that Bloy's choice of name for his hero is of particular significance. In "Marchenoir (Loir-et-Cher)" in Cahiers Léon Bloy, Nov.-Dec., 1933, Pierre Arrou discusses the sources of the name Marchenoir. He suggests that Bloy originally took the appellation from a village of the same name because it suited "son tempérament singulier, déjà travaillé par le désespoir perspicace et clairvoyant qui le force à marcher vers Dieu à travers la pénombre des routes de la terre, comme un pèlerin enragé." p. 42. The name Cain, of Biblical origin, belonged to an accursed murderer whose life became that of a vagrant as a punishment for his act of fratricide. In Le Désespéré Marchenoir calls himself a parricide and while he is not a wanderer, he never achieves spiritual peace. We might say that his spirit is unable to rest.

<sup>2</sup>Bloy met Anne-Marie in 1877; he completed the writing of Le Désespéré in 1886 and the book appeared in Jan., 1887.

Montchal. The metaphysical solitude which Bloy himself appears to have experienced is transformed in the novel into a physical fact. Thus, Marchenoir not only feels a spiritual alienation from his fellow men but is actually isolated from them physically. Was it not then for purely artistic purposes that Bloy wished to exaggerate all aspects of the story, setting Marchenoir apart to create greater sympathy in the reader?

From the opening pages of the novel, Marchenoir is presented as a tragic figure who, at his father's deathbed, is in the throes of mourning and desperation. The reader is thus immediately exposed to one of Bloy's fictional transpositions, namely that of his own father's death into the death of Marchenoir père. In Bloy's biography, it is evident that the relationship between him and his father was not a close one, partly because Jean-Baptiste Bloy kept his distance from the family in order to preserve his position as head of the household. Léon Bloy's inability to conform to the standards set by his father further accentuated the gap between them. But while Léon found it impossible to follow the path his father wished him to take, Jean-Baptiste had no understanding of his son's literary talents. Despite efforts on both sides they were unable to come close to each other. When Léon, still a teen-ager, shared his first literary attempt with his father, the tragedy Lucrèce, mentioned above, the older man berated him for wasting time. On the other hand, the father did try to help his son by

finding employment for him when he decided to go to Paris, and by giving him practical advice on how to manage his affairs. Léon Bloy aimed to be worthy of his father but once he had left the family home, the distance between the father and the son increased. By the time Léon wrote his family of his conversion, his father could only castigate him in words which show clearly the alienation existing between the two of them.

J'attendrai pour recevoir une lettre de toi que tu sois en paix avec toi-même et avec les autres. Jusque-là, abstiens-toi de m'écrire. Ta lettre serait refusée et si je tolère que tu écrives à ta mère, c'est que j'ai l'espoir que tu laisseras là toute discussion de doctrine; Dieu, dont tu parles si peu, sera juge entre nous. . . .

Ton malheur est de te croire supérieur et destiné à de grandes choses. J'ai bien peur que ton orgueil te mène à l'abîme. . . . Seul tu resteras à toujours. Te plaçant au-dessus des autres, tu t'isoles et tu n'as plus ni père, ni mère, ni frère, ni amis.<sup>1</sup>

The criticisms voiced in the above letter appear to be justified by no less an authority than Léon Bloy himself. He recognized his inordinate pride and admitted to it in his correspondence on more than one occasion.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, Bloy did indeed alienate many friends and was unable to maintain close relationships with the various members of his

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 329, and Léon Bloy, Lettres à Véronique, Aug. 9, 1878. In another letter to Anne-Marie Roger of the Trappe; Bloy quotes to her the words of Father statement that he is proud.

family.<sup>1</sup>

The correspondence between father and son clearly reveals their estrangement and also indicates that their efforts to know and understand each other were doomed to failure. What we know from Léon Bloy's early years suggests that he had good intentions vis-à-vis his father but there seems to be none of the strong self-criticism evident in Le Désespéré. It seems then that Bloy may have felt some guilt or shame at the relationship which had existed between him and his father. At the same time, we know he believed that he had no alternative course of action. Therefore, it is unlikely that the strong words of Le Désespéré<sup>2</sup> are a reflection of his feelings. But Marchenoir judges himself by the same standards as those which he applies to others and these are more rigorous than those Bloy used in real life.

When Bloy's father lay on his deathbed, he was called to his father's side but delayed his departure from Paris in order to see Anne-Marie Roulé again and, as a result, arrived at Périgueux after Jean-Baptiste Bloy's

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<sup>1</sup> One exception appears to have been Georges Bloy who was himself an unusual person. However, the two brothers rarely met since Georges spent most of his adult years in Indo-China. See Maurice Dubourg, Un aventurier périgordin en Indochine: Georges Bloy, frère de Léon Bloy (Paris: J. Peyronnet, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> "Quand vous recevrez cette lettre, mon cher ami, j'aurai achevé de tuer mon père. . . . Je suis parricide, pourtant, telle est l'unique vision de mon esprit!" Le Désespéré, p. 29.

death on May 24, 1877.<sup>1</sup> His feelings about that occasion are reflected in a letter to Anne-Marie dated July 28, 1877.

Quand je songe que j'étais à peu près le seul de ses enfants sur lequel le pauvre homme pouvait compter à l'heure de son agonie pour le soutenir de ses prières et de sa présence... il me semble que je vais mourir de honte et de chagrin.

Et j'y pense toujours, ma pauvre petite. C'est pour cela que je suis si triste.<sup>2</sup>

If we are to accept Georges Rocal's testimony that Bloy père died reconciled with the church,<sup>3</sup> Bloy must have assumed a burden of responsibility which was neither needed nor expected of him. As one of six brothers, he could share his duty to his father rather than shouldering all obligations himself; however, the above quote reveals that Bloy did indeed feel guilt for his actions. In the novel, Bloy makes Marchenoir an only child who must, in fact, be answerable to his father and to society for actions towards his father. Bloy's feeling of guilt thus beomes a literary fact. Bollery attributes this guilt feeling to the emotions Bloy felt about his father's death. This view coincides with Lory's conclusion: "Toujours est-il que Léon Bloy s'accuse d'être arrivé trop tard et d'avoir ainsi privé

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., and Hubert Colleye, L'Ame de Léon Bloy, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>Rocal, Léon Bloy et le Périgord (Paris: Librairie Floury, 1932), p. 161.

son père de ses prières au moment suprême."<sup>1</sup> On balance it would seem that while the death of Marchenoir's father may have found its origins in Bloy's experience, the description as it is found in the novel seems out of character with the Bloy known to such friends as Martineau and Isabelle Debran, and whom we find revealed in the Lettres à Véronique.<sup>2</sup> The episode appears to have been highly dramatized and does not totally reflect experiences from Bloy's life. It is, however, a vivid projection of the guilt felt by Bloy and is both artistically justifiable and, what is more, artistically effective.<sup>3</sup>

Another incident at the beginning of the book connected with the death of Marchenoir's father concerns Paul Bourget. The novel opens with Marchenoir's appeal to Alexis Dulaurier (Paul Bourget) for money with which to pay his father's funeral expenses. Dulaurier grudgingly gives but a fraction of the requested amount and sends it, along

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<sup>1</sup>Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 129. In the light of other existing evidence, Colleye's statement in L'Ame de Léon Bloy (pp. 139-140) that Bloy was indeed his father's executioner in the symbolic sense, seems exaggerated.

<sup>2</sup>Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Apr., 1934. See also, Gelma's article, "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé," Les Cahiers de Psychiatrie, Strasbourg, Cahier No. 1, 1952, pp. 188-189.

<sup>3</sup>It is interesting to note that feelings of guilt are common in many families where death occurs, particularly in cases where problems of communication have existed. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969). See the chapter entitled "The Patient's Family."

with unwanted and unappreciated advice. The bitterness surrounding this episode is more readily seen when we consider not only the harsh treatment meted out to Bourget by Bloy but also the reaction of Bourget. "La lettre de Caïn Marchenoir a provoqué, de la part de l'insulté, une méchante confirmation désobligeante pour Léon Bloy. Paul Bourget a colporté à ce sujet une anecdote dont trois de ses contemporains nous ont transmis trois versions différentes."<sup>1</sup> While these anecdotes are in agreement with Bloy about his request for money, they do show Bloy in the worst possible light. This was Bourget's way of retaliation for the treatment he received at Bloy's hands in Le Désespéré. There is, however, a discrepancy between the stories told by Bourget and Bloy's own version of the incident as told in Lettres aux Montchal:

Pour l'amour de ma pauvre Berthe, j'ai enduré des humiliations plus amères que la mort et des refus appuyés sur ceci, que, quand on n'est pas riche, il est excessif et ridicule de ne pas se contenter de la fosse commune. Cela m'a été dit avec forces protestations d'amitié par deux hommes gorgés d'or, et j'ai failli devenir un assassin. Un ancien camarade de misère, aujourd'hui saturé de succès et devenu riche, pour sa peine d'avoir renoncé à être un écrivain, Paul Bourget, qui pouvait, par un seul mouvement généreux mettre fin à mon supplice, n'a pas voulu que je pusse lui reprocher de ne m'avoir rien donné, et il m'a donné des... conseils.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Piljs, La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1959), p. 148. See Appendix A for the three versions.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Jun. 7, 1885.



Thus, according to the Lettres aux Montchal the request for money was made at the time of Berthe Dumont's death and not at that of Bloy's father. Bollery concludes that, "Léon Bloy transpose cette entrevue avec Paul Bourget et en tira la lettre à Alexis Dulaurier qui ouvre Le Désespéré en situant les faits à l'occasion de la mort de son père."<sup>1</sup> We agree with the conclusion reached by Piljs, who, after quoting the passages to be found in Appendix A, states:

Des trois versions précitées nous retenons encore ce seul point, capital en l'occurrence, sur lequel elles concordent: Léon Bloy a demandé de l'argent à Paul Bourget pour l'enterrement de son père. Or, la lumière est faite maintenant sur l'anachronisme que s'est permis ici l'auteur du Désespéré. Il faut bien s'incliner devant ce témoignage de la lettre à Louis Montchal citée plus haut. Nous nous demandons donc si Paul Bourget, lecteur du roman-pamphlet de Bloy, a conçu l'idée d'aller colporter, pour se venger, ce trait déshonorant pour son adversaire, tout en le faisant passer pour authentique. C'est bien possible! Cependant, reste aussi la question de savoir si Léon Bloy a recouru, oui ou non, au truc rapporté par Paul Bourget, pour le "taper". Quitte à désobliger les plus fervents bloyens, nous posons que la missive adressée à l'ami de Genève ne réfute rien à cet égard. La question reste donc en suspens! La façon dont Léon Bloy en a usé avec J. K. Huysmans en 1901 et avec Emile Zola en 1892 prouve qu'il avait toute honte bue, quand il s'agissait de se procurer de l'argent.<sup>2</sup>

After precipitating the reader into the conditions and events surrounding the death of Marchenoir's father,

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup>La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy, pp. 148-151. A detailed discussion of the entire episode is found in these pages.

Bloy abruptly goes backward in time tracing the movement of his protagonist from his early beginnings to the opening of the novel. Marchenoir, like Bloy, is born in Périgueux, has Spanish ancestors, has a devout Roman Catholic mother, works for the railroad, has a priest friend who influences him greatly, and has a literary bent. These details, it is true, show similarities between Marchenoir and Bloy but, except for Marchenoir's literary bent, they have virtually no bearing on the development of the novel. Bloy uses these details, with which he was familiar, only to give a believable and realistic background for Marchenoir and they seem of little consequence in themselves. As Rouzet points out: "Ce que Bloy a gardé de plus exact, c'est le cadre et l'atmosphère. Le reste, forcément, obéit aux lois du genre."<sup>1</sup>

In the presentation of Marchenoir's life, the novel recounts not only that Marchenoir is bereft of friends but also that he has experienced tragic relationships with women. There is little doubt that Bloy had mistresses other than Anne-Marie Roulé and Berthe Dumont,<sup>2</sup> for as Lory states:

C'était un grand sensuel. On le soupçonne en lisant

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<sup>1</sup>"Sueur de sang et les faits et gestes du corps Cathelineau pendant la guerre de 1870-1871," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Sept.-Dec., 1935.

<sup>2</sup>Belluaires et porchers in Oeuvres, II, p. 336, Bloy writes: "J'ai eu des maîtresses, moi aussi. Pourquoi donc pas?" Anne-Marie appears to have been the first woman with whom he was emotionally involved.

ses romans, en particulier Le Désespéré dont certains passages décrivent avec violence l'obsession sexuelle. La publication des Lettres à Montchal (sic) et celle de la biographie de Joseph Bollery si riche en documents inédits, montrent une lutte constante contre la chair. . . . Les chutes de cet écrivain mystique témoignent de pathétiques conflits intimes. Il a peine à résister aux appels du désir.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is presently little information available about these other women.<sup>2</sup> What we do know indicates that his relationships with them were not of the same intensity as those with Anne-Marie, Berthe and, later on, his wife. In his discussion of the early women in Marchenoir's life Bloy uses a tragic tone which does not exist in his descriptions of the women whom he himself deeply loved: those emotions he kept to himself. Although it is brief, the presentation of Marchenoir's relationships with these early women is somewhat melodramatic. It does, however, serve the purpose of accentuating the hero's apparently persistent misfortune.

This tendency towards unhappy situations continues when we find Marchenoir attracting the attention of Véronique Cheminot, a well-known prostitute in the Latin quarter where he lives. The ensuing narrative bears some similarity to Zola's early work, La Confession de Claude. In Le Désespéré Véronique finds Marchenoir appealing and when he does not respond to her attentions, she pursues him,

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<sup>1</sup>Lory, La pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery and Petit's notes lead us to believe that some unpublished material does exist. Le Désespéré, in Oeuvres, III, p. 332.

stating, "Je vois bien que tu n'es pas comme les autres."<sup>1</sup> Marchenoir feels that he has been chosen to deliver her from prostitution. They thus share a common life together until the time of her conversion.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between Marchenoir and Véronique is known to Leverdier who shares their joys and sorrows. Bloy, on the other hand, whatever his reasons may have been,<sup>3</sup> chose to keep Anne-Marie's existence hidden from most of his friends. Barbey d'Aurevilly, for example, respected Bloy's wishes but suspected a woman in his life: "Avec votre damnée vie, rongée, je m'imagine, par quelque chienne de femme dans un coin, mon cher homme vertueux, et incertain de l'heure où vous rentrerez chez vous pour trouver ceci, j'écris au Frédégondien."<sup>4</sup> Bloy had confided in the Abbé Tardif de Moidrey who supported the couple's plan to marry, but with the abbé's death in 1879, Bloy was again thrown back on his own spiritual resources.<sup>5</sup> Finally Bloy turned

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré in Oeuvres (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964), III, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Bloy's relationship with Anne-Marie will be studied in Chapter III.

<sup>3</sup>Gelma suggests that perhaps Bloy felt guilty because of his passion which he interpreted as a spiritual short-coming and wanted to hide it from the others who may have judged him for it. See "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé."

<sup>4</sup>Barbey d'Aurevilly, Lettres de Barbey d'Aurevilly à Léon Bloy, Oct. 23, 1878.

<sup>5</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 344 ff. See p.77 for a further discussion of Tardif de Moidrey.

to Ernest Hello and his wife out of sheer desperation but begged them not to reveal his secret to anyone.<sup>1</sup>

A similar desperation comes over Marchenoir in Le Désespéré. Thus, at the end of Part I we find that, feeling overwhelmed by his problems, Marchenoir is seeking to escape them by a retreat at the Grande Chartreuse.<sup>2</sup> There he hopes to substitute the serenity of a life dedicated to God for the complications and turmoil of everyday life. At first, the calm which he so appreciates and which revitalizes him makes him believe that he has a religious vocation. Marchenoir enjoys the atmosphere of the monastery and the fellowship of Father Athanase in particular.

Chaque jour, le père Athanase, devenu son ami, le venait voir, lui donnant avec joie tout le temps qu'il pouvait. Et c'étaient des conversations infinies, où le religieux, naguère élevé dans les abrutissantes disciplines du monde, s'instruisait, une fois de plus, de leur néant à l'école de ce massacré, et qui remplissaient celui-ci d'une tranquille douleur de ne pouvoir leur échapper dans la lumineuse Règle de ces élargis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 424 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Le Désespéré, p. 99 ff. Bloy took refuge in a cloister on three separate occasions: Sept.-Oct., 1877 and Jun.-Aug., 1878 at La Trappe and in Nov., 1882 at La Grande Chartreuse. Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, pp. XVIII-XIX.

"Après l'internement d'Anne-Marie Roulé, Léon Bloy a fait, fin novembre 1882, une retraite à la Grande-Chartreuse. Le récit de ce séjour, combiné avec ses souvenirs de 1877 et 1878 à la Grand-Trappe de Soligny, forme l'un des chapitres les plus beaux et les plus émouvants du Désespéré." Bollery, "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, pp. 91-92.

<sup>3</sup> Le Désespéré, p. 99.

It is this same Father Athanase who knows and understands Marchenoir, who is able to help him resolve his problems by first analysing them. Marchenoir is not suited to monastic life because, as Father Athanase points out, he loves Véronique Cheminot, the woman whom he lifted out of the depths of her life of prostitution.<sup>1</sup> Marchenoir had thought that his love for her was a platonic Christian love, but the priest reveals to him the fiery passion which he feels. We find Cain capable of the deepest emotions and at times tortured by the thoughts which result from his ambivalent feelings. Because he cannot reconcile the spiritual with the physical, a fierce duality rages within him:

C'était à l'école de cette agonie qu'il apprenait décidément ce que vaut la Chair et ce qu'il en coûte de jeter ce pain dans les ordures! Pour la première fois, son christianisme se dressait en lui pour la défendre, cette misérable chair que nul mysticisme ne peut supprimer, qu'on ne peut troubler sans que l'esprit soit bouleversé et qu'aucun émiettement de la tombe n'empêchera de ressusciter à la fin des fins.<sup>2</sup>

A similar dichotomy existed in Bloy's thinking as we find reflected in his Lettres à Véronique: "Je serais resté à Paris, où nous nous serions désespérés en continuant à faire le mal et à nous rendre indignes de la protection de saint

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 309; see also Gelma, op. cit., p. 169 n. and Bohet, op. cit., p. 57 n.

<sup>2</sup>Le Désespéré, pp. 107-108.

Joseph," and later, to have sexual relations is expressed as "retomber dans le mal."<sup>1</sup> But the inner turmoil revealed in the Lettres à Véronique was kept from public scrutiny; Bloy did not incorporate them in his novel. He interpreted Marchenoir's feelings to his readers, but Marchenoir is completely lacking in the sensitivity that Bloy shows in his personal correspondence. Either Bloy failed to express this sensitivity a second time, or he deliberately excluded it. If the latter is true, as we are inclined to believe, it may be because he wished to portray a more composed character than himself, or because he was reticent in revealing his true self to the public.<sup>2</sup> In any case Marchenoir was Bloy "spéculativement."<sup>3</sup>

Part of Bloy's attitude to sensual matters probably stems from a general masculine attitude that was prevalent in that period and which today is referred to as "double standard."<sup>4</sup> Bloy did not scorn a woman who was another man's mistress, as we see reflected in his dealings with

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<sup>1</sup> Lettres à Véronique, pp. 27, 70. Of interest in this connection is the brief discussion of Bloy's romanticism by Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> See also Lettres aux Montchal, Jan. 19, 1887 and Rouzet, Léon Bloy et ses amis belges, Feb. 18, 1887.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Brady also speaks of "the double code of morals, one for man and the other for woman sanctioned by Bloy." M. R. Brady, Thought and Style in the Works of Léon Bloy (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1945), p. 145. For Bloy's views see Lettres à sa fiancée (Paris: Editions Stock, 1947), Dec. 2, 1889.

Anna Meunier, Huysmans' mistress, nor did he himself hesitate to take a woman for sexual satisfaction, yet the woman he sought for his wife had to be of a different calibre entirely. We find that Bloy would not consider marrying the mother of his illegitimate child and it is a well-known fact that he opposed the deathbed marriage of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam to the mother of his child.<sup>1</sup> The Véronique-Marchenoir relationship of Le Désespéré reflects a similar idea and indicates an apparent inconsistency in Bloy's attitude. Marchenoir found it is "impossible d'épouser la femme qu'il aimait, impossible surtout de vivre sans elle,"<sup>2</sup> though as we have mentioned, this differed from Bloy's real life situation since he had wanted to marry Anne-Marie. Marchenoir is tortured by the thought that this woman had belonged to other men and with a pride characteristic of Bloy, will not allow himself to be thrown into the same category as the other men with whom Véronique had been associated.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this unresolved conflict between flesh and spirit, the immense fountain of energy within Marchenoir impels him to leave the Grande Chartreuse. He returns to

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<sup>1</sup>Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 108 n.3.

<sup>2</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 344 ff. See our discussion p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>Gelma's interesting point of view is that Bloy's attitude mellowed with age and that while he felt guilt in his relations with Anne-Marie, there was none in his relations with Berthe Dumont. "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé," p. 187.



work; "Marchenoir sentit bientôt la nécessité de travailler. Il n'était pas homme à rester longtemps vautré sur une pensée de douleur, quelque atrocement exquise qu'elle lui parût." He has the plan of a book in mind and cannot stay idle.<sup>1</sup> In Paris, the problem of Véronique arises once more. The way Marchenoir chooses to deal with it diverges from the experience of Bloy. We know that after a two month stay at La Trappe (not the Chartreuse as in Le Désespéré), Bloy uneventfully returned to Paris and was once more forced to face financial hardships, unfulfilled love and failure in literary endeavours.

Using his imagination and his prerogative as a novelist, Bloy proceeds to construct a weird plot. Marchenoir, who had always shown strength in the past, in a passionate and desperate letter confesses himself to be at Véronique's mercy because he is unable to cope with his physical desires. He pours out his anguished spirit:

Je suis éperdument amoureux de vous . . . Qu'allons-nous devenir? Il n'y a que deux issues: vous me sauvez ou je vous perds. . . . Or, je n'ai plus de courage du tout, mon âme est complètement démontée. Il va falloir vous condamner à une réserve inouïe, car je brûle sur moi-même, depuis l'agitation de ce voyage, comme une torche mal éteinte que le vent aurait rallumée. Cette fraternité postiche qui nous unit et nous sépare, jusqu'à maintenant, ne va plus suffire. Il faudrait construire quelque autre muraille mitoyenne qui montât jusqu'au septième ciel et qu'aucune trahison des sens ne pût entamer.

Ce travail de maçonnerie vous sera, sans doute,

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, pp. 126 ff.

possible, à vous, âme spirituelle et dessouillée, qui n'avez plus de corps que pour les yeux trop charnels de votre malheureux ami, dont votre présence va remuer, je le sens bien, toutes les vieilles croupissures et toutes les fanges. Cherchez donc, chère trésorière d'héroïsme, c'est peut-être dans la direction du martyr que vous découvrirez ce qu'il nous faut.

. . . C'est pourquoi je vous ai demandé les prières des agonisants. Je suis en péril de mort pour mon âme, à cause de vous, bien-aimée, et je retourne à Paris, dans une semaine, comme on se fait porter en terre. Si vous n'êtes pas devenue toute forte contre ma faiblesse, je vous entraînerai dans une caverne de désespoir.

. . . Il faut donc m'exorciser, ma très chère, je ne sais comment, mais il le faut tout de suite, sous peine d'enfer et de mort.<sup>1</sup>

From the tone of the letter the reader can judge the torment through which the writer was going.

The farewell visit with Father Athanase reveals Marchenoir's reasons for the uncompromising route he chooses to take as a writer. Passionately, eloquently, Marchenoir speaks of his vocation and thereby offers an explanation for the actions he will later take.

Although we may justifiably relate Marchenoir's words to Bloy's personality and see in them his manifesto to the world, we are aware that nowhere does the historical Bloy ever succeed in stating his case as eloquently as does Marchenoir. We feel that Bloy is hiding behind the words of a fictional character because he was still struggling to find his true vocation at the time he wrote the passage. In 1878, he had expressed his searching to Anne-Marie: "Tout ce que

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, pp. 140-142.

je peux demander à ce bon Maître, c'est qu'il veuille miséricordieusement m'éclairer et me faire connaître d'une manière certaine ma vocation."<sup>1</sup> In 1886 before the publication of Le Désespéré he wrote:

L'insuccès complet, invincible après de tels efforts sera pour moi un signe assuré que je m'égare dans une fausse voie et je prierai le général des Chartreux de me donner une cellule. Je sais bien qu'on peut m'objecter que j'ai déjà vainement essayé ce genre de vie, que mon apparente vocation littéraire semble m'interdire. N'importe! j'essaierai encore . . . J'ai cru ou espéré que Dieu m'avait donné une voix pour parler à mes frères. Je le crois et l'espère encore et c'est uniquement pour cela que je ne désarme pas. Mais l'impossibilité absolue serait regardée par moi comme une intimation manifeste de la volonté de Dieu qui m'appellerait ailleurs.<sup>2</sup>

While still torn between a literary career and a penchant for monastic life, Bloy was probably loath to speak out strongly about a commitment as a writer. Nonetheless he obviously felt that his destiny was in the field of letters, or he would not have become the well-known, outspoken pamphleteer that we know. These feelings he expressed through Marchenoir and while they fully reflect the fictional character's secure knowledge that following his visit to the Chartreuse he was on the right path, they reveal only one aspect of Bloy: the one inclined to literature and awaiting a definite sign that this was to be his vocation.

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres à Véronique, p. 91, dated Aug. 4, 1878.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Dec. 4, 1886.

Upon Bloy's own return to Paris, Anne-Marie had met him at the railway station. In Marchenoir's case, however, he arrives unannounced and visits Leverdier,

qu'il avait, non sans combat, résolu de voir tout d'abord, avant de rentrer chez lui . . . Il fut, à l'instant, ressaisi de tout son trouble et d'une crainte plus grande de l'inconnu. Son ami lui parut un homme infiniment redoutable qui allait prononcer de définitives choses et il monta son escalier avec tremblement.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Leverdier tries to prepare his friend for the shocking change in Véronique. The terrifying narrative of Véronique's extreme actions serves as a link between the section on the Grande Chartreuse and the ensuing portion of the novel. Before our very eyes, Marchenoir's passionate letter to Véronique bears fruit as she deliberately sets about mutilating herself in order to repel him.<sup>2</sup> According to Bloy, Anne-Marie's actions were more extreme than those presented in his fictional account<sup>3</sup> but we question this claim since he was inclined to exaggerate. This tendency, according to Léopold Levieux, dates back to Bloy's youth. "Dix ans avant la rencontre d'Anne-Marie . . . ses parents, sa mère croyante autant que son père incroyant, l'avaient

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup>She had had her beautiful hair cut and had had all her teeth pulled, an action Bohet calls "une auto-castration symbolique." *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>Lettres à Georges Khnopff (Liège: Ed. du Balancier, 1929), Mar. 3, 1887.

souvent et fortement mis en garde contre son penchant au grossièrement épique."<sup>1</sup> Gustave Guiches picturesquely spoke of Bloy's "mégalomane verbale,"<sup>2</sup> and early in their friendship, Barbey d'Aurevilly also recognized this inclination to exaggerate.<sup>3</sup> The consensus of those who knew Bloy personally, that is, his family and friends, appears unanimous--Bloy did exaggerate. The views Bloy expressed in Le Pèlerin de l'Absolu coincide with this.

Quelqu'un blâme cette lettre qui semble excessive. A ce propos voici quelques réflexions:

On ne voit le mal de ce monde qu'à la condition de l'exagérer. J'ai écrit cela, je ne sais où. Dans l'Absolu, il ne peut y avoir d'exagération et, dans l'Art qui est la recherche de l'Absolu, il n'y en a pas davantage. L'artiste qui ne considère que l'objet même ne le voit pas. Il en est ainsi pour le moraliste, le philosophe et même l'historien. Peut-être surtout l'historien. Pour dire quelque chose de valable, aussi bien que pour donner l'impression du Beau, il est indispensable de paraître exagérer, c'est-à-dire de porter son regard au-delà de l'objet et, alors, c'est l'exactitude même sans aucune exagération, ce qu'on peut vérifier dans les Prophètes qui furent tous accusés d'exagérer.

. . . L'hyperbole est un microscope pour le discernement des insectes et un télescope pour se rapprocher des astres.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Bloy (Louvain: Rex, 1931), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Le Banquet (Paris: Editions Spes, 1926), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> See our discussion pp. 242 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Sept. 11, 1912. Martineau, in his introduction to the Lettres à Véronique provides an explanation for Bloy's exaggerations. He mentions the "grossièrement littéraire en honneur à l'époque." P. xx. Most critics seem to agree that Bloy did in fact exaggerate. See Paul Carton, Un Héraut de Dieu: Léon Bloy, p. 214; Stanislas Fumet, Mission de Léon Bloy (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946), p. 249; Bollery, in the introduction to Exégèse des Lieux Communs in Oeuvres, VIII, p. 9.

As to Véronique's actions in Le Désespéré, we must, in the final analysis accept Bollery's conclusion that "on ne saura jamais de quels sacrifices fut capable la sublime repentie."<sup>1</sup>

Leverdier's warning of the change in Véronique "does not register" and Marchenoir is unprepared when he sees her. The shock for him is overwhelming.

Entendant cette voix changée par la torture, qui se faisait amoureuse par charité, il se détendit et se brisa. Il l'attira sur ses genoux et, lui cachant le visage dans ses bras et sur sa poitrine, il sanglota éperdument. Ce fut une de ces rafales de pleurs, comme il en avait eu si souvent, et qui, déjà, tant de fois, l'avaient délivré des suggestions du désespoir. Longtemps, ses larmes, grossies par tous les orages intérieurs qui avaient précédé cet instant, roulèrent en ruisseaux sur la tête mutilée de la martyre qui se fondait elle-même, de compassion, blottie,<sup>2</sup> comme une hirondelle, contre la paroi de ce sein mouvant.

Historically quite inaccurate, this passage is, let us observe, as moving as any that Bloy has written and testifies to his ability to create from the depths of his personal suffering.

Although Marchenoir has spent a month at the Grande Chartreuse, upon his return to Paris he is back where he started or perhaps in a worse situation: he still has no money and he must also endure the ever present result of Véronique's action. All of this prepares him for the épreuve diabolique for which again, there is no historical

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 382.

<sup>2</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 172.

basis. In his need Marchenoir is receptive to the offer made by Beauvivier,<sup>1</sup> editor of Le Pilate:<sup>2</sup> This newspaper would like to have the services of Cain Marchenoir in a polemical battle with L'Univers. If Marchenoir is to make a success of the enterprise, he must conform to certain rules: "Si votre ami veut réussir au Pilate, il faudrait lui recommander de ne plus tant faire la bête féroce. S'il sait plaire à Beauvivier, sa fortune est faite. Il ne manque pas de talent, quand il veut se modérer et ne pas employer continuellement ses abominables expressions scatologiques."<sup>3</sup> Warnings such as this one uttered by Lerat<sup>4</sup> were frequently given to Bloy by both friends and enemies but never heeded: "C'était l'orgueil de Marchenoir de se couper lui-même par la racine, quand on voulait l'emporter."<sup>5</sup> The same can, of course, be said of Bloy himself.

The great scene of Marchenoir's defeat--or victory, depending on one's point of view--is a banquet at which all leading writers and literary figures of the day have been gathered together. Bloy shows the clever Beauvivier and his guests baiting Marchenoir until the tide of violence within

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<sup>1</sup>Catulle Mendès.

<sup>2</sup>Le Figaro.

<sup>3</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 204.

<sup>4</sup>Louis Nicolardot: "Parasite, bavard, orgueilleux, tel paraît avoir été le personnage." Le Désespéré, in Oeuvres, III, p. 335, cf. II, p. 386. See our discussion of Apémantus, pp. 70 ff. and of Lerat, pp. 138 ff.

<sup>5</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 212.

him can no longer be held back. Marchenoir's reaction, though in keeping with Bloy's character, let it be observed, is nonetheless totally the product of Bloy's imagination for he was never placed in such a position. Marchenoir's tirade is in the best Bloyen style. Having spoken, Marchenoir leaves, exhausted and utterly drained of energy, passing through the chastened audience which readily makes way for him.

Bloy, of course, wrote many bitter attacks, yet there seem to be few recorded occurrences in which he verbally attacked people.<sup>1</sup> Marchenoir has not compromised himself and, in his own eyes, he has scored a victory since he equates compromise with a prostitution of his talents. However, as far as society is concerned, Marchenoir has alienated himself and no escape from his isolation exists, Leverdier and Véronique, the two faithfuls, now being the only ones remaining at Marchenoir's side. A similar situation, of course, existed in the opening pages of the novel but the difference now lies in the fact that Marchenoir has definitively alienated all others and there is no possibility of reconciliation. Now, for Bloy the novelist to be able to create the utter destitution of Marchenoir, he must yet dispose of both Leverdier and Véronique.

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<sup>1</sup>There are, of course, isolated episodes in which Bloy did confront individuals but in these he sometimes appeared a ridiculous figure. E.g. the famous one with Dr. M. de Fleury, Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 96 ff.



In a few lines, Bloy dispenses with Leverdier. This faithful friend leaves Paris to live with a wealthy aunt because, as Leverdier explains, this move enables him to help Marchenoir and Véronique financially, if not morally. However, although money is of great importance in the life of Marchenoir, it is moral support of which he is so completely destitute. Thus, the withdrawal of Leverdier's presence takes on gigantic proportions for Marchenoir and, left with only Véronique, who depends totally on him, Marchenoir is gradually drained of all resources.

Véronique provides the next rise in the dramatic action of the story as she finally offers the solution to the dilemma in which she and Marchenoir find themselves. Véronique begins to lose contact with reality as she retreats into a world of her own creation. The agony endured by Marchenoir as he sees the day by day mental deterioration of his beloved is revealed in the heart-rending letter he addresses to Leverdier. This episode is, of course, based on the very real schizophrenia of Anne-Marie Roulé whom Bloy was obliged to have committed to a mental institution in much the same way as Marchenoir incarcerated his Véronique.<sup>1</sup> The illness as described in

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<sup>1</sup>For details see Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 298-464; also Fam's article, "Anne-Marie Roulé. La Véronique Cheminot du Désespéré." Gelma's article in Cahiers de Psychiatrie provides insight into an interesting medically oriented account.

the novel does not exactly parallel events in Bloy's life, however. His portrayal includes a description of the mental disintegration of Véronique showing her behaviour in the light of his knowledge, while in his personal experience, Bloy finally faced the harsh reality of her madness only as a last resort. According to Gelma, Bloy did not recognize evident signs of Anne-Marie's mental illness when they first occurred because he was unwilling to see in her anything other than a visionary.<sup>1</sup> He closed his eyes to her sickness until the very last moment.

With Véronique's admission to the mental hospital, Bloy has succeeded in the complete isolation of Marchenoir. Cut off from family, friends and acquaintances, Caïn must now bear his suffering alone.

It was not sufficient, however, for Bloy to show just the disintegration of Marchenoir's social life. With his literary taste for a proper end for his central character, Bloy felt that Caïn Marchenoir himself must die. To achieve this end for his hero, who after all is a healthy man of middle age, Bloy resorts to an accident, choosing as the instrument of death one of his bêtes noires: a motorized vehicle. Run down by a truck,<sup>2</sup> Marchenoir

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., pp. 195-199.

<sup>2</sup>Bloy states that this episode is symbolically true. Lettres aux Montchal, Jul. 23, 1887. See also Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 17. This symbolic interpretation of the event seems to find support in the fact that Marchenoir's spirit is crushed by the tragedies of Véronique's madness and consequent internment and his will to live is destroyed.

develops tetanus and dies. His death, therefore, is one of prolonged suffering, one with which Bloy was only too familiar since Berthe Dumont's death had also been from tetanus. Such a demise suited his artistic purposes perfectly: not only was it drawn out and torturous but also he could portray it with authenticity. In addition, Bloy added a spiritual anguish to the physical: no priest comes to give Marchenoir final absolution. Even Leverdier, notified of Marchenoir's illness, arrives too late to be of any comfort.

In summary, we may therefore say that the life of Cain Marchenoir coincides with that of Bloy in many respects. However, while certain occurrences do indeed find their roots in Bloy's personal experiences, these are usually altered considerably and in their final form are no longer historically accurate. Historical accuracy appears to have been maintained only in those aspects of secondary importance to the novel. Thus, Marchenoir's background, similar to that of Bloy himself, plays no role in the story. The failure of Marchenoir's Le Carcan parallels Bloy's own abortive attempt with Le Pal; yet such incidents actually lie outside the central movement of the novel. Even Marchenoir's sojourn at the monastery is but one section of the story. Conforming most closely to historical fact is the narrative concerning Marchenoir and Véronique's ill-fated love. Nevertheless, in spite of the intimate relationship which exists between the episodes in the novel and those of Bloy's real life, Le Désespéré is not an autobiography. It seems that Bloy drew

from his own experiences in order to facilitate the creation of his novel. Models drawn from real life are used as frames on which Bloy builds using ideal qualities he envisions, and actual historical events are played with freely. Still other events are entirely products of Bloy's imagination and are fused with his altered historical facts.

The episodes which have thus been constructed are not always smoothly blended together and the character of Marchenoir who plays his role against such a variegated background reveals some of this same complexity. Because he lives a life which often parallels that of his creator he sometimes appears to be a fictional version of Bloy and is, in fact, used as the author's mouthpiece on several occasions. But Marchenoir also has a life of his own and in the portrayal of this life Bloy gives free rein to his creative imagination as well as to his hopes. Through Marchenoir Bloy depicts not only a fictionalized but an idealized version of the events he wishes to present to his reader. How Bloy viewed Cain Marchenoir can better be understood when we study this character not only in Le Désespéré but also in La Femme pauvre for although his death brings the first novel to a dramatic conclusion, Marchenoir was to be resurrected in La Femme pauvre.

The Reappearance, Brief Destiny  
and Death of Marchenoir  
in La Femme pauvre

In spite of Cain Marchenoir's death at the end of Le Désespéré, for Léon Bloy he was still very much alive. In the intervening years between the publication of Le Désespéré and La Femme pauvre, Marchenoir reappears in both Sueur de sang<sup>1</sup> and Histoires désobligeantes.<sup>2</sup>

In "Les vingt-quatre oreilles de Gueule-de-Bois," a story in Sueur de sang, Bloy gives free rein to his imagination by allowing Marchenoir, his alter ego, to perform courageous acts. The hero of the story, Gueule-de-Bois, is assisted by two men of which "le second n'était autre que ce Marchenoir, silencieux rêveur aux muscles accrédités, que devaient un jour éprouver, jusqu'à l'agonie, la fange bouillante et le crapuleux vitriol des inimitiés littéraires."<sup>3</sup> This particular description is the only concession to unity in the character of Marchenoir as he is found in the novels of Bloy. Gueule-de-Bois' henchman might indeed have been anyone; there is no particular need to have

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<sup>1</sup>In "Les vingt-quatre oreilles de Gueule-de-Bois," Oeuvres, VI, p. 23, story first published Nov. 19, 1892. Consult Pierre Arrou, Les Logis de Léon Bloy (Paris: Crès, 1931), pp.104 ff. and also Fam, "L'Autobiographie dans Sueur de sang," in Cahiers Léon Bloy, Sept.-Oct., 1938.

<sup>2</sup>In "La plus belle trouvaille de Cain," Oeuvres, VI, p. 331, first published Oct. 13, 1893; cf. Ruth Hager, Léon Bloy et l'évolution du conte cruel (Paris: Librairie Klincksieck, 1967), pp. 63-66.

<sup>3</sup>Sueur de sang, VI, p. 26.

used Marchenoir because his character is not developed in the short story. Bloy is intent rather on evoking the horror of war by describing an atrocity.

In "La plus belle trouvaille de Caïn," a story in Histoires désobligeantes, Bloy gives vent to his anger against landlords through a story of just retribution, a theme often found in his work. Hager tells us that:

L'épisode sinistre qui termine l'histoire, la découverte de la tête coupée de sa propriétaire dans un "carton bureaucratique" aurait pu s'inspirer d'un fait divers, ce genre de surprise n'étant pas inconnu à l'époque. La Gazette des Tribunaux du 27 mars 1890 raconte, par exemple, la découverte dans un colis à la Gare Saint-Lazare, d'une tête de femme, décapitée dix-huit mois auparavant. C'était une vengeance rêvée à l'égard de toutes les propriétaires, un secteur de petits bourgeois particulièrement diffamé par les poètes de ce temps.<sup>1</sup>

Although the episode appears to have been borrowed, Bloy makes it his own by the presentation in which the horrifying discovery gives a sudden, final twist to the story rather than providing the core of the narrative. While the adventure befalls Caïn Marchenoir, the account is given indirectly by Pélopidas Gacougnolle, whom we shall find again as one of the characters of La Femme pauvre.

Gacougnolle, speaking as Marchenoir's advocate, defends a man who is suspiciously like the Marchenoir of Le Désespéré.

In both these cases there was no particular need for Bloy to use the character he called Caïn Marchenoir. Any other personage would have served as well, yet Bloy chose

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<sup>1</sup>Hager, op. cit., pp. 65-66.

to use Marchenoir. It seems to indicate that Marchenoir, in Bloy's mind, had not really died in Le Désespéré, and was still lurking, awaiting resurrection in La Femme pauvre.

The plot of La Femme pauvre does not, however, justify the presence of Marchenoir and the story apparently was not written as a sequel to Le Désespéré.<sup>1</sup> Marchenoir plays neither the principal role nor even the leading male role; in fact, as in the short stories mentioned above, his actions could very well have been carried out by one of the other male characters.<sup>2</sup> But instead of reducing the number of male characters, integrating Marchenoir's role into that of one of the other male personages, Bloy deliberately includes him. Because of this multiplicity of male protagonists Bloy's novel has been accused of a lack of unity. Bloy's own awareness of this weakness is moreover revealed in the very text of the novel where he states, "Marchenoir, depuis longtemps présenté, n'a jamais paru très plausible."<sup>3</sup>

An examination of the evolution of the second novel shows that, unlike Le Désespéré, from the beginning La Femme pauvre was not structured around Marchenoir. In Bloy's early

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<sup>1</sup> The original title La Désespérée suggests that either Bloy intended to benefit from any publicity Le Désespéré might achieve or that he saw his novel as complementing the first. The two, in any case, are quite independent of one another.

<sup>2</sup> Either Léopold or Gacougnol might have had more extensive roles.

<sup>3</sup> Léon Bloy, La Femme pauvre (Paris: Mercure de France, 1937), p. 126.

letters about his projected novel<sup>1</sup> there is no mention of Marchenoir, yet, at some point between the conception of the novel and the time he sat down to write it, Bloy decided to use Marchenoir. The decision once made, he did not go back on it.

As presented in La Femme pauvre, Marchenoir is a man who is never wrong and "un de nos plus redoutables écrivains"; he is described as triste and exilé, both adjectives which might be applied to the Marchenoir of Le Désespéré,<sup>2</sup> and he has essentially the same character as that of the man we met earlier. Like the Marchenoir of Le Désespéré, he has had a priest friend who has died, and a son, André, who also has died.<sup>3</sup> By these incidental references, Bloy attempts to draw the Marchenoirs of the two books together.

Once introduced, Marchenoir is used as a mouthpiece; his first digression is the well-known passage in which he speaks to Clotilde and Gacougnol about the role of animals in human suffering and universal redemption. Later Marchenoir speaks about the importance and role of the Middle Ages, a favourite subject of Bloy's. In the "Soirée chez Gacougnol," probably the single most outstanding scene

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<sup>1</sup> Lettres aux Montchal, Feb. 6, 1887; Lettres à Georges Khnopff, Mar. 14, 1887; see also Léon Bloy, Lettres à sa fiancée, Nov. 27, 1889.

<sup>2</sup> La Femme pauvre, pp. 59, 66, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 77.



in the novel, Marchenoir speaks about Wagner and, on Bloy's behalf, also attacks Huysmans through his fictional counterpart, Folantin.

The words of Marchenoir are used to describe Clotilde. "Elle est délicieuse! . . . D'où vient-elle? Il n'est pas possible qu'elle soit la maîtresse de ce gros fantassin de Pélopidas. Il ne me l'aurait certes pas caché . . . Comme elle m'écoutait! Il y a donc encore des âmes sur la terre!"<sup>1</sup> Such is Marchenoir's résumé of her after their day at the zoo.

If we compare the first meeting of Clotilde and Marchenoir with the first meeting of Jeanne Molbech and Léon Bloy, we can see similarities in the two events.<sup>2</sup> In both instances the young woman gave all of her rapt attention to the man and he in turn was captivated by her.

Clotilde, on her part, helps reveal Marchenoir to the reader: we meet Marchenoir at the same time as Clotilde and we see him through her eyes. From the first day she is duly impressed: "Il me semble, monsieur, que vous devez être assez rarement compris, car vos paroles vont plus loin que les idées ordinaires. Les choses que vous dites paraissent venir d'un monde étranger que ne connaîtrait personne."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres à sa fiancée reveals Bloy's account in the letter of Aug. 29, 1889 and Madame Bloy's version in the introduction, p. 6. See also a discussion by Fam, "Exégèse de La Femme pauvre," p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 72.

But Marchenoir's personal appearances in the novel are restricted to Part I and they are few in number because he touches the plot only slightly. At the same time, his name crops up often enough to indicate that his presence is important to Bloy.

While Marchenoir initially corresponded to Bloy, it appears that their paths actually began to diverge almost from the moment of his creation as a literary character. This did not greatly affect Le Désespéré because it is restricted in its scope, but complications did arise in the case of La Femme pauvre. There Marchenoir lived an independent life of his own, a purely fictional role, which no longer reflected Bloy's own personal experience and when the author drew from historical events he needed a new and different fictional character to represent himself.

Marchenoir had lived out so many of Bloy's dreams that the author probably did not realize that this character no longer could be identified with his own personal reality until he tried to use Marchenoir as Clotilde's husband. At that point, it became evident that Marchenoir, as presented by his creator, was not suited to marriage. Léon Bloy differed from Marchenoir in this respect for while he delayed marrying until he was over forty years of age, he did enjoy a satisfying relationship with his wife. Marchenoir, in Le Désespéré, was a man of solitude, incapable of the normal interpersonal relations. Bloy, in effect, admits the existence of this difficulty when he uses Léopold as a

liaison between Gacougnol and Marchenoir. If Marchenoir is incapable of friendship without a friend to act as intermediary and, in effect, temper the intensity of his relationship, how can he possibly survive the rigorous demands of marriage? In this indirect way, Bloy reveals Marchenoir as a man whose difficult character makes him most unsuitable for marriage to Clotilde. Bloy had included his favourite character in the novel only to discover that he could not use him. Léopold was therefore invented to fill the role of Clotilde's husband. Marchenoir had become superfluous.

Marchenoir's last appearance in Part I shows him with Gacougnol and Léopold, accompanying Clotilde home after the soirée; in Part II Bloy states: "Cinq ans plus tard. Clotilde est maintenant femme de Léopold. Gacougnol est mort. Marchenoir est mort."<sup>1</sup> Carton speaks of "morts successives que l'on sent amenées pour déblayer le terrain."<sup>2</sup> Bloy has, so to speak, conducted a purge. He makes a few brief references about the intervening time: Marchenoir was in financial straits,<sup>3</sup> he was a witness at the marriage of Clotilde and Léopold,<sup>4</sup> he was not chosen to be the godfather

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Carton, Un Héraut de Dieu, p. 68. See also Marie-Joseph Lory, Léon Bloy et son époque (1870-1914) (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1944), p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

of their child,<sup>1</sup> he attended the funeral of the child,<sup>2</sup> and finally, after an unexplained absence, he died under the same circumstances as those described in Le Désespéré: alone and without receiving the last rites.<sup>3</sup> These statements are Bloy's concession to integrating Marchenoir into the novel since he does not actually appear in Part II.

As far as Marchenoir's death is concerned there is, however, a slight difference in emphasis from the presentation in the first novel. Where Le Désespéré describes Cain's death in grisly detail, the second novel merely mentions the circumstances:

Ils songèrent à consulter Marchenoir, qui ne se montrait plus depuis quelque temps. Ils venaient même de lui écrire, lorsque Druides éperdu vint leur annoncer sa mort...  
Ce fut une catastrophe énorme, une désolation qui les écrasa. Et quelle pitié sur cette mort! Quelle pitié!  
Seul, dénué de tout, n'ayant pas même obtenu un prêtre, ce chrétien des catacombes n'avait pu compter que sur un miracle pour être fortifié au dernier instant.  
On n'avait pas été averti du danger et tout le monde arriva trop tard. Il n'y eut personne pour recueillir les dernières paroles de celui qui avait si grandement parlé toute sa vie, et que les hommes refusèrent si obstinément d'écouter!<sup>4</sup>

Le Désespéré had, of course, been terminated by Marchenoir's death; in the second novel life goes on.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

It appears that in the intervening years between the writing of the two novels, Bloy had achieved a new dimension. He had acquired a humility completely new to him: he had discovered, as it were, that life could go on without him.

His first sojourn in Denmark may have played a significant role in this realization.<sup>1</sup> Bloy had gone to the country of his wife in the hope of making a new beginning, but his heart was in Paris. He kept abreast of events in the French capital by his voluminous correspondence with such friends as Henry Cayssac, Alcide Guérin, Georges Landry, J.-K. Huysmans, Charles Buet and Léon Deschamps, editor of La Plume. The Montchals and Prince Ourousof further enriched his knowledge of the outside world.<sup>2</sup> Despite the many letters Bloy received and wrote, he nevertheless suffered from his self-imposed exile but it seems that he may have learned a valuable lesson: while friends cannot always be present, yet their friendship should not be discounted. What Bloy had learned from those months in Denmark is translated to the pages of La Femme pauvre where we find that Bloy does not berate and criticize those who have allowed Marchenoir to die alone. This is indeed a considerable development from the episode described in Le

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<sup>1</sup> Bloy's first stay in Denmark was from Feb. to Sept., 1891. He later visited Denmark again from Jan., 1899 to Jun., 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 369 ff.

Désespéré.

By Bloy's admission Marchenoir is based on himself<sup>1</sup> and this may well have been the case at the outset. However, as we pointed out earlier, the paths of Marchenoir and Bloy diverged almost from the beginning, Bloy evolving and Marchenoir retaining his rigidity of character. Thus, it would seem quite understandable that Marchenoir, in La Femme pauvre, has become largely a fictional personality. His character conforms to the role Bloy outlines for him: he is still the destitute writer we met in Le Désespéré but this time a man whose talents are appreciated and lauded by an intimate circle of friends.

Marchenoir does display a grandiose eccentricity in La Femme pauvre and is somewhat of a poseur. This latter characteristic is, of course, reflected in some of Bloy's writings. Yet the poseur side of Bloy does not seem to have been an inherent part of the personality he displayed to his friends and acquaintances. Moreover, no historical person other than Bloy himself has ever been suggested as a model for Marchenoir. We find, therefore, that we cannot agree with Martineau who feels that Bloy is one hundred percent Marchenoir but only fifty percent Léopold.<sup>2</sup> Neither can we subscribe to his statement that Marchenoir "s'est imposé

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<sup>1</sup> Ballery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"  
p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 121.

fortement à l'attention du lecteur et l'a subjugué."<sup>1</sup> One can reach this conclusion only by coming to the novel with a preconceived idea of the kind of person Marchenoir is going to be, an idea to be obtained only by reading Le Désespéré.

In La Femme pauvre, therefore, we see that Marchenoir fills a secondary role with fixed boundaries beyond which he does not go. These limits are set by Bloy and his imagination and Marchenoir strictly adheres to them. The few concessions to a historical model are of negligible importance and Marchenoir, in La Femme pauvre, remains indeed a fictional personage.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 122. Ernest Beaumont supports our viewpoint. See "Léon Bloy, the Artist," in The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 165.

## CHAPTER II

### OTHER FICTIONAL CHARACTERS REFLECTING ASPECTS OF BLOY'S PERSONALITY

In this chapter we have grouped together several characters who have one thing in common as they appear in La Femme pauvre: all of them reveal some facet of Léon Bloy's personality. Reginald Graulich sums this up neatly:

"Gacougnol, Marchenoir, Léopold, et jusqu'aux tragiques et humbles comparses: un Druide, un l'Isle-de-France, un Hercule Joly, autant de faces de l'intense personnalité de Bloy."<sup>1</sup>

In his journal Bloy explains why this is so. "Songez que je suis réellement le protagoniste perpétuel de toutes mes fictions, que j'incarne exactement, au prix de quelles douleurs! tous les souffrants, tous les saignants, tous les désolés que j'ai tenté de faire vivre en leur supposant mon âme."<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that so many people have been tempted to see only the autobiographical elements. However, as we examine the characters in this chapter, it will soon be evident that they are complex and that the aspects of Bloy's personality reflected in them by no means reveal the entire personage.

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<sup>1</sup>In "En lisant Hello et Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Feb., 1928, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Mon Journal, Jun. 26, 1897.



Léopold

Léopold, created for the sole purpose of being Clotilde's husband in La Femme pauvre, is a complex character of whom, Bloy admitted, description was difficult: "personnage plus qu'étrange, celui-là, et qu'il n'était pas facile d'expliquer."<sup>1</sup> The problem arises from the fact that Léopold had three models: Bloy himself, Bloy's friend Camille Redondin, and Léopold de la Roquebrussance, a character in Catulle Mendès' novel Zo'har.<sup>2</sup>

Léopold is at first only an episodic character. Bloy nevertheless devotes a half dozen pages<sup>3</sup> to a sketchy characterization of the man in preparation for his role later in the novel. Dealing primarily with Léopold's character, Bloy reveals to the reader the qualities which set him apart from others: the fact that his background is kept secret, the dynamic but indefinable vitality beneath a calm exterior, and his great talent as an enlumineur. We are also told that he participated in military exploits in central Africa and survived despite the risks that he took during the expeditions.

Because Marchenoir's background was already based on that of the author, it is understandable that Bloy did not also pattern Léopold's background on his own. He may have decided to leave Léopold's background a mystery in order to

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>(Paris: Charpentier, 1886).

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 129-136.

appeal to the reader's curiosity, or, what seems more likely, to dispense with the necessity of creating a background, which for Bloy would have been a laborious process. But even when he chose to present a character with unknown origins, a state of affairs quite acceptable to a reader of fiction, and therefore needing no explanation, Bloy, it appears, had recourse to a model. It has been shown that Camille Redondin, a close friend of Bloy for several years<sup>1</sup> served as the model for the early Léopold. Camille Redondin made a distinct impression on Léon Bloy as is borne out in the latter's correspondence,<sup>2</sup> yet, while Bloy felt close to him, he knew little about him. Redondin remained somewhat of a mystery until the findings of Fam, published in the Cahiers Léon Bloy.<sup>3</sup>

There are many possible models for the military exploits of Léopold because "les suggestions d'exploration africaine ne manquaient pas à Léon Bloy."<sup>4</sup> In addition to Zo'har, which Bollery mentions, Bloy had his own military experiences of the War of 1870-71 from which to draw and he was familiar with the adventures of his brother Georges in Indo-China.<sup>5</sup> It must also be remembered that this was the

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<sup>1</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 344-346; Bollery, "En marge de La Femme pauvre," Cahiers Léon Bloy, May-Jun., 1934 and Lettres à sa fiancée, Jan. 18, 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Lettres aux Montchal, May 20, 1890.

<sup>3</sup> "Exégèse de La Femme pauvre," Sept.-Oct., 1937.

<sup>4</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre", p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Bollery, II, pp. 185 ff. and Maurice Dubourg, Un aventurier périgordin en Indochine, Georges Bloy, frère de Léon Bloy.

era of significant colonialist enterprises. Bloy may very well have dreamed of Africa and while he himself did not experience such adventures, those related are in keeping with the ones of which he may have heard. Léopold thus becomes a fearless individual who is talented and sensitive as well. Because he is virile yet gentle, he incorporates the best of both types and is, therefore, an acceptable partner for Clotilde when the time for their marriage arrives. Léopold also acts as a liaison between Marchenoir and Gacougnol, in this way bringing three incongruous personalities together. Léopold's devotion to Marchenoir is based on that of Camille for Bloy.<sup>1</sup>

The writing of La Femme pauvre was halted after the introduction of Léopold, apparently because Bloy was uncertain as to the direction the course of the novel would take.<sup>2</sup> Léopold's first appearance gives us no indication of the future role he is to play. We learn only that the worldly concerns which preoccupy most people are of no interest to him. Bloy seems to have idealized the ability to remain disinterested in or detached from this world's goods. Ironically, this was something he was never able to achieve in his own life as his very poverty made him set high value on money and possessions.

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 134; Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 354; Lettres aux Montchal, May 20, 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 25.

When Léopold makes his second appearance during the soirée, his personality is developed no further; he participates as a member of the group but that is all. We do, however, see his solicitous concern for Clotilde, foreshadowing his future actions. When Léopold assumes a major role in Part II he is not a stranger to us but like a falling star he makes a brilliant though brief appearance.

Before marrying Clotilde, Léopold confesses his past to her. The story he tells of his incestuous relations with his sister Antoinette bears a resemblance to that found in Zo'har. However, Catulle Mendès' work and Léopold's narrative are different in their emphasis. The action of Zo'har revolves around the incestuous relationship of Léopold and Stéphanie de la Roquebrussane. Mendès exploits the inner turmoil of Léopold and dwells on this conflict. The movement of the novel is impelled by a classic misunderstanding such as those on which so many stories are based. Léopold's experience is in the past of La Femme pauvre. Bloy's reasons for incorporating this episode are explained by Bollery in the following way:

Léon Bloy a voulu symboliser, synthétiser, puisque Léopold c'est lui-même, tout son passé sentimental et charnel par cet aveu du plus monstrueux des crimes de la chair, l'inceste, et il pense certainement à ses relations, coupables à l'origine, avec celle qui devait devenir sa soeur d'élection, Anne-Marie Roulé.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 29; See also Fam, "Exégèse de La Femme pauvre," Sept.-Oct., 1937, pp. 12-13.

But because Bloy had at one time considered marrying Anne-Marie, it seems apparent that he did not view her only as a sister. Furthermore, as stated above, the character of Léopold is not merely a fictional representation of Bloy. Ernest Beaumont's viewpoint therefore seems more persuasive.

This episode does not constitute an important element in La Femme pauvre, being presented merely in a retrospective discourse, but it reveals the author's seemingly inescapable predilection for an outrageous sensationalism commonly confined to the lowest reaches of fiction.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy often experienced discouragement in his life, but he did not have suicidal tendencies, while Camille Redondin on the other hand "cherchait la mort"<sup>2</sup> and was hospitalized on one occasion "pour coup de feu par revolver."<sup>3</sup> The man Léopold reveals to Clotilde as his former self tried to escape his destiny by death-defying adventures and attempted suicide.<sup>4</sup> None of these efforts was successful and when he met Clotilde his life was changed so radically that he no longer sought to escape from its clutches.

Léopold marries Clotilde and together they share some of the experiences of the real Bloy and his Jeanne.

Like his creator, Léopold is an enlumineur and like

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<sup>1</sup>"Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup>Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 123.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 345.

<sup>4</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 204.

Bloy, his eyesight suffers from this work.<sup>1</sup> For Bloy this art, for which he had great talent, was a sideline in which he indulged occasionally,<sup>2</sup> but for Léopold, it is his means of livelihood and the loss of sight brings about financial hardships for himself and his family. The young couple which has experienced only happiness is suddenly confronted with difficulties of ever increasing proportions.

With the accumulation of financial problems, the idyllic life of the couple comes to an end and everyday concerns invade their home and marriage. Despite their love for each other, tragedy appears always to hover on the horizon. We witness a gradual process of destitution similar to the one described in Le Désespéré. The couple is forced to move from pleasant lodgings to squalid ones.<sup>3</sup> It is there that takes place the outstanding autobiographical experience related in the novel: the death of the baby André, an experience Bloy wrote first in his personal journal and then reproduced, virtually intact, in his novel. Indeed, he found it such an emotional drain that he thereafter, in the published version of his Journal simply referred to the

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup>These works were sometimes given to friends as gifts or tokens of appreciation; at other times, Bloy sold them to raise money. Unfortunately, financial necessity forced him to accept a mere pittance for this artistic work requiring painstaking effort and much time.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 219-220.

account in La Femme pauvre.<sup>1</sup>

The little boy was buried near Camille Redondin and his parents moved to the vicinity of the cemetery so that they could tend and visit the tombs regularly. In the same way, the fictional personages of Léopold and Clotilde care for the graves of André and Marchenoir.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this new environment that they meet their satanic neighbours, Mesdames Poulot and Grand.<sup>3</sup> Clotilde is the victim of their torment and abuse and Léopold finds himself unable to protect her from the two women. In desperation he prays to God that the tormentors might be silenced.

Léopold's prayer, by its very violence, has an effect on the reader. Lory calls it "ce genre d'objurcation forcenée qui rappelle les malédictions des anciens prophètes."<sup>4</sup> Despite Bloy's great faith in the power of prayer<sup>5</sup> it seems doubtful that he ever practised the type of prayer to which Léopold feels forced to have recourse.

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<sup>1</sup> In the manuscript of his journal dated Jan. 25, 1895 ff. we find the detailed account which was not, however, reproduced in the published journal. There, Bloy, in a footnote, merely refers the reader to La Femme pauvre. The actual text may be found in the notes to the Journal, I, p. 373 and in Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 152 ff. See La Femme pauvre, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> La Femme pauvre, pp. 237, 243, 285; cf. Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, pp. 94, 159.

<sup>3</sup> La Femme pauvre, pp. 269-270.

<sup>4</sup> La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion see Lory, op. cit., pp. 80-90.

Lory states that "cette prière arrive à être inhumaine à force d'être implacable,"<sup>1</sup> yet inhumanity was not one of Bloy's attributes.<sup>2</sup> The prayer uttered by Léopold serves a dual purpose: it illustrates Bloy's belief in the power of God and gives further dramatic impetus to the literary plot.

With the exception of the prayer uttered in his desperation, Léopold is, however, definitely a more gentle version of Bloy than is Marchenoir. Most of the experiences attributed to Clotilde and Léopold during the brief period of their marriage are based directly on the life led by Jeanne and Léon Bloy. These parallels between fictional and real events, however, exist only for the duration of Léopold and Clotilde's marriage. Outside their marriage, both Léopold and Clotilde have lives of their own and differ significantly from their historical counterparts.

In both the fictional characters we notice an element of submission and humility which is absent in the Bloys. These qualities not only characterize Clotilde and Léopold, but serve to prepare the reader for events which will occur later in the novel. As Léopold and Clotilde calmly await the event that will mark their lives, the reader too knows that this will occur. And, indeed, Léopold's prayer leads

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<sup>1</sup> La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 88 n.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Bloy is here purging his subconscious self of some of the perverse elements lurking within his inner self.



to his death for he must pay the price of the punishment given to the two neighbours. Created to be Clotilde's husband, Léopold is eliminated when he has fulfilled this role, just as earlier Bloy disposed of Marchenoir and Gacougnol. His death by fire in the blaze at the Comic Opera<sup>1</sup> is an important and necessary occurrence in the sequence of symbolic events which will lead to the closing scene of La Femme pauvre.

### Apémantus

A strange character under the even stranger name of Apémantus makes a single appearance in La Femme pauvre at Gacougnol's soirée. This colourful name, drawn from Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, took on special significance in Barbey d'Aurevilly's circle of friends in much the same way as the French language has appropriated Molière's Harpagon and Tartuffe. Barbey d'Aurevilly used the name to imply a bitter, cynical person, and sometimes directed the reference to Bloy himself.<sup>2</sup>

Apémantus appears in "Propos digestifs,"<sup>3</sup> a story in Histoires désobligeantes, and several persons have indicated their belief that in this instance he represents Villiers de

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup>Oeuvres, VI, pp. 309, 361; see also Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>Oeuvres, VI, p. 308.

l'Isle-Adam expressing Bloy's ideas.<sup>1</sup> Carton tells us, "Apémantus, c'est encore Léon Bloy, sous le nom d'un personnage misanthrope, hargneux, emprunté à Shakespeare."<sup>2</sup> At the time Bollery wrote Bloy's biography he was of the same opinion because he called Apémantus an alias for Léon Bloy.<sup>3</sup> Later in his studies Bollery found a scrap of paper, in Bloy's own handwriting, listing the characters in La Femme pauvre. According to Bloy, the model for Apémantus is Louis Nicolardot, who had appeared in Le Désespéré as Alcide Lerat.<sup>4</sup> Martineau tells us that Apémantus is a "personnage complètement imaginé,"<sup>5</sup> an opinion substantiated in Bollery and Laquerrière's Biblio-iconographie.<sup>6</sup> In the light of all this testimony, we feel that the character of Apémantus in La Femme pauvre warrants more than passing mention.

We cannot disregard the evidence of Bloy's own hand-

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<sup>1</sup>Hager, Léon Bloy et l'évolution du conte cruel, p. 89; Albert Béguin, Léon Bloy, mystique de la douleur (Paris: éd. Labergerie, 1948), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Un Héraut de Dieu, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, index, p. 415.

<sup>4</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 134.

<sup>6</sup>A.-L. Laquerrière and Joseph Bollery, Biblio-iconographie de Léon Bloy (Paris: la Connaissance, 1935), pp. 23-24. We can thus see an evolution in Bollery's thought: in 1935, he believed Apémantus to be an invented character, in 1947 he thought him to be a manifestation of Bloy and by 1968 he had proof, in Bloy's own handwriting, that Nicolardot had been used as a model.

writing: Apémantus must be Nicolardot and, if we compare the character sketch of Lerat (Nicolardot) in Le Désespéré with that of Apémantus in La Femme pauvre, the similarities are immediately apparent.

Cet Alcide Lerat, fort connu dans le monde des journaux, est une sorte de Benoît Labre littéraire sans sainteté, dont le panégyrique posthume serait une besogne à faire trembler les dégrasseurs d'auréoles les plus audacieux. Vivant exclusivement d'aumônes récoltées chez les gens de lettres qu'il amuse de ses calomnies ou de ses médisances et qui le reçoivent dans les courants d'air, le drôle fétide, heureusement incapable de s'enrhumer, promène infatigablement sa carcasse, de l'un à l'autre crépuscule,-- colportant ainsi, dans le pantalon d'un romancier qu'il a diffamé la veille, chez un rédacteur en chef qu'il vient de couvrir d'ordures et qui lui donnera peut-être vingt sous, les basses conjectures de son déshonorant esprit sur la vie privée d'un poète dont il a fini tous les chapeaux.<sup>1</sup>

. . . un serpent à moitié coupé,<sup>2</sup> de l'espèce la plus venimeuse, lequel rampe habituellement dans les crachoirs de divers bureaux de rédaction, et que sa langue féroce a rendu célèbre. On ne le désigne que par le sobriquet diagnostique d'Apémantus. On lui a, autrefois, cassé les reins à coups de canne et, depuis cette époque, il vaque à ses insolences coutumières en traînant le râble, assez conforme à une cucurbitè ou se distilleraient de très sûrs poisons.<sup>3</sup>

Nicolardot was a familiar member of the group surrounding Barbey d'Aurevilly and like Bloy and Georges Landry (a close friend of Bloy's for many years) he did

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 200.

<sup>2</sup>A serpent is generally considered a repelling creature and persons to whom the term is applied are believed to be sly, treacherous individuals. Apémantus is equated to a venomous serpent because of his caustic tongue and repulsive appearance and personality.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 139.

proof-reading for the literary critic.<sup>1</sup> This explains, at least in part, his presence at the soirée. However, unlike Le Désespéré and some of Bloy's other works, La Femme pauvre, by Bloy's own admission, is not intended to be an attack on those included in the work.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore difficult to accept Apémantus merely as a fictional Nicolardot intended to be the target of ridicule and criticism. While we believe that Apémantus is essentially Nicolardot, it seems unlikely that Bloy would actually forget the other circumstances under which the name had been used. In La Femme pauvre, as in "Propos digestifs," Apémantus reflects an aspect of Bloy which is partly within him and partly within his imagination: that is, his willingness to speak out at all costs, reminding us of Molière's Alceste in Le Misanthrope. Bloy was constantly being warned to be careful of what he said, so it is quite possible that he would dream of bravely challenging the world by daring to confront all and sundry with whatever he wanted to say. Unlike Nicolardot, Bloy's outspokenness was only the result of his failure to curb himself and not deliberate action against the world. Thus, Apémantus would personify that aspect of Bloy which wished to "thumb his nose" at the world.

Because Apémantus is not shown sympathetically when

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<sup>1</sup>Barbey d'Aurevilly, Lettres de Barbey d'Aurevilly à Léon Bloy.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Feb. 6, 1887.

first portrayed, one might be tempted to dispel the idea that Bloy exists in him; yet Bloy recognized that he himself was disliked and criticized by many. His own use of the term, Médiant Ingrat, as the title of the first volume of his journal, indicates his acceptance of negative feelings towards himself. We must conclude that Bloy might very well write about himself in unflattering tones. In the few descriptive lines which we quoted above, several facts could refer to Bloy as well as to Nicolardot: his frequent visits to newspaper offices, the biting tongue which makes him famous (perhaps compared to Bloy's pen), and his name, Apémantus.

In La Femme pauvre, Apémantus is by no means fully characterized and the statement that "on lui a, autrefois cassé les reins à coups de canne et, depuis cette époque, il vague à ses insolences coutumières en traînant le râble, assez conforme à une cucurbitè où se distilleraient de très sûrs poisons,"<sup>1</sup> probably has no basis in the lives of either Bloy or Nicolardot. We are thus forced to reach the conclusion that Apémantus does not represent a historical Nicolardot. The inadequacy of the portrait is further emphasized later in the novel when Bloy writes: ". . . non loin du poussier de l'illustre Nicolardot."<sup>2</sup> The fact that

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

Bloy has resorted to the use of the historical name rather than the fictional substitute suggests to us that Apémantus does not fully represent Nicolardot. But what does he denote?

Apémantus seems to be a caricature of all of the negative attributes of Bloy: the anti-social, repulsive and even revolting qualities that Bloy saw in himself. Bloy was probably honest enough to recognize the weaknesses in his own character but reticent to incorporate these into the male characters who represent his more positive qualities. In Apémantus he is able to personify his faults and to relegate them to a minor position in the novel.

### Gacougnol

In our examination of the fictional manifestation of Bloy, we will include Pélopidas Gacougnol though some may very well ask why in view of some existing evidence.

René Martineau states bluntly, "Gacougnol, c'est Zacharie Astruc,"<sup>1</sup> and no one can deny this since Bloy's list of characters corroborates this fact.<sup>2</sup> In presenting him, Bloy writes in La Femme pauvre: "A la fois peintre, sculpteur, poète, musicien et même critique, l'universel Gacougnol paraît avoir pris à forfait l'illustration de tous les

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<sup>1</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 125.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"  
p. 34.

proverbes et de toutes les métaphores sentencieuses."<sup>1</sup>

Zacharie Astruc was, in fact, a painter, a sculptor and a poet, to which Martineau adds, "il était encore musicien, jongleur et gymnaste."<sup>2</sup> Both Martineau and Bollery give ample evidence to substantiate the fact that Bloy did indeed derive many of Gacougnol's traits from Astruc.

It was through Barbey d'Aurevilly that Bloy met Astruc and he admired the artist's work, especially the bust of Barbey d'Aurevilly which inspired him to write the poem in prose called La Méduse Astruc.<sup>3</sup> The two enjoyed an amicable relationship, as evidenced by their correspondence<sup>4</sup> until the time that Astruc severed his ties with Bloy who had criticized his friend Alphonse Daudet.<sup>5</sup> Bloy nonetheless portrays Gacougnol in a sympathetic way.

La rupture est honorable pour Zacharie Astruc, et certainement Léon Bloy en comprit la valeur exacte quand il eut décidé d'utiliser Astruc en l'appelant Gacougnol. Il fit de lui un portrait où la générosité, l'enthousiasme et l'esprit cocasse de l'excellent artiste apparaissent dans toute leur magnificence.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Oeuvres, IV, pp. 78 and 360. This magnificent bust is today at the Barbey d'Aurevilly Museum at Saint-Sauveur but was for a time displayed at the Louvre.

<sup>4</sup> See Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," pp. 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 129-130, 132. See also Carton, Un Héraut de Dieu, pp. 66-67.

<sup>6</sup> Martineau, op. cit., p. 132.

While there is no doubt that Gacougnol serves as a tribute to Astruc, he is more than that. In his plot, Bloy needed a benevolent benefactor: the man who would save Clotilde had to be not only kindly but financially secure. In his search for a model, Bloy found Zacharie Astruc meeting the requirements more closely than anyone else.

Fam, on the other hand, in recognizing the complexity of Gacougnol, wrote, "Gacougnol, c'est Zacharie Astruc, mais aussi Léon Bloy et l'abbé Tardif de Moidrey."<sup>1</sup> This inclusion by Fam of the name of Tardif de Moidrey necessitates a brief glance at the role of this unusual priest in Bloy's life.

Louis, Marie, René Tardif de Moidrey était né à Metz le 9 août 1828 d'une famille de vieille noblesse normande. . . . Il fut ordonné prêtre le 30 novembre 1859 au couvent des capucins de Lyon où il voulait entrer, mais sa santé le força à renoncer à la vie monacale. . . . Léon Bloy avait rencontré l'abbé Tardif de Moidrey en 1877. . . . En plusieurs endroits de son oeuvre, Léon Bloy a déclaré que son ami lui avait "ouvert l'intelligence des Ecritures". . . . Sous la signature: "Un prêtre du Tiers-Ordre", l'abbé Tardif avait publié (en 1869?) une exégèse du Livre de Ruth que Paul Claudel qualifie de chef-d'oeuvre. Le Salut par les Juifs serait né de méditations sur les Textes saints faites d'après les méthodes d'investigation léguées à l'auteur par le saint prêtre. . . . L'abbé Tardif n'eut pas de peine à faire partager son enthousiasme pour la Salette à Léon Bloy.<sup>2</sup>

Bloy had come to depend on the Abbé Tardif de Moidrey as a source of help and encouragement, both financially and

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<sup>1</sup>"Exégèse de La Femme pauvre," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Sept.-Oct., 1937.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 402, 403, 404.



spiritually when the untimely death of the abbé occurred at La Salette following a short illness.<sup>1</sup> Bollery relates that:

Pendant un de ses derniers moments de lucidité, l'abbé de Moidrey avait manifesté le désir d'écrire son testament; il prit même une plume et écrivit quelques mots, mais, à part la première ligne, très lisible: "Ceci est mon testament", le reste du document s'avéra indéchiffrable. Sans doute avait-il pensé donner à son indigent collaborateur le moyen de travailler en paix au service de Celle qui pleure.<sup>2</sup>

We find this episode transposed to the pages of La Femme pauvre, at the time of Gacougnol's death.

Environ deux heures avant sa mort, Gacougnol, s'éveillant d'un long évanouissement, pendant lequel on lui avait administré l'extrême-onction, s'était tout de suite informé d'elle. Léopold et Marchenoir, qui ne quittaient pas sa chambre, lui ayant répondu que le juge d'instruction l'avait fait appeler en hâte:

--Pauvre fille! avait-il dit, j'aurais aimé sa figure de sainte au dernier moment. Mais je ne veux pas la laisser sans ressources. Donnez-moi du papier, chers amis, je vais écrire un bout de testament.

Il avait, en effet, trouvé la force d'écrire pendant quelques minutes, puis laissant tout tomber, indifférent, désormais, aux choses terrestres, il s'était mis à heurter doucement à la porte pâle...

Le testament avait été reconnu INDECHIFFRABLE!<sup>3</sup>

When the two accounts are placed side by side, the comparison is obvious. This episode seems, however, to be the only one in Gacougnol's fictional life which is drawn from the abbé's experiences.

The third element in Gacougnol's personality is the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 416.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 188.

contribution which Bloy himself made to the fictional character. It has already been established that in La Femme pauvre Gacougnol portrays opposite Clotilde the role that Bloy fulfilled for Berthe Dumont: that of a generous benefactor.<sup>1</sup> If Bloy were indeed transposing this act of kindness from historical events to the pages of his novel, one might very well ask why he did not use one of his two other important fictional manifestations for this task rather than assigning it to Gacougnol. However, neither Léopold nor Marchenoir suits Bloy's purposes.

Marchenoir is as poverty-stricken in La Femme pauvre as he was in Le Désespéré and is therefore incapable of providing the most meagre help. There also appears to be a certain reticence in Bloy about some details in his life with Berthe, just as there had been with Anne-Marie and there was later to be with Jeanne.

As for Léopold, he was added to the story only as a replacement for Marchenoir; Bloy could not possibly use him in the early pages of the novel.

In addition to the facts mentioned above, one should keep in mind that Bloy lumped all the wealthy into one category and saw himself as their victim. This attitude is reflected in the vicious and bitter attacks found in his

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 20; Léon Bloy, II, p. 127; and "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, p. 53.

writings. Consequently, Bloy could not identify with the rich and could not see himself in the role of wealthy artist and patron of the arts.

To lift Clotilde out of her destitution, if only temporarily, Bloy had to create Pélupidas-Anacharsis Gacougnol, whose very name suggests a pomposity which is ideal for the purposes of the novel. As we have seen, Gacougnol combines certain characteristics from Astruc, Bloy himself and the Abbé Tardif de Moidrey. Yet his existence is nonetheless fictional by its very composite quality. Gacougnol was made to measure by Bloy in order to fulfil a particular role. He needed to be, and was depicted, as a person of considerable means, accepted and established in society, kind-hearted, although no fool, and a man of principles. Bloy used him only until he had played out his role and then abruptly dispensed with him. Since his death is a necessity strictly for literary purposes, we can see that Bloy manipulated this character to suit his purposes rather than being restricted by the personality and life of the historical models. Having raised Clotilde out of her abject surroundings and shown her a new life, Gacougnol has served his purpose and may now disappear. Bloy contrives his murder by sending him to the squalid household where Gacougnol is knifed by Chapuis the lover of Clotilde's mother.

Gacougnol's death, like others portrayed by Bloy, is protracted. On his deathbed, the artist speaks words of comfort to Marchenoir and Léopold and then, as we mentioned

above, he makes an unsuccessful attempt to write a will. Gacougnol does, however, receive the last rites, quite unlike Marchenoir of Le Désespéré, reflecting a changing and more mellow attitude to life on the part of the author.

### Clotilde

One of the unlikely places to look for a characterization of Bloy is in the person of Clotilde; nevertheless, we feel that Clotilde does represent, at least partially, an alter ego of Bloy. Bollery supports this idea in his Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre" when he writes, "Léopold, qui fut une face et une étape de la personnalité de Léon Bloy, va revivre dans Clotilde qui a tout perdu, qui a tout abandonné."<sup>1</sup> Though we shall later discuss her more fully as the leading female character in La Femme pauvre, it is essential that we also deal with her now in the role of Bloy's alter ego.

It is only in the final pages of the novel, when Clotilde remains alone, that she becomes another manifestation of Bloy. After the death of Léopold, she is in much the same position as was Marchenoir at the end of Le Désespéré, alone and abandoned by everyone except Lazare Druide who for her fulfils much the same function as Leverdier had for Marchenoir. Bloy's purpose in depicting his characters alone and abandoned

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<sup>1</sup>p. 47.

is somewhat similar: he wishes her, like Marchenoir, to be completely thrown back on God for resources, destitute of all but faith in God. The reaction of Clotilde, however, is quite different from that of Marchenoir. Indeed, she reflects a different Bloy. The man of ten years earlier had raged, while the intervening years and his marriage had taught him an element of self-discipline and given him some degree of inner peace. As Clotilde makes her pilgrimage from one church to another, we find in her no trace of bitterness or resentment. She seems to have reached a sublimity that Bloy himself sought.

Despite the fact that Bloy almost suggests that Clotilde is a saint, he is careful to refrain from any such explicit comment. Instead, he puts into her mouth the final, frequently quoted statement about sanctity, "Il n'y a qu'une tristesse, c'est de N'ETRE PAS DES SAINTS."<sup>1</sup> This is in keeping with Bloy's ideas on the matter, for his hope throughout his life was that he might continually be moving in the direction of sanctity.<sup>2</sup> Clotilde's words are thus but a reflection of Bloy's hopes and her life is a model for Christian living as Bloy saw it. In this final picture of Clotilde, he allows himself to give substance to his dream of Christian perfection.

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Bloy, Lettres à l'Abbé Cornuau et au Frère Dacien (Paris: Le Divan, 1926), Apr. 24, 1910.

### CHAPTER III

#### VERONIQUE CHEMINOT

There is ample evidence to substantiate the fact that the character of Véronique Cheminot in Le Désespéré is based on the historical person of Anne-Marie Roulé.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Bloy relied heavily on his personal experiences with Anne-Marie in order to depict certain vivid aspects found in the novel. But before examining Véronique in Le Désespéré we shall present a brief sketch of the life of Anne-Marie Roulé.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Rennes in February, 1846, Anne-Marie was the illegitimate child of Françoise Roulé. Abandoned by her mother as a baby, she was raised at public expense until 1860 when, at the insistence of the de Kermarec family who had employed her mother, Anne-Marie was acknowledged by Françoise. The de Kermarecs had agreed to assume the costs incurred in raising the child and which had to be reimbursed when Anne-Marie was acknowledged.

Something of Anne-Marie's personality and background is revealed in the following passage from Colleye's L'Âme

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<sup>1</sup>See Bloy, Lettres aux Montchal, Feb. 6, 1887; Bloy Lettres à sa fiancée, Sept. 24, 1889, Oct. 31, 1889; Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 298-464; Bollery, "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy; Colleye, L'Âme de Léon Bloy, pp. 135-181; Bohet, Léon Bloy, essai de psychologie; Gelma, "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé"; Fam, "Anne-Marie Roulé. La Véronique Cheminot du Désespéré."

<sup>2</sup>Fam's original research, which appeared in the Cahiers Léon Bloy in 1933, includes historical documents; birth certificate, death certificate, and correspondence with the mental institution. This preliminary and basic study has been enriched by more recent publications including Gelma's medically oriented account and Bollery's work. See preceding note.

de Léon Bloy:

Anne-Marie avait eu une enfance pieuse et une jeunesse sans doute édifiante. En 1864 ou 67, elle voulût même entrer au couvent des Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Charité, à Tours. Ce projet eut un commencement d'exécution; mais il n'aboutit pas, parce que la naissance (?) d'Anne-Marie lui interdit de devenir religieuse de chœur. Elle aurait pu être soeur converse; mais sa santé délicate ne lui permettait pas les durs travaux. Et elle refusa de descendre au rang de soeur tourière.<sup>1</sup>

When the plan to enter a convent failed, Anne-Marie resumed her work as a seamstress in order to earn a living. Though again abandoned by her mother the two must have been once more reunited, if only briefly, as records indicate that Françoise Roulé died at Anne-Marie's domicile in 1874.

The next trace of Anne-Marie is found in Paris and it appears that she had probably travelled there as the mistress of some young man.<sup>2</sup> Again abandoned, this time by her lover, she moved to new lodgings in early 1877 and soon thereafter met Bloy. While there is evidence that she had been the mistress of several men,<sup>3</sup> she was definitely not the notorious prostitute Bloy described in Le Désespéré. She became Bloy's mistress in June or July, 1877, but, her regeneration was gradual so that even when she went to

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<sup>1</sup> Colleye, L'Ame de Léon Bloy, pp. 146-147.

<sup>2</sup> Gelma, "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé," p. 201.

<sup>3</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 309; see also Gelma, op. cit., p. 169 n. and Bohet, Léon Bloy, essai de psychologie, p. 57 n.

live with Bloy she did not cease for some three months to have relations with other men and it was eighteen months before she and Bloy were able to live together in the chastity which in Le Désespéré marks the relationship of Marchenoir and Véronique from the very beginning.<sup>1</sup>

Encouraged by the abbé Tardif de Moidrey to consider marriage,<sup>2</sup> Bloy and Anne-Marie began making plans and in January, 1878, they appealed to Mademoiselle de Kermarec for her permission to marry, hoping thereby to win some much needed financial assistance. When Mademoiselle de Kermarec did not respond to their request, they were forced to abandon their plan.

The relationship between Bloy and Anne-Marie in the summer months of 1878 is revealed in the Lettres à Véronique, addressed to her from Bloy's retreat at La Trappe. Bloy is evidently prey to temptations of the flesh. When Anne-Marie experienced a new conversion in September, the situation became even more complex but the two continued to live together in order to save money though they no longer shared the same bed. Anne-Marie's existence had been kept hidden from Bloy's friends with the exception of the abbé Tardif de Moidrey who died suddenly in 1879. The life Bloy shared with Anne-Marie was too much for him to bear alone and as a result he began to unburden himself in his correspondence with Ernest Hello. These letters reveal Anne-

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 105; Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 349-350.



Marie's mental deterioration two years before she was incarcerated for schizophrenia. On April 19, 1880, Bloy wrote to Hello, "Vous me parlez d'Anne-Marie. Sa stupéfaction est incomparable. Elle me dit qu'elle a été trompée prodigieusement, épouvantablement trompée. Son état est tel que je pense qu'elle en perdra la raison."<sup>1</sup> But, despite such obvious warnings, Bloy refused to see in her other than a visionary until finally Anne-Marie's danger to herself and to his own person could no longer be ignored and he was forced to have her committed to a mental institution.

On June 30, 1882, Anne-Marie Roulé was admitted to the Asile Sainte-Anne. She was never cured and spent the rest of her days hospitalized until her death of a cancer of the stomach in 1907.<sup>2</sup> Thus, after the time of her confinement, Bloy's life and Anne-Marie's followed two separate paths.

Though Anne-Marie must have been Véronique's historical model, "the fact that Véronique is a literary metamorphosis of Anne-Marie is irrelevant. Bloy in any case played freely with the data which her life furnished."<sup>3</sup> He portrays Véronique as a twenty-five year old prostitute who had practised her profession for at least two years when she met Marchenoir.

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<sup>1</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 429.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 463-464, 481 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 163.

. . . polluée dès son enfance, putréfiée à dix ans, vendue par sa mère à quinze, on l'avait vue se débiter dans toutes les halles à poisson de la luxure, se détailler à la main sur tous les comptoirs du stupre, pendre à tous les crocs de la grande triperie du libertinage.<sup>1</sup>

Véronique is attracted to Marchenoir and approaches him, telling him of her physical attraction for him, "Monsieur Marchenoir, j'ai envie de vous et je vous désire, voulez-vous coucher avec moi?"<sup>2</sup> On the second occasion Véronique tells Cain of her love for him and asks him to allow her to remain near him.

Quelques jours après, il s'installait avec Véronique, rue des Fourneaux, au fond de Vaugirard, dans un petit appartement d'ouvrier. Alors, commença cette cohabitation tant calomniée de deux êtres absolument chastes, à la fois si parfaitement unis et si profondément séparés. La formidable machine à vanner les hommes qui s'était appelée la Ventouse devint, par miracle, une fille très pure et un encensoir toujours fumant devant Dieu. Les pratiques religieuses, d'abord commencées en vue de s'identifier avec l'homme qu'elle aimait, devinrent bientôt un besoin de son amour, son amour même, transfiguré, transporté dans l'infini!<sup>3</sup>

While we have no record of the meeting between Anne-Marie and Bloy, it seems most unlikely that there would be any similarity between the fictional episode and the historical event. The initial burning passion ascribed to Véronique resembles much more that of Bloy than of Anne-Marie who, by all accounts, was a docile creature and who appears to have loved Bloy for the security and comfort he

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<sup>1</sup> Le Désespéré, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

represented. As Fam points out, it is probably because Anne-Marie had been abandoned by her mother that she sought tenderness and kindness wherever it was offered.<sup>1</sup>

If we examine a few brief passages written by Anne-Marie to Léon Bloy her simplicity becomes quite apparent:

situ saves mon pauvre léon comme jai soufair  
 haujourd'hui mardi tu n'orais paeut le coeur de me laisse  
 toute la journée soeul Mardi<sup>2</sup>

and again,

mon cher petis léon je tembrasse de tous mon coeur  
 je vous drez bien te voir ce soir car jemennuit tres fort  
 deux jours san toi c'est une vrait enfair sur la taire je  
 ressemble a une prisonnier je taime mon petis loup et tu  
 n'as pas laire de le croire vien vite vite vite membrasse je  
 ne peut plus vive san toi je mennuit je mennuit san toi, toi  
 tu as des amis pour te den ennuiter et ta petite marie est  
 toute soeul<sup>3</sup>

Marie Roulé

Of the correspondence between Bloy and Anne-Marie, written during periods of separation, only Bloy's letters have been published.<sup>4</sup> Not only do these reveal his love and

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<sup>1</sup>"Anne-Marie Roulé," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Nov., 1932-Apr., 1933, pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Bloy, Lettres à Véronique (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, n.d. [1933]). We learn of the other half of the correspondence from Gelma who writes that Bloy "réunit les lettres qu'elle lui avait écrites en un paquet étiqueté A.M., initiales que Madame Jeanne Léon Bloy crut longtemps être celles de Madame Anne-Marie Martineau, jusqu'au jour où un hasard le lui fit ouvrir. Elle s'empressa alors de la céder à M. Jacques Maritain, le filleul de Léon Bloy, qui n'a publié

concern for her but they also show her as a childlike creature needing to be cared for. Bloy's letters indicate his willingness to help and guide her and indirectly reveal the fact that Anne-Marie can offer little if any support in return.

Gelma, summing the situation up very well, writes:

Elle était bien en effet, une simplette, comme il ressort des quelques misérables lignes que nous avons déjà lues, et aussi des lettres de son ami où il la traite en petite fille ignorante et naïve, à laquelle il multiplie des avis, des conseils, comme à une enfant.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy's inner struggle is easily understood with such a woman as its cause: he desires her physically yet realizes that she is incapable of being his helpmate.

In the few lines written by Anne-Marie and quoted above, her strong attachment to Bloy and love for him stand out. Unlike Anne-Marie, Véronique is depicted with a great deal of dignity and an element of independence. She has a strength to which Marchenoir can turn in his desperation and thus, in "La Grande-Chartreuse" he addresses a letter of appeal to her. It in no way resembles the actual missives sent to Anne-Marie for Marchenoir passionately throws himself

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de cette correspondance que les lettres de l'écrivain. Mais il a bien spécifié dans sa préface son intention qu'elles ne soient pas données 'en pâture aux psychologues ni aux futurs historiens littéraires du sentiment religieux'. C'est sans doute pour cela qu'il a laissé dans l'ombre celles d'Anne-Marie Roulé, humainement dénuées, a-t-on dit, aussi peu montrables que les plaies d'un pauvre." "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé," p. 168.

<sup>1</sup>Gelma, op. cit., p. 200.

at Véronique's mercy, asking her to solve the problem which is torturing him. Moreover, Bloy, unlike Marchenoir, is revealed in his correspondence with Anne-Marie as a relatively strong character and appears to have assumed the burden of responsibility for the concerns besetting him and Anne-Marie. His letters are filled with such statements as the following taken at random from his letters to her: "Ne t'inquiète pas au sujet du paquet," "Ne te tourmente pas pour ton logement," "Ne crains rien," "Ne te fais pas de peine, mon amour."<sup>1</sup> All he asked of his mistress was to pray--no less than ten to fifteen hours a day!

Another difference between the historical and fictional letters lies in the form of address they use. In Bloy's letters to Anne-Marie, she is addressed with the familiar "tu" form while the letter to Véronique uses "vous" in keeping with the form of address used by Marchenoir and Véronique throughout the novel.<sup>2</sup> This difference arises, not from a difference in the depth of love represented, but rather from a basic difference in attitude: Véronique is presented as an adult, while Anne-Marie retains childlike qualities which lead Bloy to treat her as a child even in his form of address. It appears that Bloy wished to raise the

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<sup>1</sup> Lettres à Véronique, pp. 24, 27, 55.

<sup>2</sup> Under stress the two do fall into the use of the intimate form but revert to "vous" when normal conditions are re-established. See Le Désespéré, p. 172.

affair with Anne-Marie to a noble, almost aristocratic level. Bloy perhaps wished to give "tone" to the relationship, a tone which existed in his mind alone, just as their living together without carnal intercourse was also an attempt by Bloy to ennoble the relationship. No doubt Le Désespéré is a statement of what Bloy would have liked their relationship to have been.

In Le Désespéré Véronique does indeed react to Marchenoir's letter, for in Leverdier's words, "Tu as écrit une lettre insensée à Véronique et la pauvre fille s'est défigurée pour te dégoûter d'elle."<sup>1</sup>

The description of Véronique's action is told by the narrator who presents all of her decisions and movements as saintly and God-inspired. Yet Beaumont states quite reasonably that "in Le Désespéré the shaving of Véronique's head and the extraction of all her fine teeth must appear to the critic not as symbols of some spiritual happening but as actual events well in the tradition of an exasperated romanticism."<sup>2</sup> Even viewed in this light, Véronique's action of self-mutilation inspires the reader with a sense of revulsion and her eventual madness provides a logical explanation for her self-inflicted injury.

Shearing of hair has throughout history been a

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," p. 163.

symbol of disgrace and punishment for moral laxity, for treason in wartime and for behaviour that is socially frowned upon. Nuns entering a convent have also submitted to this action which symbolizes either humility or humiliation depending upon the situation in which it occurs. When Véronique has her hair shorn, her action suggests all of these symbols to the reader and also to Marchenoir and it is, therefore, potent. However, because this indignity is familiar to the reader, it is somewhat acceptable in the case of Véronique, particularly since its consequences are not permanent. But, the extraction of Véronique's teeth, because of its finality, seems incomprehensible. Bloy must have recognized that most readers would feel aversion for he attempts to explain the episode as follows:

Quant à Marchenoir, il avait assez à faire de ne pas expirer sous la barre qui le rompait, comme un vulgaire assassin qu'il s'accusait d'être. A chaque détail, il poussait un han! caverneux, en crispant ses poings, et grinçait des dents comme un tétanique. Seulement, il voyait plus loin que Leverdier et connaissait mieux sa Véronique. Il discernait, à travers la buée de son supplice, à lui, une immense beauté de martyr, que cet homme de petite foi ne pouvait apercevoir dans son plan surnaturel, et il rencontrait ainsi un principe de consolation future dans le paroxysme même de son désespoir.<sup>1</sup>

And later he makes Véronique pray:

Mon doux Sauveur, ne vous fâchez pas contre moi. Vous voyez bien que j'ai fait ce que j'ai pu. Mon confesseur m'a blâmée très sévèrement de ce qu'il appelle un zèle

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 161.

téméraire et je dois croire que vous lui avez inspiré ce blâme. Il m'a dit que j'avais mal compris votre précepte d'arracher soi-même ses propres membres, quand ils deviennent une occasion de scandale, et cela se peut bien, puisque je suis une fille pleine d'ignorance. Mais, mon Jésus, si je me suis trompée, ne jugez que mon intention et prenez pitié de ce malheureux qui a exposé sa vie pour me donner à vous. Si je dois lui être un obstacle, détruisez-moi plutôt, faites-moi mourir, je vous en supplie par votre divine Agonie et les mérites de tous vos saints.<sup>1</sup>

Véronique's prayer, in which she mentions death as a possible solution to Marchenoir's problem, is a direct result of the statement Marchenoir makes in his letter to her: "C'est peut-être dans la direction du martyre que vous découvrirez ce qu'il nous faut."<sup>2</sup> Since he has, in fact, instructed her to offer her life for him, it is understandable that he views her as a martyr.<sup>3</sup> She herself, impelled by her overpowering love for Marchenoir, may have wished to fulfil this role of martyr. Because Bloy's explanation for this entire episode is not adequate, one either reaches Beaumont's conclusion or else sees in Véronique's action the martyr's frenzy which appears to border on madness. What the historical circumstances were we cannot know. Bloy claims that reality was far worse<sup>4</sup> but with his tendency to exaggerate and the lack of witnesses, we cannot be certain: Bloy's friends were ignorant of Anne-Marie's existence and others who might have knowledge of historical events such as neighbours remain

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>4</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Aug. 26, 1887.



unknown to us.

In the novel, the meeting between Véronique and Marchenoir shows Véronique to be in full control of herself and able to help Marchenoir accept the reality of what she has done.

Véronique's capacity for help suggests that she is not simply based on Anne-Marie but also incorporates some of the qualities Bloy sought in his ideal woman. Because Bloy had difficulty in seeing himself as a married person<sup>1</sup> he probably felt unqualified to portray a marriage and wanted at all costs to avoid Marchenoir's marriage to Véronique. By blackening Véronique's character from that of a simple misguided young woman to that of a notorious prostitute, Bloy has given Marchenoir an acceptable reason for avoiding marriage. Marchenoir's reaction towards Véronique's earlier sexual relations is stated as follows:

C'était donc uniquement la chair souillée de ce corps qui le faisait tant souffrir! Un inexplicable lien de destinée, contre lequel il se fût vainement raidi, le faisait époux de cette chair qui s'était débitée comme une denrée et, par conséquent, solidaire de la même balance, dans la parfaite ignominie des mêmes comptoirs...

En ce jour, Marchenoir assumait toutes les affres de la Jalousie conjugale, --impératrice des tourments humains, --que les êtres sans amour ont seuls le droit d'ignorer, et qui peut magnifier jusqu'à des passions ordurières, dans des coeurs capables de la ressentir!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Feb. 6, 1887, Aug. 10, 1888.

<sup>2</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 108.

The long passage devoted to Marchenoir's jealousy is fully in keeping with human nature and, far from being unusual, Marchenoir's reaction reflects what in the past has been a fairly prevalent masculine attitude towards pre-marital sex. Here Bloy indicates to the reader that Marchenoir and Véronique will never be married without hinting yet at the dénouement to their story.

Instead, Bloy discusses Véronique's difficulties in finding a sympathetic and understanding confessor. Véronique's problem provides Bloy with an excuse for venting his anger and annoyance at the clergy who were often unable to accept some of his ideas about the Christian faith and Christian way of life.<sup>1</sup> While the account in the novel is undoubtedly biased, it probably accurately reflects a problem which did exist.

Returning to the story of Véronique and Marchenoir after this digression, Bloy depicts Véronique's appearance before and after her self-mutilation. He concludes:

Les traits, demeurés intacts, semblaient être

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<sup>1</sup> Bloy's journal makes mention of some of his experiences after 1890. The extremity of some of Bloy's ideas has brought about accusations of heresy. See Raymond Barbeau, Un prophète luciférien, Léon Bloy (Paris: Aubier, 1957); Raymond Hubert, Léon Bloy et le prétendu renouveau catholique (Nice: Brun, 1917). and Raymond Hubert, Un grand écrivain catholique, ou prétendu tel. Léon Bloy (Nice: Frey et Trincheri, 1931). Barbeau's thesis was accepted by the University of Paris with reservations about some of the conclusions reached by the author. Most readers of Bloy have accepted his sincere motives and have been more lenient in their judgment of the writer. It is, however, significant that Bloy could inspire such bitter attacks as those of Barbeau and Hubert.

devenus plus beaux, de même que les membres épargnés sont faits plus robustes, paraît-il, après une amputation.

En somme, Véronique avait à peu près manqué son coup et n'était pas devenue moins belle qu'avant, --la dilapidation d'une partie de ses richesses ayant proportionnellement accru la valeur du fertile potager d'amour, que l'infortuné Marchenoir avait si malencontreusement ensemencé de l'impartageable concupiscence du ciel.<sup>1</sup>

Véronique's sacrifice has in no way altered her relationship with Marchenoir but a few scenes must still be played out before drawing the story of the couple to a close.

The few pages devoted to a dinner with Marchenoir, Véronique and Leverdier are primarily included so that Bloy may expound on his ideas of the duties of a writer. However, also implicit in this section is Véronique's contribution on an intellectual plane: she is not merely Marchenoir's housekeeper but participates in discussions with Marchenoir and Leverdier, and while she does not alter the course on which Marchenoir embarks, she is fully capable of understanding his actions and the reasoning behind them. She offers him encouragement so that he will stand by his convictions despite the full knowledge that only personal destruction can result.

In Bloy's life, however, Anne-Marie was sheltered from Bloy's concerns as we have already seen. Hidden from Bloy's friends,<sup>2</sup> it appears most unlikely that she ever

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, pp. 193, 196.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 312.

participated in a cosy scene such as the one depicting Marchenoir, Véronique and Leverdier sharing a meal.

With this scene Véronique disappears from the novel and we learn of her destiny only indirectly. Having isolated himself from society, Marchenoir becomes even more tormented by his physical attraction to Véronique which he sees as a sin of the flesh and therefore evil. Véronique, perceiving the inner struggle "se mit à convoiter le fruit savoureux de sa propre mort."<sup>1</sup> The outcome of this untenable situation is revealed in a letter Marchenoir addresses to Leverdier, now living in the country. Marchenoir's description of Véronique's mental deterioration is considered by Gelma, a medical authority, to be an accurate account conforming to a clinical description of schizophrenia.<sup>2</sup> In order to achieve this accuracy Bloy must have drawn on his personal knowledge of Anne-Marie's condition, gained from the intimacy in which they lived. Marchenoir's problem has indeed been solved by Véronique for with her admission to a mental institution, she passes out of the novel.

Knowing the circumstances surrounding Anne-Marie's schizophrenia, one is not surprised that she finally had to be put into an institution. We are forced to recognize the logic of Gelma's summary:

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup>"La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé," p. 203.

L'écrivain ne s'était pas plus douté de la fidélité de sa description clinique que de la cause de la haine qui lui criait sa malade, de son refus de le reconnaître, des propos outrageants dont elle l'accablait, et qui exprimaient, peut-être, une accumulation ancienne de ressentiments: mécomptes de la malheureuse à l'égard de l'amant dont elle n'a jamais compris les subtilités, les invites à un conformisme dévotionneux incompatible avec la nature et l'objet de leurs relations, privations matérielles dues au manque d'argent pendant les longs mois passés avec ce "gueux" comme il s'est une fois qualifié devant elle, auquel elle avait reproché d'avoir déserté un emploi qui les faisait vivre tous deux pour fuir au couvent, et l'abandonner à Paris sans ressources durant des semaines; sans compter les délaissements où, toute seule dans sa chambrette, elle attendait pendant des heures son retour tandis qu'elle le savait avec des amis.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy, however, as might be expected in view of his idealization of his affair with Anne-Marie, would not wish to accept any personal responsibility for her illness and so the novel portrays Véronique's madness as a supernatural occurrence. There are, however, logical reasons for Véronique's insanity within the context of the novel. Loving Marchenoir as she does, she feels responsible for his anxieties and guilt concerning their relationship. She apparently gives no thought to leaving Marchenoir, perhaps because she wishes to stay near him or possibly because in his letter from the Chartreuse he wrote that he could not live without her. In any case, her constant awareness of his inner turmoil seems to have eroded her mental stability. Véronique here differs from her historical counterpart for while Anne-Marie was, as we have pointed out, somewhat simple-minded, Bloy

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<sup>1</sup>Gelma, "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé," pp. 203-204.

credits his fictional heroine with a "belle raison,"<sup>1</sup> and it is precisely this attribute which makes her conscious of Marchenoir's emotional state. She herself then becomes prey to conflicts arising from the question of whether she is a help or a hindrance to her loved one. But Bloy does not deal with this problem, preferring to treat her illness as a supernatural event. Whether Bloy's decision to portray Véronique's madness in this manner was a conscious act or merely an ego defence mechanism we cannot know. Suffice it to say that Marchenoir's letter to Leverdier is moving and, as well as giving an accurate description of schizophrenia, it reveals the suffering incurred by watching the downhill trend in the health of a loved one. Whatever may have been Bloy's actions towards Anne-Marie, he did love her and this love is vividly reflected in the pages where Véronique's story is told.

Anne-Marie's life unquestionably provided a source for Bloy's story of Véronique, but he worked the material to his own liking and the fictional character and historical model differ in many respects, thereby revealing Bloy's literary creativity.

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 314.

## CHAPTER IV

### CLOTILDE MARECHAL

The original model for Clotilde was Berthe Dumont who entered Bloy's life in the winter of 1883-1884.<sup>1</sup> Information pertaining to Berthe Dumont is not voluminous and our principal sources present virtually the same data.<sup>2</sup> The reason for the sparsity of information stems, at least in part, from the fact that Berthe died at the relatively young age of twenty-eight. Her date of birth and of death and her parentage have been established with the aid of documents and we know that she was born May 11, 1857, and died May 11, 1885. Evidence indicates that she was a morphine addict but since she was a gilder by trade and poisoning through the bloodstream was an occupational hazard,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Jul. 9, 1885. In this letter Bloy states that he extended Berthe's life by eighteen months and since she died on May 11, 1885, we may place the date of their meeting to the winter of 1883-1884, perhaps as early as Nov., 1883. It appears that René Martineau has erred in both his book, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre" (p. 104) and in his article, "Les Personnages de La Femme pauvre," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1932 when he states that Bloy met Berthe in Astruc's studio. Furthermore, Astruc himself does not appear to have corroborated Martineau's statement.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 122-157; Bollery, "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, pp. 50-55; Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre", pp. 7-13; Fam, "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Feb., 1938, p. 90, pp. 126-128 and Mar.-Apr., 1938, pp. 160 ff., p. 215; Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre", pp. 103-119; Martineau, "Les Personnages de La Femme pauvre," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1932.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 128 and Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre", p. 11.

the conclusion has been reached that Berthe became addicted to the drug only after it was first used to treat her illness. In Bollery's words,

Pour combattre les douleurs fulgurantes du saturnisme, elle avait dû recourir à la morphine et, comme il est fréquent en pareil cas, elle était devenue morphinomane, ainsi qu'en témoigne une ordonnance du docteur Berlin du 13 février 1882, recopiée par l'intéressée, prescrivant le chlorhydrate de morphine, recollée sur une feuille de papier, usée aux plis et recousue, constellée de cachets de pharmacies de tous les quartiers de Paris.<sup>1</sup>

Other than what we have already mentioned above, there is little of significance in Berthe's background. Her character is, however, of some importance. A glimpse of Berthe's personality is revealed in a letter she addressed to Madame Montchal on May 6, 1885, only a few days before her unexpected, tragic death.

L'aimer tant et être impuissante à le soulager!  
Si vous saviez, ma bonne et douce amie, comme je souffre à cette pensée et comme j'ai besoin d'un coeur et d'une amitié tels que les vôtres pour adoucir un peu l'amertume de mon coeur! Quand je vois mon cher et par trop malheureux ami partir le matin pour courir après le nécessaire, le chagrin que je ressens est horrible surtout à cette pensée: trouvera-t-il? l'humiliera-t-on? lui fera-t-on sentir ce qu'on lui donne?

O très chère amie, vous qui aimez votre mari, vous comprendrez combien je dois souffrir!

. . . Vous seriez heureuse que je fusse près de vous. Moi aussi, ma chère et tendre amie. Avec quel bonheur parlerions-nous de ceux que nous aimons. Comme j'aurais du bonheur à vous raconter tout ce que mon Léon a fait et fait pour moi et pour ma mère, car vous me comprendriez, vous. . . . J'espère que vous et votre petite famille vous portez bien. Que je voudrais être auprès de vous. Je serais si heureuse d'embrasser vous et vos chers bébés. Espérons qu'un jour mon voeu se réalisera. Mon noble ami est aussi impatient que moi de vous témoigner de vive voix ce que son coeur

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<sup>1</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 11.



renferme pour vous. Ecrivez-moi souvent.

Moi, à l'avenir, je vous enverrai une lettre toutes les semaines.

Faites tout ce qui dépendra de vous pour en faire autant, car vous ne savez pas le bonheur qu'elles me donnent.

Dites-moi quels sont vos bébés, quel âge ils ont, leurs noms.

Que je puisse les aimer et leur parler.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy's reaction to Berthe's letter can be read in the following excerpt:

. . . Par malheur ce que dit ma pauvre fiancée est trop vrai quoiqu'elle y mêle l'excès d'une sensibilité extraordinaire. Elle m'a fait lire sa lettre dont la naïveté m'a touché, sans m'étonner. C'est une rare et exquise nature qui ne peut manquer de plaire à votre excellente femme.<sup>2</sup>

In other letters to his friends in Geneva, written after Berthe's death, Bloy also spoke very highly of her:

Ma bien-aimée Berthe était l'espérance de ma vie. Je voulais la guérir, en faire ma femme et me reposer en elle comme dans un asile de paix. Elle était belle, douce, pleine de toutes les tendresses. Elle m'avait aimé d'abord parce que j'étais malheureux puis la pauvre enfant avait cru voir en moi un homme de génie et son amour était devenu presque aussitôt un mélange de tendresse et d'enthousiasme tel que je n'ai jamais rien vu de semblable ni d'aussi touchant.<sup>3</sup>

and again:

Que vous l'auriez aimée si vous aviez pu la connaître! Elle était si belle, si douce, si tendrement dévouée! Ame droite et fière que le plus absolu malheur accompagné des infernales suggestions de la misère et du désespoir n'avait pu faire tomber! Apprenez une chose navrante. Notre première rencontre s'est faite dans la rue,

<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 148-149.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, May 7, 1885.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Jun. 7, 1885.

par une glaciale soirée d'hiver. La pauvre fille, vêtue de guenilles fort légères que je conserve comme des reliques, mendiait en pleurant pour sa mère et pour elle. Ah! qu'elle était touchante ainsi!

Elle m'a raconté depuis ses humiliations, ses terreurs, et les outrageantes propositions qu'elle subissait de la part d'individus qui auraient voulu la secourir conditionnellement.

Je suis venu à temps pour prolonger sa vie de dix-huit mois. Ses pauvres pieds nus ne pouvaient plus la porter. Il fallait mourir ou se prostituer. Son choix n'était pas douteux.<sup>1</sup>

In Fam's words, the above "lettre à Montchal évoque une vierge forte et sage."<sup>2</sup> Since Bloy had no reason to falsify his letters to Geneva regarding Berthe, and since his comments about her correspond so closely to the Berthe revealed in her own letter, it appears that Bloy's testimony in this matter can be taken at face value. Thus, with even these few sources, the reader is able to form an opinion about the character of the historical model who inspired the creation of Clotilde Maréchal.

In La Femme pauvre the heroine appears only after Bloy has already presented both Madame Maréchal and her paramour, Isidore Chapuis, both of course, in the blackest of colours. By this technique Bloy achieves a contrast, which he reinforces at every opportunity and Clotilde emerges as a young woman who is lovely both spiritually and physically.

Before giving the reader Clotilde's history, Bloy

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Jul. 9, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1938, p. 157.

provides a general description of her:

Elle était plutôt jolie que belle, mais sa haute taille, légèrement voûtée aux épaules par le poids des mauvais jours lui donnait un assez grand air. C'était la seule chose qu'elle tint de sa mère, dont elle était le repoussoir angélique, et qui contrastait avec elle en disparates infinies.

Ses magnifiques cheveux du noir le plus éclatant, ses vastes yeux de gitane captive, "d'où semblaient couler des ténèbres", mais où flottait l'escadre vaincue des Résignations, la pâleur douloureuse de son visage enfantin dont les lignes, modifiées par de très savantes angoisses, étaient devenues presque sévères, enfin la souplesse voluptueuse de ses attitudes et de sa démarche lui avaient valu la réputation de posséder ce que les bourgeois de Paris appellent entre eux une tournure espagnole.

Pauvre Espagnole, singulièrement timide! A cause de son sourire, on ne pouvait la regarder sans avoir envie de pleurer. Toutes les nostalgies de la tendresse--comme des oiselles désolées que le bûcheron décourage, -- voltigeaient autour de ses lèvres sans malice qu'on aurait pu croire vermillonnées au pinceau, tellement le sang de son coeur s'y précipitait pour le baiser.<sup>1</sup>

Although Bloy never had a portrait of Berthe,<sup>2</sup> Bollery was able to find a picture of her in his research and we can therefore compare the description in the novel with the photograph.<sup>3</sup> This portrait of Berthe, when taken in conjunction with Madame Montchal's statement that "il est à regretter que je ne sois pas grande et belle comme votre Berthe,"<sup>4</sup> indicates that the description of Clotilde could very well be drawn from Berthe Dumont. However, implicit in

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Lettres aux Montchal, Jul. 25, 1885.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Bollery, "Etat présent des études sur Léon Bloy," in L'Information Littéraire, No. 8, 1956, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 107.

the novel is the fact that it is not Clotilde's physical appearance which is important but rather her intrinsic qualities. If we accept the various statements made about her, the same can be said of Berthe.

When the novel opens, Clotilde has already suffered "trente ans de misère, de piétinement, de désespoir! . . . On sentait si bien qu'un peu de bonheur l'aurait rendue ravissante,"<sup>1</sup> but she maintains an aura of inner beauty and dignity despite the numerous problems and continued unhappiness which beset her. After creating this tableau of a pure Clotilde, surrounded by the grotesque Chapis and Madame Maréchal, Bloy outlines for the reader the various events which have led to the conditions described at the beginning of the novel.

Because of her mother's hypocritical way of life, Clotilde has been exposed to a nominal Roman Catholic rearing, including a first communion. She has learned to suffer without showing any outside signs because complaints are not tolerated and it is in this way that she at first acquires the dignity which becomes one of her inherent qualities. Like Berthe Dumont, Clotilde pursues the occupation of a gilder until ill health forces her to give it up. She then becomes a sales-clerk in a cheap store.

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 24-25.

Seulement, à force de souffrir, sa grande vigueur s'altéra. Les stryges de l'anémie dévorèrent ses couleurs charmantes et elle devint pâle comme l'humilité même. Elle n'eut bientôt plus la force de supporter les fatigues de cet écrasant métier de vendeuse dans un grand bazar qui avait remplacé l'intoxication quotidienne de la dorure.<sup>1</sup>

Clotilde's lead poisoning coupled with her unhealthy environment result in her inability to support herself and thereby the loss of her independence. Through no fault of her own, Clotilde is forced by financial circumstances to share her mother's life.

While Bloy does contrast Clotilde with her mother and the way of life led by Madame Maréchal, he does not overextend the bounds of reality. Though Clotilde is shown to be out of place in her surroundings because she is superior to them, she is nonetheless affected by her background and the behaviour of those around her. By blackening Madame Dumont's character into that of the fictional Madame Maréchal,<sup>2</sup> Bloy is able to introduce into his novel and into Clotilde's consciousness, depraved and debased influences not present in the actual experience of Berthe Dumont. When Ballery writes, "voici encore quelques détails qui permettent d'affirmer, dans la première partie de La Femme pauvre, la parfaite identité de Clotilde Maréchal avec Berthe Dumont,"<sup>3</sup> this suggests to us, not that the fictional and historical

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>See the section on Madame Maréchal, p. 146.

<sup>3</sup>Léon Bloy, II, p. 128.

events correspond identically in all respects, but rather that the Clotilde of the first part of La Femme pauvre is based on Berthe Dumont and not on another historical character. It must be remembered that Bloy is creating and in fiction events have to be set in relief. Consequently, while it is to be expected that Bloy will alter historical facts and events when it suits his purposes, this in no way negates Bollery's statement.

The immoral conditions which Bloy introduces into the life of his heroine in La Femme pauvre are conducive to the trivial love affair which ends leaving Clotilde feeling sullied, betrayed and ashamed. However, she shoulders this indignity with her other experiences and Bloy uses it to further enhance the inner beauty of her personality. This episode in Clotilde's life is fully in keeping with the fictional environment Bloy creates. Fam speaks of this incident in his article, "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," and provides evidence that Clotilde's affair is not based on Berthe's experiences but on another source.<sup>1</sup> This difference between Clotilde and Berthe coincides moreover with the difference between the fictional Madame Maréchal and Berthe's own mother. While the episode with the Faublas de ministère appears to be based on another source, it plays

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<sup>1</sup> In Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1938, p. 156 ff. Fam suggests that the Faublas de ministère is Victor Lalotte, a friend of Bloy's youth and the young woman a "Justine D..." involved with Lalotte. See also "Le Passé du Monsieur," in Histoires désobligeantes, VI, pp. 249-254.

an important role in the novel since it portrays Clotilde with human weaknesses, and therefore provides a contrast for the Clotilde of the finale. It is this gloomy beginning which permits Bloy to achieve such a striking effect in his conclusion.

In his portrayal of Clotilde, Bloy is careful to indicate that while she is gentle, she is not insipid and that beneath her calm exterior lies strength of character. Although Clotilde's anger erupts in defense of her maligned godmother<sup>1</sup> she is nonetheless unable to shield herself from the attacks of her own mother and of Chapuis because her physical energy has been sapped.

Clotilde's concern for Madame Maréchal is in keeping with Berthe Dumont's interest in her own mother's welfare, a concern which extended beyond the limits of her lifetime.<sup>2</sup> It is Clotilde's care for others, coupled with the obligation she feels towards Chapuis for his support during her illness, that causes her to accept Chapuis' arrangement with Gacougnol. However, she cannot reconcile herself to employment as an artist's model, deeming it akin to prostitution. Both the ideas attributed to Clotilde and those which the narrator puts forth on this subject seem to

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup>Aware of the precarious condition of her health, Berthe exacted a promise from Bloy to care for her mother whatever should happen to her, and this he did. The correspondence to the Montchaix reveals Madame Dumont's abuse of Bloy's generosity which in turn made him resent her and led to his most unflattering portrayal of her fictional counterpart.

represent Bloy's own opinion.

The whole episode at Gacougnol's studio would appear to have been created by Bloy, although he was probably familiar with artists' models from the time he himself had studied art.<sup>1</sup> Some years after the appearance of La Femme pauvre Bloy wrote in his journal, "Modèle féminin vu à l'atelier Brou. A cette occasion, vérifier, une fois de plus, le chapitre VII de la première partie de la Femme pauvre et l'affreuse misère, même physique, de ces malheureuses."<sup>2</sup> In La Femme pauvre, when she is actually confronted with the necessity of posing in the nude, Clotilde breaks down finding it impossible to undress herself.<sup>3</sup> Bloy then shows Gacougnol changing from an abrupt, business-like artist to a man who voices words Clotilde has heard before, "Mon enfant, pourquoi pleurez-vous?"<sup>4</sup> This simple phrase reminds Clotilde of an event which took place when she was sixteen. A kindly missionary, seeing her crying in church, approached her with the same question, thereby adding a touch of tenderness to her harsh life. Gacougnol's words bring hope to Clotilde by reminding her of that other occasion in her life and this hope is reflected in her face. "L'ayant à peine regardée, lorsqu'elle était survenue, au milieu d'une

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<sup>1</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> L'Invendable, Oct. 7, 1905.

<sup>3</sup> La Femme pauvre, pp. 46-49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 33, 49.



oiseuse discussion qui l'exaspérait, il la trouvait maintenant très touchante et presque sublime, dans le décor de son affliction."<sup>1</sup>

From this moment Clotilde is literally and figuratively transported from her miserable surroundings. Gacougnol hails a cab, and on their ride he outlines his plans. First, Clotilde is to be fully outfitted in new clothes which will make her a suitable model, then they will go to the Jardin des Plantes so that he can study the lions which are to appear in his painting. The narrative of Clotilde's life up to that memorable morning in Gacougnol's studio has included her faults and failures which she reveals to the artist with unusual candour. But Gacougnol is duly impressed with his charge and his reaction, underlined by the author's comments, conveys the idea that Clotilde's weaknesses should be dismissed as being of little consequence.

At this juncture Marchenoir makes his first appearance in La Femme pauvre. He too contributes to Clotilde's self-respect:

Cette jolie toilette avait modifié son coeur. On ne se transforme pas seulement au dehors. C'est une sottise de le prétendre. Et puis, ce monsieur Marchenoir . . . Ne faisait-il pas exactement pour son âme, depuis trois heures qu'on était ensemble, ce que M. Gacougnol avait fait pour son pauvre corps de mendicante guenilleuse, affamée et désespérée?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

Marchenoir, like Gacougnol, is taken with Clotilde and Bloy uses his reaction to the young woman in order to reinforce the positive impression of Clotilde which he wishes to convey.<sup>1</sup>

As a considerate protector, Gacougnol does not permit Clotilde to return to the hovel occupied by her mother and Chapuis. Instead, he takes her to a rooming house run by Mademoiselle Virginie Séchoir. Almost immediately Bloy hints that this place will not prove the refuge it appears to be and that Clotilde's tribulations are not over.<sup>2</sup> However, she uses it as a pied-à-terre, going each day to Gacougnol's studio.

The story of Clotilde as it is related in "L'Epave des Ténèbres," Part I of La Femme pauvre, is familiar since it is but a variation of the Pygmalion legend. As Shaw was to do in his 1912 play, the heroine is groomed, first with a new wardrobe and later both intellectually and socially. Quite obviously, this is in the realm of fiction as Bloy imaginatively develops a simple myth with his own interpretations, thereby revealing his personal ideas of what constitutes a woman's proper education. Clotilde is taught the art of reading aloud and while Gacougnol paints, she reads to him works of his selection which he then interprets

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<sup>1</sup>See the section on Marchenoir, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 98-101.

and explains to her. In this way, her education is accomplished. Clotilde's appreciation for her good fortune in no way mars her inclination towards God and daily she is to be seen praying in church with a devotion reflected in her face. The piety exhibited by Clotilde during the time she is Gacougnol's protégée moreover serves as a prelude of things to come.

Clotilde's life, which has assumed a routine with her daily visits to church and to Gacougnol's studio and her room at the Séchoir boarding house is not, however, secure. Bloy gives the reader a premonition that the status quo will not be maintained:

Ce bonheur ne dût-il être qu'une simple trêve, elle voulut en jouir pleinement et s'approvisionner au moins de courage en vue des tribulations ultérieures. . . .  
 . . . Elle ne pouvait croire que l'état actuel pût être autre chose qu'une halte rafraichissante, qu'une fantaisie passagère de sa destinée qui s'interrompait un instant de la tourmenter, pour aiguïser à loisir ses jolis couteaux.<sup>1</sup>

Clotilde plays only a small role in the remaining pages of Part I but the events described there are to influence her life greatly. At the soirée, we see Clotilde in Léopold's company for the first time and observe behind the violent words he voices his solicitude for her.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, he, like Gacougnol and Marchenoir before him, is

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 118, 126-127.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

taken with Clotilde and concerned for her well-being. Once more this serves to reinforce Clotilde's unique character and also to prepare the reader for the part it will play later in the novel.

Not only does the soirée bring Clotilde and Léopold together for the reader but it also exposes the young woman to the pleasures of a social life. The soirée marks Clotilde's début into society. Here she meets a variety of individuals, and learns by personal experience that the world also includes types other than those whom she has known in her early life. At the same time, she is exposed to music, discussions and repartees; this is another way of life.

Returning to her room at the end of the evening, Clotilde becomes prey to an uneasy feeling that is followed by terrifying dreams and visions which not only frighten her but serve as dramatic foreshadowing: the reader, like Clotilde, awaits significant events.

The final chapter of Part I brings us to the point of a momentous occurrence without revealing what it will be. A missive from Clotilde's mother requests her daughter's presence since she is on her deathbed. Not believing Madame Maréchal, it is Gacougnol who undertakes the errand to spare his protégée. Bloy closes "L'Epave des Ténèbres" with the enigmatic comment that "cette minute décida de leur destin."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 180.

The period of time following Gacougnol's death and the imprisonment of Chapuis, Madame Maréchal and Mademoiselle Séchoir has no apparent historical basis. Clotilde is once more plunged into destitution and loneliness. Marchenoir, himself penurious, is unable to help her financially and, she at first refuses help from Léopold because of "une pudeur qu'elle n'expliquait pas."<sup>1</sup> However, after a separation of one month, they are reunited.

After exchanging a few sentences with Léopold, Clotilde murmurs, "Je meurs de faim, mon Léopold, donne-moi à manger."<sup>2</sup> This request has been interpreted by both Fam and Bollery to represent "la faim spirituelle de Johanne Molbech mourant d'inanition dans le désert glacé et inanimé de son luthérianisme originel."<sup>3</sup> Keeping in mind that Jeanne is Clotilde's model only from the tenth chapter of Part II on,<sup>4</sup> and that Clotilde's cry is in keeping with its fictional context and therefore does not require a deeper interpretation, we remain only partly convinced that a symbolic meaning does lie behind these words.

In their delight at finding each other once again, Clotilde and Léopold momentarily lose their inhibitions,

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," pp. 41-42; see also, Fam, "Exégèse de La Femme pauvre," in Cahiers Léon Bloy, Sept.-Oct., 1937.

<sup>4</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," pp. 16-17.

just long enough for them to reveal their love for one another. This brings them to the place where they are able to express their love and their respective need for each other and the threat of a bourgeois marriage is eliminated. Bloy sees woman as either a saint or a prostitute and the bourgeoisie as a woman who sells herself but for less valid reasons than a prostitute.<sup>1</sup> Understandably he wishes to protect Clotilde from this pitfall and it is for this reason that he makes Clotilde flee Léopold following Gacougnol's death. When they are reunited, Clotilde's words are the sign of a new beginning and a necessary part of the novel in their own right rather than merely a fictional adaptation of a historical occurrence.

In order to provide the proper basis for their marriage relationship the two must have no secrets from one another and Léopold makes a confession of his past to Clotilde.<sup>2</sup> She, like Jeanne, accepts the man who loves her, with all his past sins, but for his own peace of mind she recommends him to a priest.<sup>3</sup>

Having cleared all obstructions in their path, the two are joined in marriage and share a blissful existence in a three year period of happiness. Bloy does not here

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<sup>1</sup>Bloy's ideas are expressed in Lettres à sa fiancée, Nov. 27, 1889 and La Femme pauvre, pp. 110-113.

<sup>2</sup>See our discussion of Léopold, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 206.

elaborate since this time is but a brief interlude in Clotilde's earthly pilgrimage. After giving Clotilde this respite, which parallels the period of peace enjoyed by Clotilde under Gacougnol's care in Part I, Bloy continues the story, now quickly accelerating the pace by the accumulation of events.

Some of these events are drawn directly from the life shared by Jeanne and Léon Bloy and were discussed in our presentation of Léopold: the birth of Lazare, the move to new lodgings, the death of the baby Lazare, and the ensuing battle with the landlord and the authorities about the unsanitary conditions of the dwelling. The médecin des morts may well have been drawn from the historical Dr. Le Coq<sup>1</sup> but this is of little consequence. The scene in which he appears serves merely to underline Clotilde's suffering and her sensitivity when she is contrasted with the abrupt and rather obtuse doctor. Bloy also includes the death of Marchenoir and the terrible episode with the Poulot couple and their friend Madame Grand.<sup>2</sup> He gives special attention and detail to the events surrounding the baby's death and to the anguish suffered by Clotilde at the hands of her tormentors, Mesdames Poulot and Grand. In the Poulot-Grand episode, Mademoiselle Planude, Clotilde and Léopold's elderly

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<sup>1</sup>Laquerrière, Biblio-iconographie de Léon Bloy.

<sup>2</sup>See our section on Poulot and Grand, p. 155.

landlady, not only refuses to help them but actually sides with their tormentors. She is shown as an utterly heartless individual who, hiding behind the façade of a devout person is, in fact, interested only in money and has no sympathy for tenants who may be faced with overwhelming problems. To reinforce this presentation, Bloy reveals her inhuman treatment of an even more unfortunate family than Clotilde and Léopold. This brief presentation affords Bloy another opportunity to attack what he sees as greed, hypocrisy and cruelty in landlords: kindness among them is the exception rather than the rule.<sup>1</sup> Mademoiselle Planude in her brief appearance emphasizes the isolation experienced by Clotilde and Léopold as they attempt to cope with the abuse inflicted on them by their neighbours. In short, the happiness Clotilde felt early in her marriage is marred by anguish.

Bloy's own life with Jeanne differed substantially from the narrative in the novel, not only with respect to what is included in La Femme pauvre but what is omitted. The poverty which affects the lives of the fictional characters is brought about by Léopold's failing eyesight which finds no historical parallel. The tragic events listed above were in real life tempered by both time and happier occasions. The fictional characters must suffer their trials consecutively without respite and almost

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 263.



entirely alone. The Bloys had the encouragement of Jeanne's family, the pleasure of their daughter Véronique, the company and help of a number of close friends, and none of the ignominy which Clotilde endured after the notorious trial involving her mother and Chapuis. But Bloy did not intend to portray authenticity; instead, through literary creativity, he wished to communicate the distressing aspects of the experiences which he chose to include. It was important that he achieve this end successfully because Clotilde's suffering plays a role, not only in the progression of the novel but, even more significantly, on her journey towards sanctity.

Bloy's ideas on sanctity are clearly expressed in a letter addressed to his friend Pierre Termier, "Dieu vous veut saint, je ne dis pas vertueux ou honorable, ce qui est bon pour les bourgeois, mais SAINT, et il saura vous y contraindre, fût-ce par d'effroyables douleurs, des douleurs à la Marchenoir."<sup>1</sup> It is evident that Bloy believes that suffering is necessary in order to achieve sanctity, and Clotilde is no exception. The shelter she enjoys through Gacougnol's generosity and in the early years of her marriage are like oases found by a traveller in the desert.

Clotilde is stripped of her worldly ties and possessions, one by one, in a process resembling that used

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Bloy, Lettres à Pierre Termier, suivies de Lettres à Jeanne Termier (Paris: Stock, 1927), Jan. 28, 1907.

for Marchenoir in Le Désespéré. Léopold, her final link with society, disappears in the blaze which destroys the Comic Opera. The evening of Léopold's disappearance, Clotilde is alone at home in a state which Gertrude Henri describes in the following manner:

N'est-ce pas l'étage contemplatif que saint Augustin appelle la "force Tranquille" (tranquillitas), degré supérieur de la voie illuminative? Les dons de force et de conseil sont fermement assis dans le coeur avec le divin Esprit. Il n'y a plus à douter ou à trembler ou à s'agiter.<sup>1</sup>

Léopold's death is indeed the line of demarcation between Clotilde's old and new life.

Après la mort de Léopold dont le corps ne put être retrouvé parmi les anonymes et épouvantables décombres, Clotilde avait tenu à se conformer à celui des Préceptes évangéliques dont l'observation rigoureuse est jugée plus intolérable que le supplice même du feu. Elle avait vendu tout ce qu'elle possédait, en avait donné le prix aux plus pauvres et, du jour au lendemain, était devenue une mendiante.<sup>2</sup>

This later Clotilde resembles no historical model. In spite of the trials and tribulations endured by both Berthe Dumont and Jeanne Molbech, neither was ever deprived simultaneously of family, friends and financial resources,

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<sup>1</sup>Gertrude Henri, "Deux Portraits de Clotilde" in Les Carnets Viatoriens, VIII, No. 1, Jan., 1943, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 298. Bloy is here referring to Christ's advice to the rich young ruler: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." Matthew 19: 21. Also, Mark 10: 21 and Luke 18: 22.

as is Clotilde. The state in which Clotilde is left, after Léopold's death, differs from that at the beginning of the novel, for the negative influence of Chapuis and Madame Maréchal has been removed. Having no ties, Clotilde is at liberty to choose the life she wishes to lead.

With each successive loss, her faith in God had grown. During her association with Gacougnol, she had made daily visits to church where she prayed to God.<sup>1</sup> Later during their marriage,

Léopold et Clotilde prenaient la fuite aussi souvent qu'ils pouvaient. Ils allaient dans les églises qui sont, aujourd'hui, les seules cavernes où les fauves au coeur saignant se puissent réfugier encore. Ils se promenaient dans la paix sublime des cimetières, s'agenouillant, çà et là, sur les tombes en ruine des plus vieux morts.<sup>2</sup>

Clotilde now makes this a way of life. At Gacougnol's soirée, she had seen what society had to offer and, fully aware of what she was rejecting, she chose not to follow that life. The significance and importance of the soirée, then, lies in the fact that Clotilde was thus able to choose her new life in knowledge and not in ignorance.

Bloy compresses ten years of Clotilde's life into the closing pages of the novel and shows a way of life that projects indefinitely into the future. Although he suggests that Clotilde is a saint, Bloy is careful not to state it

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 126-128.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

explicitly:

Les chrétiens confortables et bien vêtus qu'incommode le Surnaturel et qui "ont dit à la Sagesse: Tu es ma soeur", [sic] la jugent dérangée d'esprit, mais on est respectueux pour elle dans le menu peuple et quelques pauvresses d'église la croient une sainte.<sup>1</sup>

This final chapter advocates Clotilde's way of life by presenting her as a person filled with a deep, inner peace, something Bloy always sought but was never quite able to achieve, as he stated in a letter to abbé Cornuau:

"Il n'y a qu'une tristesse, ai-je écrit à la fin de ma Femme pauvre, c'est de n'être pas des saints."

Cette tristesse est la mienne depuis un grand nombre d'années. Elle n'a cessé de me tourmenter, quelquefois d'une manière terrible et, chaque jour, quand je reçois le corps de Notre-Seigneur, comme une mauvaise terre reçoit le bon grain, c'est presque toujours avec des larmes de grande amertume, en considérant mon épouvantable stérilité.<sup>2</sup>

Clotilde thus represents an ideal for, having experienced the vicissitudes of life, she has emerged triumphant. We suggest that Clotilde's life is presented by Bloy as a model for each Christian: though tormented and suffering, if one relies entirely on God, one acquires inner peace by dissociating oneself from such mundane concerns as

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 297. See also Gertrude Henri, "Deux Portraits de Clotilde," Les Carnets Viatoriens, VIII, No. 1, Jan., 1943. She states that God did indeed grant sainthood to Clotilde and draws parallels between Clotilde and Thérèse de l'Enfant Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Bloy, Lettres à L'Abbé Cornuau et au Frère Dacien, Apr. 24, 1910; see also Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, pp. 17, 202; Le Vieux de la Montagne, Jan. 16, 1908; Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre", p. 47.

gaining a prestigious social position and the accumulation of money.

In his study on "La Femme pauvre and Feminine Mythology," Beaumont writes:

The closer woman comes to God, the more her feminine nature is realized, a statement fraught with vast implications. In the last chapter of La Femme pauvre, Clotilde thus fulfils her destiny. She is, really and truly, in so far as this is possible on earth, in paradise, therefore wholly Woman. . . .

The movement that we follow in La Femme pauvre is from the superficial form of the earthly paradise, mere pleasure, which is only a parody of paradise, the appearance of it, to the deepest and most authentic experience of the earthly paradise, in the condition created by the Fall, suffering at its most extreme: woman deprived of home, husband, child and of all but fortuitous means of subsistence. One may see how this is prostitution spiritually understood: Clotilde has given everything, she has nothing left to give but her life itself, offered at every moment to God himself, who may thus entirely possess her.<sup>1</sup>

There is, thus, no model for this last Clotilde. It is true that an element of Bloy himself exists in her, but not an historical Bloy--rather the one he sought to be.<sup>2</sup>

At the end, Clotilde is devoid of bitterness and

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest Beaumont, "La Femme pauvre and Feminine Mythology," in Studies in French Literature, ed. by J. C. Ireson (Manchester-New York: University Press-Barnes and Noble Inc., 1968), pp. 40-41.

<sup>2</sup>Gertrude Henri, on the other hand, writes: "Que peignait-il là? La figure de son idéal et la figure de son existence. L'idéal, il l'avait chéri comme les parfaits amants du Dieu pauvre l'ont toujours fait depuis qu'il y a un christianisme. L'existence, il l'avait menée peut-être un peu plus cruellement encore... Mais il avait trouvé son bonheur à faire coïncider l'existence avec l'idéal si crucifiant." O.p. cit., p. 31.

hate despite all of her earlier experiences. She accepts life as it is because "tout ce qui arrive est adorable."<sup>1</sup> This final chapter has impressed most readers and such adjectives as "luminous" and "sublime" have been used to describe it.<sup>2</sup>

Bloy's success in presenting a "sublime" as well as a convincing personality in the character of Clotilde stems, however, not merely from his being able to incorporate details of real persons, but even more so from his genius in incarnating these details in Clotilde, as he tried to articulate through her his own Christian ideal.

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"  
p. 47.

CHAPTER V  
SECONDARY CHARACTERS

Le Désespéré

Georges Leverdier

In the role of Marchenoir's friend and confidant in Le Désespéré, Georges Leverdier acts as a sounding board for the writer's ideas and he provides needed links between episodes in the novel. He exists, in Beaumont's words, "as a foil to show up the outstanding qualities of the hero . . . The function of Leverdier is purely that of an Horatio."<sup>1</sup>

In 1884, Bloy began what was to be an extensive and revealing correspondence with Louis Montchal, a Swiss librarian.<sup>2</sup> The photograph of Montchal<sup>3</sup> confirms that the physical description of Leverdier was indeed based on Montchal, as Bloy had intended.<sup>4</sup> Bloy's correspondence with Montchal further provides evidence to show that he originally modelled

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>We have already referred to these letters published in three volumes by François Bernouard and spanning the years 1884-1894.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, plate V. The friendship between Bloy and Montchal is traced in some detail in both Bollery's biography of Bloy, II, pp. 107-121, his "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, pp. 26-49 and also his introduction to the Lettres aux Montchal.

<sup>4</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Jan. 19, 1887.

some of Leverdier's characteristics on his Swiss friend and the names Marchenoir and Leverdier were freely used in addressing each other. Le Désespéré is, in fact, dedicated to Louis Montchal.

Encore que Louis Montchal n'ait jamais joué le rôle dévolu, dans Le Désespéré, à Georges Leverdier, personnage épisodique placé dans la trame du roman comme le confident dans l'action de la tragédie classique, quelques initiés savaient que Léon Bloy avait emprunté à son dédicataire les traits physiques et le portrait moral de l'ami de Cain Marchenoir.<sup>1</sup>

But, on the other hand, we find Bloy's own affirmation that Leverdier was created from the author's imagination as was stated many years later when he wrote the following dedication: "A mon somptueux ami Alfred Pouthier: Exactement préfiguré par Leverdier qui n'eut jamais d'existence que dans la vision prophétique de l'auteur."<sup>2</sup> The explanation for the apparent contradiction of facts is provided by Bollery with whom we fully concur:

Il est établi que jamais, Montchal--ni personne--n'a joué le rôle qui est attribué à Georges Leverdier dans le récit de l'idylle mystique Véronique-Marchenoir. La dite idylle prit fin en 1882, et la première lettre de Montchal est datée du 18 juin 1884. Avant cette date, les deux hommes s'ignoraient absolument. Montchal n'habita jamais à Paris et vit Léon Bloy pour la première fois en juillet 1885. Il entra donc dans l'existence de Léon Bloy au moment précis où l'écrivain commençait son roman. S'il ne pouvait prendre place dans le fond de l'oeuvre puisé tout entier dans la vie antérieure de l'auteur, Louis Montchal entra du moins dans la réalisation littéraire des événements qui forment la trame du livre. Pour la conduite de son roman, Léon Bloy avait besoin

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<sup>1</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Au seuil de l'Apocalypse, Aug. 5, 1913.



d'un personnage qui jouât le rôle du confident dans la tragédie classique. Il créa ce personnage qui n'existait pas et lui donna les traits de son nouvel ami, mais il serait vain de rechercher, dans Le Désespéré, une image fidèle de Louis Montchal et le récit exact de ses relations avec Léon Bloy.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand the factors influencing the creation of Leverdier, we must examine Bloy's notion of friendship. His journal reveals the attitudes he held towards friends and friendship as with each new potential relationship we see him wax enthusiastic. If the relationship does not measure up to his expectations, he denounces the individual responsible for his disappointment. When occasionally a friendship does develop, there is no assurance that it will last since Bloy is very exacting.<sup>2</sup>

Bloy était un ami tyrannique et singulièrement exigeant. "Il faut être tellement avec moi pour être mon ami" reconnaissait-il lui-même. Son Journal et sa très abondante correspondance, en partie publiée, nous renseignent de manière unilatérale et en certains endroits fort tendencieuse sur ses rapports, tantôt affectueux et confiants, tantôt troublés et orageux, avec ses répondants belges.<sup>3</sup>

The poet Jehan Rictus, who befriended Bloy in his later life, expressed Bloy's possessiveness and apparently excessive demands in the following manner:

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<sup>1</sup>"Le Désespéré de Léon Bloy, pp. 28-29.

<sup>2</sup>The friendship between Léon Bloy and Henri Cayssac is of special interest in this respect. Bloy's letters to Cayssac have been published with a very revealing preface by Pierre Arrou. See "Lettres de Léon Bloy à Henri Cayssac," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Nov.-Dec., 1927 and Jan.-Feb., 1928.

<sup>3</sup>Gustave Vanwelkenhuyzen, Insurgés de lettres: Paul Verlaine, Léon Bloy, J.-K. Huysmans (Brussels: Renaissance du livre, 1953), p. 45.

C'est un ogre d'amour, qui a faim, faim, faim, et personne ne peut le rassasier.

Quand je suis avec Bloy je me fais l'effet d'un belluaire entré dans la cage d'un lion qui l'aime. J'observe tous les mouvements de ce lion, je sais que je n'ai rien à craindre parce qu'il m'aime, mais sa patte est lourde, sa langue râpeuse, ses étreintes redoutables, son affection définitive, forte et dangereuse. Ses tendresses sont des rugissements: je me méfie sans en avoir l'air. Dans un élan d'amour, il pourrait m'écraser; quand il joue, il m'étreint; je tiens compte de sa force, je me laisse rouler; quand il a fini, je lui échappe et je me remets debout en me secouant et m'époussetant. J'ai vu, avec des lions en cage, des terre-neuve ainsi associés et qui, insoucieux et habitués aux rugissements et aux brusques coups de colère, dormaient au flanc formidable du lion. Je suis plutôt ce chien que le belluaire. Le pauvre lion prisonnier qu'est Bloy est si solitaire et si triste qu'il en arriverait à adorer le Rat.<sup>1</sup>

And even so faithful a Bloyen as Bollery admitted that, "Chez Léon Bloy, l'amitié ressemblait singulièrement à l'amour, avec ses exclusives, ses jalousies, ses exigences et ses fureurs."<sup>2</sup>

Leverdier's friendship, selflessness, and devotion were qualities Bloy had dreamed of but it was only with the passing years that he came to recognize them for what they were: ideals created by his imagination. This is reflected in the aforementioned dedication to Alfred Pouthier. In giving substance to his dream, Bloy used the sources which were available.

Georges Leverdier est, au témoignage de Bloy, Louis Montchal. En fait, le personnage paraît composite: des

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, pp. 348-349.

<sup>2</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 36.

rare amis qu'il a eus jusqu'alors, Bloy crée un personnage . . . Barbey d'Aurevilly . . . lorsqu'il ne pouvait aider Bloy lui donnait pour les vendre les livres qu'il recevait; quant au prénom, aux détails sur la vie des deux amis à Paris, ils viennent de Georges Landry.<sup>1</sup>

One need only read Bloy's Lettres de Jeunesse<sup>2</sup> to understand the closeness of the friendship existing between Landry and Bloy. Thus, the choice of name for Marchenoir's confidant in Le Désespéré appears to have been deliberate for not only is he Georges but also Georges L-- an obvious tribute to Georges Landry. Yet the fact that Bloy did not speak of Landry as a model for his fictional character further suggests the author's use of imagination.

Leverdier is introduced as "un unique ami, à peine moins indigent, qui le sauva de la mort quinze ou vingt fois,"<sup>3</sup> and then he is characterized as "âme sereine et peu croyante, en tout l'opposé de Marchenoir,"<sup>4</sup> thereby suggesting that Leverdier is indeed a foil for Marchenoir. Their friendship, according to the novel, dates back to 1869, fourteen years prior to the time of our story. During the 1870-1871 war with Prussia, the two men fought in the same battalion and Leverdier was responsible for saving Marchenoir's life.

The accounts of Bloy's life prior to 1890 suggest that not only Montchal but several of Bloy's Paris friends

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, notes, p. 331.

<sup>2</sup>(Paris: Edouard-Joseph, 1920).

<sup>3</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

who were as poor as he, shared their meagre substance with him. Among those who usually met for a weekly dinner party were: Lucien Descaves, Gustaves Guiches, Georges Landry, J.-K. Huysmans, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Maurice de Fleury and on occasion, Gustave de Malherbe. Bloy's experiences during the Franco-Prussian War may well have included narrow escapes with Bloy owing his life to a companion. There is, however, no record of who this may have been--perhaps none of his known friends; in any case, it could not have been Montchal, whom Bloy met only later, nor Landry, with whom Bloy corresponded during his own military service.

As the novel develops, we see that Leverdier has no life outside his relationship to Marchenoir. His employment as a librarian serves uniquely to provide him with funds to aid Marchenoir; in fact, his whole existence seems directed to helping the writer. Bloy's friends certainly had other responsibilities ranging from Montchal with his family of four children to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's illegitimate son Totor, to Huysmans' mistress Anna Meunier. Obviously, Leverdier has been created to fulfil the role of devoted friend, far beyond the duties usually expected of a friend.

After Leverdier is introduced, he disappears and does not re-enter the picture during the section dealing with the Grande Chartreuse. However, upon Marchenoir's return to Paris, Leverdier is the first person whom Marchenoir seeks out. It is at this point that Bloy gives us the physical description of Leverdier, which, as we

mentioned above, is obviously based on Montchal. Bloy thus pays tribute to his friend while in no way altering the development of the novel since this physical description is, in Le Désespéré, of only secondary importance.

When Leverdier sees Marchenoir upon the latter's return from his retreat at the Grande Chartreuse, it is his function in the novel to link the events taking place in Paris with Marchenoir's experiences at the monastery. He introduces the subject of Véronique's self-mutilation to Marchenoir and then again fades out, not to reappear until the fourth part, "Le retour."

At that point Leverdier encounters Alcide Lerat,<sup>1</sup> a man who moves in literary circles and thrives on gossip. Lerat, who is bearing a message for Marchenoir, passes it on to Leverdier. He, in turn, acting as intermediary between Marchenoir and the literary world, relays the communication to Marchenoir when they meet in a café, one of Bloy's favourite haunts. In that scene,<sup>2</sup> we see an example of Leverdier as a foil for Marchenoir. As the two friends discuss the offer Marchenoir has received to become a member of the journalistic staff of Le Pilate, it becomes increasingly evident that Marchenoir overwhelms Leverdier with his opinion. What is supposed to be a conversation deteriorates into a lecture by Marchenoir with Leverdier

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<sup>1</sup> See our discussion of Lerat, pp. 138-139.

<sup>2</sup> Le Désespéré, pp. 205-213.

emerging as a kind but colourless figure by contrast. He appears to be no more than a sounding board for Marchenoir's ideas.

The two men then proceed to Marchenoir's apartment where they partake of a meal with Véronique. This gathering symbolizes the closeness of the friends as Leverdier is permitted to share the intimacy of Marchenoir's home and table. It also again permits the discussion of one of the central themes of Le Désespéré: the duties of a writer--a Christian writer, it is understood. Marchenoir dominates the conversation with Leverdier merely providing added impetus by the odd comment. When the evening draws to a close, Bloy gives the reader a hint of impending tragedy: "Vers minuit enfin, on se sépara dans l'effusion d'une allégresse attendrie que ces trois coeurs souffrants ne connaissaient guère et qu'ils étaient probablement condamnés à ne plus jamais ressentir."<sup>1</sup> The remainder of the section, "L'épreuve diabolique," is given over to Beauvivier's dinner party and Leverdier reappears only in the closing lines when he again fulfils his role as confidant and connecting link in the novel.

It is Leverdier who first brought Marchenoir the message of an opening on the staff of the Pilate, it is he who discusses the matter, first with Marchenoir alone and later

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 226.

with both Marchenoir and Véronique, and it is Leverdier who is present when this episode reaches its expected conclusion. "Une demi-heure après, il [Marchenoir] disait, en se laissant tomber sur une banquette du café où l'attendait Leverdier: -- Cher ami, mon journalisme est fricassé, mais, c'est égal, je n'ai pas payé trop cher la volupté de leur sabouler la gueule!"<sup>1</sup>

Leverdier's final meeting with Marchenoir constitutes an essential part of the dénouement. He comes to Marchenoir and explains that he has taken irrevocable steps to leave Paris: he has sold his furniture and any other saleable items and he gives the money to Marchenoir. Although his decision to leave Paris might appear to be an act of abandonment, Leverdier's action is based on the premise that he can offer Marchenoir and Véronique better financial support by leaving them, rather than by staying in the capital. It is his plan to join a wealthy, elderly aunt who lives in the country and from there to send them a regular monthly living allowance.

To this point in the novel, Marchenoir has suffered alienation from literary circles and financial problems. The departure of Leverdier is the first of the personal disasters which will afflict him and Bloy uses it to foreshadow tragedies which will befall Marchenoir. Bloy concludes this chapter with, "Leverdier partit donc le soir même, laissant

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 271.

à son compagnon, désormais solitaire, cette accablante impression qu'ils venaient de s'embrasser pour la dernière fois et qu'ils ne se reverraient plus!"<sup>1</sup>

It is through Leverdier that Bloy provides the conclusion to the novel in the form of a letter Marchenoir addresses to his friend some months later. In it the writer explains what has happened to him and to Véronique in the intervening time: increasing hardships, Véronique's ensuing madness, the necessity of committing her to a mental institution and finally his accident which leaves him on the threshold of death. Marchenoir urgently asks for Leverdier's presence, but although the latter complies with the request, he arrives only too late to be of service.

In the novel, the friendship between Leverdier and Marchenoir appears to be based primarily on the former's admiration and respect for the latter, as well as on Leverdier's belief that it is his duty to help and encourage Marchenoir in his literary career. Their relationship resembles more that of kind master and devoted servant than a friendship between two peers. However, Marchenoir does rely on Leverdier and it is in Leverdier's absolute dependability that we find the key to Bloy's concept of an ideal friend. An ideal friend appears to be one on whom we can consistently rely, no matter what demands are made on him, he who will defend us no matter what the personal cost

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 307.



will be, he who will accept us for what we are without trying to change us, he who will respect our opinions even if he does not always agree, he who will put his friend's needs ahead of his own.

Leverdier is thus not only a composite character made up of historical persons, but he is also the incarnation of Bloy's concept of an ideal friend. By creating such a character, Bloy is able to mould him as he wishes and is not restricted by the limits historical accuracy imposes. Through the relatively minor character of Leverdier, the reader is initiated into Bloy's view of what constitutes true friendship. Armed with this knowledge, one is better able to understand the apparently unexplainable deterioration in Bloy's friendships only a few short years after the publication of Le Désespéré. What appear to be close relationships, in actual fact are different from what is portrayed in the novel and therefore are unable to stand the strains imposed on them by Bloy himself.<sup>1</sup>

Leverdier thus serves a two-fold purpose: he reveals something of Bloy to the reader while at the same time fulfilling a crucial and necessary function in the novel.

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<sup>1</sup>In real life Bloy's demands on friendship appear to have been even more excessive than the above rather comprehensive list suggests. Bloy himself never visited Geneva despite the many invitations received from the Montchals and in spite of a number of visits made to Paris by both Montchal and Madame Montchal. As for Bloy's friendship with Henry Cayssac, Bloy refused to accept Cayssac's wife into his circle of friends and told Cayssac to visit him alone. Invitations to Cayssac pointedly excluded his wife and when, needless to say, visits between the two friends became less frequent, Bloy blamed Cayssac and not himself.

### Minor Characters

The long list of characters appearing in Le Désespéré is misleading since the central story involves only Marchenoir, Véronique and to a much lesser extent, Leverdier. Most of them have no more than very brief roles. These roles are moreover so rigidly defined that we suspect that Bloy must have followed a more rigorous plan than is generally believed. In each of the five sections one or two of these secondary characters makes a contribution to the central story. And, although these personages may reappear elsewhere, their actual role is restricted to the section of the novel where they do provide an extra dimension: Alexis Dulaurier and Dr. Chérubin des Bois in Part I; Father Athanase in Part II; Judas Nathan in Part III; Alcide Lerat and Properce Beauvivier in Part IV; the janitor in Part V.

In Part I, "Le Départ," we meet Alexis Dulaurier and Dr. Chérubin des Bois. The former represents Paul Bourget who is readily identifiable since "les détails sur sa vie, avant ses premiers succès, sont parfaitement exacts."<sup>1</sup> Dulaurier's reaction to Marchenoir's plea for help serves a two-fold purpose. Bourget is attacked and Marchenoir's behaviour is to some extent explained: if the relationship between Marchenoir and Dulaurier is one of the more sympathetic experienced by Marchenoir, then the others must

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, notes, p. 330.

indeed be less than satisfactory.

Dr. Chérubin des Bois, pseudonym for Dr. Albert Robin, is, according to the novel, the fashionable physician of society. Des Bois cultivates those whom he believes will help him maintain this popular position and for awhile this includes Marchenoir who is invited to be a frequent guest. However, with our hero's outspokenness, des Bois experiences some discomfort and begins to express to others the sentiment that Marchenoir is somewhat of a parasite and hanger-on. When Marchenoir hears of these complaints, he immediately cuts all ties with des Bois. It is this man whom Dulaurier approaches in order to collect what he considers a respectable sum of money for Marchenoir at no great cost to himself. Bloy treats us to an imaginary conversation between these two men and shows them through his own eyes. Although they disapprove of Marchenoir they are afraid to alienate him in case he should suddenly regain popularity. By admitting to themselves that this is a possibility, they are also recognizing Marchenoir's literary talents. A letter of advice which Dulaurier includes with the money sent to Marchenoir is intended as a taunt for Bourget who had given Bloy similar unappreciated advice.

Both Dulaurier and Dr. Chérubin des Bois do reappear in the novel but only briefly and their roles are then of negligible importance. Thus, at Beauvievier's dinner when they attempt to befriend Marchenoir in order to regain his favour, he treats them brusquely and they immediately retreat. They

are again mentioned in Marchenoir's final letter when Bloy attacks them for the last time.

In Part II, "La Grande-Chartreuse," we find Father Athanase, a character based on two historical priests, Father Marie-Cyprien, of the Grande Chartreuse, and Father Roger, a priest at the Trappe whom Bloy had met on his retreats at these monasteries. These two men fulfilled the same function of friend, advisor and confessor for Bloy as Athanase does for Marchenoir. Bloy's characterization of Athanase is a tribute to these historical models, for their help during his stays at the monasteries as well as for the support received when he returned to Paris. Athanase also plays a significant role in Marchenoir's life, if only temporarily, as he is the one to point out the hero's love for Véronique, to listen to his problems and to guide him. In short, he takes on Leverdier's role of confidant during the section devoted to "La Grande-Chartreuse."

Rather than merely presenting the reader with a fait accompli in "Le Retour," Bloy takes us to the scene in which Véronique's teeth are extracted. To portray this, the author requires a character to perform the operation and he uses Judas Nathan, a Jew who apparently represents Arthur Meyer. Arthur Meyer was, in his own time, a noted Parisian journalist who founded le Gaulois in 1865, then worked on the Paris-Journal and finally returned to le Gaulois. Meyer took up various political causes including the support of the monarchy and, despite his own Jewish origins, he led an

attack on Dreyfus. It is thus evident that, as Bollery and Petit have indicated, "celui-ci est d'ailleurs de ceux auxquels Bloy fait subir la transformation la plus nette."<sup>1</sup>

Judas Nathan is the individual through whom Véronique's disfiguration becomes a possibility and a reality. It is his action which permits the story to develop along the lines it does and for this reason the part he plays in the novel is of some importance. The extraction of Véronique's teeth becomes particularly repelling when the reader sees that even the hardened, avaricious Judas Nathan is horror-struck and must be threatened in order to perform this task.<sup>2</sup> His role in the plot then is to provide another dimension of horror to Véronique's disfiguration by showing it actually taking place.<sup>3</sup>

We meet Alcide Lerat, who represents Louis Nicolardot in Part IV, "L'Épreuve diabolique." Bloy violently attacks him immediately after introducing him. We have not been able to establish why Bloy felt so strongly and negatively about Nicolardot but that he did is evident, since similar attacks are found in La Femme pauvre.<sup>4</sup> In Le Désespéré Lerat's function is purely that of a messenger and

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, notes, p. 333.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 165-168.

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Pierre Goldenstein of Université Laval presented a paper at the 1971 meeting of the Association des Professeurs de Français des Universités Canadiennes, in which he spoke of Nathan's role as a necessary and indispensable intermediary for Marchenoir's salvation. This coincides with Bloy's views as expressed in his Le Salut par les Juifs.

<sup>4</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 139 ff., 245.

it is through him that Marchenoir is offered a position with Beauvivier. Using a go-between seems a sensible solution since one cannot be certain of Marchenoir's reactions in view of his violent nature and a man such as Lerat would provide a buffer between Marchenoir and the individual making the advances. This is Abraham-Proporce Beauvivier, fictional representation of Catulle Mendès on whose behalf Lerat is acting. The considerable space devoted to Beauvivier attests to Mendès' stature in the literary world of that day but it does not contribute a great deal to the novel. While Beauvivier is the tool of Marchenoir's downfall the "considerations on the iniquity of Proporce Beauvivier"<sup>1</sup> are of no importance. Bloy is here merely indulging himself. Beauvivier's role, however, is crucial in the final outcome of the novel for he provides Marchenoir with a position on the staff of Le Pilate,<sup>2</sup> thereby giving him reason to write the article which creates the final rift between Marchenoir and his contemporaries. It is also Beauvivier who stages the dinner party at which Marchenoir makes a spectacle. We may thus conclude that it is not Beauvivier's character but his role which is important in

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Bloy appears to have chosen the name Le Pilate deliberately to bring to the reader's mind the Biblical story of Pontius Pilate who, because he washed his hands of the whole matter was indirectly responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Beauvivier, in a similar way, brings about Marchenoir's downfall: although he does not attack Marchenoir, his failure to take protective or preventative measures leads to the events of the dinner party.

Le Désespéré.

The final secondary character worthy of individual mention has neither a given name, nor is she included in the list of characters. We refer to the janitor who tends Marchenoir in his final hours. While Bloy was certainly familiar with those who had been janitors in his various abodes, this fictional character owes her existence, not to any historical model, but rather to the part she plays in Le Désespéré. It is through her that we see the agony endured by Marchenoir and the problems he faced in trying to convey to her the importance of obtaining last rites. This is the final confrontation between Marchenoir and the world with which he is out of step and for this reason, she represents not only herself but the whole society which fails to understand the hero of Le Désespéré. Not only does she not comprehend Marchenoir's request for a priest but she does not carry out his wishes. It is at this point that Bloy shows a particularly charitable side of his nature for he states: "Ce n'était pourtant pas une méchante femme. Elle l'avait même soigné avec une évidente sollicitude, et avait passé une partie des nuits dans la chambre de ce malade que le médecin avait condamné, dès le premier jour."<sup>1</sup> She carries out the function for which she was specifically created, that is, to emphasize Marchenoir's isolation and final desolation. This emphasis exists because, although

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 318.

she had the opportunity of fulfilling Marchenoir's request for a priest, she neglected to do so. Hers is a sin of omission but the result is the same as a deliberate action against Marchenoir for he dies alone and without the blessing of the church.

#### Beauvivier's Dinner Party

No discussion of the minor characters in Le Désespéré would be complete without a mention of Beauvivier's dinner party. In that scene most of those whose names appear on the list of characters make their single appearance. Since Bloy does little more than attack them, not even permitting them to speak or be characterized, it appears that the following statement by Beaumont has merit:

The roman à clef is for later generations always a tiresome riddle. M. Joseph Bollery has published the key to the disguises through which contemporaries of Le Désespéré had no difficulty in discerning the original characters. For us today the writers of one kind and another whom Bloy flayed with such barbarity are, nevertheless, with a few exceptions, nothing but names. The dinner party which, together with the considerations on the iniquity of Properce Beauvivier (Catulle Mendès), occupies one seventh of the novel, is that part which could most easily be dispensed with. It irremediably shifts the centre of interest away from Véronique and, frankly, it offers no interest today at all.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 161. Beaumont refers us to Bollery's "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, Appendix number 6 for a key to the characters of the novel. The reader may also consult Laquerrière and Bollery, Biblio-iconographie de Léon Bloy, p. 12, Lettres aux Montchal, Jan. 19, 1887 and Bollery and Petit's notes to Le Désespéré.



It cannot be denied that Bloy's attacks on the various writers who make their only appearance at Beauvivier's dinner are superfluous to the novel in general and, if the story of Véronique and Marchenoir is viewed as central to Le Désespéré, then the dinner party and "the considerations on the iniquity of Properce Beauvivier" could indeed be dispensed with. Insofar as secondary characters are concerned, the dinner holds no particular interest but it cannot be entirely ignored and in that respect, we disagree with the above statement by Beaumont. It is our belief that what is of importance is the role of the dinner party itself within the framework of the novel, not the guests present on that occasion.<sup>1</sup>

#### La Femme pauvre

The secondary characters in La Femme pauvre are much more successfully portrayed in every respect than those in Bloy's earlier novel. Bloy develops their personalities to a greater extent and better integrates them into the very fabric of the novel. We shall first examine five characters who, achieving various degrees of success, all are forces of evil: Isidore Chapuis, Madame Maréchal, Mademoiselle Virginie Séchoir, Mesdames Poulot and Grand.

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<sup>1</sup>Since we are not dealing with characters, this merits further discussion in another section. See pp.223-224.

Isidore Chapuis

"Ça pue le bon Dieu, ici!"<sup>1</sup> Few readers forget these opening words of La Femme pauvre, enunciated by Madame Maréchal's paramour, Isidore Chapuis. He is a perfect match for the hypocritical woman, but unlike her, he appears to have no historical model.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he seems without an identifiable model. Bollery does not completely discount the possibility of a historical model but, "s'il ne fut pas complètement imaginé par l'auteur de La Femme pauvre, il est bien évident qu'il ne put le connaître que par les confidences de Berthe." Bollery continues, "Il est bien possible aussi que le balancier communard, ivrogne et criminel soit une pure fiction artistique destinée à équilibrer par un pendant digne de lui le repoussoir maternel dont l'écrivain encadra la sublimité de son héroïne."<sup>3</sup>

Bloy might have met this type of person himself in the cafés he frequented or he may have met such persons through Madame Dumont, Berthe's mother. After her daughter's death, Madame Dumont was supported by Bloy and the principal cause of his disgust with her was her drinking and carousing, using money already in short supply which had been intended for other things. It appears, therefore, that

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 13; Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 127.

Bloy may have been exposed to such persons, if only indirectly, since they were not in his immediate entourage.

It has been established with reasonable certainty that Bloy used Denis Poulot's Le Sublime<sup>1</sup> as a source in creating the character of Isidore Chapuis.<sup>2</sup> Le Sublime is an objective work which attempts to characterize the various types of workmen with which Poulot was acquainted. Bloy was evidently familiar with Poulot's book since he had used it as a source in preparing his Humiliation d'un Sublime.<sup>3</sup> In La Femme pauvre, unlike Poulot's objective text, Bloy brings his sublime<sup>4</sup> to life. "Si Isidore Chapuis est né d'une source livresque, son créateur en a fait un type bien à lui par l'originalité du style et la nouveauté des images."<sup>5</sup> Chapuis' picturesque language<sup>6</sup> and the descriptive phrases

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<sup>1</sup>(Paris: A. Lacroix, Verboeckoven, 1872.)

<sup>2</sup>Fam, "Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jan.-Feb., 1938, p. 116; see also Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 13, and Beaumont "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>First published on Jun. 10, 1893 and later included in Sueur de sang. See Oeuvres, VI, p. 349.

<sup>4</sup>"Précisons qu'en argot de l'époque, un sublime est un ivrogne." Oeuvres, VI, p. 349.

<sup>5</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 13.

<sup>6</sup>Addressing Madame Maréchal Chapuis says, "Tu sais que je n'aime pas que tu me fasses ta sale gueule de jésuite. Si c'est une danse qu'y te faut, tu n'as qu'à le dire, tu sera servie illico, et à l'oeil. Et puis, c'est pas tout ça, où est-elle, ta bougresse de fille?" (p. 15). He bellows to Clotilde, "O la vache! Et tu ne lui as pas foutu ça par la figure, à cet' Héloïse du champ de navets, qui a gagné plus

applying to him<sup>1</sup> provide the details which evoke his vivid personality. Not only are these aspects characteristic of Bloy but they also reveal his creative talents through this unusual fictional personage.

The unsavoury Chapuis and Madame Maréchal are attracted to one another and their unlikely alliance persists even in the face of bankruptcy and the debased conditions in which they choose to live. Chapuis had, on one occasion, tried to rape Clotilde and the ensuing fight was so violent that he sustained severe injuries. As a result, a sort of truce was declared between them and when the novel opens, Clotilde is tolerated by both her mother and Chapuis. The episode serves to contrast the heroine and Isidore Chapuis in a very obvious manner by showing the level to which he has fallen and the extent to which Clotilde tries to repel such immorality. Because she is expected to make a

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de cent mille francs à se mettre sur le dos avec sa sale carne à cochons? Vrai, t'es pas dégourdie, ma fille," (p. 25). And again speaking to Madame Maréchal, he says, "Allons! c'est bien, la vieille, tu peux aller t'asseoir. Personne n'a envie de te démolir. On a le temps d'y penser jusqu'à Noël, si tu peux mettre, d'ici là, un peu de margarine sur tes abatis," (p. 27).

<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre contains such descriptions of Chapuis as: "ce mufle de basse canaille couperosé par l'alcool et tordu au cabestan des concupiscences les plus ordurières," (p. 10), "l'aspect de ce ruffian démantibulé donnait l'ensemble d'un avorton implacable, méticuleux et présent jusque dans l'ivresse," (p. 10), "il grommelait en crachottant sur ses bottes, symptôme connu de hargneuse préoccupation que les camarades respectaient," (p. 13), "il grailonna surrogatoirement quelques doléances préalables," (p. 14).

financial contribution to the household in spite of her ill-health, Chapuis decides to seek employment for her. It is his action which thrusts the heroine into Gacougnol's sphere of activity.

Though Chapuis provides local colour and does indeed liven up the story, his real importance is to be found in the force he exerts on events in the novel. His laziness and greed prompt him to seek work for Clotilde, not himself; his attitude to and treatment of the artist leave Gacougnol with the impression that Chapuis' surroundings are no fit place for a young woman of Clotilde's character; this, in turn, leads Clotilde to Virginie Séchoir's boarding house. Chapuis carries out the plot to kill Gacougnol which proves a turning point in the story.

The entire novel pivots on Chapuis whose role is of major importance since each of his actions significantly alters the course of events. When he conspires with Madame Maréchal and Mademoiselle Séchoir against Gacougnol and when he strikes the fatal blow, he irreversibly affects Clotilde's destiny. The fact that Chapuis receives a life sentence to hard labour and that he disappears completely from Clotilde's life is irrelevant: he has influenced her future. Without Chapuis' contribution, La Femme pauvre would have been an entirely different book.

#### Madame Maréchal

The squalid, sordid background from which Clotilde comes plays a significant role in the portrayal of the

heroine's character and provides a foil for her nobility. Clotilde's mother who forms a part of this background first appears merely as an old woman, "une vieille femme,"<sup>1</sup> but Bloy gradually blackens her portrait. Presented as a crone whose male companion has unhygienic habits, she then is revealed as a hypocrite with considerable dramatic talent. As she mistreats her daughter we are made to realize that the filthy surroundings are but a reflection of the inner personalities of the inhabitants. To the old woman, Clotilde represents no more than a source of financial revenue whose origins she does not question. In fact, she would encourage any activities Clotilde might undertake, prostitution included, in order to obtain money. Such revenue she is only too happy to share with her paramour, Chapuis, for whom she has an unexplained affection.

The detailed description of the lodging in which Clotilde, her mother and Chapuis live is followed by a brief résumé of Madame Maréchal's origins as well as of her descent to a state of poverty. Bloy portrays the details of her life, gradually introducing her weaknesses and faults one by one, until the reader is convinced she has no redeeming qualities.

Depuis le moment où Madame Chapuis accueille son Isidore dans le taudis de la rue des Grenelles, jusqu'à ce que nous la retrouvions dans la prison cellulaire, Bloy ne

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 4.

lui accorde pas une seule possibilité de se réhabiliter aux yeux du lecteur; il la présente comme une pure comédienne qui possède au suprême degré l'art d'apitoyer les autres et de leur extorquer de l'argent, et ses "talents" abjects font oublier les quelques traits qui pourraient la rendre un peu moins antipathique.<sup>1</sup>

This negative presentation of Clotilde's mother is a direct outgrowth of the emotions Bloy had experienced towards Berthe Dumont's mother, the model for Madame Maréchal. Because Bloy had loved Berthe, he had looked after her and her mother and following Berthe's death had continued to care for Madame Dumont. The details of the relationship between Bloy and the older woman clearly indicate that she abused Bloy's kindness and generosity.<sup>2</sup> For example, money intended for food was spent on alcoholic beverages.

Bien qu'il n'eût pour elle, aucune sympathie, il eut l'héroïsme, pour respecter un voeu de la morte, de garder chez lui Mme Dumont jusqu'au début d'avril 1886, date à laquelle il rentra à Paris. Le portrait "à la manière noire" qu'il avait gravé de la concubine d'Isidore Chapuis, un peu chargé, sans doute, n'est pas une composition "de chic". Les lettres qu'il reçut d'elle, après leur séparation, donnent bien le ton des discours qu'il met dans la bouche de la mère Isidore.<sup>3</sup>

A côté de la figure lumineuse et douce de Clotilde . . . Bloy nous présente avec tout son réalisme cruel des femmes au caractère fort bas et même monstrueux. Tout ce qu'il y a de plus triste, de plus répugnant dans certains caractères féminins, il l'a présenté, détaillé et amplifié en employant les termes les moins nuancés.

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<sup>1</sup>Coolen-Deton, Anny, La Femme dans la Vie et l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy, unpublished thesis, Université catholique de Louvain, 1945, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy; Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, III; see also Lettres aux Montchal.

<sup>3</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 13.

Sa violence s'acharne surtout sur la mère de Clotilde dont il réussit à faire un portrait réellement écoeurant.<sup>1</sup>

We have seen Madame Maréchal in the presence of Chapuis and Clotilde and know how she behaves with them. Therefore:

Une des scènes les plus révélatrices du caractère de Madame Chapuis est sa visite chez Gacougnol. Celui-ci découvre très vite les intentions de la mégère et, malgré son désir d'éviter tout ennui à Clotilde, il ne peut s'empêcher de lui signifier son congé. D'où la scène burlesque où la mère Isidore, avec un talent consommé, joue le rôle de maman affectueuse et sensible; elle se prétend toute dévouée à sa fille, et elle va même jusqu'à proposer<sup>2</sup> à Gacougnol de venir se réfugier chez lui avec son "chéri."

Enraged when Gacougnol rejects her proposal, she plots the artist's downfall, thereby further emphasizing her base character. Bloy concludes his portrayal of Madame Maréchal with a simple phrase: "Quant à la papelarde, elle consommait son martyre dans la pénombre claustrale d'une prison cellulaire."<sup>3</sup>

Bloy wishes to symbolize Clotilde's break with the past by removing most of the characters who appear in Part I. However, when he dispenses with Madame Maréchal, he creates a vacuum in the novel as an adequate foil no longer exists for Clotilde. This clearly reveals what Madame Maréchal's

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<sup>1</sup>Coolen-Deton, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Coolen-Deton, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 187.



principal role has been. The problem is solved, however, by her reincarnation; in Fam's words, "elle se retrouve dans Mesdames Poulot et Grand du Parc-La-Vallière."<sup>1</sup>

### Virginie Séchoir

Virginie Séchoir and her pension appear in La Femme pauvre ostensibly to provide a refuge for Clotilde from the hovel in which she lives prior to her encounter with Gacougnol. "Mademoiselle Séchoir ne fait que passer dans la vie de Clotilde, mais sous le couvert d'une fausse gentillesse lui fait tout le mal possible."<sup>2</sup> The boarding house, which was to have been a retreat, instead provides the heroine with yet another test of her inner, spiritual resources. The trials endured by Clotilde in her new abode are not easily defined but Bloy does offer the reader ample clues to indicate that she is under some strain. When Clotilde first arrives, Mademoiselle Séchoir steals a glance at her: "Toutefois, si ce regard impliquait la centième partie d'une allusion, ce fut si vague, si lointain, que la susceptibilité la plus ombrageuse n'aurait pu s'en alarmer."<sup>3</sup> The reader is alerted that all is not well and that this shelter is not a safe one.

The extent of the danger is realized only in retro-

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<sup>1</sup>"Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Jan.-Feb., 1938, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Coolen-Deton, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 100.

spect when we discover that Virginie Séchoir, whom Gacognol had considered a friend, is involved in the scheme which leads to his death. She is given a prison sentence and passes out of the novel.

The various elements which enter into the creation of Virginie Séchoir are interesting. Fam provides minute details to show how he arrives at the conclusion that Virginie Séchoir is based on three prototypes: Madame de Molènes, of whom we know very little, Gyp, comtesse de Martel, and Louise Read, Barbey d'Aurevilly's companion.<sup>1</sup> Gyp, who had made a name for herself with witty, biting articles attacking various aspects of society, as well as people and politics, may indeed have provided Bloy with ideas on Virginie Séchoir. The latter shows a cleverness in making Clotilde uncomfortable by encouraging her boarders to bait Clotilde but she does this subtly so that appearances are maintained. Both Gyp and Louise Read had already been models for the two characters described in Bloy's 1893 story, Deux fantômes,<sup>2</sup> and there is no reason to believe that he would not use them again. However, only Louise Read is implicated in the plot to assassinate Gacognol. Fam, in fact, expresses this idea quite strongly, "J'ai dit enfin la tentative d'assassinat moral perpétrée sur Léon Bloy et

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<sup>1</sup>"Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1938, p. 178.

<sup>2</sup>Histoires désobligeantes, pp. 229-233.

sur sa fiancée par les Coppée, et, encore une fois, par...

MLLE READ!"<sup>1</sup> While Bollery does not specifically mention Louise Read, he follows the same line of reasoning:

Il est bien entendu que le rôle assigné à la marchande de soupe et de sommeil dans le guet-apens tendu à la protégée de l'artiste ne peut être que symbolique et se rapporte vraisemblablement aux manoeuvres hostiles déployées dans l'entourage de Mlle Molbech et de Léon Bloy pour empêcher leur mariage.<sup>2</sup>

Although one might find it possible to accept the conclusion reached by these two critics, we feel that Bollery is exaggerating when he states that the underlying reason for attempting to stop the marriage is "l'intention inavouée et inavouable de satisfaire de basses rancunes et des jalousies de célibataires égoïstes ou de vierges racornies."<sup>3</sup> While it remains a fact that attempts were made to halt the marriage, the reasons were probably other than those put forth by Bollery who goes on to say,

Rétrospectivement, il tremble à la pensée de la catastrophe qu'eût été pour lui la perte de Johanne Molbech et sa plume s'alourdit singulièrement sur ceux qu'il accuse d'avoir fomenté ce désastre. Une tentative de viol, un assassinat ne lui paraissent pas exagérés pour stigmatiser des manoeuvres qui l'eussent infailliblement précipité au désespoir.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., p. 176.

<sup>2</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

This historical event may well have been transposed to the episode in La Femme pauvre as Fam and Bollery believe, but we must not lose sight of the role played by Virginie Séchoir in the novel as a literary creation.

Bloy's sources for Virginie Séchoir extend beyond his own personal experiences. Bollery tells us that:

Le personnage de Virginie Séchoir est emprunté aux souvenirs de Johanne Molbech qui, au cours de ses séjours à Paris, avant son mariage avec Léon Bloy, fut hébergée dans diverses pensions de famille pour jeunes filles étrangères. L'une de ces pensions était tenue par une demoiselle Thornly qui semble avoir fourni les traits de Virginie Séchoir.<sup>1</sup>

Since Madame Bloy influenced Bloy a great deal and since Bloy knew little about boarding houses for young ladies, it seems very likely that Madame Bloy's personal experiences and knowledge were used in the presentation of Virginie Séchoir and her establishment. Bollery moves from a discussion of Mademoiselle Thornly to the conclusion that the assassination episode is symbolic in nature and he glosses over the lack of connection between the two.

The reader can better understand Virginie Séchoir if he accepts her as a character created by Bloy's imagination to fulfil a specific literary purpose. Bloy envisages Clotilde escaping from the undesirable environment of

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, op. cit., p. 23. See also Madame Bloy's own testimony in Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1928 and Jul.-Aug., 1928.

Chapuis but he is not yet prepared to depict her in a married state. At the same time it is imperative that her reputation be protected and what better protection than a chaperone like Virginie Séchoir, a respectable spinster operating a respectable boarding house? At the same time as Bloy uses Mademoiselle Séchoir's establishment for literary purposes, he also attacks the bourgeois attitude toward respectability; hence, at least in part, the negative portrayal of Mademoiselle Séchoir, who although she has the superficial sanction of society represents a force of evil.

Virginie Séchoir thus provides a contrast to Clotilde but she is a subtle portrait of evil to balance the blatant one offered earlier by Chapuis and Madame Maréchal. Her implication in the murder plot serves to emphasize further her affiliation with evil, something merely hinted at in earlier scenes.

One other very interesting aspect of Virginie Séchoir is Bloy's choice of name. As Fam so well phrases it when referring to Louise Read:

Confite dans sa virginité, sèche comme un cordon ombilical transformé en signet et d'un abord aussi desséchant qu'était pétrifiant celui de la Méduse, Virginie Séchoir n'était pas l'Ointe des Vertus que d'aucuns se sont plu à monter en épingle, et Léon Bloy, lui, en savait quelque chose, qui avait éprouvé ses calomnies, son hypocrisie et son orgueil.

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<sup>1</sup>"Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Mar.-Apr., 1938, p. 179.

Virginie Séchoir's role in any case is that of offering Clotilde a further test of her inner, spiritual resources.

Although it would appear that Bloy did use historical models as a guide in the creation of Virginie Séchoir, the role she plays is of sufficient significance to indicate that she was created to fulfil a fictional purpose. As an evil character in La Femme pauvre, she begins her attack on Clotilde by causing her discomfiture in the boarding house and concludes with her involvement in Gacognol's murder, that is, the stripping of Clotilde's protective armour. When Virginie Séchoir passes out of the story, she leaves Clotilde more vulnerable than before. It is evident that in this instance, Bloy did not merely transpose historical characters to his novel but that he created both a role and a character to fill it.

#### The Poulots and Madame Grand

Following the tragic death of their baby son, André, Clotilde and Léopold are anxious to leave their dwelling with its unhappy memories.

Enfin, on put quitter l'endroit effroyable. . .  
Un recouvrement inespéré permit tout juste à ces orphelins de leur propre enfant de s'installer hors de Paris, dans un très humble pavillon de Parc-la-Vallière et d'y respirer en paix quelques jours.<sup>1</sup>

As is usual in his style, Bloy gives the reader clues fore-

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 235-236.

shadowing coming events. The words "quelques jours" prepare the reader for the worst.

The entire episode involving the Poulot couple and Madame Grand shows Bloy's dramatic talent. Beginning with a general description of the suburb and the type of people living there, Bloy moves on to specifics by presenting the Léopolds' immediate neighbours, Monsieur and Madame Poulot. First depicting Monsieur Poulot, and casting subtle aspersions on his character, Bloy then adds, "or, M. Poulot n'était rien, absolument rien auprès de Mme Poulot."<sup>1</sup>

Bloy succeeds very well in conveying a feeling of disgust for the woman. Yet, if we examine his description, we find that it is basically a physical one showing her exterior appearance, and some of the attributes which Bloy mocks are beyond the control of Madame Poulot. For example, he speaks of her mustache and physical shape; she is, "mal bâtie, au demeurant, carrée des épaules, privée de gorge et de taille."<sup>2</sup> It appears that Bloy is reacting against her almost completely intuitively and the reader responds in kind. The single element of importance which one must accept as a reasonable, logical reaction is the annoyance felt by Léopold in response to the innumerable visits paid by the Poulot couple. The invasion of privacy generates resentment which we are warned will eventually erupt in some form.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 247.

Clotilde "tombe elle-même dans un silence triste, comme si elle avait vu passer de sombres images."<sup>1</sup>

Just what Bloy had been hoping to accomplish in his presentation of the Poulot couple can be found in his journal where, after a visit to the Salon d'Automne in October, 1905, he wrote concerning a painting of the Poulots, as imagined by his friend, Georges Rouault:

Il a voulu faire mes Poulot (personnages de la Femme pauvre). A aucun prix je ne veux de cette illustration. Il s'agissait de faire ce qu'il y a de plus tragique: deux bourgeois, mâle et femelle, complets: candides, pacifiques, miséricordieux et sages à mettre l'écume de la peur à la bouche des chevaux des constellations. Il a fait deux assassins de petite banlieue.<sup>2</sup>

After presenting his despicable couple, Bloy moves to the next stage in the problems encountered by Clotilde and Léopold; this is a breakdown in even superficial relations between the Poulots and Clotilde and Léopold. Clotilde, more perceptive than Léopold, fears repercussions. "Ne crains-tu pas, cependant, que ces gens ne cherchent à nous nuire? Ils le peuvent, sans doute. Nous sommes si pauvres, si désarmés!... Il faut croire que le chagrin m'a ôté le peu de courage que j'avais. J'ai peur de cette femme."<sup>3</sup> It is at this point that Bloy introduces Madame Grand whose role shall be that of an accomplice of Madame Poulot as she

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>L'Invendable, Oct. 31, 1905.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 251.



torments and abuses Clotilde.

The neighbours first carry out a thorough investigation of Léopold and Clotilde's past and are thus provided with the knowledge of what might hurt them. Verbal attacks are rendered even more acute by the little scenes which the women act out for Clotilde's express benefit. Madame Poulot, holding in her arms an infant of the same age as would have been the heroine's child, speaks to it and to Madame Grand in words that serve only to torture Clotilde. "Allons! dis papa! dis maman!" "Si ça ne fait pas dresser les cheveux sur la tête de penser qu'il y en a qui les font mourir, ces chérubins!"<sup>1</sup> At first Clotilde suffers anguish alone but as the tribulations gain intensity, Léopold becomes aware of the situation. When all efforts to halt the abuse fail, we find Léopold, in desperation, praying to God that his tormentors might be silenced.

Seigneur Jésus! je Vous demande pour Votre Gloire, pour Votre Justice, pour Votre NOM, de confondre ceux qui nous outragent dans notre maison, qui nous haïssent, qui nous tuent, qui aggravent si cruellement et si injustement notre pénitence. . . . Sans phrases ni détours, je Vous demande contre ces deux femmes un châtement rigoureux qui fasse éclater Votre Nom, c'est-à-dire un châtement très manifeste qui rende visible leur péché. Je Vous demande enfin que ce châtement soit prochain. . . . Faites attention, Seigneur Jésus, que je ne Vous offre pas moins que ma vie en échange de cette justice, que je réclame avec toute la force que Votre Passion a donnée à la prière humaine!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 255, 256.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 269-270.

The results of the prayer are described as follows:

Depuis les dix-huit jours de la prière terrible, l'hostilité des voisins semblait frappée de paralysie, et Léopold attendait en paix, avec une effrayante confiance, la catastrophe.

A la suite d'on ne sut quel incendie de torchon, les deux cochonnes se brouillèrent et la vieille Grand déménagea. Quelque temps après, on la trouva morte dans sa chambre, au bout du village, les entrailles rongées par son chien, un horrible molosse vairon qui ressemblait à sa maîtresse et qui avait un museau de brochet.

--C'est le tour de l'autre, maintenant, dit tranquillement Léopold au facteur de la poste qui lui racontait la nouvelle.

Ce mot, entendu par la Poulot qui n'était jamais bien loin, fut pour elle comme le signal de toutes les disgrâces de la fortune. L'huissier, compromis dans quelque fiasco, se vit forcé de vendre le mobilier de son salon. Même les reliques les plus chères, l'armoire à glace et le canapé de Madame, qu'elle montrait avec tant d'orgueil, ainsi qu'un vétérans sa panoplie, disparurent, et le gracieux couple alla cacher dans Paris son humiliation.

Pendant une semaine, on désinfecta leur clapier.

La persécution était finie, plus que finie, car il se fit autour des Léopold une sorte de crainte vile et superstitieuse.<sup>1</sup>

In real life the Bloys had also suffered at the hands of their neighbours, a Madame Augustin and Madame Petit.<sup>2</sup> According to Pierre Arrou, the setting for the fictional events is an exact reproduction of the actual neighbourhood and the building occupied by Jeanne and Léon Bloy.<sup>3</sup> Arrou explains the physical disposition of the various apartments and how the verbal torment of Madame Bloy may have occurred.

<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, pp. 270-271.

<sup>2</sup> See Laquerrière's Biblio-iconographie de Léon Bloy.

<sup>3</sup> "Toute la description de 'Parc-la-Vallière', dans la Femme pauvre. . . s'applique exactement au Grand-Montrouge." Les Logis de Léon Bloy, p. 49.

However, even at the time that he made his study (prior to 1931), there remained little to testify to the Bloys' stay, so there is no actual corroboration of the facts Bloy presents. If we are to believe a letter Bloy addressed to Henry de Groux, the historical Madame Augustin and Madame Petit apparently met fates similar to those of their fictional counterparts.

Vous souvenez-vous de la prière de Léopold contre les deux gueuses, dans la Femme pauvre, et comment cette prière fut exaucée? Ne vous ai-je pas dit que cet épisode était absolument mon histoire? Eh bien! j'ai appris que l'une des deux scélérates, celle que je donne à manger à son chien est réellement morte, mangée par un cancer, dans l'année qui a suivi. Quant à l'autre, je n'ai assisté qu'au commencement de sa ruine et j'ignore de quelle affreuse manière elle a dû finir.<sup>1</sup>

While all accounts indicate that there were indeed historical models for these satanic neighbours, Bloy presents them and uses them in a fictional context to further his plot in La Femme pauvre. These women play a role similar to that of Madame Maréchal and reflect the evil which is pitted against Clotilde and Léopold throughout the novel. While in the earlier part of the book Clotilde suffers physical deprivations, and the distress of ambivalence towards her mother, with Mesdames Poulot and Grand, the suffering is more refined, more related to spiritual trials than merely physical ones.

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<sup>1</sup>Mon Journal, Dec. 28, 1899.

Because the suffering of Clotilde is necessary in order for her to achieve sanctity, we must recognize the importance of the literary role of these women within the fictional context of La Femme pauvre. As the final epitome of evil to which Clotilde is subjected, these characters pave the way for the conclusion to the novel.

### Characters Present at Gacougnol's Soirée

#### Folantin

The various accounts of the Huysmans-Bloy relationship<sup>1</sup> coincide on one fact: a close friendship for a number of years was later replaced by an estrangement. We can only speculate as to the exact causes for this alienation but we believe Piljs comes closest to the truth when he states: "Les causes de la brouille des deux amis sont multiples et d'ordre divers: incompatibilité de leurs caractères, par laquelle leur amitié s'use à la longue."<sup>2</sup> Bloy's bitterness about the break is revealed in his articles on Huysmans<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Baldick, The Life of J.-K. Huysmans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); Bollery, Léon Bloy, II; Piljs, La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy; Gustave Guiches, Le Banquet; Gustave Vanwelkenhuyzen, "Histoire d'une brouille littéraire," Bulletin de la Société J. K. Huysmans, Oct., 1938, pp. 95-115, reproduced with slight revisions in Vanwelkenhuyzen's Insurgés de Lettres: Paul Verlaine, Léon Bloy, J.-K. Huysmans; Fam, "Essai de Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," Cahiers Léon Bloy, May-Aug., 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> "Les Dernières colonnes de l'église," pp. 252-274, "L'incarnation de l'Adverbe," pp. 348-357, and "L'Expiation de Jocrisse," pp. 357-360 all in Oeuvres, IV; see also "Projet d'Oraison funèbre," in Histoires désobligeantes, VI, pp. 214-217.

while Huysmans avoided mention of Bloy<sup>1</sup> and "se tut, se contentant d'épancher sa rancœur dans sa correspondance privée."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the articles in which he attacked Huysmans, Bloy meted out his revenge through the portrayal of Folantin in La Femme pauvre. The selection of Folantin as the name for the fictional representation of Huysmans left no doubt as to the identity of this character since Huysmans had used the name for himself in his own novel, A vau l'eau. Furthermore, Martineau tells us that,

Les propos tenus par le personnage--et ce sont ces boutades qui surtout le rapetissent--furent tous réellement tenus par Huysmans. Si celui-ci les a trouvés mauvais, ce fut tant pis pour lui. L'auteur du roman n'a fait, en somme, que répéter ou transcrire. Il suffit, pour s'en convaincre de lire Là-Bas, Sac au dos, et surtout la curieuse page autobiographique que Huysmans a publiée dans Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui et qu'il a fait signer par son amie Anna Meunier.<sup>3</sup>

But Folantin does not accurately portray Huysmans. Bollery speaks of the "sonorités verbales qui aboutirent au portrait,

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<sup>1</sup>When Jules Huret conducted a series of interviews among leading literary figures of the day, he included Huysmans who made no mention of Bloy, a fact Bloy remembered with bitterness. See Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, pp. 403-406; Jules Huret, Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire (Paris: Charpentier, 1891); Journal I, notes pp. 367-368; Lettres de Jeunesse (Paris: Edouard-Joseph, 1920), May 15, 1891.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 37. See also Piljs' La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1959). Of special interest in this work are the numerous quotations from Huysmans' unpublished correspondence with his Dutch friend, Ary Prins.

<sup>3</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 142.

certainement outré, de Folantin,"<sup>1</sup> while Martineau states that Huysmans "est là rapetissé, démoli, réduit à rien.

. . . Les amis de Bloy sont injustes pour Huysmans, en ne voyant en lui que le médiocre Folantin du roman de Bloy."<sup>2</sup>

Because Folantin is depicted in such unflattering tones, he appears to be out of place at Gacougnol's soiréé. In an attempt to explain his presence, Bloy makes the statement that, "l'éclectisme de Gacougnol est attesté surtout par la présence de Folantin, le peintre naturaliste et préalable dont le succès, longtemps captif, se déchaîne."<sup>3</sup>

And, after a derogatory introduction to Folantin, Bloy writes:

Il pourra paraître peu croyable que l'indépendant Gacougnol reçoive chez lui un personnage si fait pour l'exaspérer. Mais le brave homme, on l'a vu, ne connaît que son bon plaisir et c'est à coup sûr dans l'espoir de quelque conflit qu'il a réuni sous le même toit des antagonismes si certains.<sup>4</sup>

But Bloy's reasons are not very convincing and we are of the opinion that he remembered many similar evenings spent in the company of Huysmans and he felt constrained to include him, if only in caricature. Bollery supports this point of view: "Son affection déçue, trahie, se traduit en violences, outrées sans doute, injustes peut-être, mais aussi paradoxal que ce puisse paraître elles sont des signes

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<sup>1</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Martineau, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 140.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

d'une tendresse qui ne veut pas mourir."<sup>1</sup>

Since the soirée is presented as an evening among friends, we must consider possible influences which may have been brought to bear on Bloy, to cause him to depict Folantin as he did. Bloy's wife, Jeanne, was most probably one of them. While she did bring a much needed discipline to Bloy's life and work, she also helped him to form his ideas and she directed his thoughts as well.

Il ne faut pas oublier que Huysmans fut un de ceux qui désapprouvaient le mariage de Léon Bloy avec Johanne Molbech. Il le manifesta en refusant brusquement d'assister à la cérémonie, après avoir accepté d'être le témoin du marié. Il s'exprima en propos désobligeants concernant le physique de Mme Bloy. "Ce roman nous occupe beaucoup tous les deux" écrivait Mme Léon Bloy, le 20 juillet 1891.<sup>2</sup>

Bollery here is merely hinting at her influence, but we feel that he has touched on a very important factor. While Jeanne Bloy supported her husband in all his ventures, she was herself a strong-willed person and it appears to us then that Folantin's portrait may well have been coloured by Madame Bloy's opinions.

In describing the negative portrayal of Folantin, Piljs writes:

Léon Bloy ne se lasse pas d'accabler Folantin de ses critiques mordantes. Tantôt c'est Apémantus qui assume le rôle d'interprète de la satire de l'auteur de La Femme pauvre,

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"  
p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

tantôt c'est Rollon Crozant, égratigné en même temps que Folantin, tantôt encore c'est Marchenoir qui le couvre de ridicule.<sup>1</sup>

While the attack on Folantin takes place almost entirely at the soirée, it is reinforced whenever his name is mentioned in the novel. Thus, when Bloy speaks of Léopold's conversion, he does not miss the occasion to deride Huysmans.

Léopold n'était pas de l'école des Rares qui découvrent tout à coup le catholicisme dans un vitrail ou dans un neume du plain-chant, et qui vont, comme Folantin se "documenter" à la Trappe sur l'esthétique de la prière et le galbe du renoncement. Il ne disait pas, à l'instar de cet imbécile, qu'un service funèbre a plus de grandeur qu'une messe nuptiale, persuadé, jusqu'au plus intime de sa raison, que toutes les formes de la Liturgie sont également saintes et redoutables.<sup>2</sup>

Although Bloy attacked Huysmans in his writings on a number of occasions, it is through Lazare Druide in La Femme pauvre that he relentlessly makes fun of Huysmans and reveals himself to be a virtuoso of satire.<sup>3</sup> In the narrative concerning the death of Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France (i.e. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam), Druide is not merely a mouthpiece for Bloy but actually portrays him, while Folantin, of course, represents Huysmans. Piljs discusses the episode as it was

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<sup>1</sup>Piljs, La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup>Piljs, op. cit., p. 13.



reputed to have occurred and from the information available he draws the conclusion that the account in La Femme pauvre has been distorted and exaggerated as a result of the rupture in the friendship between Huysmans and Bloy. "L'abîme est devenu infranchissable. Il ne faut pas s'étonner que l'auteur de La Femme pauvre, transposant les événements dramatiques de 1889 dans une oeuvre d'art, les ait interprétés librement."<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that Folantin is attacked in La Femme pauvre but Bloy also reveals an ambivalent attitude towards his former friend. Although portrayed with many flaws, Folantin is nonetheless within the inner circle of friends and he is there by invitation. La Femme pauvre is not primarily a polemical work and Bloy's harsh words seem to be an outgrowth of disappointment rather than mere pettiness. As might a cartoonist, Bloy has taken Huysmans' existing characteristics and caricatured him so that while there is an undeniable resemblance to the model, there is also the clear handiwork of the artist. Thus it is that Folantin reflects the person of Huysmans and Bloy's literary talent as well. Folantin's role in the novel is of little consequence. He serves primarily to add depth to Gacognol's entourage and in that way to enrich the background of the story. At the same time, Bloy is able to express his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

frustrations with the deterioration of what had, to him, been a meaningful friendship.

### Lazare Druide

The year 1890 marks a turning point in Bloy's life; it was in May of that year that he married Jeanne Molbech and it was after his marriage that he broke with many of his friends, even those of such long standing as Georges Landry whom Bloy had known for over thirty years. Rouzet writes,

Il ne faut pas perdre aussi de vue qu'il y a deux périodes dans la vie de Léon Bloy:  
Bloy célibataire et Bloy marié.  
Avant et après.  
. . . Il y a donc les amis d'ayant . . .  
Il y a enfin les amis d'après.<sup>1</sup>

The Belgian painter, Henry De Groux belongs to the second category. Their friendship appears to date back to September, 1890, when Bloy published "Le Cabanon de Prométhée" in La Plume.<sup>2</sup> De Groux was so impressed with the article that he made his way to the Plume's office to meet the author.<sup>3</sup> Bollery also places their meeting in the offices of La Plume but a year later than the publication of

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<sup>1</sup>Georges Rouzet, Dans l'ombre de Léon Bloy (Liège: Ed. L'Horizon Nouveau, 1941), pp. 40-41.

<sup>2</sup>"Le Cabanon de Prométhée" appears in Belluaires et Porchers, II, pp. 186-196. For publication date, see also Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 323.

<sup>3</sup>Emile Baumann, La vie terrible d'Henry de Groux (Paris: Editions Grasset, 1936), p. 70.

the article in question, that is in 1891.<sup>1</sup> By October, 1891, Bloy and de Groux were engaged in what was to become a voluminous correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

De Groux was in constant contact with Bloy precisely during the time that the latter was working on La Femme pauvre, so it is natural that Bloy should wish to incorporate his friend into his novel. However, Henry de Groux and his fictional counterpart, Lazare Druides, had played no role in the original plan of the novel; Bloy, it appears, chose to introduce Druides into the scene at Gacougnol's, a simple technique which permitted him to include the painter in the book without entailing any particular modifications. However, although Lazare Druides is not involved in the main plot, he does frequently reappear so that the reader is reminded of his steadfast friendship with the principal characters. At the soirée he is presented as "un peintre . . . mais jusqu'à ce jour peu célèbre et . . . différent de Folantin."<sup>3</sup> And further Bloy writes:

La physionomie de l'homme, très jeune encore, est tumultuaire autant que ses oeuvres. Jamais un artiste n'a pu porter plus que lui son art sur chacun des traits de son visage. On y peut lire l'enthousiasme continu, perpétuel, un enthousiasme comme il n'y en a plus; la générosité

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<sup>1</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>See Correspondence Léon Bloy et Henry de Groux (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1947). This collection is unfortunately incomplete but it nonetheless gives a clear indication of the nature of the friendship between the two men. It is supplemented by Bollery's biography and by Bloy's own journal.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 145.

merveilleuse, le zèle dévorant pour la Beauté où s'appareille à ses yeux la sainte Justice; l'intuition d'éclair sur les somptuosités de la Douleur; une indignation de fleuve contre la sottise qui lui fait obstacle; et tout cela en capitales hautes comme des tours.<sup>1</sup>

While *Druide* does not alter the course of events, he is present on a number of significant occasions in the lives of Clotilde and Léopold. Their son is named after him;<sup>2</sup> in real life, Henry de Groux was asked to be godfather<sup>3</sup> to Bloy's second child, a son, André. Although André died as an infant, de Groux felt a sense of obligation to the Bloy family and this particular episode in the novel is a tribute to the artist. When the child dies in the novel, the only ones to mourn his death are Clotilde, Léopold and Marchenoir, (both manifestations of Bloy), and *Druide*. In effect this reduces the historical models present at that time to Jeanne and Léon Bloy and their friend de Groux, thereby indicating the close relationship existing between Bloy and Henry de Groux.<sup>4</sup> *Druide* fulfils the function of messenger when he

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 216.

<sup>3</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> The story of the friendship between Bloy and de Groux is indeed a strange one. In Jun., 1900, their relationship was severed as a result of de Groux's peculiar behaviour. For a discussion of this episode, see Baumann, La vie terrible d'Henry de Groux, pp. 158-163; Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, pp. 312-316; Quatre Ans de Captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne, Jul. 1, 1900 and notes. A reconciliation between the two men took place in Oct., 1916. Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 393; La Porte des Humbles, Oct., 1916.

brings news of Marchenoir's death. It is on this occasion that Bloy in one phrase states Druides's financial position, "Druide . . . gémissait dans les mêmes griffes que Léopold."<sup>1</sup> This puts a halt to any unanswered questions the reader might have about financial help from those quarters. It is also Druides who narrates the account of Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France's death, in that instance actually serving as Bloy's mouthpiece and reflecting some of Bloy's own characteristics and ideas.

At the end of the book, Druides remains for Clotilde, "le seul témoin de son passé qui la voie encore quelquefois. C'est l'unique lien qu'elle n'ait pas rompu."<sup>2</sup> The friendship of Druides is clearly defined in the novel, first at the soirée, then in the intimate family circle with the birth and death of André, still later as a friend conveying news and finally as the only friend of the widow Clotilde. But although his name recurs, he is not an integral part of the story. It would, therefore, appear that there is some truth in Martineau's statement that Bloy included Druides in the novel for the sole purpose of praising his historical model, Henry de Groux.<sup>3</sup>

We must observe, however, that while Druides is based on a historical person, his role in La Femme pauvre is

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>3</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 134-135.

purely a fictional one from his first appearance at Gacognol's soirée. *Druide*, like *Leverdier* in Le Désespéré, reflects an ideal friend who has no outside responsibilities. It must be noted that de Groux married in February, 1893, and that his daughter Elisabeth was born the following year, yet Bloy persists in depicting a friend without family obligations. This suggests that Bloy is presenting a character drawn, at least in part, from his imagination, and that he is manipulating the role, minor though it is, to show *Druide* in the best possible light. We believe that this is done not only as a credit to Henry de Groux but because Bloy is giving free rein to his creative imagination and through *Druide* he is showing another facet of friendship as he sees it.

#### Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France

When Bloy depicts *Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France*, he is presenting us with a very fine portrait of his friend *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam*.<sup>1</sup> Bollery calls it "le portrait le plus beau et le plus exact qui ait jamais été brossé du créateur de l'Eve future. Il est là, tout entier, vivant, avec sa grandeur, son génie et ses tics, son aristocratie et ses travers."<sup>2</sup> Martineau, in greater detail, writes:

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<sup>1</sup>Villiers de l'Isle-Adam is revealed in the following texts: Alan William Raitt, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1965); Bollery, Léon Bloy, II; Albert Béguin, Léon Bloy, mystique de la douleur with the unpublished correspondence of Bloy and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.

<sup>2</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 39.

Le portrait de Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France est un chef-d'oeuvre. L'auteur de Tribulat Bonhomet est là vivant, avec tout son charme et tous ses tics. On voit ses gestes, sa tournure noble, touchante et fantastique, son oeil bleu, sa mèche blonde indisciplinée. On entend sa voix sans timbre, les vers de Baudelaire gémissant dans l'ombre et les doigts maigres tombant sur les touches du piano pauvre.

Quand Léon Bloy fait improviser Villiers, le conte qu'il imagine est absolument digne d'être signé Villiers. On est à la lecture enchanté et dérouter, en plein rêve.

Léon Bloy a souvent parlé de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et toujours avec bonheur. De toutes les pages écrites à propos de son ami, celles de la Soirée chez Gacougnol sont les plus belles.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy and Villiers had their differences as revealed in the Lettres aux Montchal and finally Bloy wrote to his friend in Geneva: "Je suis à peu près brouillé avec Villiers."<sup>2</sup> But Bloy attributed much of Villiers' peculiar behaviour to his state of mind: "Je sais bien que Villiers est un désorbité, un détraqué, qu'il faut lui pardonner plus qu'à bien d'autres."<sup>3</sup> And later, Bloy wrote:

Je t'ai écrit avec amertume sur Villiers. C'était excessif. Villiers n'est ni un égoïste, ni même un tiède ami, c'est tout simplement un détraqué. Je l'ai revu plusieurs fois. Il ne comprend même pas qu'il ait pu me faire de la peine. Il faut prendre les gens tels qu'ils sont et ne pas leur demander ce qu'ils sont incapables de donner.<sup>4</sup>

Even when Villiers on his deathbed refused to see Bloy, the latter preferred to blame Huysmans rather than Villiers for this behaviour. Since Bloy's attitude to Villiers remained

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<sup>1</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 144-145.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Oct. 18, 1888.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Mar. 17, 1888.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1888.

sympathetic, in spite of the estrangement between them, it is understandable that the portrait of Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France reflects his feelings. The bitterness found in the section devoted to Folantin is noticeably absent from the description of Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France.

There were many similarities between Léon Bloy and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and it is probably for this reason that they became friends. Raitt presents a portrait of a rather charming individual who captivated the minds and hearts of his friends. But Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who enjoyed sharing his various works orally, found it difficult to discipline himself sufficiently to commit his thoughts to paper. Thus, while he gained the admiration of a close circle of friends, the promise of a great literary career never materialized. Because Bloy also found writing a long, laborious process, he probably understood that aspect of Villiers quite well and may indeed have come under the latter's spell. Both men seem to have lacked practicality and to have had a haphazard attitude towards financial matters and, since Bloy appears to have despised a careful budgeting of money, it is possible that this trait in Villiers also appealed to him.

Villiers returned Bloy's friendship for some time and in turn shared the latter's joys and tribulations. It was Villiers' son Totor who provided an outlet for Bloy's paternal inclinations during his bachelor years and who also served as the model for the fictional son we read about in



Le Désespéré.<sup>1</sup> Villiers understood some of Bloy's problems and, even though their relations were already quite strained at the time, he took his defence in a letter to Huysmans dated December 23, 1888.<sup>2</sup>

The person of Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France seems accurately to reflect Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. His role in the novel is of no consequence for the development of the central theme and story and as a result, there was no need to alter his personality or character for any literary reasons. It appears that Bohémond de l'Isle-de-France is included in La Femme pauvre, as Martineau has stated, for the sole purpose of receiving praise.<sup>3</sup>

### Klatz

The old engraver Klatz who makes his appearance at the soirée is, according to several accounts, based on the colourful figure of Ludwig Wihl.<sup>4</sup> By a comparison of the historical model and the fictional counterpart, we are led to the conclusion that Léon Bloy's portrait is authentic and that in this instance he is merely transposing reality to the pages of fiction.

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, notes, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 134-135.

<sup>4</sup>For a brief account of his life see: Gaëtan Presque, "Le Vieux graveur Klatz," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Sept.-Oct., 1928 and René Martineau, "Un personnage de La Femme pauvre," in Types et Prototypes (Paris: Messein, 1931), pp. 81-94.

Information about Ludwig Wihl reveals that he was an eccentric and undoubtedly conspicuously different from others. However, the very qualities which rendered him odd helped to create local colour and variety in the scene which Bloy depicts for us. He was dirty, dishevelled and generally of unkempt appearance but nonetheless highly intelligent. He counted among his friends the great German poet Heinrich Heine and Barbey d'Aurevilly and certainly must have been of interest to Bloy. "La présence de Ludwig Wihl, parmi la plupart des invités de Gacougnol est certainement anachronique. Cependant, il n'était pas déplacé chez Zacharie Astruc qui le connaissait et dessina son portrait."<sup>1</sup> The presence of Klatz reveals that Bloy was not a proponent of conformity but that he believed a man should be accepted if he had something to offer, not just if he conformed to certain preconceived standards. Since Klatz is a personage of negligible importance in the novel, his omission would certainly have gone unnoticed, but it does appear that Bloy has taken a historical character and used him to provide colour. In Martineau's words: "Il est évident que Bloy ne l'a placé dans son roman que pour le pittoresque dégagé par cette figure rembranesque, digne de son pinceau, certain aussi que personne autre que lui-même ne serait tenté de se

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"  
p. 35.

l'approprier."<sup>1</sup>

Rollon Crozant

After introducing the soirée Bloy writes, "Le prétexte avoué de ce groupement insolite, de cet invraisemblable synode machiné par le protecteur de Clotilde, était l'exhibition de Rollon Crozant, musicien brucolaque, fameux depuis, mais, à cette époque, besogneux encore d'être inventé."<sup>2</sup> Rollon Crozant was a name transparent to Bloy's contemporaries<sup>3</sup> who recognized in this fictional character the poet-musicien, Maurice Rollinat.<sup>4</sup>

The somewhat critical presentation of Crozant makes it appear that Bloy had forgotten the kindnesses of Rollinat<sup>5</sup> but in Bloy's own peculiar way, this brief mention is a testimony of bygone friendship. Furthermore, "le

<sup>1</sup> Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," pp. 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 18-19, pp. 252-253.

<sup>5</sup> Rollinat had offered Bloy the sanctuary of his mother's country home at precisely the time when Bloy was depressed following Anne-Marie's committal to a mental institution. Later he gave him financial help. Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 176-178, pp. 16-25. For an interesting account of Bloy's stay at Bel-Air, see Edmond Haraucourt's Mémoires des Jours et des Gens (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1946). Haraucourt tells of saving Bloy from drowning, an event Bloy recalls in the dedication of a copy of his Mon Journal to Haraucourt. "Souvenir d'un bain dans la Creuse où, sans lui, j'aurais pu mourir, il y a vingt-deux ans. Qualis artifex!" L'Invendable, Jul. 8, 1904.

portrait de Rollon Crozant n'est pas une critique littéraire, mais une fiction romanesque."<sup>1</sup> Rollon Crozant resembles his historical model by the fact that he is a talented entertainer. As a fictional character, he provides, not only for Gacougnol, but for Bloy as well, the excuse to bring together such a large number of individuals; he also satirizes Folantin and he launches the evening's discussion.

Unlike some of the other minor characters, Rollon Crozant has a role which goes beyond that of petty criticism or the praise allotted to a friend. While he plays no part in the larger plan of the novel, he does have a significant role in the soirée which in turn is an important episode in Clotilde's life and the novel as a whole. Bloy drew on his personal knowledge and experience in attempting to find a pretext for the gathering at Gacougnol's home. However, when he decided to use Rollon Crozant, he created a fictional character whose primary literary function is to act as a catalyst at Gacougnol's soirée and thereby indirectly affect the entire novel. Rollon Crozant, like his historical model, is a talented entertainer and is, therefore, included at Gacougnol's soirée.

### Zéphyrin Delumière

Zéphyrin Delumière is, by all accounts, based on the

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre,"  
p. 41.

historical person of Joséphin Péladan.<sup>1</sup> Péladan, who was called "Sâr" and nicknamed Mage, came to Paris around 1881 and began moving in the same literary circles as Bloy.<sup>2</sup> As early as August, 1883, when their relations were still amicable, Bloy's correspondence with Péladan already reveals underlying humour generated in him by Péladan.<sup>3</sup> Martineau suggests that Péladan had hoped to follow in the footsteps of the great dandy, Barbey d'Aurevilly.<sup>4</sup> Instead, he achieved ridicule which most people tolerated because, "Péladan . . . savait beaucoup et [sa] conversation était souvent attrayante."<sup>5</sup>

In 1891, however, when Bloy was in Denmark, Péladan's pomposity made him take exception to a joke played on him by the Chat Noir which published the following on March 21, 1891:

Secrétaire de la rédaction  
 Joséphin PELADAN (sâr)  
 derrière éprouvé.<sup>6</sup>

Although others had received the same treatment, Péladan felt

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," pp. 34-35; Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 134, 136-138; Piljs, La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy, pp. 47-48.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 58-59.

<sup>4</sup>Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," p. 137.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 410.

particularly insulted. He accused the editor, Rodolphe Salis, of slander and the newspapers of the day took up the case with great gusto. The episode continued with more persons becoming involved in the polemic until eventually even Bloy, from his isolation in Denmark, entered the fray. "Léon Bloy ne fut peut-être pas fâché de ce que, à défaut de ses 'amis', ses ennemis lui donnassent l'occasion de se rappeler au souvenir du public français."<sup>1</sup> The end result was a court case which greeted Bloy upon his return to Paris. Fortunately, Bloy had the legal services of the Russian Prince Alexander Ourousof and the latter was successful in defending Bloy. The case was dismissed and Péladan required to pay all expenses.<sup>2</sup> Because of the successful outcome, Bloy seems to have been able to look back on the 1891 court case with a smile. However, he was not one to forget and the portrayal of the ridiculous Zéphyrin Delumière in La Femme pauvre is entirely at Péladan's expense.

We are first introduced to him on the morning that Clotilde goes to Gacougnol's home to pose for him. The two men are talking when she arrives and from the first words addressed to Delumière we sense the condescension with which Gacougnol treats him. After criticizing Delumière's artistic ideas and telling him that he has nothing new to offer,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 419. See also our thesis, p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, pp. 410-453. Bollery traces in detail the events leading up to the court case.

Gacougnol plainly states: "Ta conversation est aussi ravissante que nutritive, mais j'en ai assez pour quelque temps. Tu viendras me voir, quand je n'aurai rien à faire . . . Là! c'est bien, prends ton chapeau et bonsoir à tes poules."<sup>1</sup> After Delumière's departure, Gacougnol erupts into raucous laughter because, "le caricaturiste, qui ne sommeille jamais longtemps chez cet excellent Gacougnol, venait d'être atteint en pleine poitrine par le ridicule tout-puissant que dégage, vingt-quatre heures par jour, la personnalité de Delumière."<sup>2</sup> Delumière is further shown at a disadvantage by the poignant contrast between him and Clotilde. His affected ways offer a perfect foil for a heroine who is depicted as a young woman with great dignity and bearing while he is made even more ridiculous by the difference between them. He reappears at Gacougnol's party and in Ballery's words, "Zéphyrin Delumière-Joséphin Péladan apparaît dans les premières pages du livre parmi les relations de Gacougnol: il était naturel qu'il prit place au nombre de ses invités."<sup>3</sup> Bloy explains his presence in spite of the earlier treatment accorded him by Gacougnol. "Zéphyrin Delumière n'est pas exclus (sic). Ce mystagogue sans courroux a très certainement oublié l'accueil disgracieux de Pélopidas raconté plus haut. La mémoire des

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 35.

mages est inapte à retenir ce qui n'est pas occulte."<sup>1</sup> If the description of Zéphyrin had not already done so, the use of the word mage would certainly remind Bloy's reader of Péladan, making the satire quite obvious.

According to Martineau's account, there is justification for the portrait of Péladan:

Il faut avouer qu'à l'heure où se passe la scène en question, Péladan dépassait le but qu'il s'était proposé d'atteindre, avec l'excentricité de ses costumes et la préciosité de son langage.

La description de l'habillement ridicule, depuis les bottes en peau de daim jusqu'au bonnet persan, est rigoureusement exacte.<sup>2</sup>

Péladan's role in the novel is of a very minor nature: he is briefly a foil for Clotilde, a source of amusement to Gacougnol and the reader, a colourful figure at the soirée, but in a completely different way from the local colour of Klatz or Apémantus. In all probability, Bloy's principal reason for including him was to ridicule him but in so doing, he also brought a touch of humour to an otherwise serious work. This humour is somewhat akin to certain scenes found in Shakespeare's tragedies where the incongruity creates humour and briefly lightens an otherwise sombre work. Though this was probably not their original intention, Péladan's appearances certainly fulfil this

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 136-137.



literary function.

Other minor characters in "La Femme pauvre"

Hercule Joly

Hercule Joly, a most sympathetic character in La Femme pauvre, had for a historical model Alcide Guérin.<sup>1</sup> An examination of the events leading to the creation of Hercule Joly provides revealing information. Bloy included Alcide Guérin at the latter's request but at the time the request was made, Bloy was already in the final stages of writing his novel. On January 12, 1897, Bloy had reached the 15th chapter of Part II and by March 2nd he had completed the book.<sup>2</sup> Hercule Joly first appears in the 17th chapter of Part II, that is, in the final month of the novel's completion. The circumstances surrounding this last minute addition are found in the author's unpublished journal from which Bollery draws the following information:

Quant à Hercule Joly, ce fut sur la demande de son modèle qu'il figure aux derniers chapitres de La Femme pauvre. Le 24 janvier 1897, Léon Bloy notait dans son journal:

"Guérin vient dîner. Je lui lis les derniers chapitres de La Femme pauvre. Occasion nouvelle de constater

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 274; Bollery, "Hercule Joly," Cahiers Léon Bloy, Jul.-Aug., 1932; Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre", p. 46; Carton, Un Héraut de Dieu: Léon Bloy, p. 67; Piljs, La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy, pp. 13-15; Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre", pp. 146-168. Martineau includes an account of Guérin's life both before and after his acquaintance with Bloy. Some details were made available by Guérin's nephew, Paul Avisseau.

<sup>2</sup>See Mon Journal.

la pauvre intelligence de ce malheureux qui avoue un extrême désir d'être fourré dans mon livre. Je le ferai peut-être."

Et deux jours après, le 25 janvier, on peut lire dans le même éphéméride: "Guérin m'avait demandé dimanche de le fourrer dans mon livre. C'est fait."<sup>1</sup>

Since Guérin was indeed one of the only friends to visit the Bloys for a time, it is easy to understand Bloy's willingness to comply with his wishes in spite of the difficulties arising from the fact that his novel was nearing completion.

This belated addition explains why Hercule Joly's role is quite independent of the general plot. He is brought into the lives of Léopold and Clotilde to help them overcome the problem of persecution at the hands of Mesdames Poulot and Grand and he belongs only to that episode. To weave him into the main story would have entailed major alterations and Bloy understandably would have been reluctant to do so. Hercule Joly thus plays a minor role which bears remarkable similarities to Leverdier's role in Le Désespéré. Both men are presented as the closest of friends to the heroes yet they do not affect the development of the respective plots; neither of the two men appears to have any family commitments or responsibilities; both try to help the protagonists but fail in their efforts. Leverdier also serves as a connecting link between segments of the first novel but because of his belated arrival, Hercule Joly's role does not include this function. Joly is pleased to be

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<sup>1</sup>Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 46.

of service to Léopold and he shares the hospitality offered to him by Léopold and Clotilde just as Leverdier had joined Marchenoir and Véronique on occasion.

The marked similarity between Joly and Leverdier can be attributed, we believe, to the fact that Bloy's model was more than Alcide Guérin. Guérin may have been the inspiration for Joly, but as in the case of Leverdier, the model was Bloy's imagined, ideal friend and it is for this reason that the qualities and characteristics which we find in Joly are the same ones we saw earlier in Leverdier; devotion, generosity, honesty and true friendship. We may, therefore, say that these two characters are two manifestations of Bloy's ideal of a friend. While Hercule Joly is primarily Bloy's tribute to Alcide Guérin, this fictional character also reveals to us Bloy's view of friendship at the time he was completing his novel and a comparison of Leverdier and Joly shows that Bloy's concept of an ideal friend remained fairly static over the years.<sup>1</sup>

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The foregoing study of the characters in Bloy's

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<sup>1</sup>In his journal Bloy comments on a curious coincidence regarding Hercule Joly: "Particularité surprenante et qui tient du surnaturel, Mme Martineau a un oncle du nom d'Hercule Joly--comme le Tourangeau fictif de la Femme pauvre--et la configuration physique de mon personnage est exactement celle de cet authentique enfant de la Touraine. J'ai connu et détesté des oculistes qui auraient trouvé cela très-simple et qui auraient eu raison peut-être. Moi je demeure confondu et mon étonnement augmente chaque fois que j'y pense." Quatre ans de Captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne, Apr. 25, 1901.

novels has revealed that Bloy created from his imagination as well as drawing from historical models. He sometimes idealized, expressing in written form his dreams and hopes. His characters reveal an evolution in Bloy himself--from the sombre Marchenoir to the luminous Clotilde, from the bitter presentation of Beauvivier to the caricature of Delumière. The portrayals in the two novels differ and reflect the change in Bloy's outlook on life. His people are essentially human in their traits and reactions but in the second novel they are also frequently used as symbols to give physical substance to such abstractions as evil and goodness. In conclusion, it appears to us that despite the shortcomings to be found in Bloy's fictional characters, they are nevertheless excellent vehicles for conveying some of the writer's deepest thoughts.

## PART II

### CHAPTER VI

#### LE DESEPERE

##### Weaknesses in Le Désespéré

In this section we shall be pointing out the criticisms which can be directed against Bloy's technique from the traditional absolutist point of view. These criticisms will be used as a means of bringing to light certain characteristics of Bloy's novels. It should be kept in mind, however, that the criticisms we shall be discussing are merely provisional; that is, Bloy's novels would seem to be deficient if judged according to certain traditional or classical principles but we must reserve our final judgment until we have considered Bloy's prophetic tendencies.

It is generally accepted that "every work of literature has both a fictional and a thematic aspect,"<sup>1</sup> the first having to do with the narrative or story in the work and the second with the principal thought or idea being conveyed through the work. The fictional aspect is closely tied to plot, which is the plan of action of a story, while the use of the term theme or thematic aspect relates, in our work, to the question, "What is the point of this story?"; that is, what is the author, in this case Bloy, trying to say?

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1957), p. 53.

As we shall see, Le Désespéré, with its many flaws, fails to exploit the full potential of either of these aspects, and therein lies its essential weakness.

### The Fictional Aspect of "Le Désespéré"

In order to evaluate the degree of success achieved by Bloy in the narrative of Le Désespéré, it is first necessary to determine what comprises the central story. This task presents a problem for "the novel hovers between the biography of Marchenoir and the story of Marchenoir and Véronique."<sup>1</sup>

The author appears to have begun with a male protagonist, Cain Marchenoir, and to have written what approximates to a biography of the man. Bloy portrays Marchenoir's entire life span but he neither concentrates on a specifically stated period of time, with attention being given to minute detail, nor does he follow the life of the subject through its various stages, giving some measure of detail to all aspects. Marchenoir must vie for the reader's attention with a number of subjects dear to Bloy's heart. As a result, Bloy fails to develop thoroughly Marchenoir's background and through it to reveal more aspects of the protagonist's personality. Nor does he systematically deal with the events in Marchenoir's life to show the development of his character and the influence played by his experiences in the formation

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 160.

of his personality. The novel thus presents an incomplete story of Marchenoir. It also has too much variety to be treated as a work dealing with only one area of Marchenoir's life. We may thus say that despite the fact that the book treats the protagonist's youth, albeit briefly, and includes his death, it cannot be considered Marchenoir's story.

The study of Marchenoir and Véronique which may be regarded as the central episode, stands out alone in direct contrast to everything else the book offers. In fact,

Had Bloy been content to use as the basic material of his book only the history of his relations with Anne-Marie Roulé, ending with her removal to the lunatic asylum, he might have written an entirely successful novel; he would in any case have achieved the unity, the absence of which is so disastrous for the novel that he did write.<sup>1</sup>

Because Véronique appears only at a relatively late stage in the novel, the reader is led to believe that her role will be a minor one. But, upon further reading, it becomes evident that the Marchenoir-Véronique relationship is quite significant since the entire story pivots on it. While Marchenoir does have problems with the literary and social milieu, it is the emotional and financial burdens imposed on him by Véronique which are the deciding factors in his destruction--everything else is of secondary importance. Nonetheless, this episode frequently recedes into the background while another subject briefly claims the reader's

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," pp. 160-161.

attention. It appears that Bloy could not decide where to lay the emphasis in his work. The fictional narrative and the plot, or plan of action, are closely related but in order to formulate a plot, the writer should have a clearly defined story. As Bloy wrote it, Le Désespéré does not have such a story nor, consequently, a properly defined plot. For purposes of discussion, we shall, therefore, consider both the Marchenoir-Véronique relationship and Marchenoir's life as the fictional element or story in Le Désespéré.

The Role of Digressions in the Fictional Aspect of "Le Désespéré"

In examining the so-called digressions, we shall attempt to determine their functions within the framework of Le Désespéré and the extent to which they do belong in the novel.

Diatribes--Attacks on Contemporaries

The most striking digressions are Bloy's diatribes against his contemporaries, remembered primarily because of their verbal violence. Early in the novel, (in the second chapter), Bloy attacks first Alexis Dulaurier (Paul Bourget) and immediately following Dr. Chérubin des Bois (Albert Robin). In passing, he also manages to make derogatory references to both Coquelin Cadet and Georges Ohnet, without even troubling to disguise their names.<sup>1</sup> The criticism

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 39.



levied at the latter two, who play no role whatsoever in the novel, is completely extraneous, and included merely at the author's whim. Dulaurier and des Bois on the other hand are legitimate targets of criticism since their reactions to Marchenoir's request for money do influence his life and, consequently, the novel. However, Bloy's attack is overwhelming in its intensity and out of proportion to their behaviour. Bloy evidently was simply using this opportunity to strike out at the historical models.

Bloy again indulges himself in Part IV. As messenger to Marchenoir, Alcide Lerat's role in the novel has some importance but what is said of Lerat (Nicolardot) while apparently based on facts, might very well have been omitted since it is merely a personal attack.

The events leading up to the famous dinner scene and the dinner party itself<sup>1</sup> are devoted almost exclusively to attacks on contemporary writers. Le Désespéré has, in fact, been dismissed as a roman à clef because of that scene. In defence of Bloy, it must be stated that the events of the dinner party do alter the course of Marchenoir's life and Bloy did, therefore, have reason to include it. Bloy's mistake lies in the fact that he did not properly integrate that scene into the novel. Linked only tenuously to the narrative, it exists to permit Bloy to vent his spleen and to

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, Chapters 55, 56, 58, 59, and 60.

obtain revenge for slights real or imagined which he had received from these men. The scene appears to have been contrived. Piljs, in fact, writes:

Le lecteur devine aisément comment l'auteur du Désespéré s'est arrangé pour nous peindre les images caricaturales des convives au banquet organisé au domicile du rédacteur du Pilate. En une quarantaine de pages Léon Bloy a brossé une vingtaine de portraits satiriques fort chargés, aux traits vifs, âpres et farouches, des coryphées de la presse et de la littérature.<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis Bloy places on the criticism of the dinner guests unfortunately detracts from another function of the scene, the explanation for Marchenoir's further alienation from the literary world. This is the role of the dinner party in the narrative and it is underplayed. Bloy also fails to show adequately the weaknesses of those whom he attacks; he offers no proof but merely gives a statement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> La Satire littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> The following examples illustrate the line of attack taken by Bloy.

"Quant à Léonidas Rieupeyroux [Léon Cladel], c'est un personnage vraiment divin, celui-là, capable de restituer le goût de la vie aux plus atrabilaires disciples de Schopenhauer. Il est grotesque comme on est poète, quand on se nomme Eschyle. Il a la Folie de la Croix du Grotesque. Méridional, autant qu'on peut l'être en enfer, doué d'un accent à faire venir le diable, il rissole, du matin au soir, dans une vanité capable d'incendier le fond d'un puits," (p. 240).

"Pour ce qui est de Vaudoré [Maupassant], c'est le plus heureux des hommes. Tout ce que la médiocrité de l'esprit, la parfaite absence du coeur et l'absolu scepticisme, peuvent donner de félicité à un mortel lui fut octroyé," (p. 243).

"Octave Lorient [Albert Delpit] n'est, en effet, qu'un imbécile. Les analyses de la critique la plus attentive n'ont pu dégager un autre élément de la pulpe cérébrale de ce romancier pour dames. Il cuisine loyalement son petit navet au macaroni," (pp. 247-248).

". . . Valérien Denizot [Aurelien Scholl], l'officier

Had Bloy developed this aspect, the reader might have recognized the demonic imagery which shows the guests as cannibals feasting on the misery of another human being, Marchenoir. By using only verbal attacks, Bloy fails to underscore the reason for his point of view and appears to be succumbing to a petty urge to insult. If Bloy intended the scene to serve the purpose we have indicated, then it appears irrelevant that the characters presented in it are based on historical persons. Bloy's personal weakness, which led him to attack some of his enemies, has adversely affected this portion of his work as he has neither thoroughly integrated the dinner party into the narrative nor fully developed its significance either as an isolated unit or within the context of the novel.

### Chartreuse

The section dealing with Marchenoir's sojourn in the monastery serves to provide the reader with insight into Marchenoir's inner struggle by revealing the depth of the feeling he experiences and the suffering which results from his emotional turmoil. We see not only the anguish, but the cause for it, both in the straight narrative as well as in the talks between Marchenoir and his confessor. It is of

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à monocle de la cavalerie légère du journalisme. Sacré homme de lettres par Dumas fils, le grand archonte, et vraisemblablement né pour autre chose. Denizot est le plus universel raté de son siècle. Raté de la poésie, raté du roman, raté du théâtre, raté de la politique, raté même de l'amour, ayant été cocufié à Lesbos, --ce qui est un cocuage sans espérance," (p. 248).

particular importance that Bloy convey to the reader the significance of Marchenoir's love for Véronique in the novel since the entire Marchenoir-Véronique story revolves around this ill-fated relationship. If Bloy failed to convince the reader of this passion, the rest of the book would be totally unrealistic and difficult to accept. But most of this section, in fact "one fifth of [the novel] is devoted to the Grande Chartreuse, its history and its geography, and the meaning of the life that is lived within it."<sup>1</sup> While these facts may in themselves be interesting, they bear no relation to the story of Marchenoir and Véronique and could easily have been left out without adversely affecting the novel. In fact, omitting those pages dealing only with the Chartreuse, which are in themselves suitable for an essay or an article,<sup>2</sup> and concentrating instead on Marchenoir's emotions and thoughts would have enhanced the unity of the novel.

#### Symbolism of history

In Chapters 34 and 35, devoted to the symbolism of history, Bloy presents his ideas on this subject by attributing them to Marchenoir but otherwise they bear no

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> "Après son séjour à la Grande Chartreuse, Bloy avait écrit sur ce monastère un article qui ne fut pas publié et qu'il utilise ici." Le Désespéré, p. 332.

relationship whatsoever to the novel. They are a unit in themselves and, like the pages on the Chartreuse, are suitable for presentation in an essay rather than in a novel.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 35 was, in fact, published as a separate article in May, 1886, in the Revue de Genève<sup>2</sup> but Bloy nevertheless also included it in his novel.

### Le Carcan

In one last effort to achieve literary success, Marchenoir embarks on a publishing venture producing a periodical he calls Le Carcan. Pages originally intended for Bloy's own defunct Le Pal, on which Le Carcan is modelled, are incorporated into the novel under the title L'Hermaphrodite prussien Albert Wolff.<sup>3</sup> To this article Bloy added Le Pêché irrémissible, also structured as if it were an essay for a periodical.<sup>4</sup> Both of these are entities in themselves and stand isolated from the novel to which they are artificially linked by attributing them to the pen of

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," Aug., 1953, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Le Désespéré, notes, p. 333; Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, bibliography, p. 321.

<sup>3</sup> "En fait cet article devait paraître dans le cinquième numéro du Pal, qui ne put être publié." Le Désespéré, p. 339. Albert Wolff, a naturalized Frenchman, of German origin, first went to Paris as a newspaper correspondent. He settled there in 1857 and for a time was secretary to Dumas père. In 1891, he was named drama critic of the Figaro. Wolff wrote many plays, alone, as well as in collaboration with others.

<sup>4</sup> "Cet article n'a pas paru dans le Pal, mais le départ en semble pris dans un article du numéro 3: 'La République des Vaincus.'" Le Désespéré, p. 339.

Marchenoir. Since this episode in Le Désespéré serves to reinforce Marchenoir's apparent inability to succeed at any undertaking, it does play a role in the novel. It was not necessary, however, to include the substance of these articles in order to convey Marchenoir's failure, but Bloy apparently succumbed to the urge to address himself directly to the reader. Consequently, the articles appear in their entirety and since these passages are rather lengthy, they detract from the narrative.

### Poverty

Because Marchenoir is depicted as living in a state of poverty, Bloy might have made a connection between the hero of Le Désespéré and the ideas which he expresses in Part V, chapter 68. Instead, these pages, which appear to be a prelude to later works dealing with the theme of poverty and the significance of money,<sup>1</sup> are isolated from

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<sup>1</sup> Bloy's preoccupation with this theme is indicated by its frequent occurrence in his work. In Le Sang du Pauvre, IX, p. 92, Bloy wrote, "La Pauvreté groupe les hommes, la Misère les isole, parce que la pauvreté est de Jésus, la misère du Saint-Esprit. La Pauvreté est le Relatif, -- privation du superflu. La Misère est l'Absolu, --privation du nécessaire." See also L'Invendable, Jan. 6, 1906. "Les Fanfares de la Charité" appeared in Le Gil Blas in Dec., 1888, was later published in Belluaires et Porchers (1905) where Bloy added in a footnote, "J'ai développé cette idée, -- combien vainement! -- dans le Salut par les Juifs, le seul de mes livres que j'oserais présenter à Dieu." II, p. 372. Le Salut par les Juifs appeared in 1892 and Le Sang du Pauvre in 1909. See Oeuvres, IX.

the fictional narrative. Bloy has once more neglected to take advantage of an important passage. By not making it a logical outgrowth of his story, it seems to intrude in the novel rather than to support and emphasize the fictional aspect as it might so easily have done.

What the preceding examination of certain so-called digressive sections of Le Désespéré shows is that they appear to intrude in the fictional narrative primarily because Bloy failed to exploit their potential. He did not fully integrate the passages into the story so that they would reinforce the fictional aspect. It appears that Bloy himself has weakened his novel, for the narrative of Le Désespéré would seem to suffer from unnecessary interruptions.

#### The Thematic Aspect of "Le Désespéré"

Just as the fictional narrative in Le Désespéré is not clear-cut, so also is the thematic aspect of the novel difficult to determine because there appears to be no single, dominating, unifying thought in the novel. It is possible, nevertheless, to draw some conclusions about what the author wished to convey and to isolate a number of ideas from the book.

What stands out clearly in Le Désespéré is the religious orientation of the work. Both Marchenoir and Véronique are portrayed as ardent Christians and it is their devotion to God which stimulates much of the action in the book. Their concern with spiritual matters is stressed by

the author and is shown in a sympathetic light so that Bloy's ideas are implicitly conveyed to the reader. Their way of life, in which prayer, communion with God, and attendance at high mass are important, is viewed with approval. Such institutions as the Grande Chartreuse are presented as retreats and as places in which those with a religious vocation may devote their lives to serving God. Coupled with the ideas which are implicit in Le Désespéré are the passages in which Bloy explicitly attacks the Roman Catholic church and clergy, as well as those who claim to be Christians. He also discusses such religious concepts as suffering, chance, free will, liberty and the communion of saints. Because that which is implicit in the novel corresponds so closely with what is explicitly communicated to the reader, it is impossible to mistake Bloy's position with relation to the subjects presented in Le Désespéré but, in most instances, no connection is drawn between the numerous ideas presented in Le Désespéré.

This absence of a single uniting theme adversely affects the story because the fictional aspect and the theme are inter-dependent in literary creations such as novels. On the other hand, the fact that the narrative is not clearly delineated in Le Désespéré hinders the presentation of ideas, and subsequently, any theme which may exist. Bloy's failure to structure carefully his fictional narrative and to determine his theme, created for him complications which he was unable to overcome in his work.



As a result, the novel has significant weaknesses which cannot be ignored, but as we shall see, Bloy also achieved some successes in Le Désespéré.

#### Relative Success

While Le Désespéré contains flaws as a novel, it also reveals Bloy's talent as a writer. We find that he makes excellent use of a number of literary techniques. For example, he uses shock to good effect to capture the reader's attention; he offers variety in form by using, not only narrative, but also the epistle and dialogue. Bloy's most distinctive characteristic as a writer is probably his vocabulary which is fully displayed in Le Désespéré. In our evaluation of the success Bloy is able to achieve in his first novel, we shall examine his characterization of Marchenoir, and the conclusion to the work, as well as discussing the aspects of Le Désespéré which we mentioned above.

Bloy opens the novel by plunging the reader into conflicting emotions with the blunt statement: "Quand vous recevrez cette lettre, mon cher ami, j'aurai achevé de tuer mon père."<sup>1</sup> An open admission of patricide on the part of the protagonist stimulates our interest while at the same time shocking us because this action is deemed unacceptable in our society. In this instance, Bloy's use of shock is

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 29.

primarily a literary technique to claim the reader's attention rather than a mere desire to scandalize.<sup>1</sup>

This same technique is repeated several times in the novel but Bloy uses it sparingly so that it does not lose its effect. Véronique boldly states, "Monsieur Marchenoir, j'ai envie de vous et je vous désire, voulez-vous coucher avec moi?"<sup>2</sup> Since at the time she makes her approach to Marchenoir we have just been told that Véronique has been a prostitute for ten years, her statement is not out of character. Nevertheless, it is unexpected in a work with a religious orientation and it comes as a surprise to the reader who was earlier informed that Véronique spends eighteen hours a day in prayer and that while she lives with Marchenoir, she is not his mistress. It appears that Véronique's shameless request is not included in order to jolt the reader but rather to stress the extent of the change that comes over her after her association with Marchenoir, which in turn leads to her conversion.

Véronique's mutilation, to which we have already made reference, is a further example of an incident which shocks. Whether it is based on fact or fiction is irrelevant.

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<sup>1</sup>"Among the manifold aims of Léon Bloy is always to be found the desire to scandalize, so that it is not always easy to distinguish, in the expression of his thought, between what is intended to shock and what corresponds to his inner conviction. Usually, however, the two things coincide admirably." Beaumont, "La Femme pauvre and Feminine Mythology," in Studies in French Literature, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 80.

Atrocities and acts of violence are generally considered to be aberrations rather than constituting normal behaviour and are looked upon with distaste. Nothing in what Bloy has already said about Véronique prepares us for her extreme action. Marchenoir's letter to Véronique foreshadows an event of great importance but no knowledge of Véronique's own personality or character suggests that she might undertake her self-mutilation. Even if the reader did expect something of a violent nature, these events are foreign to most persons and would consequently shock.

Bloy also elicits surprise by his own specialized vocabulary which draws its words from all areas of life. He creates unusual combinations of words associated with insults, with pity, with condescension, words considered improper, as well, of course, as using words which are generally considered noble. In his article on Albert Wolff, it is the combinations of words which convey to the reader the utter contempt with which he regards his subject. Since the phrases are distinctively his own, they are unusual and the reader cannot anticipate what Bloy will choose to say. As a result, each insult is totally unexpected. The following examples illustrate this clearly:

En réalité, ce vomitif gredin est surtout lépreux. Il porte sur sa figure, --où tant de claques retentirent, -- la purulence infinie d'une âme récoltée pour lui dans l'égout, et il tient beaucoup plus de la charogne que du monstre.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 299.

Avec la ténacité d'acarus de sa double race, il se cramponna au bitume, essuyant les crachats et l'ordure dont l'inondait le passant stupéfait de son impudence, voulant, quand même, s'imposer à Paris, qu'un atome de fierté lui eût conseillé de fuir.<sup>1</sup>

Pourtant, s'il nous venait une seule minute d'énergie et de généreuse révolte contre l'effroyable vermine qui nous dévore, il me semble qu'on la devrait employer, cette bienheureuse minute, à l'expulsion immédiate de ce Prussien de malheur, qui nous empoisonne, qui nous souille, qui nous conchie à son plaisir; qui ose se permettre de nous moraliser et de nous juger; --comme si ce n'était pas assez de la rage d'avoir été vaincu et piétiné par un million d'hommes et qu'il nous fallût encore avaler la suprême honte d'être opprimé, par cette vieille SALOPE, sans esprit, ni coeur, ni sexe, ni conscience, plus pestilentielle, en sa personne, que les<sup>2</sup> croupissants détritrus de tout un peuple en putréfaction!

It is evident that Bloy chooses words which conjure unpleasant, ugly, even revolting images in the mind of his reader by appealing to his senses, particularly the sense of smell and of touch.

The distinctive vocabulary used by Bloy sometimes serves to shock and surprise the reader but it always serves to place his stamp of individuality on what he writes. In Thought and Style in the Works of Léon Bloy, Sister Mary Rosalie Brady categorizes the various types of words used by Bloy. We find for example that he uses a "catholic vocabulary." "One meets terms that are biblical, liturgical, dogmatical and moral."<sup>3</sup> Brady also speaks of his "vocabulary of Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>3</sup>Brady, p. 151. For a further discussion of Bloy's style, see Lotte Kaupp, Versuch über den Stil Léon Bloy's (Guebwiller: Ed. Alsatia, 1937), thesis, University of Zurich. "Les pages de M. R. Brady sur le style bloyen ne

Pessimism,"<sup>1</sup> and includes a discussion of Bloy's use of naturalistic vocabulary, medical terms, mixture of catholic and naturalistic terms. In one chapter devoted to Bloy's "Naturalistic-Impressionistic Style," Brady writes, "Bloy's style, bordering on the flamboyant, is particularly abundant in adjectival use."<sup>2</sup> At times, his accumulation of adjectives is reminiscent of Rabelais. We read for example: "polluée dès son enfance, putréfiée à dix ans, vendue par sa mère à quinze," "ces chartreux, si austères, si suppliciés, si torturés," "ses vieilles illusions archidécrépites, crevassées, poussiéreuses, grelottantes, mais cramponnées encore et inarrachables," "le repentir les avait effacées, raturées, grattées, anéanties," "abattu, roulé, dilacéré, dévoré dans le même instant."<sup>3</sup> It is evident that through

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sont qu'un complément naturel de l'étude de L. Kaupp. La première tire ses exemples surtout de La Femme pauvre, la seconde du Désespéré. Comme L. Kaupp, M. R. Brady fait une étude consciencieuse du vocabulaire, d'après une règle donnée par B. lui-même: 'Voici une règle à peu près infallible: recherchez dans un écrivain, bon ou mauvais, le mot habituel, le mot préféré, celui qui revient le plus souvent et quand on aura trouvé ce mot, il est probable qu'on apercevra le fond de son âme'." Giovanni Dotoli, Situation des Etudes Bloyennes (Paris: Nizet, 1970), pp. 183-184.

<sup>1</sup> Here she includes such ideas and concepts as discouragement, solitude, sacrifice, death, pain, sadness, poverty and destitution.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Le Désespéré, pp. 78, 99, 105, 107, 284. Marie Sloot has also commented on the fact that Bloy's style at times resembles that of Rabelais and Zola. See Jos. J. Gielen, "Léon Bloy aux Pays-Bas," in Revue de littérature comparée, Jan., 1939, p. 131. One might here see a resemblance to the vituperative style of Céline, a more recent figure in French literature. The two writers, it appears, shared not only a

his choice of vocabulary, Bloy achieves a striking effect which must be counted among his successes.

After showing his ability to present the unusual by referring to patricide in his opening paragraph, Bloy continues his novel using different literary forms: the first eight chapters alone provide straightforward narrative, the use of the epistle, and conversation. All of these forms are used repeatedly throughout the novel, thereby giving the book diversity, as well as helping to maintain the reader's interest. The narrative is provided by both the omniscient narrator and by Marchenoir who sometimes uses the third person verb form. This distinction provides further variety. Coupled with the technique of using several literary forms is the shift in verb form from third to first person. Early in Le Désespéré, Bloy permits the omniscient narrator to recede into the background and Marchenoir to speak briefly for himself. The first person verb form recurs in the various letters, as well as in the article on Albert Wolff. Both the accounts in the first and third person are biased in Marchenoir's favour but they differ in that the passages written in the first person have a certain vividness while those in the third person exude the omniscience of the narrator. Bloy has evidently understood the advantages of the

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similarity in verbal expression, but in some of their personal experiences which included disappointments. Céline's works have, like Bloy's, been considered to have prophetic aspects.

different forms and is making the best use of them in an attempt to give vitality to his work.

While characterization is more or less absent from Le Désespéré,<sup>1</sup> Marchenoir's personality emerges without any conflicting elements, perhaps because he is the only fictional characterization of Bloy in that novel. Since we have already devoted a section to Marchenoir, we shall, at this point, merely emphasize that Marchenoir represents one of Bloy's successes in Le Désespéré for Bloy achieved a unity of character in his protagonist. We may say, in fact, that in Marchenoir, he successfully fused fiction and biography. Since Marchenoir is the hero of the novel, this achievement takes on particular importance for it minimizes some of the novel's other weaknesses.

The novel is brought to a satisfactory conclusion as Bloy neatly ties up loose ends: Leverdier is sent to the country, Véronique to a mental institution and Marchenoir dies after a motor vehicle accident. There is no suggestion of deus ex machina since each of these incidents is well integrated into the work. While Bloy has at times properly been accused of exaggerating, in the conclusion, he exhibits his ability to describe factually. As we mentioned earlier, his account of Véronique's mental deterioration bears a close resemblance to clinical descriptions of schizophrenia. It

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<sup>1</sup>  
"Léon Bloy, the Artist," The Dublin Review, Aug., 1953, p. 161.

is to Bloy's credit that without professional training, he was able to observe and then to write what is considered by experts to be an accurate account.<sup>1</sup> The narrative of Véronique's eventual incarceration, the logical outcome of her mental illness, has a poignancy which can be attributed only in part to the fact that Bloy is relating a personal experience. He maintains the same mood as he vividly portrays Marchenoir's gradual isolation, which has no historical basis. Though the description of Marchenoir's final lonely hours of agony deals with fiction and not fact, Bloy achieves a pathos which overcomes any feelings the reader may have that Marchenoir has been the instrument of his own downfall. Bloy has essentially written a successful conclusion to a novel containing many flaws.

Quite evidently Bloy knew that the introduction and conclusion to a work are of particular importance and he successfully achieved these in Le Désespéré. He also appears to have mastered such technical aspects as effective literary form and his own talent for vivid vocabulary and catchy phrases has stood him in good stead. Obviously, the weaknesses in Le Désespéré do not stem from minor technical flaws but rather from the fact that it does not conform to what is generally expected of a literary work: it is lacking in both a fictional narrative and a central theme.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gelma, "La Schizophrénie d'Anne-Marie Roulé."

<sup>2</sup> The title, Le Désespéré, does not appear to us to be thematic but rather an indication of the mood of the entire work which is sombre and gloomy and from which despair emanates.



## CHAPTER VII

### FROM "LE DESEPERE" TO "LA FEMME PAUVRE"

During the ten years which lapsed between the publication of Bloy's first novel and the realization of La Femme pauvre, a number of events left their mark on Bloy and consequently on the second novel. As we follow the development of La Femme pauvre from its original concept, we shall mention the significant events which altered Bloy's creative life.

Shortly after Le Désespéré appeared on January 15, 1887, Bloy wrote to his friend Madame Henriette L'Huillier:

Il me restera ceci, qui me suffirait bien si je pouvais vivre, d'avoir profondément remué certaines âmes, d'avoir conquis une situation littéraire vraiment formidable et d'être assuré de la plus anxieuse curiosité au lancement de mon prochain livre que j'ai le projet de réaliser sans aucune attaque de personnes. C'est une gourme que j'avais besoin de jeter et que je ne reprendrai plus, du moins dans un roman. J'ai un sujet magnifique dont la pensée m'affole déjà! C'est une étude--dont les points de vue seraient bien extraordinaires, je vous assure, --sur la femme et l'infériorité temporaire, provisoire de son rôle dans ce monde en chute, mais promis au "renouvellement" par l'Amour. C'est bien autre chose que Le Désespéré.<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks later, he revealed more details about this projected novel in letters addressed to his publisher Quantin on February 24, 1887, and almost verbatim to his friend

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Feb. 6, 1887.

Georges Khnopff on March 14, 1887.<sup>1</sup> These lengthy letters clearly show that Bloy has an idea for a novel and is eager to pursue work on it, if he could be assured of financial support. However, Bloy's slow progress reveals that his usual financial straits made it impossible for him to work steadily on the second novel. Because Bollery's "Le projet initial: La Désespérée," the first section of his Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," traces the beginnings of the novel, we shall but briefly summarize specific dates and occurrences which permit us to follow Bloy's evolving thoughts on his new work.

The idea for the new novel developed before Le Désespéré was even completed and Bloy was obviously influenced at its inception by Berthe Dumont. A constant source of help and encouragement, she became the first model for Clotilde Maréchal.<sup>2</sup> With her death in May, 1886, Bloy's life changed but the new subject appears to have been on his mind as he sought material for his book. A letter to Montchal in June, 1887, reveals this:

Décidément, je n'ai pas de chance, puisque je n'étais pas à l'Opéra-Comique l'autre soir.  
 Cette catastrophe dont je déplore amèrement de n'avoir pas été victime m'a suggéré une idée surprenante pour

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix B for the text of the letters.

<sup>2</sup>Martineau, Léon Bloy et "La Femme pauvre," pp. 103-111. See also our section on Clotilde Maréchal, pp. 100-123.

mon prochain livre. Mais combien il eût été profitable pour la suggestion complète d'avoir été un peu calciné!

Il me faudra donc accomplir un tour de force de restitution pour donner l'intégrale sensation de cette grandissime horreur. Je ne désespère pas d'y parvenir.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy's literary career came to a brief standstill after the appearance of Le Désespéré before surging forward with a steady volume of publication, but because financial remuneration was still less than satisfactory, Bloy continued to struggle with this problem. Then, in April, 1889, his friend and protector, Barbey d'Aurevilly, died;<sup>2</sup> fortunately, only a few months later Bloy met Jeanne Molbech who was to become his wife. Bloy soon shared his ideas for the new novel with her in a letter which appears in Lettres à sa fiancée. Most of the plan coincides almost word for word with that Bloy had earlier given first to Quantin and later to Khnopff. Bloy adds, however, "Après le Désespéré, la Prostituée. J'aurai ainsi donné à ma manière d'artiste et d'après ma vision d'exégète, les deux faces cruellement symboliques de la vérité du drame divin," and further he reiterates the words found in the letter to Khnopff, "Je brûle de dire enfin un peu de vérité profonde au milieu de tant de mensonges littéraires et de dramatiques rengaines."<sup>3</sup>

Bloy's marriage to Jeanne Molbech took place on

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<sup>1</sup> Lettres aux Montchal, Jun. 1, 1887.

<sup>2</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 311. Apr. 23, 1889.

<sup>3</sup> Lettres à sa fiancée, Nov. 27, 1889.

May 27, 1890.<sup>1</sup> Her interest in Bloy's work is revealed in a letter written only a few weeks later, on July 20, 1890. Speaking of La Femme pauvre, Madame Bloy wrote, "ce roman nous occupe beaucoup tous les deux."<sup>2</sup> Jeanne's influence was especially felt after Bloy and his wife moved to Denmark in 1891, away from Bloy's friends and the distractions Paris offered. In the four years following the publication of Le Désespéré, Bloy appears to have formulated only the basic plan for his second novel and while there are indications that the novel must have been on his mind,<sup>3</sup> it seems that actual work on the text took place only after his arrival in Denmark in February, 1891.<sup>4</sup> The principal contribution of Bloy's marriage to La Femme pauvre was the concept of a new model for Clotilde in Jeanne. Bloy did not discard the original plan but modified it to accommodate his wife and the new experiences he had come to know. This modification is already reflected in the choice of title which became La Femme pauvre as early as June, 1891.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jeanne heralded the coming of a new group of friends and a new way of life. It was around the time of his marriage that Bloy broke with his relationships with most of his friends, including those of long standing such as Georges Landry whom Bloy had known for over thirty years.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>We have already mentioned his interest in the fire at the opera as a possible episode. Bloy also played with his title before settling on his final choice. Bollery, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 16. Bloy had previously considered La Désespérée and La Prostituée.

The move to Denmark proved to be a new experience in the life of a man who was very insular and loathe to leave his native country. Although on several occasions Bloy had made plans to travel abroad, none came to fruition.<sup>1</sup> We find that later in his life Bloy stayed in France when his family travelled to Rome, visiting many holy places on the journey.<sup>2</sup> Even his move to Denmark was occasioned only because Bloy hoped that in the vicinity of his wife's family he would find a refuge from financial and other problems, but he was unhappy away from Paris and the family soon returned to France<sup>3</sup> bringing with them their first child, Véronique, born in Denmark.

The famous 1891 court case between Joséphin Péladan and Bloy, in which the Russian Prince Ourousof successfully defended Bloy, greeted Bloy immediately upon his return from Denmark.<sup>4</sup> The reaction to the case is described by Bollery in the following manner:

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, pp. 356, 357, 361, 365, 367; II, p. 393. Bloy made tentative plans with a French-Canadian, de Puyjalon, to travel to Canada and he later wanted to carry out a speaking tour in Russia. There was also question of a speaking tour in Belgium but Bloy refused on the grounds that the payment was too small. See Léon Bloy et ses amis belges, Rouzet, pp. 141 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres intimes à sa femme et à ses filles (Paris: Ed. Marcel Astruc, 1952), show Bloy's great tenderness and affection for his family, thus revealing a very different Bloy from the man who wrote so violently. Even his loneliness, brought about by separation from his family, did not induce Bloy to travel with them to places for which he had great interest and respect.

<sup>3</sup>In Sept., 1891.

<sup>4</sup>See our discussion, pp. 179 ff.

Le retentissement de l'affaire fut immense. Tous les journaux de Paris, de province et même de l'étranger en parlèrent pendant plusieurs jours. Facilement alimentée par les extravagances péladanes, la verve des chroniqueurs remplit des colonnes avec la déconfiture de ce pauvre mage qui succombait malgré sa puissance occulte. D'autre part on était en pleine alliance franco-russe et la nationalité de l'avocat triomphant ajoutait à ce procès littéraire un piment politique et diplomatique flairé par tous les reporters en quête d'actualité.<sup>1</sup>

For a time the manuscript of La Femme pauvre was abandoned, then briefly resumed on March 16, 1893.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, Bloy had achieved success with the short stories published in the Gil Blas. These appeared as anthologies entitled Sueur de sang and Histoires désobligeantes in 1893 and 1894 respectively. In 1895, Bloy had the idea of using his personal journal for publication.<sup>3</sup> Since it was "une oeuvre toute faite,"<sup>4</sup> he saw immediate potential in it but he found that it required much work. "Difficulté grande. Il faut paraître me livrer au public et cependant garder soigneusement notre intimité."<sup>5</sup> Bloy, nonetheless, made excellent progress and eventually looked on Le Mendiant Ingrat not only as a hoped-for success but as a source of publicity for La Femme pauvre which he expected would be published after the

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<sup>1</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, II, p. 453.

<sup>2</sup>Bollery, Genèse et composition de "La Femme pauvre," p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 198 and Journal, I, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 199.

<sup>5</sup>Journal, I, Introduction, p. 9.

journal.<sup>1</sup> As it happened, La Femme pauvre preceded Le Mendiant Ingrat by eleven months.<sup>2</sup> Bloy worked steadily on the novel from June, 1896, until it reached completion March 2, 1897.<sup>3</sup> Since the two works were written over the same period of time, they complement one another; the journal, in particular, throws light on some of the episodes described in La Femme pauvre which were inspired by historical events.

One section of Bollery's biography entitled, "L'Année Terrible (1895),"<sup>4</sup> tells of the illness which struck the Bloy family and which was compounded by the deaths of two infant sons, André on January 26, 1895, and Pierre on December 10, 1895. The poverty in which Bloy lived served to accentuate the tragedy of these deaths.

There can be no doubt that Bloy was greatly affected by the events occurring in his personal life during the years between the publication of Le Désespéré and La Femme pauvre. It was in these years, 1887-1897, that he married, became a father, lost two children, published a number of works, made and lost friends, travelled abroad, and was involved in a well-publicized lawsuit. It was also during this time that he began to exhibit stability in his life and in spite of the many problems with which he had been faced, he had a productive life, probably as a result of his wife's influence.

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<sup>1</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 224, in a letter from Bloy to Henry de Groux dated Jun. 21, 1896.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 262, 277. Le Mendiant Ingrat was published in Apr., 1898 and La Femme pauvre on May 15, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> Mon Journal, Jun. 12, 1896 and Mar. 2, 1897.

<sup>4</sup> Bollery, Léon Bloy, III, p. 152 ff.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LA FEMME PAUVRE

#### Weaknesses

La Femme pauvre reveals to the reader the narrative or fictional element in a much more straightforward manner than Le Désespéré. This in itself constitutes a major improvement over the earlier novel. Bloy chooses to portray a segment of Clotilde's life in which significant events occur, events which will permanently alter her way of life. He begins when she is thirty years of age and closes eighteen years later when her life has taken on a completely new aspect. There can be no doubt that Clotilde is the central character in La Femme pauvre or that the story revolves around her: other characters come and go but she remains the heroine.

The thematic and fictional elements in La Femme pauvre are closely related and each reinforces the other in the work. The story of Clotilde's life can be seen as representing a journey:

Of all fictions, the marvellous journey is the one formula that is never exhausted . . . Poetry in this mode is an agent of catholicity . . . Its typical episodic theme is perhaps best described as the theme of the boundary of consciousness, the sense of the poetic mind as passing from one world to another, or as simultaneously aware of both. . . . The poem of vision, conventionally dated on a May morning, contrasts the worlds of experience and dream. The poem of revelation through female or divine grace contrasts



the old dispensation with the vita nuova.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout La Femme pauvre, Bloy stresses the contrast between the "worlds of experience and dream"; on the one hand are Clotilde's experiences as seen on a human level, while on the other hand is the spiritual world of which Clotilde is given only brief glimpses until the very end of the story. At this time, it is not our intention to discuss the fictional and thematic aspects of the novel at length, but rather to point out that in La Femme pauvre, unlike the earlier novel, these elements are clearly defined and because they are integrated with one another, they provide the novel with a solid framework.

Nonetheless, La Femme pauvre has a number of weaknesses. Lory even writes the following:

On peut faire à la Femme Pauvre les mêmes reproches qu'au Désespéré, et même en les aggravant, car Clotilde n'a pas toujours l'unité de Marchenoir. Quant aux autres personnages, l'auteur les emploie suivant ses besoins et les fait mourir quand ils l'embarrassent. Une fois de plus, ce n'est pas composé. Il y a tant de passages hors-d'oeuvre, qu'on se demande où est l'essentiel. L'essentiel est dans l'âme de Léon Bloy. Il n'y a pas unité d'action ni même unité d'intérêt, mais unité d'âme.<sup>2</sup>

The standards used to evaluate La Femme pauvre determine to what extent one agrees with the preceding statement. One cannot deny that the novel contains digressive passages, or

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<sup>1</sup> Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> Marie-Joseph Lory, Léon Bloy et son époque, pp. 111-112.

that characterization is not fully developed yet, as we have already pointed out and as we shall further discuss, the novel shows remarkable changes from Le Désespéré. Our concern, for the present, is the weaknesses which do exist.

An examination of the form and structure of La Femme pauvre shows unmistakable signs that Bloy gave these technical aspects some consideration. In Beaumont's words:

The form of La Femme pauvre does show that the author was conscious of the need for structure and proportion and in that as in other respects it is vastly superior to the earlier effort. The work consists of two somewhat unequal parts, the more important later part being considerably shorter than the earlier section, but at least an attempt has been made to control the diffusiveness wherein Le Désespéré ran to its ruin. The main structural defect is the insufficient integration of the two parts. . . . It is evident that Bloy intended the two parts of his second novel to stand in contrast, as their respective titles indicate, L'Epave des Ténèbres and L'Epave de la Lumière. No doubt it was necessary in order to obtain the full effect of the ultimate resplendence of his heroine for the writer to give solidity to her initial environment, but in actual fact the ténèbres are prolonged throughout the greater part of the whole novel and Mme Poulot and Mme Grand are but more diabolical counterparts of Chapuis and Mme Maréchal.<sup>1</sup>

The events occurring in the two parts of the novel are separated by a time period of five years which Bloy makes little effort to span. It appears that he sees the two parts as distinct entities, representing different and separate periods of Clotilde's life. Even a cursory examination of Bloy's work indicates that Bloy was incapable of producing a literary creation of sustained length. His work attests

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," Aug., 1953, pp. 165-166.

to the fact that he succeeded much better where brevity was used: his journals with daily entries, short stories, essays and meditations. Unity in these was more easily achieved. In La Femme pauvre, however, we must recognize the lack of total integration of the two portions of the novel. While acknowledging this flaw, Lory nevertheless writes, "Le roman se compose de deux parties distinctes, difficiles à relier, mais qu'importe!"<sup>1</sup> There is some truth to Lory's statement since Bloy's concern in La Femme pauvre is thematic rather than fictional and the smooth flow of the narrative is, therefore, secondary in importance. But while the message in La Femme pauvre is its principal merit, and is successfully conveyed to the reader, the structural flaw in the work exists and cannot be denied.

Because it has a theme, La Femme pauvre also has a sense of direction which prevents an excessive number of detours or digressive passages. These do, however, exist but, in our opinion, not to the extent that the above quotation from Lory would lead us to believe. In fact, Bloy contrives to include certain passages. Thus, when Clotilde comes under Gacougnol's care, "son âme s'ouvre aux plus belles choses: prétexte à développements splendides sur La Salette, sur les animaux, créatures de Dieu, sur le Moyen Age, sur Byzance."<sup>2</sup> However, the digressions which

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<sup>1</sup> Lory, Léon Bloy et son époque, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

appear in the later novel generally have a more direct bearing on the main subject than those we encountered in Le Désespéré. In La Femme pauvre, Bloy is dealing with the Christian's search for sanctity and Christian way of life as he sees it. This means that the Christian must make a conscientious effort to achieve and to maintain a close relationship to God, an effort which includes diligent prayer, attendance at mass and confession. The Christian must also be prepared to suffer for his faith. Bloy discusses in the novel basic concepts relating to the church as well as his own interpretation of religious places, events, and times. These, though apparently unrelated to each other, are all in keeping with the main subject.

Of a different nature is the digression found in Part I, chapter XX which Bloy introduces in the following manner:

Une parenthèse est ici nécessaire. Les bonnes gens qui n'aiment pas la digression ou qui regardent l'Infini comme un hors-d'oeuvre sont dévotement suppliées de ne pas lire ce chapitre qui ne modifiera rien ni personne et qui sera probablement regardé comme la chose la plus vaine qu'on pût écrire.<sup>1</sup>

Since this chapter contains almost verbatim a portion of the text in which Bloy first outlined his proposed novel<sup>2</sup> and since he here calls it a digression, it becomes evident that "the central concept of his novel, so clearly expressed in

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<sup>1</sup> La Femme pauvre, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 206 ff. and Appendix B.

the various letters written by Bloy between 1887 and 1889, has obviously been modified."<sup>1</sup> What was to have been the core of his book instead merely constitutes a short chapter in La Femme pauvre. It is true that throughout the novel is reflected Bloy's conception of the destiny of woman; Beaumont's article clearly substantiates the validity of this interpretation, but was this Bloy's single-minded purpose in writing the novel? Although La Femme pauvre provides a source of information for Bloy's views on woman, "it is only in the light of Bloy's ideas, to be gleaned elsewhere in his work, that we can fully comprehend the striking conception of woman's destiny that he tried to embody in his second and last novel."<sup>2</sup> The fact that Bloy himself viewed this chapter as a digression indicates that he was not specifically dealing with the concept of woman's destiny and that this is not the central thought in the work. What La Femme pauvre reveals on this matter is merely implicit in the novel and therefore provides one source of information about his position rather than alone illustrating his definitive views. We believe that Bloy's second novel has a theme and message self-contained in the book which can be understood without reference to the author's other works. Furthermore, this message is of universal interest and has a wider application than his position on the destiny of woman.

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont, "La Femme pauvre and Feminine Mythology," p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 29. See also p. 44. We refer the reader to Beaumont's article for a discussion of this subject.

The passage in question provides us with a better understanding of Bloy's thoughts and is, therefore, useful but it is indeed a digression insofar as the central story and theme of La Femme pauvre are concerned.

Léopold's lengthy confession is further evidence of Bloy's tendency to digress. This character does offer proof of God's forgiving nature and his confession provides the reason for his particular need of God's mercy but it is far longer than necessary to fulfil this function. Since Léopold is not a fully developed or fully satisfactory fictional character, and since the events he narrates are in the past, it seems that Bloy devotes too much space to this episode.

In addition to the weaknesses in form and structure and to the digressions, there is one other significant flaw in La Femme pauvre: characterization is not successfully achieved. As in Le Désespéré, Bloy has incorporated too many characters: "a greater economy would have achieved a more satisfactory result."<sup>1</sup> Although the numerous minor characters are better developed than those in Le Désespéré, they nonetheless do not evolve fully since their appearances are few and generally brief. Bloy gave himself little time to delve into the personalities of his characters and consequently has left us with only superficial views of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," Aug., 1953, p. 165.

His apparently casual dismissal of so many of his characters almost places them in the category of useful tools rather than showing them with personalities of their own. They are used as a means to an end instead of participating in the narrative as human beings.

As for the male protagonists, Beaumont summarizes the problem posed there:

The change of principal male protagonist between Part I and Part II is disconcerting. Gacougnol is conveniently killed in order to provide a conclusion to the former, but he has been a character too dominant to dispose of so abruptly, and Léopold, who replaces him, has enjoyed in the earlier section too minor a rôle. Marchenoir is in any case de trop. There is such little distinction between him and Léopold that he should have been completely merged with the latter. Having narrated his distressing death at the end of Le Désespéré, the author should have allowed Marchenoir to remain buried.<sup>1</sup>

The use of so many leading male characters automatically limited Bloy's opportunities for a full development of any one of them; as a result, none achieves full characterization. As in the case of the minor personages, Bloy appears to be using them to suit his purposes without particular concern for their personalities. Each plays his role before being summarily dismissed. Had Bloy been concerned with a smooth-flowing narrative, he should have merged at least Léopold and Marchenoir, as Beaumont suggests, and possibly even Gacougnol into one character; however, he did not.

Of all the characters in La Femme pauvre, Clotilde

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<sup>1</sup>"Léon Bloy, the Artist," p. 165.

illustrates most clearly the weak characterization in the novel. As the central personage, she appears in the greatest detail yet nonetheless lacks some of the humanity that would truly bring her to life. This probably results in part from the fact that she personifies Bloy's ideal of womanhood rather than portraying a mere human being, fictional or historical. She also represents Everyman, and therefore embodies characteristics of a human nature rather than traits associated with a specific individual. However, because Bloy drew on several historical models as well as on his imagination and because he did not trouble to integrate the differing aspects of these diverse models, Clotilde does not have the unity of character seen in Le Désespéré's Marchenoir. In Clotilde, we see evidence that Bloy has gone beyond the portrayal of historical fact and instead has created an idealized person as his heroine.

From the minor characters in La Femme pauvre to Clotilde, we find that characterization has not been satisfactorily achieved. This can be explained by the fact that characters in the novel symbolize abstract qualities rather than merely embodying human traits, but in a fictional work, one generally expects a more sophisticated degree of characterization than what is found in La Femme pauvre.

Even a brief analysis of La Femme pauvre reveals that it has fewer weaknesses than its predecessor. The flaws which exist, lack of integration between the first and second



parts of the novel, digressions, and sketchy characterization quite definitely interfere with the fictional narrative. However, since it is the thematic aspect which is dominant in the novel and not the fictional, these flaws are of less significance than they might otherwise have been. Nonetheless, insofar as the fictional story is concerned and La Femme pauvre in general, we must recognize the existence of these weaknesses in Bloy's later novel.

#### Evident Evolution of Bloy as a Novelist

An examination of Bloy's novels appearing in 1887 and 1897 provides evidence that during the intervening years an evolution must have occurred in the writer as a novelist. His creative development can be seen in terms of what we shall call the literary and the thematic aspects of his work; both of these must be considered when we attempt to determine what changes are reflected in and through the novels. In the first category, we shall consider such factors as the fictional narrative and the more technical aspects of the plan, structure and general composition of the novel. The second deals with the overall theme and message contained in the works.

#### The Literary Aspect

The action of the traditional novel, like the classical play, usually rises to a climax, then ends after the ensuing dénouement which may be brief or in some cases even non-

existent. In Le Désespéré, however, because of the lack of unity which results from the absence of a single central story, such a climax is noticeably absent. A schematic outline of the action of the book reveals this at a glance for it shows the wave-like line obtained when one draws a diagrammatic representation of the numerous episodes, each with a climax of sorts; there is no single climax for the novel as a whole.

As we mentioned above, the central story is a sort of hybrid of the biography of Marchenoir and the Marchenoir-Véronique relationship. Each of these narratives has its own movement but many events are common to both. The relative importance of particular episodes varies in the two cases. Let us first isolate the Marchenoir biography, to use Beaumont's phrase, and examine the structure of the action found therein.

Each individual event moves with increasing intensity to the climactic dinner scene where Marchenoir severs all ties with the literary elite; thus alienating himself from all chance of possible success, he is precipitating his own downfall. Part I gives us the synopsis of Marchenoir's past, reviewing the events which lead to his father's death, which represents the close of one chapter in the hero's life. The accumulation of these events results in his escape to the Chartreuse; Marchenoir's letter to Leverdier which announces this forth-coming trip contains the climax of Part I. At the Chartreuse we see Marchenoir's unsuitability to monastic life,

his failure to reconcile physical and spiritual needs and his stubborn desire to fulfil a vocation as a writer. Twice during Part II the action reaches a peak, with Marchenoir's discovery of his love for Véronique and with the momentous letter he addresses to her. His return to Paris is highlighted by Véronique's dramatic action which in no way alters the hero's love for her. Part IV begins with the resumption of an apparently normal life, followed by the promise of employment, the interview with Beauvivier and the climax of the dinner which leaves no doubt as to Marchenoir's future in literary circles. In Part V, we are treated to the failure of Le Carcan and to Leverdier's departure from Paris. There follows a letter from Marchenoir to Leverdier which climaxes with the account of Véronique's madness and Marchenoir's motor accident and the following dénouement ends with the hero's tragic death.

In the story of Marchenoir and Véronique, the climax comes in the detailed description of Véronique's self-mutilation. Part I merely introduces us to Marchenoir and Véronique, reveals to us how they met and shows them sharing a home while maintaining a platonic relationship. In "La Grande-Chartreuse," the action moves quickly as we witness Marchenoir's violent love, then his inability to bridle his passion, and finally we read the letter which forewarns us of its far-reaching consequences. Part III shows Véronique's reaction to the letter's plea for help and provides the climax. The apparent resumption of a normal life is portrayed in Part IV, but Bloy also hints at the presence

of an underlying passion which is hidden even from Leverdier, sole witness to the relationship of the couple. In Part V, the apparent peace ends with Véronique's madness and her admission to a mental institution. In the Marchenoir-Véronique story, the love and passion of the couple which continue even after her disfigurement, and which culminate in Véronique's demented state, and her ensuing committal to a mental institution, provide the dénouement.

What becomes clear when we separate the overlapping threads of the two stories is that each in its own way does move towards a logical climax. The apparent seesawing in the action of the novel exists only when the two stories are examined simultaneously as we are inevitably forced to do since the novel must be considered as Bloy wrote it.

La Femme pauvre shows evidence of evolution in Bloy's work simply by virtue of the fact that the author has given his work a central fictional element. This significant aspect is found in Bloy's later novel in the form of the narrative of Clotilde's life and her pilgrimage towards sainthood during a specified period of time. With very few exceptions, we find that each event and episode in La Femme pauvre has a specific role and meaning within the context of the novel. There appears to be a plot in which, in ascending order, each event leads towards Léopold's death. While the occurrence of his death is not in itself climactic, it does represent the culmination of all of Clotilde's tribulations and is the logical outcome of all that has

preceded; after it comes the dénouement in which Bloy describes Clotilde's new way of life. Bloy's second novel thus exhibits direction and focus with a rising action leading to a climax followed by a brief dénouement.

The existence of a fictional narrative in La Femme pauvre serves not only to channel the action of the story but also keeps the novel from some of the pitfalls which beset Le Désespéré. It has already been established that La Femme pauvre contains digressive passages; however, as we mentioned, these are fewer in number than in the earlier novel, thus indicating an evolution in Bloy's work. This is explained in part by the fact that the publication of Le Désespéré marks the turning point of Bloy's career as a writer; shortly after the appearance of the novel, Bloy began publishing more frequently and as a result, he had the opportunity of presenting his work and ideas to the public. This, in turn, relieved him of the pressure he may earlier have felt that he must, at all costs, include in his work whatever material he had on hand. The reader is thus spared the type of digressions found in Le Désespéré which, while they may themselves have value, are out of place in the novel.

Either Bloy had always known that such passages had no place in the body of a work dealing with another subject and his later success gave him the liberty to choose what material would be included in each work, or he had, over the years, acquired the ability to discriminate and select what

truly belonged in each literary creation. We believe that the truth lies somewhere between these two possibilities. In any case, fewer interruptions lend this novel more unity than its predecessor and provide an indication of the progress taking place in Bloy's work.

An excellent example of the evolution in Bloy's life and work can be seen in the way he chooses to convey criticism in the two novels. In Le Désespéré Bloy merely interrupts the narrative, lashes out at his victim and then calmly resumes the story; in La Femme pauvre, the writer is more subtle. For example, the entire scene at Gacougnol's studio, as witnessed through Clotilde's uninitiated eyes has a new tenor. Implicit disapproval rather than outright censure conveys the criticism aimed at Delumière/Péladan. The insult thus levied is in a sophisticated vein, unlike what we earlier saw in Le Désespéré. Similarly, for all that Bloy's aversion is evident, his condemnation of Virginie Séchoir and what she represents is indirect; we are taken into her boarding house to see a group of persons belonging to a different social set and the weaknesses of the landlady and boarders are revealed by contrasting them with the heroine and hinting at the abuse they inflict on Clotilde.

These examples illustrate the fact that in the first novel, the story seems contrived to include criticisms while in the later novel the scenes containing fault finding and disapproval are a natural outgrowth of the story. This

subtle approach is far more effective, for the unsuspecting reader absorbs the information unawares and is influenced by what is being said. The method used in Le Désespéré causes the reader to put up defenses against the barrage of attacks and to accept Bloy's statements skeptically, if at all.

As we previously mentioned, because Bloy attained a certain reputation after the publication of Le Désespéré, shocking the public merely in order to create an impression was no longer necessary.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while portions of the earlier novel leave the reader unnerved, in La Femme pauvre such passages are noticeably absent. Bloy no longer attempts to shock the reader into giving him his attention but rather subtly reaches him by providing a worthy heroine in Clotilde.

The literary aspect of the two novels clearly reflects that Bloy's perspective of life, or his point of view, were radically altered between the writing of the two works. In Le Désespéré Bloy describes a world which revolves around the protagonist; Véronique and Leverdier exist solely in relationship to Marchenoir and the actions they carry out are undertaken with the explicit purpose of helping him. Since Marchenoir initially represented the author, Le Désespéré reveals Bloy's egocentricity but just as a baby's discovery of the world begins with himself and by degrees includes more of his surroundings, Bloy's work also shows the gradual

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<sup>1</sup>See p. 199.

intrusion of the outer world into the life of the protagonist. The evolution in Bloy's attitude seems to begin at the time of his liaison with Berthe Dumont. Berthe was closer to being Bloy's equal than had been Anne-Marie Roulé and as we mentioned above,<sup>1</sup> none of the conflict of the earlier relationship seems to have existed in his affair with Berthe Dumont. Though the change in Bloy is not evidenced in the first novel, it exists already in his initial plan for La Femme pauvre which reveals as protagonist, not a male character modelled on himself and his idealistic dreams of himself, but rather on a female character built as much out of his imagination as on any historical model. This central character demonstrates the various relationships which are possible between an individual and the world in which he lives.

The difference between Le Désespéré, where Marchenoir and his friends are pitted against an outer world which appears ready to attack and destroy him, and La Femme pauvre, in which society's various facets are depicted, clearly reflects Bloy's own development. The outside world, in the later novel, provides the necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing and the employment which makes these possible. These necessities have neither positive nor negative qualities in themselves; rather, they are neutral. Similarly, some of the characters in La Femme pauvre are neither good nor bad;

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<sup>1</sup>P. 37 n. 4.



in this category, we can include such persons as Delumière, Apémantus, and Rollon Crozant. The bad or negative characters are those who cause Clotilde to suffer as a result of her association with them. Here, of course, are classed her mother, Chapuis, Virginie Séchoir, the Poulots and so on. And still other persons are good: Gacougnol, Marchenoir, Léopold and Druide for example. We see thus that Bloy's point of view has expanded to include not only the extremes of good and evil as in his first novel, but he has recognized the existence of the neutral as well. He sees evil in a variety of forms and evaluates individual actions rather than simply grouping the entire world in one category and treating everyone outside his immediate circle as evil. Bloy no longer portrays the world as cruel and evil as he did in Le Désespéré, but rather as a place which accommodates all measures of good and evil, things which are useful and others which are obstacles in our journey through life.

Bloy's changing viewpoint is also seen in his treatment of secondary characters. While in Le Désespéré these had played only a superficial role, in La Femme pauvre they are more deeply embedded into the structure of the novel, actively influencing the outcome of the plot by directly affecting the life of the heroine. While Marchenoir had attempted to cope with life alone in Le Désespéré, bearing the burden of Véronique's illness without help, we find that other persons are permitted to participate in

Clotilde's life. She has family and friends and is no longer isolated, as was Marchenoir. Clotilde does suffer through her relationships with others, but she also shares happiness with them with the result that other people are not seen merely as threats to one's existence but also as sources of solace and fellowship.

In spite of the fact that Marchenoir's character has more unity than that of Clotilde, the reader can more readily associate himself with Clotilde than he could with Marchenoir because she brings with her broader and richer experiences, those with which he is more likely to be familiar. The very weaknesses of characterization which make Clotilde into a symbol of Everyman, bring to her personality the traits which the reader may recognize as his own.

Familiar elements exist in La Femme pauvre also because the second novel offers more variety of situation than that found in Le Désespéré. In spite of the considerable length of the earlier novel, there is little difference in the type of situation presented. This arises partly from the fact that much of the book is devoted to digressions which are at times self-contained essays, and to a description and analysis of Marchenoir's emotions. Even when Bloy does confine himself to his story, much is told indirectly, whether by the narrator or by Marchenoir. Presented in retrospect, the events tend to be seen in groups and the reader places emphasis on the repercussions of particular actions

rather than on the situations in which they occurred. Furthermore, Marchenoir and Véronique lead an isolated and sheltered life which precludes diversity of situation since they interact with few other characters. Their own poverty prevents them from moving to different backgrounds and thereby further emphasizes the lack of variety in situation. Bloy was evidently hampered by the fact that he drew primarily from his own experience and his personal life which differed considerably from that of most people and the general reader would find it hard to associate with the events and situations in Le Désespéré.

In La Femme pauvre by contrast, we find increased variety in the situations presented. Because the secondary characters are more intricately involved in the story, they appear and reappear in various permutations and combinations.<sup>1</sup> Each of the groupings presents different scenes and/or different situations as the characters meet under new circumstances. These new situations are created not only by the better integration of the characters but also by Bloy's more frequent departure from historical fact. Whenever this occurs, Bloy is in effect creating or inventing the scene. Beauvivier's dinner party in Le Désespéré and Gacougnol's soirée in La Femme pauvre provide excellent examples of the different treatment accorded to scenes which are superficially

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<sup>1</sup> Madame Maréchal appears not only in her hovel but also at Gacougnol's studio; Marchenoir is seen at the zoo, in a café and at Gacougnol's; Delumière attends the soirée and also visits Gacougnol privately.

similar. Although both are panoramas portraying a large number of characters:

Dans le Désespéré, les écrivains présentés n'avaient bien souvent que deux dimensions; dans la Femme pauvre, on voit des êtres qui vivent, et on retrouve parfois un peu de cette atmosphère extraordinaire des dialogues de Platon, un peu de cette chaleur, de ce sentiment poignant qui résulte de l'importance des réalités mises en jeu.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy could allow himself free rein in La Femme pauvre because the personages whom he brought together for the soirée belonged to different phases of his life and had never actually met. Since he was imagining the entire evening, Bloy had to create what might have been the reactions of these people. In the dialogue Bloy offers us personal exchanges as well as conversation on thought-provoking and controversial subjects. This differs considerably from the dinner party of the first novel where Marchenoir and the guests essentially do not interact: Marchenoir speaks and the guests listen to his oration. Bloy's point of view has evidently broadened to include greater invention of situation; he is now able to write rather lengthy passages which are entirely created from the author's imagination.

#### The Thematic Aspect

In the preceding section, we have been discussing the more technical aspects of Bloy's two novels, aspects

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<sup>1</sup>Lory, Léon Bloy et son époque, p. 110.

which clearly show an evolution in the author's work. We shall now turn our attention to theme as it is found in these works.

The essential difference between the two novels becomes apparent when we consider the thematic aspect. As we earlier pointed out, the single theme which would unite the diverse elements in Le Désespéré and speak to the reader is missing. Instead, Bloy tells the story of a doomed love and a doomed writer, inserting into this narrative several non-related ideas he wants to share with the reader. As a result of the numerous tragic events which accumulate without respite in Le Désespéré, the book is pessimistic in tone. The absence of a theme also lends greater emphasis to individual episodes which are usually of an unhappy nature and there is no alleviation of this mood by the thread of a central theme or thought which leads the reader to a broader concept or vision. The hero, Marchenoir, while attempting to fulfil the duties of a Christian writer, fails at nearly all that he attempts to do and his story ends with an unhappy death. We may call Le Désespéré a tragedy for the hero Marchenoir is indeed isolated from the society in which he lives.

The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is

established by a social consensus.<sup>1</sup>

Marchenoir, in Le Désespéré, is completely isolated for Bloy stresses that not even Leverdier understands him and Véronique cannot be joined with him.

La Femme pauvre, on the other hand, is held together by a central theme which links the various elements in the novel and overrides weaknesses contained in the book. The narrative does not drift along aimlessly but appears to be moving in a definite direction with each episode emphasizing the importance of a close relationship with God. Since La Femme pauvre was written in a somewhat piecemeal fashion, it appears to us that Bloy did not write with a definite and clear plot in mind but he did seem to have an idea which he wished to convey. Using the metaphor of life as a journey, Bloy communicates to the reader both the possibility and the importance of achieving a closeness to God. The logical goal of the Christian's journey is sanctity which includes just such a relationship to God. La Femme pauvre contrasts sharply with its predecessor for it concludes with a brilliant triumph on the part of its heroine. Having a central theme the entire novel is directed towards the beautiful conclusion and each episode plays a small role in the sequence of events which lead to the final page. La Femme pauvre contains tragic scenes as did the earlier novel but the sadness of any particular scene is mitigated when

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<sup>1</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 39.

considered in the light of the entire work.

Frye speaks of two main tendencies in fiction, "a 'comic' tendency to integrate the hero with his society, and a 'tragic' tendency to isolate him."<sup>1</sup> These, of course, are extremes and can be viewed as being at opposite ends of a continuum. Thus, because Le Désespéré ends on a pessimistic note--Marchenoir fails to be administered final unction--it would be found near tragedy on the continuum. La Femme pauvre, on the other hand, ends with an optimistic tone and would, therefore, lie at the opposite end of the continuum from its predecessor, close to comedy.

The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it. The mythical comedy corresponding to the death of the Dionysiac god is Apollonian, the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods. In Classical literature, the theme of acceptance forms part of the stories of Hercules, Mercury, and other deities who had a probation to go through, and in Christian literature it is the theme of salvation, or, in a more concentrated form, of assumption; the comedy that stands just at the end of Dante's Commedia.<sup>2</sup>

In La Femme pauvre, Clotilde by her own testimony has been incorporated into a spiritual way of life and she does not suffer from the isolation inflicted on Marchenoir. The following dialogue between Clotilde and a "true" priest suggests assumption:

--On n'entre pas dans le Paradis demain, ni après--

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<sup>1</sup> Anatomy of Criticism, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

demain, ni dans dix ans, on y entre aujourd'hui, quand on est pauvre et crucifié.

--HODIE mecum eris in paradiso, murmura le prêtre, qui s'en alla bouleversé d'amour.<sup>1</sup>

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The evolution in Bloy's novels is reflected not only through the technical improvements evident in La Femme pauvre but also, and more significantly, through the universality of the later work which the technical improvements enhance. The central theme of Bloy's second novel contains a message for the reader which does more than merely tie together the threads of the story; it provides the work with a universality which is the characteristic of all great literary creations.

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 298.



CHAPTER IX  
PROPHETIC ELEMENT

Throughout our work we have made a number of references to the prophetic aspects of Bloy's novels. At this time, we should like to define our use of the term prophet.

A prophet may be characterized as a person who, because he is conscious of having been specially chosen and called, feels forced to perform actions and proclaim ideas which, in a mental state of intense inspiration or real ecstasy, have been indicated to him in the form of divine revelations.<sup>1</sup>

Such a person is first and foremost a man of God. He speaks of having had a special call or vocation and always shares his experiences. In attempting to portray the prophetic personality, Abraham Heschel writes of his sensitivity to evil:

To us a single act of injustice . . . is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode: to them a catastrophe, a threat to the world . . . They speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse . . . The prophet is a man who feels fiercely . . . The prophet's use of emotional and imaginative language, concrete in diction, rhythmical in movement, artistic in form, marks his style as poetic . . . Prophetic utterance is rarely cryptic, suspended between God and man; it is urging, alarming, forcing onward, as if the works gushed forth from the heart of God, seeking entrance to the heart and mind of man, carrying a summons as well as an involvement. Grandeur, not dignity, is important. The

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<sup>1</sup>J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 46.

language is luminous and explosive, firm and contingent, harsh and compassionate, a fusion of contradictions . . . If justice means giving every person what he deserves, the scope and severity of the accusations by the prophets of Israel hardly confirmed that principle. The prophets were unfair to the people of Israel. Their sweeping allegations, over-statements, and generalizations defied standards of accuracy. Some of the exaggerations reach the unbelievable . . . In terms of statistics the prophets' statements are grossly inaccurate. Yet their concern is not with facts, but with the meaning of facts . . . The prophet hates the approximate, he shuns the middle road. Man must live on the summit to avoid the abyss. There is nothing to hold to except God. Carried away by the challenge, the demand to straighten out man's ways, the prophet is strange, one-sided, an unbearable extremist . . . The prophet bears scorn and reproach. He is stigmatized as a madman by his contemporaries, and, by some modern scholars, as abnormal . . . The prophet is a lonely man. He alienates the wicked as well as the pious, the cynics as well as the believers . . . But to be a prophet means a challenge and to defy and to cast out fear. The life of a prophet is not futile. People may remain deaf to a prophet's admonitions; they cannot remain callous to a prophet's existence . . . The prophet is a person who suffers from a profound maladjustment to the spirit of society, with its conventional lies, with its concessions to man's weakness. Compromise is an attitude the prophet abhors.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy's own personal testimony coupled with that of Bloyen critics indicates that his life and personality coincide remarkably with the aforementioned characteristics of prophets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Prophets (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 408. See also Lindblom, op. cit.; Otto Eissfeldt, "The Prophetic Literature," in The Old Testament and Modern Study, ed. H. H. Rowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951); Kurt Kuhl, The Prophets of Israel (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960); Bernard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957).

<sup>2</sup>Lory devotes one section of his La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy to showing how Bloy falls into the prophetic tradition. Pp. 194 ff.

Like the prophets, he believed that he had been called by God to carry out a specific function:

Je suis surtout un être religieux. Je le suis à une profondeur que vous ne savez pas. J'ai cru ou espéré que Dieu m'avait donné une voix pour parler à mes frères. Je le crois et l'espère encore et c'est uniquement pour cela je ne désarme pas.<sup>1</sup>

In a public lecture given in Denmark in 1891, Bloy also tried to explain the purpose underlying all of his work. "C'était pour sauver le feu sacré de l'âme humaine que je combattais nuit et jour, c'était afin que les bêtes malfaisantes et ténébreuses ne s'en emparassent pas. C'était, au fond, pour l'honneur de Dieu."<sup>2</sup> Some years later, reiterating his belief that his orders came from God, he wrote: "Personnellement je n'ai besoin d'aucun homme et je n'implore aucun suffrage. J'obéis à une consigne d'en haut, comme faisait l'homme dont parle Josèphe, à la veille de la destruction de Jérusalem. Cela jusqu'à ce que je sois, comme lui, écrasé."<sup>3</sup>

Another link Bloy has with the prophets is the absoluteness found in his life and work. Acknowledging this quality with a sense of pride, he entitled one volume of his journal, Le Pèlerin de l'Absolu. He also once wrote, "Je

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Dec. 4, 1886.

<sup>2</sup>Léon Bloy, Les Funérailles du Naturalisme, in Oeuvres, IV, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup>Quatre ans de Captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne, Sept. 21, 1900.

n'ai que des croyances ou des certitudes absolues, lesquelles sont toujours à prendre ou à laisser, bien entendu."

Alphonse de Parvillez comments on the above statement:

"Appliquées aux convictions religieuses, ces paroles seraient admirables; généralisées, elles sont ridicules."<sup>1</sup>

But it was in Bloy's nature to make such bold statements without concern for the consequences.

His loneliness stemmed in good part from this outspokenness for Bloy alienated not only those whom he attacked but his friends as well and then they too became subject to his verbal laceration. Bloy did, however, always have an intimate circle of friends and in his later years, he particularly enjoyed the company of those persons gathered around him as the disciples of the prophets had gathered around them. Bloy's friends listened to his readings and treated his work with awe and respect. But, with the exception of his relationships with close friends, Bloy was maladjusted to society and did not conform to the behaviour expected of him. "Il est bien établi qu'entre Bloy et son époque, il y eut une incompréhension totale."<sup>2</sup> Prophets are not the only ones to suffer from a lack of understanding; poets too are misunderstood. The prophet has, in fact, at

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<sup>1</sup>"La Bataille autour de Léon Bloy," in Etudes, May 20, 1931. Bloy's statement is taken from a letter to Francis de Miomandre.

<sup>2</sup>Marie-Joseph Lory, Léon Bloy et son époque, p. 25.

times been called a poet,<sup>1</sup> and the existence of a relationship between prophet and poet is generally acknowledged; both are inspired by some indefinable exterior force and as a result, both create something for which they do not claim full responsibility.

In their work, poets take liberties which are excused by poetic licence. When prophets do the same, they are simply accused of exaggerating. Bloy frequently exaggerated because, in his own words, "on ne voit le mal de ce monde qu'à la condition de l'exagérer. . . . L'hyperbole est un microscope pour le discernement des insectes et un télescope pour se rapprocher des astres."<sup>2</sup> Recognizing Bloy's tendency to exaggerate, Barbey d'Aurevilly wrote,

C'est votre manière de voir, je le sais bien, que de voir énorme. C'est la nature même de votre esprit que de voir grand, quand ce ne serait pas moi que vous regardiez ou Astruc, à propos de moi. En grand comme en mal, vos yeux grandissent et grossissent l'objet. C'est la qualité et le défaut aussi des poètes, --le dos et la paume de leur puissante main.<sup>3</sup>

Barbey d'Aurevilly was one of the first to link Bloy with the poets. Bloy has since been called both poet and prophet. Albert Béguin, for example, writes:

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<sup>1</sup>Heschel, The Prophets, pp. 367 ff. See also Kuhl The Prophets of Israel, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Le Pèlerin de l'Absolu, Sept. 11, 1912.

<sup>3</sup>Lettres de Barbey d'Aurevilly à Léon Bloy, Sept. 15, 1875.

C'est la destinée, et c'est l'appel obstiné d'un Prophète. Aucun titre ne peut convenir à Bloy que celui-là, dont il s'est défendu plus d'une fois. Sa solitude est celle du prophète . . . Sa colère est celle du prophète . . . Et son adoration encore est le profond désir de Dieu qui met les grands Israélites face à face avec leur Seigneur que le peuple refuse de voir . . .

Il est un prophète par sa situation. . . . Ce prophète est un poète.<sup>1</sup>

Others have called him "poète chrétien,"<sup>2</sup> "prophète des Pauvres,"<sup>3</sup> "the pauper prophet,"<sup>4</sup> "un très grand lyrique et un magnifique poète épique."<sup>5</sup> In referring to himself, Bloy uses the term poet. "On a souvent parlé de mes livres, mais personne n'a dit que je suis un poète, rien qu'un poète, que je vois les hommes et les choses en poète comique ou tragique, et que, par là, tous mes livres sont expliqués."<sup>6</sup> Bloy is here giving us the key for the understanding of his

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<sup>1</sup>Léon Bloy, l'impatient (Fribourg: Egloff, 1944), p. 12; Béguin, Léon Bloy, mystique de la douleur, pp. 18-19; Béguin, Léon Bloy, choix de texte (Paris: Egloff, 1946). Bloy did not always deny being a prophet; in fact, at times he acknowledged the title. See Le Mendiant Ingrat, Sept. 12, 1894; Quatre ans de Captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne; Oct. 18, 1900, Aug. 5, 1902; Au Seuil de l'Apocalypse, Jul. 13, 1915.

<sup>2</sup>Hubert Colleye, "Léon Bloy, Poète," in Cahiers des Poètes Catholiques, Brussels, 1943, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>Luc Estang, "Dans l'Amitié de Léon Bloy," which precedes Présence de Bernanos (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1947), p. xvi.

<sup>4</sup>Emmanuella Polimeni, Léon Bloy the Pauper Prophet (London: Dennis Dobson, 1947). Polimeni speaks of Bloy's mission and his affinities with the Eastern Orthodox church.

<sup>5</sup>Levaux, Léon Bloy, p. 203.

<sup>6</sup>Au Seuil de l'Apocalypse, Apr. 19, 1915. It is interesting to note that Bloy calls Marchenoir "un sombre poème vivant," and also says about him, "il lisait mal, comme il convient à tout prophète." Le Désespéré, pp. 113, 266.

work. While he is widely accepted as poet and prophet, it is generally with reference to his personal life that the terms are applied, rather than being looked upon as clues to the interpretation of his work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The following quotations are examples of Bloy's prophetic statements and are taken from both his correspondence and his work, from as early as 1871 to as late as 1917.

Qu'on me montre dans le monde chrétien un seul exemple d'un essai fructueux de république accompli au sein d'une grande nation. Cherchez bien, vous ne trouverez pas. Et gardez-vous de me citer l'Amérique. Il vaudrait mieux pour l'Europe mourir de toutes les morts que de lui ressembler. Je me ferai comprendre par un mot. L'Amérique n'a pas encore eu un seul poète, un seul artiste. Ce gracieux pays est porté sur le trépied que voici: la vapeur, le nègre et le revolver.

From a letter to Daussin, 1871, quoted in Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 136.

Je crois qu'un esprit sage formulerait ainsi les pensées qui m'agitent: Le monde moderne a perdu la pure notion du VRAI et il ne lui reste plus que la notion de l'UTILE.

From a letter quoted by Bollery, Léon Bloy, I, p. 114.

Le Sang du Pauvre, c'est l'argent. On en vit et on en meurt depuis les siècles. Il résume expressivement toute souffrance. Il est la Gloire, il est la Puissance. Il est la Justice et l'Injustice. Il est la Torture et la Volupté. Il est exécrable et adorable, symbole flagrant et ruisselant du Christ Sauveur, in quo omnia constant.

Le sang du riche est un pus fétide extravasé par les ulcères de Caïn. Le riche est un mauvais pauvre, un guenilleux très puant dont les étoiles ont peur.

La Révélation nous enseigne que Dieu seul est pauvre et que son Fils Unique est l'unique mendiant. "Solus tantummodo Christus est qui in omnium pauperum universitate mendicet", disait Salvien. Son Sang est celui du Pauvre par qui les hommes sont "achetés à grand prix". Son Sang précieux, infiniment rouge et pur, qui peut tout payer!

Il fallait donc bien que l'argent le représentât: l'argent qu'on donne, qu'on prête, qu'on vend, qu'on gagne ou qu'on vole; l'argent qui tue et qui vivifie comme la Parole, l'argent qu'on adore, l'eucharistique argent qu'on boit et qu'on mange. Viatique de la curiosité vagabonde et

In what way does the prophet choose to express himself? Lindblom writes:

We find among them sermons and admonitory addresses, announcements of doom and punishment, lyric poems, prayers, hymns, parables, dialogues, monologues, short oracles, didactic sentences, predictions, messages, letters, etc. Neither the prophets themselves nor their contemporaries regarded these as ordinary literary productions, but as inspired by God and revealed to the prophets in a supernatural way.<sup>1</sup>

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viatique de la mort. Tous les aspects de l'argent sont les aspects du Fils de Dieu suant le Sang par qui tout est assumé.

From Le Sang du Pauvre, in Oeuvres, IX, p. 87.

Chez les anciens Juifs, ou plutôt chez ces bons vieux israélites de la Bible, antérieurs à la fondation de Rome, on appelait voyant un prophète. On allait consulter le Voyant aux jours de péril et le Voyant consultait le Seigneur.

Aujourd'hui cela se passe autrement. Les voyants modernes n'ont plus de Seigneur à consulter. Ils n'en ont aucun besoin. Il leur est interdit, d'ailleurs, de regarder en haut, la Révélation démocratique ne le permettant pas. Il doit leur suffire d'interroger l'Opinion. Ils regardent donc en bas, fixant leur attention sur le point où les ténèbres sont le plus denses. Ils peuvent alors vaticiner avec autorité comme ce romancier fameux qui prononça, quelque temps avant la guerre, que la barbarie n'était plus à craindre, le grand Etat-Major allemand lui opposant une barrière insurmontable.

Les prophètes de cette force et de cette précision ne nous ont pas manqué depuis trois ans. On peut même dire qu'il y a eu autant de voyants que d'électeurs. Ne serait-ce pas l'accomplissement, après vingt-huit siècles, des paroles du Livre saint: "Je répandrai mon esprit sur toute chair et vos fils prophétiseront et aussi vos filles. Vos vieillards songeront des songes et vos jouvenceaux verront des visions."

From "Les aveugles," in Dans les Ténèbres, in Oeuvres, IX, p. 302.

<sup>1</sup>J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel, p. 122.



Bloy used several of these diverse forms during his lifetime but on only two occasions did he turn to the novel. He was indeed encouraged to write Le Désespéré by others but it appears more likely that the underlying reason for writing it is that given by Lory:

Au début de sa carrière, Léon Bloy essaya--c'est banal-- d'être romancier. Mais l'imagination était la seule de ses qualités: il n'avait ni l'art de la composition, ni le don de rendre vivant, ni même le style qui convient au roman. Il sait animer les silhouettes. Il possède un sens aigu du pittoresque, mais il n'aime pas la réalité. "Je ne me croyais pas et je ne me crois pas romancier", déclare-t-il en décembre 1884 à la suite d'un premier essai manqué de la rédaction du Désespéré (J. Bollery, "Le Désespéré" de Léon Bloy, pp. 24 et 25).

Il écrit son roman parce que tout le monde à cette époque en fait autant et qu'il ne voit pas comment atteindre autrement le public. C'est pour lui un effort douloureux. La Femme Pauvre sera relativement moins pénible à composer.

As a prophet, Bloy had a duty to reach the public and how better accomplish this task than using a novel: the literary genre then in vogue? With the added encouragement of his publisher and of his friends, it is understandable that he decided to write Le Désespéré.

Basing the following discussion on the premise that Bloy is a prophet, we shall see that both Le Désespéré and La Femme pauvre reveal themselves to be not merely novels or fictional creations, but also mediums of communication. The study of Bloy's fictional composition will show how Bloy sought to convey his message and thus to communicate with his reader through his literary creation.

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<sup>1</sup>Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p.43.

Le Désespéré reflects the fact that it is used primarily as a means to an end. Bloy uses three different methods to convey his ideas: direct statement from author to reader, completely by-passing the fictional narrative, explicit statement or comment incorporated into the story, and ideas implicit in the story. The first group is generally comprised of what we have called digressions. As narrator, Bloy speaks directly to his readers giving praise or making accusations as he sees fit. In prophetic tradition, he makes bold statements which frequently develop into harangues or tirades. If the reader is receptive to Bloy's convictions, he will read the dissertations and accept the message therein, but he may also reject Bloy's point of view and look upon these statements merely as interruptions in the central story.

In the second category, explicit statements incorporated into the central story, we find the conversations in which Marchenoir expresses his opinions and feelings. Through the direct speech of his protagonist Bloy is able to convey his own ideas to the reader and Marchenoir becomes no more than a mouthpiece for the poet-prophet. When Marchenoir engages in conversation with others, their comments are either supported or attacked by him, thus further expressing Bloy's ideas. In some cases, statements made by other characters also represent the author's point of view, as, for instance, Father Athanase's words in Part II. Also among the explicit statements can be classed the

brief comments Bloy makes in passing when he is dealing with another subject. For example, in the midst of a section devoted to Alexis Dulaurier/Paul Bourget, we read: "Il avait passé la soirée chez la baronne de Poissy, la célèbre amphitryonne de tous les sexes, en compagnie d'un groupe élu de chenapans du Premiers-Paris et de cabotins lanceurs de rayons."<sup>1</sup> While this is not a particularly conspicuous digression, it does show an instance in which Bloy is not giving extensive treatment to a subject, but includes it nonetheless; here he is making a passing judgment, which needs no interpretation.

Finally we come to the third category, ideas implicit in the novel. First and foremost is the importance of one's devotion to God, which Bloy conveys by describing the actions of the principals, Marchenoir and Véronique. He shows us how they turn to God in prayer, through confession, by attendance at mass and by going to a retreat in times of trouble. Marchenoir's absoluteness also stems from his devotion to God. Although this characteristic is to some extent drawn from Bloy's own inability to compromise, it signifies more than merely a reflection of the author's attitude to life; it is an outspoken criticism of a society which Bloy feels is willing to sacrifice virtually any principle as a means to an end. Marchenoir's uncompromising stand is contrasted with the attitudes of other writers. The passages devoted to the duties of a writer serve not only to defend Bloy's

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<sup>1</sup>Le Désespéré, p. 36.

own position but also to attack those who are engaged in writing for monetary gains. Bloy saw the talented writer as one who is inspired by a superior being to whom the writer in turn owes allegiance. Those creations which merely pander to public fancy ought never to be written. None of Bloy's own works are frivolous in nature; even his short stories contain a truth for the reader.

Although Le Désespéré does present some of the author's ideas, it tends to be negative, merely attacking institutions and individuals. Bloy fails to communicate a positive message which will guide the reader in his personal life or teach him a useful lesson. We may say that this stems from Bloy's own uncertainty about his vocation as a prophet. In a letter written to Montchal in October, 1886, he expresses his personal doubts in the following manner: "A de certains instants, j'enrage de n'avoir personne à côté de moi, pour me dire que je suis un homme de génie. Je ne le croirais peut-être pas. Mais cela me donnerait du courage."<sup>1</sup> When Bloy later married, he found exactly such encouragement and moral support and was able to bring some of his ideas to fruition as is reflected in La Femme pauvre.

La Femme pauvre, far more than Le Désespéré, expresses the message of the poet-prophet Bloy. It is our intention to show how Bloy's second novel may be interpreted as an allegory, a literary form most suitable to a man who

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<sup>1</sup>Lettres aux Montchal, Oct. 17, 1886. See also his letter dated Dec. 4, 1886.

admired the Middle Ages, for it was a popular form during that time. Furthermore, since an allegory is merely an extended parable, what better way to convey a Christian message than by the form used in Biblical tradition? However, let us make it clear from the outset that our interpretation of La Femme pauvre as an allegory differs from Fam's. Fam,

abundantly demonstrated the allegorical nature of both the short stories and of episodes in the novels. In his fiction Bloy transposed to a physical or material plane happenings in his life which were spiritual, so that every event narrated bears a hidden significance and is not merely what it often appears to be, an outrageously sensational absurdity redeemed by a note of ironic incongruity. The incests, parricides, infanticides and kindred phenomena which make up the subject matter of so many of the short stories are all susceptible of symbolical explanation and each fictitious name covers or, to the initiated, reveals the identity either of Bloy himself or of an associate. However, it cannot be claimed that the novels or the short stories are allegories in the accepted sense. An allegory should be easily distinguishable as such. . . . In the case of Bloy's fiction it is rarely apparent that there is an allegorical meaning and the allegories that Fam claims to have discovered have no universality but a particular application to Bloy's life and to persons and events known to him. Without a thorough biographical knowledge, without the patient research undertaken by M. Joseph Bollery, Fam and others, there would be no possibility of realizing the complex nature of the literary transpositions that Bloy seems to have made. Thus, literary criticism cannot take account of such esoteric involutions, but must judge the work according to its external appearance. Bloy himself does not seem to have wished that what he had so carefully disguised should be brought fully to light and he was always insistent that there was no hidden meaning to be discovered.<sup>1</sup>

We recognize that:

all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching

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<sup>1</sup>Beaumont, "Léon Bloy, the Artist," Aug., 1953, pp. 162-163.

of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery. The instant that any critic permits himself to make a genuine comment about a poem . . . he has begun to allegorize. . . . [Furthermore] within the boundaries of literature we find a kind of sliding scale, ranging from the most explicitly allegorical, consistent with being literature at all, at one extreme, to the most elusive, anti-explicit and anti-allegorical at the other.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, while La Femme pauvre may not be among the most explicit of allegories, it is nevertheless easily interpreted as an illustrative fable. Nor is it necessary to have any particular knowledge of Bloy's personal life; an examination of the novel as it stands is sufficient in order to understand the universal theme it contains.

The allegory in La Femme pauvre has more in common with those found in English literature than those existing in French literature where the romantic allegory seems to predominate. It is similar, for example, to William Langland's Piers Plowman of the fourteenth century and to John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. In each of these allegories the hero dreams of undertaking a journey on which he meets various characters who personify abstract qualities. We have already mentioned that La Femme pauvre, like the works mentioned above, can be interpreted as an allegory in which Clotilde makes an earthly journey towards sainthood which she achieves in the final pages of the novel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 89, 91.

<sup>2</sup>The interpretation of La Femme pauvre as a journey is supported by Bloy himself, who referred to the work as an "Odyssey" in a letter to Georges Khnopff. See Lettres à Georges Khnopff, Mar. 14, 1887.

Clotilde and the other characters in the novel are symbols representing universal concepts rather than being merely fictional personages or literary forms of historical characters. While the characters in La Femme pauvre are not so explicitly revealed as in the works mentioned above, one can easily discern the symbolic meaning behind them. Clotilde meets obstructions which make her journey more difficult and more painful and she faces temptations before she reaches her goal but she does in the end triumph and is rewarded for her faithfulness.

Bloy begins Clotilde's journey when she is already an adult and when she has begun to face the trials that life can bring an individual. Having engaged in a trivial love affair, she has lost her virginity and feels polluted. Bloy likens Clotilde to Mary Magdalene and the comparison serves the purpose of showing God's concern and love for the sinner. The choice of a heroine who, like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, is aware of her sin enables Bloy to stress that hope exists for all, not only the virtuous. He reinforces this concept when he shows that Léopold undergoes a miraculous conversion in spite of his sin of incest. In the opening pages Clotilde is being dragged into further degradation by Chapuis and Madame Maréchal who both represent evil forces. Clotilde, thirsting for

life,<sup>1</sup> and dreaming of a deliverer who will take her away from her surroundings, remembers a picture of Christ which she has seen in which, hands extended, he offers forgiveness to a repentant sinner.

Early in the novel, Clotilde becomes resigned to suffering. Bloy never lost his belief in the significance and importance of this experience. As early as April, 1873, he wrote:

Il faut avoir souffert pour être capable d'amour. L'amour est un acte de la volonté, mais la douleur est toujours une révélation antérieure à cet acte même parce que l'homme a des endroits de son pauvre coeur qui n'existent pas encore et où la douleur entre afin qu'ils soient. C'est pour cela que le martyre, c'est-à-dire l'acceptation complète de toute la douleur possible, précipite en un instant l'âme dans l'amour parfait sans passer même par l'imitation laborieuse de la pénitence.<sup>2</sup>

and a few years later,

La Douleur est une chose si grande, si substantiellement sainte et sublime que l'imagination humaine n'a jamais rien inventé qui lui fût égal, pour dompter la liberté des coeurs. . . . L'Homme de douleurs, préfiguré par l'Homme de désir, est au sommet de leur Foi et toute vérité, toute vertu, toute beauté, toute grandeur aboutissent à lui et s'accomplissent en lui. Tout, par conséquent, doit s'y conformer et l'incomparable magnificence du christianisme est justement d'avoir édifié la vie

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<sup>1</sup>La Femme pauvre, pp. 39-40. This imagery here is clear. Christ, speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well said, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be a well of water springing up into everlasting life." John 4:14.

<sup>2</sup>Lettres de Jeunesse, p. 55.



humaine sur ce Type sanglant.<sup>1</sup>

Bloy equated joy and suffering on a very exalted level<sup>2</sup> and therefore predestined his heroine to a life that would express this point of view. Clotilde's statement, "Ta destinée, vois-tu, c'est de souffrir,"<sup>3</sup> thus takes on greater significance for it speaks not only of the suffering which Clotilde will endure throughout the novel but also of the joy which she will experience through her suffering, for Bloy believes these emotions to be interchangeable.

Gacognol, seen as a symbol of help and goodness, offers Clotilde an avenue of escape from her distressing situation. As he provides new clothes for her, we see an outward cleansing and renewal of the young woman; this outward sign is a symbol of an inner regeneration and a new spiritual beginning. Clotilde is now able to throw off the influence of her mother and Chapuis and begin life anew.

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<sup>1</sup>Propos d'un Entrepreneur de Démolitions, in Oeuvres, II, pp. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup>"Il se dit vulgairement que la joie est le contraire de la douleur et que ces deux impressions de l'âme ou du corps sont incompatibles. On les oppose donc l'une à l'autre. C'est la ressource des littératures.

Comment faire comprendre qu'à une certaine hauteur, c'est la même chose et qu'une âme héroïque les assimile avec facilité?" Dans les Ténèbres, in Oeuvres, IX, p. 296.

<sup>3</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 43. Beaumont writes that, "Emphasis is given in the novel itself to the attainment of the earthly paradise through maximized suffering." "La Femme pauvre and Feminine Mythology," p. 44.

While at the beginning of the novel Clotilde does suffer at the hands of Chapuis and her mother, she primarily endures physical hardships in the form of squalor, lack of food and privacy. She also experiences feelings of discomfort and uneasiness because she must yield to the wishes of those who are stronger than she. After the brief respite Clotilde experiences under Gacougnol's care, Bloy subtly accelerates and increases the pace of suffering. Through Mademoiselle Séchoir, who also personifies evil, Bloy presents a subtle wickedness. Because it is insidious, Gacougnol does not recognize it and is unable to protect Clotilde and in the end is himself destroyed by it. However, although Clotilde suffers, she is able to bear the trials which she must undergo for she has gained some strength since the opening pages of the book. During this time she is also learning to endure spiritual pain for the suffering is no longer merely of a physical nature but has progressed in intensity. Her suffering is accentuated by the fact that through her those around her are also made to bear affliction. Her difficulties broaden to include Gacougnol and Léopold. Gacougnol pays the penalty of death as a result of an errand he undertakes on Clotilde's behalf and through this event he becomes not only a symbol of goodness but in part a Christ figure. Later, Léopold must suffer first the loss of his sight, then of their child and finally death, which comes at the very moment of Clotilde's sanctifying experience.

Clotilde's mother, Chapuis, and Mademoiselle Séchoir are replaced as symbols of evil in Part II by Mesdames Poulot and Grand, by Poulot, and to a lesser extent by such persons as Mademoiselle Planude and the médecin des morts who inflict psychological or spiritual torture on her. But it is not only evil which presents a threat to Clotilde; so also do the good things in life which might separate her from God. The role of the soirée in the novel is to represent just such a threat. Bloy shows that one can become enmeshed in intellectual and cultural concerns and friendships and forget about the infinitely more important spiritual side of the human being. The brilliance of the description makes this type of environment seem appealing and a veritable pleasure. For these reasons, the type of life described at the soirée provides Clotilde with another choice following the death of her husband. But although Clotilde had enjoyed her evening with Gacougnol and his guests, so completely does she reject the thought of life among such people that she gives it no consideration whatsoever.<sup>1</sup> Bloy has here gone beyond a mere description of black and white, good and bad;

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<sup>1</sup>As the only woman in the group, Clotilde holds a privileged position which is further enhanced by the fact that Gacougnol is "sponsoring" her. With his training she has learned how to comport herself in a milieu that revolves around the arts. She meets persons who are influential in a particular social set, but whose lives revolve around intellectual rather than spiritual concerns. It appears to us that it is this factor rather than any other incompatibility which leads Clotilde to reject the life of the salons.

he is indicating that separation from God can result not only from outright evil, which he portrays vividly in the persons we have mentioned, but also from a misuse of something which is potentially and basically good.

Goodness is personified primarily in Gacougnol, Marchenoir, Léopold, Lazare and Hercule Joly, who also represent human happiness as it is brought by love in its different forms: friendship, conjugal love and parental love. The various intensities of love are shown through the relationships Clotilde enjoys with these persons, but just as human beings are mortal, human happiness is short-lived. The successive deaths which we have already mentioned serve to stress repeatedly the contrast between the human and the divine, the mortal and the eternal.

As Clotilde successfully passes each hurdle, her earthly ties are broken one by one and at the same time she is gradually drawn closer to God. In this way Bloy places earthly concerns in diametric opposition to spiritual matters, revealing that, although there has been an evolution in his life since the writing of Le Désespéré, he still has not completely resolved the duality within himself. The state achieved by Clotilde in La Femme pauvre represents an ideal rather than a possible experience, for it is impossible to disassociate completely the physical from the spiritual in this life.

The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream . . . as soon as romance achieves a literary form, it tends to limit itself to a sequence of

minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story. We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest.

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero.<sup>1</sup>

We earlier spoke of Léopold's death as marking the climax of the novel. It is at that precise moment that the old missionary's prediction to Clotilde is fulfilled. "Quand vous serez dans les flammes,"<sup>2</sup> he had said, and Bloy describes the "incendie de Holocaustes spirituels" as follows:

Bien des fois, depuis son enfance, et même dans les heures les plus troublées, bien des fois elle a senti le voisinage de Celui qui brûle, mais jamais elle n'a été si atteinte.

Cela commence par des étincelles volantes et rapides qui la font pâlir. Ensuite les grandes flammes s'élancent... Déjà il n'est plus temps de fuir, si elle en avait seulement la volonté. Impossible de s'échapper, soit à droite, soit à gauche, soit par en haut, soit par en bas. Le courage de vingt lions serait inutile, aussi bien que la force ailée des plus puissants aigles. Il faut qu'elle brûle, il faut qu'elle soit consumée. Elle se voit dans une cathédrale de feu. C'est la maison qu'elle a demandée, c'est la volupté que Dieu lui donne...

Longtemps les flammes grondent et roulent autour d'elle, dévorant ce qui l'environne, avec des ondulations et des bonds de grands reptiles. Quelquefois, elles se dressent, rugissantes, sous une arche et déferlent à ses pieds, se bornant à darder leurs langues en fureur sur son visage, sur ses yeux, sur son sein qui fond comme la cire...

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<sup>1</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 186-187.

<sup>2</sup>La Femme pauvre, p. 33.

Où sont les hommes? et que peuvent-ils? Sache, pauvre Clotilde, que cette fournaise n'est qu'un léger souffle de la respiration de ton Dieu... "Peut-être l'Esprit-Saint vous a-t-il marquée de son signe", a dit autrefois le Missionnaire.

Les inapaisables flammes, devenues assez intenses pour liquéfier les plus durs métaux, tombent enfin sur elle, d'un coup, avec le fracas d'un oecuménique tremblement des cieux...<sup>1</sup>

This entire experience and what follows conforms to the symbolism of fire as Frye presents it in his "Theory of Myths."

Poetic symbolism usually puts fire just above man's life in this world . . . The imagery of light and fire surrounding the angels in the Bible, the tongues of flame descending at Pentecost, and the coal of fire applied to the mouth of Isaiah by the seraph, associates fire with a spiritual<sup>2</sup> or angelic world midway between the human and the divine.

It is this experience which enables Clotilde to pass from the human world to her state of sainthood. Each of the trials which she earlier endured have prepared her for the holocaust in which she "dies to self." Consequently, we must recognize that her earlier difficulties are neither autobiographical transpositions nor mere fictional episodes, but rather logical and necessary steps leading to the climax and conclusion of La Femme pauvre. The fact that Bloy has chosen the familiar metaphor of life as a journey and that he uses images and symbols occurring in both

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 295-296.

<sup>2</sup>Anatomy of Criticism, p. 145.

Biblical and Classical literature as well as more recent works, in no way negates or belittles the value of his own work.

All art is equally conventionalized, but we do not ordinarily notice this fact unless we are unaccustomed to the convention. In our day the conventional element in literature is elaborately disguised by a law of copyright pretending that every work of art is an invention distinctive enough to be patented. . . . Demonstrating the debt of A to B is merely scholarship if A is dead, but a proof of moral delinquency if A is alive. This state of things makes it difficult to appraise a literature which includes Chaucer, much of whose poetry is translated or paraphrased from others; Shakespeare, whose plays sometimes follow their sources almost verbatim; and Milton, who asked for nothing better than to steal as much as possible out of the Bible. It is not only the inexperienced reader who looks for a residual originality in such works. Most of us tend to think of a poet's real achievement as distinct from, or even contrasted with, the achievement present in what he stole, and we are thus apt to concentrate on peripheral rather than on central critical facts. For instance, the central greatness of Paradise Regained, as a poem, is not the greatness of the rhetorical decorations that Milton added to his source, but the greatness of the theme itself, which Milton passes on to the reader from his source. This conception of the great poet's being entrusted with the great theme was elementary enough to Milton, but violates most of the low mimetic prejudices about creation that most of us are educated in.<sup>1</sup>

Our preceding discussion leads us to the conclusion that what appeared to be deficiencies in Bloy's work when judged by traditional standards are appropriate in the light of Bloy's prophetic tendencies. As both poet and prophet, Bloy did recognize that he had been entrusted with a message for his reader. Early in his literary career, he had been uncertain of his vocation and consequently of his

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<sup>1</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 96.

message. As a result, Le Désespéré reflects this hesitation through the absence of a central theme. But with the evolution occurring in his own personal life, he was able to see his vocation more clearly and with greater certainty and consequently he could also convey or pass on the great theme of La Femme pauvre. Each of us can recognize our own search in that of Clotilde and we are able to associate with her as she experiences joy and suffering, temptation and peace. The theme of La Femme pauvre is not merely a vision of woman but is universal in its application. Every human being is embarked on his own personal search.



## CONCLUSION

Our examination of the characters in Bloy's two novels has shown that there exists a gradual but undeniable progression in the author's work from the use of personages who are based on historical models with some fictional trimmings, primarily in an idealized form, to characters who, though originally inspired by historical models, have a role which is principally fictional. Although better use is made of the characters in the later novel, better characterization does not in actual fact occur since the personages are never fully developed. Because Bloy's interest is predominantly thematic his characters have taken on symbolic roles within La Femme pauvre. While in the first novel some of the characters are included to satisfy personal bitterness, in La Femme pauvre they tend more to convey the central idea Bloy wishes to share with his reader.

As Bloy's certainty of his vocation grew, an evolution took place in his thought and La Femme pauvre reflects his belief that he had a theme or message to convey. While Le Désespéré has neither a central theme nor a fictional narrative, La Femme pauvre, according to Fam, exists on three levels: the autobiographical, the fictional and the mystical.<sup>1</sup> The first two are self-

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<sup>1</sup>"Essai sur la Fiction dans l'Oeuvre de Léon Bloy," in Cahiers Léon Bloy, May-Aug., 1938, p. 319.

explanatory. As for the mystical, we must not be confused by a modern tendency to separate the sacred and the secular. Bloy's central theme is directly related to Roman Catholic theology as Bloy interpreted it but, as we have pointed out, it has a universal application. In religious terms we may say that Clotilde's search is for Paradise lost. In Eden man was closely allied to God, had direct communication with Him but since the Fall man has tried to regain the state in which he earlier existed. This is the search on which Clotilde is embarked in La Femme pauvre. "Il s'agissait alors de mériter à nouveau le Paradis perdu, de le reconstruire en acceptant la pauvreté et la douleur, d'édifier péniblement un Royaume."<sup>1</sup> In La Femme pauvre, Bloy shows a Clotilde who does accept poverty and suffering and who does regain paradise. Clotilde's successful journey is meant to encourage the reader in his own search.

Bloy's vision of humanity in La Femme pauvre, although in Christian terms, is nonetheless a universal view of man, such as is found in all outstanding literary works. The use Bloy makes of the novel form explains why he wrote only the two works we have discussed. Le Désespéré was an attempt to reach the public and was written in a form popular at the time but Bloy's own personal doubts prevented him from making maximum use of the work. La Femme pauvre on the other hand does convey

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<sup>1</sup>Lory, La Pensée religieuse de Léon Bloy, p. 121.

this universal view of man and leaves Bloy no room for improvement except on a technical level which was of little interest to Bloy. As a prophet his main concern was to reach the public.

Son imagination part de ce qui est concret, mais s'évade tout de suite dans le spirituel. C'est en ce sens qu'on peut dire qu'il échoua en tant que romancier. Sensible et sensuel, incapable et ennemi de toute abstraction, il n'a pourtant qu'une ambition: celle d'échapper le plus vite possible au concret, qui lui sert de tremplin, pour déboucher dans l'invisible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

## APPENDIX A

Lorsque Paul Bourget eut reçu la lettre qui ouvre Le Désespéré et y eut opposé la fin de non-recevoir que vous savez, il éprouva non point remords de sa laderie, mais bien la crainte judicieuse d'être avant peu écartelé par Bloy aux quatre chevaux de l'Apocalypse. Si le père de Bloy était bien mort et que celui-ci fut (sic), comme il le proclamait tragiquement, sans argent pour l'enterrer, quelle vengeance Bloy ne tirerait-il pas de cette affaire! Il fallait voir. Donc, Bourget résolut de porter non les vingt-cinq louis réclamés par le Sous-Veuillot, mais seulement deux cents francs. Il courut chez Bloy qu'il trouva attablé devant une grosse fille rousse, un monceau de portugaises et trois litres de "blanc". "Votre père, Bloy, n'est donc pas mort?" Bloy tendit négligemment le pouce au-dessus de l'épaule désignant ainsi la chambre mortuaire, et répondit: "Mon père, il est là... il pue..."<sup>1</sup>

Il me souvient, à cette occasion, d'une anecdote particulièrement pénible que Paul Bourget m'a relatée sur Léon Bloy. Ce dernier, quoique ne s'étant pas privé de déblatérer contre le romancier de l'Etape, était venu lui emprunter cent francs pour enterrer son père. Bourget, que cette raison laissait sceptique, fit remettre par son valet de chambre la moitié de la somme au quémandeur qui d'ailleurs, l'empocha non sans insulter au surplus tout le monde dans la maison. "Le malheureux se trouvait à peine dehors, me dit Bourget, que je me reprochai de ne point lui avoir donné le billet entier. Obéissant à ce scrupule, je me fis conduire le soir même chez Bloy. Je sonnai à sa porte. Il me cria d'entrer et je l'aperçus attablé devant plusieurs bouteilles et une assiette de charcuterie, en compagnie de deux commères en cheveux, complètement ivres. L'une d'elles était assise sur les genoux mêmes de l'écrivain. --Vous êtes ignoble! déclarai-je, le voyant repousser la femme et se précipiter vers moi. Il me barra la route et vrilla dans les miens ses yeux étincelants. --Quelle honte, ajoutai-je. Pour Dieu, ne cherchez pas d'excuse. --Mais non, fit-il. Moi, des excuses? Et m'entraînant dans le fond de la pièce, il ouvrit brutalement la porte d'une chambre puis, désignant le lit où gisait le corps d'un vieillard, il grogna: --Constataz!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fernand Kolney, Laurent Tailhade, son oeuvre (Paris: Ed. du Carnet Critique, 1922), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Carco, Bohème d'Artiste (Paris: Albin Michel, 1940), pp. 29-30.

Bourget, avec qui j'entretenais d'amicales relations, m'ayant raconté l'inqualifiable histoire que voici: --Un jour, il y a de ça des années, j'étais assis devant ce bureau, travaillant. On m'annonce Léon Bloy. Il m'avait déjà fait plus d'un petit emprunt et je ne doutai point que sa visite n'eût encore pour but de me "taper". Il était malheureux, je le plaignais, mais je n'étais pas riche. Mon premier véritable succès de vente fut Mensonges, vous le savez. Il entre et, tragique: "Bourget, il me faut à l'instant même trois cents francs!... Mon père est mort chez moi... et déjà il pue... Jam foetet". Je m'excuse de ne trouver dans ce tiroir que la moitié de la somme. "C'est tout ce dont je puis disposer, mon pauvre Bloy... Mais, peut-être, Coppée... --"Je ne veux plus rien demander à Coppée. C'est un saligaud!" --"Voyons, Bloy!" --"Je frapperai à d'autres portes. Adieu!" Et sans me remercier, il s'en va... Je n'ai pas le coeur de lui en vouloir. Cette mort de son père!... N'est-ce pas dans la détresse qu'il vit!... "Eh bien, me dis-je, je vais courir, moi, chez Coppée." J'y cours et j'obtiens sans peine cent cinquante francs... Alors, vite chez Bloy!... Je suis un peu étonné de voir les fenêtres illuminées. Mais je ne m'attarde pas à réfléchir. Je monte en hâte... étonné derechef et davantage à mesure que m'arrivaient, de plus en plus forts, des bruits de voix joyeuses, de cliquetis de verres, qui me clouent une seconde devant la porte... Je sonne. On ouvre, et sur une table entourée de deux ou trois individus peu reluisants d'aspects, dont une femme m'a l'air d'une "roulure", m'apparaît une énorme dinde que Bloy découpe en riant... Je m'avance, lourd de tristesse: "Et votre père, Bloy, où est-il?" Il me regarde comme hébété(sic), balbutie je ne sais quoi... puis part d'un éclat de rire infernal... Le cadavre était cette dinde qui, elle non foetet.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Léopold Lacour, Une longue vie, histoire d'un homme, préface de Georges Lecomte (Paris: Malfère, 1958), II, pp. 193-194.

## APPENDIX B

Je copie textuellement la lettre explicative du sujet de mon futur livre, que j'ai adressée le mois dernier au chargé d'affaires de la maison Quantin, quand j'espérais obtenir une avance d'argent de cette librairie qui consent volontiers à m'éditer A SES FRAIS, mais qui refuse d'escompter un succès qui n'est que probable.

"Monsieur. Voici en aussi peu de mots que possible, l'idée de mon prochain roman, puisque vous me faites l'honneur de me demander cette confiance. Une jeune fille, issue de la bourgeoisie ouvrière et douée, par transmission atavique, d'une âme supérieure à son milieu, haïe, par conséquent ou méprisée de ses proches, persécutée par son abominable mère qui voudrait la vendre, finit par tomber d'elle-même dans l'infortune banale d'un premier amant fâcheux. Alors, s'ouvre pour elle, comme pour les autres, le triple gouffre de la prostitution, du suicide ou d'un retour pur et simple à la vie médiocre, avec l'aggravation d'un idéal irréparablement carié.

"Ces trois solutions détestées l'épouvantent et elle en cherche éperdûment une quatrième, qui sera de toute nécessité, la prostitution encore, parce que tel est l'inéluctable destin de la femme pauvre et abandonnée, quand la Providence n'accomplit pour elle aucun miracle. Cette absurde Odyssée sera curieuse et je l'espère, assez passionnante, car elle sera l'occasion de traverser d'étranges milieux et de basses tragédies plus étranges encore. Une des plus longues escales de cette partie du livre et l'une des plus fécondes en dégoûtations inexprimables, sera le cabotinisme inférieur, tel qu'on peut le vérifier à Belleville, à Montparnasse ou dans les villes de province.

"Le central concept de ce roman est le sexe physiologique de la femme, autour duquel s'enroule ou se débobine implacablement sa psychologie tout entière. Pour parler net, entre nous, la femme dépend de sa vulve, comme l'homme de son cerveau.

"L'idée n'est pas neuve. Elle pourrait avoir soixante millions de siècles, si l'histoire humaine avait elle-même cet âge ridicule. Mais il est possible de la renouveler et d'en donner même une impression terrifiante, en la poussant à ses plus extrêmes conséquences et c'est précisément ce que je me propose avec l'espoir de rencontrer la vérité absolue.

"Par exemple, le culte, le vrai culte latrique de la femme, quelque vertueuse qu'il vous plaise de la supposer, pour le signe extérieur de son sexe, qu'elle estime, inconsciemment, à l'égal du Paradis, imaginez-le, ce culte,

en conflit immédiat avec l'absolue nécessité de la prostitution vénale, poussez jusqu'au bout cette idée, cette conception du SACRILÈGE et vous serez un fier homme si vous ne tremblez pas devant le monstre que votre esprit aura évoqué.

"Mon héroïne, qui a réellement existé, et que j'ai observée avec le plus grand soin, n'aura ni beauté supérieure ni dons singuliers. Elle ne possédera qu'un triste cœur assez sublime, mais elle le portera à la manière des femmes, c'est-à-dire, au plus profond de son sexe, puisqu'il faut les éventrer, ces êtres bizarres, pour leur donner la Maternité qui est la véritable explosion de leur personnalité affective!

"Elle est donc forcée de revenir à son premier carrefour, après de lamentables explorations. Cette fois, c'est bien la prostitution qu'il faut choisir, mais, encore, avec l'arrière espérance qu'au tournant de quelque ordure, elle dénichera le merle blanc d'un amour parfait. Le prodige, c'est qu'elle le trouve, juste à temps pour désespérer, avant de mourir, un brave homme qui arrive trop tard, comme tous les braves gens de ce dérisoire globe, où personne ne se présente jamais assez tôt pour sauver personne.

"Après le Désespéré, la désespérée. Ce n'est pas le titre du livre que je vous donne là et je vous prie de ne pas l'exiger de moi. Il est dans la nature de mon esprit de ne pouvoir trouver le titre d'un livre qu'en écrivant les derniers chapitres. Mais vous pouvez compter sur une oeuvre de l'observation la plus douloureuse et d'un tragique puissamment noir. Plus une seule attaque personnelle, d'ailleurs. Le pamphlétaire est enterré avec Marchenoir. C'est une gourme que j'ai jetée une fois pour toutes et que je ne reprendrai pas, du moins dans un roman.

"Ce que je puis vous assurer, c'est que ce livre passionnera les irrégulières, pour lesquelles je suis, à ne vous rien cacher, débordant de tendresse. Jugez par là si je suis pour votre maison une bonne affaire!"

Cette lettre confidentielle où je n'aventurai que la moitié de ma pensée se terminait par la demande officielle d'une avance de cinq cents francs qui n'aurait pas suffi, pour les raisons que vous savez, mais qu'on me garantissait renouvelable sur la justification ultérieure d'une moitié de mon manuscrit.

Certes! je ne disais pas toute ma pensée. Ces médiocres trafiquants auraient poussé de beaux cris! Le fond de mon livre, le voici: Il n'y a pour la femme, créature temporairement, provisoirement inférieure, que deux façons d'être acceptables: la maternité la plus auguste ou le

plaisir. En d'autres termes: la Sainteté ou la Prostitution. Marie-Magdeleine avant ou Marie-Magdeleine après. Entre les deux, il n'y a que l'Honnête Femme, c'est-à-dire la femelle du Bourgeois, le réprouvé absolu qu'aucun holocauste divin ne peut rédimier. Une sainte peut tomber dans la boue et une prostituée jaillir dans la lumière, mais jamais ni l'une ni l'autre ne pourra devenir une honnête femme, et l'inamovible pécore sans entrailles et sans cerveau, qu'on appelle une honnête femme et qui refusa naguère l'hospitalité à l'Enfant-Dieu, est dans une impuissance éternelle de s'évader de son néant par la chute ou par l'ascension.

Mais toutes ont un point commun, c'est la préconception assurée de leur dignité de dispensatrices de la joie. Causa nostrae laetitiae! Janua caeli! Dieu seul peut savoir de quelle façon ces formes sacrées s'amalgament à la méditation des plus pures et ce que leur mystérieuse physiologie leur suggère!

Moi, cher ami, je ne crois qu'aux idées absolues. Je passerai donc sur le ventre à toutes les psychologies connues et j'irai droit à cette affirmation monstrueuse par laquelle je crois possible de tout expliquer:

Toute femme,--qu'elle le sache ou qu'elle l'ignore, --est persuadée que sa vulve est le Paradis. Plantaverat autem Dominus Deus PARADISUM VOLUPTATIS a principio, in quo posuit hominem quem formaverit. Par conséquent, nulles prières, nulles pénitences, nuls martyres n'ont une suffisante efficacité d'impétration pour obtenir cet inestimable joyau que le poids en diamants des nébuleuses ne pourrait payer. Jugez de ce qu'elle donne quand elle se donne et mesurez son sacrilège quand elle se vend. Or, voici ma conclusion fort inattendue:

La femme A RAISON de croire tout cela et de prétendre tout cela, elle a infiniment raison, puisque cette partie de son corps a été le tabernacle du Dieu vivant, et que nul ne peut assigner des bornes à la solidarité de ce confondant mystère.

Mon cher ami, Georges Knopff, je viens de relire toute cette exposition d'un inexposable sujet et je sens très bien que je suis très embêtant et fort peu clair. En vérité, j'aurais besoin des développements du livre et des péripéties du drame pour préciser ces évolutions psychologiques telles que je les conçois. Cependant, ai-je réussi, dites-le moi, à vous faire entrevoir la magnificence d'un tel sujet dont les difficultés prodigieuses m'accablent d'avance mais dont la seule pensée me transporte? Je brûle de dire enfin un peu de vérité profonde au milieu de tant de mensonges littéraires et de dramatiques rengaines. Et, vous le savez, la Vérité est un



des noms de la Miséricorde. Je veux que cette oeuvre transsude la miséricorde, qu'elle la pleure, qu'elle la pleuve et que Celles qu'on regarde comme le fumier du monde soient littéralement submergées de cette effusion!

Mais, je veux que ce nouveau livre, que je crois plus grandement conçu que le Désespéré, soit une oeuvre d'art plus parfaite aussi et c'est pour cela que j'ai tant besoin de cette bienheureuse sécurité que vous me faites entrevoir. C'est une grande charité et peut-être, je le crois, une haute justice, de délivrer des angoisses de la matérielle existence un artiste dont les oeuvres sont considérées<sup>1</sup> comme une occasion de joie ou de dilatation pour les âmes.

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<sup>1</sup>Léon Bloy, Lettres à Georges Khnopff, March 14, 1887.

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