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Marcel Hébert, *The Modernist as Philosopher: Selected Writings of Marcel Hébert*. Translated by C. J. T. Talar and Elizabeth Emery. Edited by C. J. T. Talar. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011. viii + 254 pp. Bibliography and index. \$64.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8132-1879-3.

Review by Stephen Schloesser, Loyola University Chicago.

In September 1902, an essay entitled “Souvenirs d’Assise” was published in the venerable *Revue blanche* as it approached the end of its fabled fin-de-siècle career. The author’s attribution read: “Abbé Marcel Hébert.” A quick glance at other authors in that volume—including Guillaume Apollinaire, Alfred Jarry, Félix Le Dantec, and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus—suggests strange company.[1] How did the Abbé’s philosophical contribution find warm welcome alongside avant-garde agendas of anarchists, socialists, Dreyfusards, ‘pataphysicians, symbolists and other assorted post-impressionists?

Not surprisingly, “Souvenirs d’Assise” had a back story. Hébert had written and reproduced it three years earlier for private circulation only among friends. Somehow a copy made its way into the hands of the cardinal archbishop of Paris who, in turn (as the *Revue blanche* reported) “forced Abbé Hébert to resign as director of the École [Fénelon], then, little by little, relieved him of all ecclesiastical faculties because M. Hébert refused to retract these lines, the result of twenty-five years of reflection” (p. 51). Why had the *Revue* decided to publish this document now gone rogue? “The interest of this dialogue is that it asks aloud a question everyone asks in hushed tones,” asserted the editor’s note. “Attentive spectators of the times, we limit ourselves to informing our readers about a development likely to mark the history of French ideas” (pp. 51, 49). The following year, the *Revue*’s last, Abbé Hébert published a final salvo as he quietly left the Church: “La Faillite du catholicisme despotique.”[2]

*The Modernist as Philosopher* reintroduces this largely forgotten figure to a new audience, especially those desiring (or requiring) Hébert’s writings in English translation.[3] In the first part of this volume, editor and co-translator C. J. T. Talar has assembled five essays by Hébert spanning seventeen years (1886 through 1903). In the second part, Talar has provided a translation of Hébert’s brief but rich analytical survey of varieties of philosophical *Pragmatism* (1908). He has also included William James’s review of that book; Hébert’s response to James; and yet another 1908 review by the French Protestant Eugène Ménégoz who, along with Auguste Sabatier, initiated the “symbolo-fideistic” movement in theology. By assembling texts underscoring ties between French Roman Catholic Modernists and American philosophical pragmatism, Talar has provided source documents underlying his earlier exposition of this transatlantic exchange.[4]

However, behind the pragmatism hovers Hébert’s primary interest, an uncompromising fin-de-siècle symbolism. This anti-positivist movement had been embraced by literary, artistic, and musical fellow travelers populating the pages of several journals including the *Revue blanche*. Indeed, a decade after Hébert’s death, his 1925 biographer retrospectively christened him “*Un Prêtre symboliste*.”[5] Hébert’s somewhat single-minded attention to distinguishing the symbol from its referent had been first profoundly influenced by his reading of Immanuel Kant. He believed that Kant’s fundamental distinction

between phenomena and noumena (as Hébert understood it) was capable of rescuing religion in modernity. More pointedly, symbolism offered the possibility of reconciling religious belief with the seemingly heartless waste in both nature and history. As Talar notes in his illuminating introduction, the implications of Darwin's vision haunted Hébert along with many others in his epoch (pp. 8-10). "[W]e would gladly *symbolize* this spirit of goodness (itself a symbol) by the 'heavenly Father' of the Gospel," wrote Hébert, "but it has become forever impossible to take these words *literally* in saying: I believe in the Heavenly Father, in the Infinite Love that created consumption, the plague, cancer, hurricanes, volcanoes. . . ." (p. 76, emphasis original).

By means of the symbolist's analysis, anthropomorphic "images" produced by theology and popular piety—approximate and provisional symbols of perfect, unchanging, and fundamentally unknowable "ideas" analyzed in philosophy—could be rescued and preserved for those who found them personally necessary. As long as the (phenomenal) "image" was not confused with the (noumenal) "idea," idolatry could be avoided and religion rendered compatible with reason. Derivations from this basic distinction between the thing-in-itself and the thing-for-us run throughout these essays and function as the pivot on which Hébert's arguments turn. In the final analysis, in both the 1886-1903 works influenced by Kantianism and the 1908 study of pragmatism, the central problem is epistemological: What constitutes more or less adequate *representation* of "Reality"? The symbolic image must be "objective" in the sense that it is derived from phenomenal experience and truly point beyond itself to the Ideal; and yet its provisional and partial nature must always be maintained, never confused with the Ideal it represents.

By opening the volume with two essays written thirteen years apart—"Thomism and Kantianism" (1886) and "Memories of Assisi" (1899)—Talar establishes both Hébert's initial conciliatory stance, as well as the galvanizing effect that fin-de-siècle symbolism was about to exert on him. Hébert frames his first essay as a defense of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) which had been the subject of much controversy during the previous six years.[6] The encyclical had mandated the restoration of Thomism in Catholic educational institutions throughout the world—an attempt, Hébert underscores approvingly, "to strengthen and perfect the old" (p.28; Hébert quoting Leo XIII, emphasis original). Although Kant had generally been viewed as that destructive figure against which the Thomistic revival had primarily been aimed, Hébert deftly portrays Kant as fundamentally agreeing with Thomas Aquinas on basic principles. Both systems acknowledge the "objectivity" that comes from the "matter" of sense experience; and both agree that this "objective" principle must nevertheless undergo distortion in the process of knowledge as phenomena conforms to the knower's state or conceptual schema.[7] Throughout this essay, Hébert's argument utilizes multiple variations on the basic phenomenal-noumenal distinction: facts v. nature; facts v. essence; existence v. nature; senses v. substance. Beneath the variety lies the single problem of representation: while our general ideas, definitions, and classifications "have an *objective* value since they represent *objective* realities; it is nonetheless true that they do not enable us to know things as they are *in themselves*, but as our mind subject to their mysterious influence, represents them, in accordance with its own laws" (p. 43, emphasis original).

"Thomism and Kantism" had been published in January 1886. Later that same year, on September 18 in *Le Figaro*, Jean Moréas published his literary manifesto, "Le symbolisme." The task of symbolist poetry: "à vêtir l'Idée d'une forme sensible." The symbol's aim was not itself but rather the representation of the Ideal: "Ainsi, dans cet art...tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes: ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales." [8] The next month, Moréas co-founded the literary review, *Le Symboliste*.

There is something serendipitous about this intersection of Hébert and Moréas in 1886. As this decade

passed into the fin-de-siècle, Hébert would find in symbolism a creative inflection for his Kantian insights. In the very last year of the passing century, he privately published and circulated among sympathetic friends (or so it seemed) his “Memories of Assisi.” In this essay, Hébert explicitly uses symbolist terms as he analyzes the problem of treating the (phenomenal) image as an “object in reality” when in fact “it represents for pure thought only a symbol” of the (noumenal) idea (p. 62). Moréas’ image of the Ideal clothed in perceptible form is here applied to doctrine: for example, although the Resurrection of Christ “ceases to be considered a fact of the physical order, it remains a fact of the ideal order and conserves, under its imaginative covering, all its value” (p. 65). This value, as Talar helpfully underscores, is the “regulative” function of the “ideal.” At stake is representation: both thought and action need a metric that measures their more or less approximate approaches to the ideal. “I recognize that the truth is in Christ and in the Church, but it resides there only in the general direction given to thought and activity,” writes Hébert; “we must adapt this direction to the scientifically established conditions of reality” (p. 67).

As the fin-de-siècle yielded to a new century, “The Last Idol: Study of the ‘Divine Personality’” (July 1902) appeared in the very midst of the Church-State civil war. The anti-clerical laws begun the previous summer (Law of Associations, 1901) would eventually entail the rupture of diplomatic relations with the papacy in 1904 and culminate in the Act of Separation (9 December 1905). In this study of the “idolatry” entailed in anthropomorphizing the ideal as a “divine personality,” Kantian categories are deployed via symbolism to argue that the “divine,” properly speaking, is an ideal that lies “beyond everything we know as *substance* and as *essence*.” Hence, the attribution of anthropomorphic traits to this Ideal—the creation of a “Divine Personality” as “it *appears* in our imperfect and fragmentary experiences”—is the forging of an idol, the “Last Idol” (p. 81, emphasis original).

Pulsing within the discursive current of the “anthropomorphic” is this essay’s vitalist focus on *life* and, as a corollary, temporal directionality. The laicist icon, Ernest Renan, makes an important appearance here, as does the symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck. “What was called ‘the gods,’” asserts Maeterlinck, “is today called ‘life’” (p. 79). More pervasive is Henri Bergson’s vitalism and perhaps also Schopenhauer’s renowned “will to live” (which Hébert later quotes with approval [pp. 186-187]).<sup>[9]</sup> Reality here is in perpetual motion, “an incommensurable force” that “strives unceasingly” toward “the Ideal”; it “carries within it, as the law of its own evolution, this Ideal, a living law, true life of all life” (p. 76). Problems arise (following Bergson) when we “spatialize” metaphorical realities (pp. 72, 75; cf. 90-91). Seen within what Friedrich Nietzsche termed the “perspectivity-optics of life,” the noumenal’s regulatory function acquires increased importance: it gives phenomenal time and movement directionality.<sup>[10]</sup> Hébert glosses Renan: “when all is said and done, the outcome of the world’s forces drifts toward the Good” (p. 76).

Two months following “The Last Idol” appeared the *Revue blanche*’s publication of “Assisi” (September 1902). As the next year arrived, Hébert’s Catholic world underwent a seismic shift. Not only had the Abbé been subjected to dismissal from his teaching post and suspension from ecclesiastical faculties; but in July 1903, Leo XIII—the Pope whom Hébert had so vigorously supported nearly two decades earlier—died. He was succeeded by the intransigent anti-modernist, Pius X. The two essays here dating from 1903 reveal Hébert’s mind as he quietly leaves the Church. “Anonymous or Polyonymous” is a sequel to the anthropomorphic analysis in “Last Idol.” Hébert distinguishes philosophy from theology: the first is concerned with the (noumenal) idea beyond all names; the second, by contrast, being both practical and popular, yields numerous names (symbolic images) for this single anonymous ineffable. Since both express the same “sentiment” and have for their object “the same objective and mysterious reality,” they

cannot at base contradict one another (p. 88). And yet in the end, concludes Hébert, “it is better to content oneself” with “minimal anthropomorphism” and avoid slippage into idolatry (p. 103).

Having arrived at this one thing necessary, Hébert concludes that it is precisely what official Catholicism cannot do. The contemporaneously published “Bankruptcy of Despotic Catholicism” (*Revue blanche*, March 1903) signals the end of his hopes for a symbolist solution: “a symbolic *Catholicism* cannot be conceived.” Hébert continues: “Without abdication, Catholic authority will never accept being considered symbolic, that is, as being fundamentally only a *provisional* pedagogical method for souls who are still ‘minors’” (pp. 127-128, emphasis original). In order to stay within the Church, “mature” souls are always forced “to *put on an act as did Galileo*: in the name of the collectivity, they will be required to adhere by faith to certain affirmations...certain *fictions*, certain ‘essential lies’...which is possible only in interpreting them, in one’s innermost heart, symbolically, ideally, *in one’s own way*, in an entirely different sense than that adopted by the masses and *imposed by authority in its official explanations*” (p. 117, emphasis original). “Despotic Catholicism” marks conclusions: shortly after its publication, *La Revue blanche* folded, Leo XIII died, and Hébert exited the priesthood and the Church.

Hébert’s 1908 study of various “pragmatist” writers lies on the far side of this French Catholic drama: by the year of its publication, the anti-clerical legislation of 1901-1905 had become settled fact; so too the papal condemnations of “Modernism” (July and September 1907) issued during the previous year. Hébert’s *Pragmatism* provides a concise compendium of the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and F. C. S. Schiller; its appendices draw stimulating and surprising connections among figures as various as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, François-René de Chateaubriand, Édouard Le Roy, Marcellin Berthelot, and Émile Durkheim. James’s review of this survey and Hébert’s reply highlight and clarify fundamental differences.

Although James disagrees with the accuracy of Hébert’s characterization, he puts his finger on exactly what Hébert considers objectionable: “thought” in the pragmatists’ scheme does not have “cognitive value, representative value, *valeur de connaissance proprement dite ... connaissance objective*” (pp. 226, 227, emphasis original). For his part, Hébert utilizes Bergson to provide a French counter to the Anglo-Saxons and maintain the primacy of the conceptual. He quotes from *L’Évolution créatrice* (which had only just appeared the previous year): “We must accustom ourselves to think Being directly,” insisted Bergson; “We must strive to see in order to see, and no longer to see in order to act” (p. 191). Although Hébert opposes what he considers to be pragmatism’s subordination of the conceptual to the instrumental—a primacy of “action”—he nevertheless recognizes the ideal as having a regulatory function in terms of desire, volition, and direction. Yet he remains, in the end, a symbolist: ground must not be yielded on both the possibility and necessity of “metaphysics,” the “objectivity” of the known object, and the ability to judge representations of the ideal as more or less approximate. Hence Bergsonism’s inestimable value: “Pure perception, intuition of the absolute,” concludes Hébert, “these are all things which establish essential divisions between M. Bergson’s doctrine and Anglo-American pragmatism” (p. 192).

Talar’s volume contributes to an ongoing revisionist project of reevaluating the episode of Roman Catholic Modernism. It has long been seen as a largely intramural affair, Catholicism’s marginal, isolated, esoteric, and even elite domestic squabble. However, with the benefit of a century’s perspective, the debates leading up to and following the 1907 Modernist condemnations increasingly appear as a broadly “catholic” engagement with key intellectual issues and challenges of the day. For example, Hébert’s attempts at thinking through Kant’s noumenal-phenomenal distinction was contemporaneous not only with Bergson and James but also with Edmund Husserl’s path-breaking explorations in

phenomenology: *Logische Untersuchungen* [1900-1901] and *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* [1913]. The as yet uncategorized Modernism was, as the *Revue blanche* astutely observed, “a development likely to mark the history of French ideas.” The legacy would eventually be carried on most importantly by a layman, Maurice Blondel.[11]

For scholars primarily interested in Catholic Modernism as an ecclesiastical episode, Hébert’s insistence on maintaining *both* the phenomenal *and* the noumenal is yet more evidence that the Church’s magisterial caricatures of the Modernists were wildly off the mark. In this two-dimensional official account, Modernists embraced phenomena, evolution, and immanence while rejecting (first as agnostics, then as atheists) their opposing correlates (ideas, changelessness, transcendence).[12] Yet, the more one reads the actual works of those authors classified (by their opponents) as Modernists, the more one sees an acute dialectical awareness—indeed, imperative—to preserve *both* the material-historical *as well as* immaterial-ahistorical elements. For all the development in his thought, Hébert’s fervent (one might say conservative) insistence on an objectivity in knowledge never strayed far from his initial position set out in 1886. The Modernists were often portrayed by their opponents not merely as atheists but as simpletons. Making their works more widely accessible a century after their silencing lets them speak once again for themselves.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

C. J. T. Talar, “Introduction”

#### PART I. Articles by Marcel Hébert

1. “Thomism and Kantianism” [“Thomisme et Kantisme,” *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 13(January 1886): 364-384]. The date in Talar [1896] is a typographical error.
2. “Memories of Assisi” [*Souvenirs d’Assise* (Paris: Impr. Bour, 1899; private circulation); “Souvenirs D’Assise,” *Revue blanche* 29(15 September 1902): 81-95]. The date in Talar [1903] is incorrect.
3. “The Last Idol: Study of the ‘Divine Personality’” [“La Dernière Idole. Étude sur la ‘personnalité divine,’” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 10(July 1902): 397-408].
4. “Anonymous or Polyonymous: Second Study on the ‘Divine Personality’” [“Anonyme ou polyonyme. Seconde étude sur la ‘personnalité divine,’” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 11(March 1903): 231-247].
5. “The Bankruptcy of Despotic Catholicism” [“La Faillite du catholicisme despotique,” *Revue blanche* 30(March 1903): 439-457].

PART II. Marcel Hébert, *Pragmatism: A Study of Its Various Forms, Anglo-American, French, and Italian, and of Its Religious Value* (second edition) [*Le pragmatisme. Étude de ses diverses formes, anglo-américaines, françaises, italiennes et de sa valeur religieuse*, 2d ed. (Paris: Émile Nourry, [1908] 1910)].

William James, Review of Marcel Hébert, *Le pragmatisme* (1st ed.) [*Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 5(3 December 1908): 689-694].

Marcel Hébert, Author's Reply to James review. [Originally in *Le Pragmatisme*, 2d ed.]

PART III: Eugène Ménégoz, Review of Hébert, *Le pragmatisme*.

[*Annales de bibliographie théologique* (1908); reprint in Ménégoz, *Publications diverses sur le fidéisme et son application à l'enseignement chrétien traditionnel*, 2 vols. (Paris: Fischbacher, 1909), 2:494-499)].

## NOTES

[1] The essay appeared in the 15 September 1902 issue. Gallica's digital copy of this table of contents may be found at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k155509/f632.image>. For the *Revue* see Georges Benier, *La Revue blanche: ses amis, ses artistes* (Paris: Hazan, 1991); Paul-Henri Bourrelier, *La Revue blanche: une génération dans l'engagement 1890-1905* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

[2] Gallica digital copy: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k15551n/f640.image>

[3] As such it finds company in Gregory B. Sadler's recent collection of translated articles and addresses on the topic of *la philosophie chrétienne*. See review of Sadler, *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011). <http://www.h-france.net/vol11reviews/vol11no233Schloesser.pdf>

[4] See C. J. T. Talar, "Le critique malgré lui: Marcel Hébert's *Le pragmatisme*," in David G. Schultenover, ed., *The Reception of Pragmatism in France and the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890-1914* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 167-184.

[5] Albert Houtin, *Un Prêtre symboliste. Marcel Hébert (1851-1916)* (Paris: F. Rieder, 1925). On this biography, see C. J. T. Talar, "An Ideal Modernist: Marcel Hébert," in Harvey Hill et al., *By Those Who Knew Them: French Modernists Left, Right, and Center* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

[6] Note that typographical errors incorrectly identify Hébert's essay as having been published ten years later, i.e., 1896 (pp. vii, 27).

[7] In this respect Hébert largely follows the open Thomism practiced at Louvain, especially exemplified by its foremost popularizer, Maurice de Wulf. See Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 33-34.

[8] Jean Moréas, "Le Symbolisme," *Figaro* (18 September 1886); reprinted in Léon Vanier, ed., *Les premières armes du symbolisme: documents* (Paris: Vanier, 1889), pp. 31-39, at 33, 34. It is worth noting that four decades earlier an art critic reporting on the Salon of 1842 had written that a mystical work expressed "a symbol and not a material action; it is the interpretation of an idea and not the reproduction of fact." See Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, p. 28; for Mallarmé and Moréas, p. 215; for origins in Charles Baudelaire, pp. 166-167 and p. 252; for the Decadent application in Joris-Karl Huysmans, pp. 40-42. For *Le Symboliste* see Michael Wroblewski, "Four Symbolist Periodicals: Toward the Definition of an Esthetic" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1977); Pamela A. Genova, *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002).

[9] Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* had been published in 1888, contemporaneously with the translation (quoted by Hébert) of Schopenhauer's *Le Monde comme volonté et comme représentation* (1888-1890). Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* had appeared in 1896.

[10] Hébert quotes this Nietzschean term from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1885) on p. 189.

[11] A consultant to the Holy Office remarked that Blondel's "poor theological ideas" were able to be tolerated because he was "a young lay professor"; in the case of Lucien Laberthonnière, however, "we cannot accept from a priest, who should be a precise and rigorous theologian, what we can tolerate from a layman." See my review of Kathleen A. Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent* (Eugene Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011): <http://www.h-france.net/vol12reviews/vol12no41Schloesser.pdf>, endnote 4.

[12] See, for example, Pope Pius X's encyclical against the Modernists, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (September 8, 1907): "We begin, then, with the philosopher. Modernists place the foundation of religious philosophy in that doctrine which is usually called *Agnosticism*. According to this teaching human reason is confined entirely within the field of *phenomena*, that is to say, to things that are perceptible to the senses, and in the manner in which they are perceptible; it has no right and no power to transgress these limits....Yet it is a fixed and established principle among them that both science and history must be atheistic: and within their boundaries there is room for nothing but *phenomena*; God and all that is divine are utterly excluded." (§6, emphasis original.)

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_x/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-x\\_enc\\_19070908\\_pascendi-dominici-gregis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html)

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