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SEEKING PERFECTION OF FORM:
FRENCH CULTURAL RESPONSES TO
THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Catherine O'Brien*

France offers a markedly rich Marian heritage, from its Gothic cathedrals to its devotional art and poetry, and yet testifies to a notably problematic relationship with organized religion. While significant connections exist between the French nation and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, such as the Marian apparitions to Saint Catherine Labouré in 1830 and to Saint Bernadette in 1858, the treatment of this subject in French literature and film reveals both reverent and contentious responses. Misunderstandings of the dogmatic definition have been disseminated via secular texts, while difficulties beset efforts to depict the Immaculate Virgin on page and screen, even in the work of those who fully comprehend the theology and seek perfection of form.

The spirit of revolutionary fervor that stirred the French people in 1789 eventually led to the separation of Church and State in 1905, and France has clung fiercely to its secular credentials—an issue that caused twenty-first-century conflict in 2004 with legislation that enshrined in law the longstanding *de facto* ban on the wearing of conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in French state schools.

Yet, it is not difficult to locate Marian symbolism in France's secular society, not least because over one hundred churches and eighty cathedrals were dedicated to the Virgin Mary between 1170 and 1270¹; the cathedral of Notre-Dame, constructed be-

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¹ See Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary? The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16.

tween 1163 and 1300, stands as a landmark at the very center of the capital city; the 15th of August, the feast of the Assumption, remains a public holiday; and the French tourist industry benefits from the pilgrimages towards the officially recognized Marian apparition sites in Paris, the Alps, the Pyrenees and Mayenne. It is somewhat ironic that this determinedly anti-clerical republic is now the location of the world's most famous healing shrine at Lourdes.

France bears the appellation the "Eldest Daughter" of the Church² and French Catholic writers extol the "special relationship" with the Madonna that the nineteenth-century apparitions appeared to confirm.³ According to legend, the Virgin Mary appeared at the baptism of Clovis (King of the Franks between A.D. 481 and 511) and gave him a lily, which subsequently became the heraldic emblem of France. In A.D. 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor and is said to have presented him with a blue banner covered with golden fleurs-de-lis.⁴ This symbol came to represent France and was used by King Louis VII on his shield during the crusades in the twelfth century.⁵

King Louis XIII chose to place his kingdom under the protection of the Virgin Mary in the seventeenth century, and the title "Queen of France" was added to the Marian litanies of praise. It was a decision that appeared to win heavenly approval when his wife's prayers to the Virgin were answered and she gave birth to a son, the future Louis XIV, after years of infertility.⁶

However, the Enlightenment brought organized religion under attack and, with the onset of the French Revolution, Catholicism

² *Marian Shrines of France* (New Bedford, Mass.: Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1998), 1.

³ Joris-Karl Huysmans, the one-time decadent writer whose conversion to Catholicism includes a great devotion to the Virgin, writes: "In the history of France, Lourdes is neither an exception nor a novelty: the Mother of Christ has always regarded France as her fief." See *The Crowds of Lourdes*, trans. W. H. Mitchell (London: Burns, Oates and Co., 1925), 1.

⁴ See <http://www.baronage.co.uk/bphtm-02/moa-15.html> (accessed 30 April 2004).

⁵ Vincenzina Krymow, *Mary's Flowers: Gardens, Legends and Meditations* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1999), 140.

⁶ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976; reprinted London: Picador, 1990), 281.

went on trial along with the aristocracy and the antagonism between Church and State reached a violent climax. It is a conflict that was played out via iconography when the Virgin Mary as emblematic Queen of France was challenged by a secular rival: Marianne. On the new French seal, designed in 1792, the post-revolutionary nation was personified as a female figure, dressed in flowing robes and wearing a red Phrygian bonnet.⁷ In one of the more famous representations, Eugène Delacroix's "Liberty leading the people" (1830), the Republic is depicted as a warlike woman that is the antithesis of the Marian image. When the French flag, with its fleurs-de-lis on a blue field, was replaced by the red, white and blue *tricolor*, the bond between the Virgin Mary and French patriotism was visibly severed.

Nevertheless, the signing of the Concordat between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII in 1801 gave the Catholic Church a foothold in France again after the Terror. Organized religion underwent something of a revival during the Restoration and again, after the July Revolution of 1830, under the reign of Louis Philippe (1830-1848). Yet, despite the fact that Catholicism was still recognized as the religion of the great majority of the French people,⁸ the Church was now subject to the State and had lost many of its earlier privileges.

The nineteenth century was an era of industrialization, revolution and anti-religious philosophies. However, in this time of upheaval, devotion to the Virgin amongst practicing Catholics remained fervent. Marie remained one of the most popular names throughout France, with the fact that it was a name also given to boys evidently increasing its dissemination. In the period 1840 to 1850, 31% of babies were called Marie, and from 1850 to 1880, more than one woman in three was named Marie.⁹

When the sanctuaries were reopened after the Revolution and there was renewed interest in religious art, images of the

⁷ Maurice Agulhon and Pierre Bonte, *Marianne: Les visages de la République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 16-17.

⁸ Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 18.

⁹ Claude Langlois, "La conjoncture mariale des années quarante," in *La Salette: Apocalypse, pèlerinage et littérature (1856-1996)*, ed. François Angelier and Claude Langlois (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2000), 23.

Virgin were particularly favored. Between 1820 and 1850, the copies of paintings most in demand for French churches included Prud'hon's *Assumption* and the Spanish painter Murillo's *Assumption, Virgin of the Rosary, and Conception*.¹⁰ The latter image was particularly significant, given that the campaign for a new dogma of the Immaculate Conception was being waged by Catholics at that time.

Therefore, the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Paris, La Salette, Lourdes and Pontmain did not appear in a vacuum and could be seen as a challenge to secular symbolism. There was a background of consciousness-raising in the wake of the damage to the Catholic Church done during the French Revolution. Hugh McLeod argues that nineteenth-century French Catholics believed that the nation was at its strongest when it adhered to the Catholic faith and that the Virgin "had a special predilection for the French people—a preference which gained added meaning when one considered how much the French people—or at least a powerful faction among them—had done to anger her."¹¹

While there was opposition to a third Marian dogma in Germany, England and Ireland during the nineteenth century, there was support for recognition of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception in France. There were petitions to have the adjective "immaculate" added to the feast of the Conception of Mary (8 December), for the title to be added to the Litany of Loreto, and, from ten French archbishops and forty-one bishops to Pope Gregory XVI, for it to become an article of faith¹²—a campaign that culminated in the proclamation by Pope Pius IX in 1854.

However, despite the fact that *Ineffabilis Deus* may have ultimately defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to the satisfaction of the Catholic Church, the term "Immaculate Conception" is not necessarily easy for lay people to comprehend—a fact illustrated by Saint Bernadette herself, whose visions at the Massabielle grotto at Lourdes appeared to validate the dogma four years later. It was on 25 March 1858, the feast of the Annunciation, that the vision who had been

¹⁰ Langlois, "La conjoncture mariale," 31.

¹¹ McLeod, *Secularisation*, 245.

¹² Langlois, "La conjoncture mariale," 36.

appearing to the young peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous, at Lourdes in the Pyrenees, identified herself as "The Immaculate Conception." When Bernadette returned from the grotto on that day, she kept repeating the phrase spoken to her in her local patois ("*Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou*") by the beautiful young girl in an endeavor to learn it by heart and to pass on the exact message to her priest, Fr Peyramale.

The film director Jean Delannoy, who is one of the exponents of France's "tradition of quality" cinema, made a feature film of these events entitled *Bernadette* in 1987—a film that is now screened every day at a cinema in Lourdes between April and October. In Delannoy's film, Bernadette walks along repeating the phrase to herself so that, with a touch of humor, she greets Fr. Peyramale in his garden with those very words: "I am the Immaculate Conception," rather than the more usual "hello." This signals that Bernadette has no idea what the phrase means and, when questioned by the priest, she denies that she has heard anyone mention the dogma before. It is at this moment that the camera focuses on Fr. Peyramale, isolating him in the frame as he places his hand over his eyes. Although he is physically obscuring his sight, it is at this moment that he *sees* and comes to believe that the vision in the grotto is indeed the Virgin Mary.

So as to convey this conviction to the cinema audience, Delannoy manipulates the time scale here by interspersing this scene of 25 March with the cure of the paralyzed and moribund boy, Justin Bouhort, who was placed in the spring water by his mother—his cure, the fifth confirmed miracle of Lourdes, actually took place in July 1858. (Henry King made the same artistic choice in his version of the story, *Song of Bernadette* [1943]—this miracle, in which a young child's life is saved, is presumably amongst the most aesthetically pleasing and emotionally uplifting for script writers.)

In Delannoy's film, Fr. Peyramale explains the dogma of the Immaculate Conception to Bernadette as she drinks a cup of milk—the beverage symbolizing her childlike innocence—but he is sympathetic when faced with her failure to grasp the meaning. (In Henry King's film, Fr. Peyramale asks: "Why should you? Great scholars have wracked their brains about it for centuries.")

The historian Ruth Harris notes: "It was as if the apparition had said she was beauty rather than that she was beautiful, for the Virgin Mary was called the *Mère immaculée*, the *Vierge immaculée*, but never the Immaculate Conception."¹³ In *Bernadette*, when Fr. Peyramale explains that the apparition was wrong to express herself in that manner, he is met by Bernadette's rather disarming response that the Virgin may not be able to speak very good French (a problem with which the poorly educated young girl could easily identify).

Saint Bernadette, in her ignorance and innocence, was uttering a phrase that she did not comprehend at that time—and the repetition of these words without fully understanding their meaning has become a common factor in secular society. While it is not surprising that lay Catholics have struggled with the arguments over the Virgin Mary's immunization or sanctification in the womb—for these are issues that troubled theologians of the stature of Saint Thomas Aquinas¹⁴—the main confusion is caused because ill-informed commentators repeatedly fail to distinguish between the virginal conception of Jesus and the 1854 dogma, so that the words "Immaculate Conception" are employed indiscriminately in popular culture, both in scholarly texts and newspaper articles, particularly with reference to female virginity and birth. The term is applied loosely, especially by journalists, with reference to IVF (in vitro fertilization) treatment or the birth of a child where the father is unknown.

Works of French literature and film serve to propagate the error. The renowned Marxist Paul Lafargue wrote an article in 1896 entitled "Le Mythe de l'Immaculée Conception" and built his whole argument on a misinterpretation, by supposedly examining the question of the Immaculate Conception while focusing on mythological goddesses and virgin births.¹⁵ Marcel Proust muddled the waters in his great twentieth-century novel *A la*

¹³ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Penguin, 1999), 8.

¹⁴ See *Dictionary of Mary* (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1997), 191-193.

¹⁵ Paul Lafargue (1841-1911) was the son-in-law of Karl Marx. http://www.marxists.org/francais/lafargue/works/1896/00/lafargue_18960000.htm (Accessed 6 April 2004).

recherche du temps perdu, in the volume entitled *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*. One of the characters, Elstir, describes the porch of the Balbec church, in which the life of the Virgin is told in low-reliefs, and he speaks of "le bras bandé de la sage-femme qui n'avait pas voulu croire, sans toucher, à l'Immaculée Conception"¹⁶ ["the bandaged arm of the midwife who had been reluctant to believe, without touching for herself, in the Immaculate Conception"¹⁷—evidently confusing the Immaculate Conception with Mary's *in partu* virginity and the apocryphal story of Salome in the *Proto-Gospel of James*.¹⁸ In *Glas* (1974), the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida refers on several occasions to the Immaculate Conception as a form of "self-generation" and claims that Mary herself was the result of a virgin birth.¹⁹

The film director Jean-Luc Godard recreates El Greco's *Immaculate Conception* (1608–1613) as a *tableau vivant* in his film *Passion* (1982) and offers it as a commentary on the loss of virginity of female protagonist, Isabelle. Isabelle and her partner, Jerzy, recite the *Agnus Dei* in the bedroom, as if underlining a sacred dimension to their actions; then, juxtapositions between this scene and the recreation of El Greco's painting of the Immaculate Conception lead to a major distortion.

El Greco's painting has, in itself, raised controversy, for some art critics have believed it to be an Assumption rather than an Immaculate Conception, but Godard sows further confusion. The respected French film critic Alain Bergala then exacerbates the problem in an article first published in 1994, indicating incorrectly that the Immaculate Conception is a moment of ecstasy and suffering when Jesus is conceived in Mary's womb.²⁰ The mistake is then promulgated in Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki's book *Speaking about Godard*, where Farocki misreads the Immaculate Conception in the light of Godard's film

¹⁶ Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* (2 vols.; Paris: Flammarion, 1987), 2:229–30.

¹⁷ Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (London: Penguin, 2002), 420.

¹⁸ See Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 253.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1994), 95b.

²⁰ Alain Bergala, *Nul mieux que Godard* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1999), 139.

so that the resulting analysis of the scene in *Passion* reproduces the inaccuracy.²¹ Consequently, artistic attempts to reflect on the Marian dogma have caused mistaken beliefs to be spread in words and image to a wider secular audience.

Nevertheless, existing beside these common misinterpretations, there are intersections between theology and French culture in the works of writers and artists who have sought to embrace the true meaning of the Immaculate Conception and to depict a woman who (in the words of Pope Pius IX) "from the first moment of her conception [was] preserved immune from all stain of original sin."²²

Latin theologians accepted without question that the Virgin Mary was free of "personal sin," reflecting Saint Augustine's view: "The honor of Christ forbids the least hesitation on the subject of possible sin by His Mother."²³ At the Council of Trent in 1547 it was confirmed that "through a special privilege Mary once justified was able to avoid all sins, even venial ones, throughout her entire life (Canon 23 on Justification)."²⁴ The difficulty is how to convey this purity on page and screen.

As the Bible offers no information on the life of Mary before the Annunciation, glimpses of her birth and childhood are limited to the apocryphal writings. The *Proto-Gospel of James*, which is also known as *The Birth of Mary*, recounts the story of Joachim and Anne, who feared that their marriage would be childless until angelic messengers informed them that Anne would conceive despite her advanced years. During the Medieval period, artists depicted Mary's parents embracing by the Golden Gate (an image which both the supporters and opponents of the Immaculate Conception could accept). In other visual manifestations, Saint Anne was represented with the Virgin visibly present in her womb.²⁵

²¹ Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, *Speaking about Godard* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 192.

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1994), 110.

²³ *Dictionary of Mary*, 191.

²⁴ *Dictionary of Mary*, 110.

²⁵ See Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 141.

Writers and (since the late nineteenth century) film directors who narrate the childhood of the Virgin must choose whether to embrace or circumnavigate this aspect of Catholic doctrine. Jacqueline Saveria Huré created a Marian "autobiography" entitled *Mémoires de Marie, fille d'Israël* (1986), which has a strong emphasis on Jewish tradition and culture and in which Mary recounts her story in a first-person narrative. In this account, the narrator's reflections on her infancy disregard any mythical or mystical elements such as those found in the *Proto-Gospel of James*. Indeed, the Mary of this story sums up her early years in the eyes of her family with the words: "On mettait à mon passif quelques colères et des espiègleries sans conséquences. Bref, je ne m'étais distinguée en rien."²⁶ ("I had been guilty of the odd tantrum or prank. In other words I had not been unusual in any way."²⁷) Then she goes on to state: "Ma vie, depuis son début jusqu'à ce jour, le Saint, béni soit-Il, en a noté les mérites et les défaillances. Qu'il lise en mon âme. Il est mon Juge, il est aussi mon Soutien. En ses mains, je place les miennes après les avoir élevées vers Lui."²⁸ ("From the very beginning, Yahweh has always known my life's merits and shortcomings. Let Him look into my soul. He is both my judge and my accomplice. I raise my hands towards Him and place them in His."²⁹)

It is a reaction taken up by Jean-Claude Darrigaud, who offers an abridged version of Saveria Huré's undertaking in *L'Évangile selon Marie de Nazareth* (1999). In the Prologue, Mary explains her decision not to discuss her own childhood: "Ne m'en veuillez pas de mes réticences. Elles ne font que traduire la conscience que j'ai de ma petitesse, de mon insignifiance."³⁰ ("Please forgive my reticence. It simply shows that I am aware how small and insignificant I am.") In attempting to relate the early years of the Virgin, Saveria Huré and Darrigaud avoid the

²⁶ Jacqueline Saveria Huré, *Mémoires de Marie, fille d'Israël* (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1986), 12.

²⁷ Jacqueline Saveria Huré, *I Mary, Daughter of Israel*, trans. Nina de Voogd (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 4.

²⁸ Saveria Huré, *Mémoires de Marie*, 14.

²⁹ Saveria Huré, *I Mary, Daughter of Israel*, 5.

³⁰ Jean-Claude Darrigaud, *L'Évangile selon Marie de Nazareth* (Bondy: Les Éditions Sacramento, 1999), 10.

problematics of a miraculous childhood. It is also notable that, in each text, Mary undergoes a normal labor in giving birth to Jesus—and there is no issue of escaping the fate outlined in Genesis: “I will multiply your pains in childbearing, / you shall give birth to your children in pain” (Gen. 3:16). Painless childbirth would be seen as “a corresponding sign of preservation or redemption from the effects of that Fall.”³¹

The focus in these texts is on humble humanity in the service of God, an approach that has echoes of Charles Péguy’s great poem *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, in which the Virgin is described as both “infiniment grande” and “infiniment petite.”³² It was this very poem that inspired Jean Delannoy’s filmic version of the life of Mary, *Marie de Nazareth* (1994), in which we briefly glimpse Mary’s ordinary existence before the Annunciation as she goes about her tasks in the community, talking to her female friends and fetching water from the well. However, Delannoy goes to some lengths to emphasize Mary’s purity and goodness of heart by stressing her gentleness and kind deeds, such as giving fruit to a blind woman in the film’s opening sequence.

In contrast, Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Je vous salue, Marie* (1984) relocated the story of Mary and Joseph to twentieth-century Switzerland, and one of the reasons that the film was so controversial is that the female protagonist at the heart of the diegesis complains at her lot after Gabriel’s visit and even utters obscenities in her struggle to come to terms with her situation. A study of theologies of the body that was published in 1985, the year of the film’s release, coincidentally identifies the disquiet caused by Godard’s work at that time: “Thus once it was seen that Mary of Nazareth was chosen by God as the virgin mother of the Son of God . . . , then for believers it gradually became evident that a woman chosen by Divine Providence for this role in cosmic history must have been prepared by God in such a way as to be entirely fitted for her role.”³³

³¹ Boss, *Empress*, 78.

³² Charles Péguy, *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 54.

³³ Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, Mass.: The Pope John Center, 1985), 538.

However, in conversations between Godard and the French writer Philippe Sollers after the making of the film, it is clear that Godard (a Protestant by birth) has little comprehension of this aspect of Catholic belief—a problem that was evidently a serious impediment to his purported ambition to make a film with Catholic images and Protestant music.³⁴ He has depicted an ordinary woman to whom extraordinary events occurred.

Xavier Bray claims that an artist's "ability to grasp and transmit a sense of beauty and grace—rather than literally to copy nature"—may constitute the glory of painting,³⁵ but filmmakers are relying on human nature and human flesh to convey these qualities. In the midst of the outcry surrounding Godard's film, critics remarked on the physical beauty of the actress, Myriem Roussel, who plays Godard's central protagonist and, in his analysis of *Je vous salue, Marie*, Charles Warren asks audiences to compare this filmic text with Renaissance painting and "to think how like or unlike painting of the Madonna is the filming of Myriem Roussel, alive and moving, playing this role?"³⁶ Indeed, Godard claimed that one of the greatest difficulties for a film director is to frame the face of the Virgin in close up, because then the focus is on the beauty of the particular actress playing the role rather than any Marian dimension.³⁷

We have no idea of the actual physical appearance of the human Mary of Nazareth, but, as Elizabeth Johnson points out in her study *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, Renaissance painters worked according to the principle "that great beauty implies lofty virtue and, conversely, that spiritual beauty shows itself in physical

³⁴ See David Sterritt, "Miéville and Godard: From Psychology to Spirit," in *Jean-Luc Godard's Hail Mary: Women and the Sacred in Film*, ed. Maryel Locke and Charles Warren (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 55.

³⁵ Xavier Bray, *El Greco* (London: National Gallery Co. Ltd., 2004), 38.

³⁶ Charles Warren, "Whim, God, and the Screen," in *Jean-Luc Godard's Hail Mary*, ed. Locke and Warren, 17-18.

³⁷ See Godard's interview with Dominique Païni and Guy Scarpetta, in *Art Press: Spécial Godard*, Hors série No.4 (December 1984-January/February 1985): 7.

ways,"³⁸ so that they used their Eurocentric ideal of female grace as the template for their images of the Virgin without regard for historical or ethnographic accuracy. Reinhold Zwick comments on the Western European features of the actress Myriam Muller, who plays the titular role in Jean Delannoy's *Marie de Nazareth*,³⁹ but it becomes clear in Delannoy's autobiographical writings that his main concern was to find a relatively unknown actress to play the part so that her previous onscreen appearances would not taint the performance.⁴⁰

Yet the image of female beauty and perfection has met with a notably antagonistic response in the works of certain feminist writers. Marina Warner, in her widely disseminated analysis of the Virgin Mary, *Alone of All Her Sex*, states that "every facet of the Virgin had been systematically developed to diminish, not increase, her likeness to the female condition. Her freedom from sex, painful delivery, age, death, and all sin exalted her *ipso facto* above ordinary women and showed them up as inferior."⁴¹ The French feminist novelist Annie Ernaux, whose work draws on her own autobiography, takes up this viewpoint in her novel *La femme gelée* (1981) in which the Catholic schoolgirls are offered a vision of "Marie sans tache"⁴² ("Mary without stain of sin") as the feminine ideal. Yet the narrator finds only negativity in this fact and repudiates what she sees as the oppression of the Catholic Church in this domain.

However, in sharp contrast, Maria Luchetti Bingemer claims that the female sex, which had been blamed for original sin, "is rehabilitated by the Catholic Church when it declares blessed this female body animated by the divine Spirit," and she writes:

It is not just Mary's soul which is preserved from sin and opposition to God's plan. It is her whole person, penetrated and energized by the

³⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 205.

³⁹ Reinhold Zwick, "Maria im Film," in *Handbuch der Marienkunde*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert and Heinrich Petri (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1997), 273.

⁴⁰ Jean Delannoy, *Aux yeux du souvenir: Bloc-notes 1944/1996* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998), 252.

⁴¹ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 153.

⁴² Annie Ernaux, *La femme gelée* (Éditions Gallimard, 1981), 57.

divine life, her bodiliness as the dwelling of the holy God. . . . For all that she is the unblemished fruit of God's creation, Mary is, in this view, more than ever a daughter of earth.⁴³

Some feminist commentators have rejected the Eve-Mary typology explored by Saint Justin Martyr, Saint Irenaeus and Saint Jerome. As Fr. Eamon R. Carroll points out in his study of feminist responses to the Virgin, this rejection of a New Eve presentation stems from the fact that certain feminist exegetes claim that Mary, as the perfect woman, is set against all other women, who are identified with the Eve of the Genesis story "as fickle, unreliable, morally inferior beings."⁴⁴

It is a theme which is adopted in Godard's film *Je vous salue, Marie* where the female characters Eva and Juliette offer carnal opposition to Mary's virginity. Eva, by name association, is linked to the temptation in Eden and the scene in which she eats an apple is played out by Godard in slow motion and with disturbing sound effects. While Eva engages in an adulterous relationship with her teacher, the character Juliette attempts to seduce Joseph away from Mary, so that rather than offering a straight dichotomy between Eva's sexual availability and Mary's chastity, the film depicts women other than Mary as wholly duplicitous.

However, Fr. Frederick Jelly offers a more positive reflection on the New Eve image:

Mary, as the Archetype of the Church, was never far from the minds of the Fathers. They contemplated in her grace-filled reception of the Word of God, and in her generous response of faith and loving obedience to Redemption, the model *par excellence* of what it means to be a Christian disciple, a member of the Church.⁴⁵

This is the approach that Jean Delannoy adopts in his film *Marie de Nazareth*, where (despite the lack of textual support

⁴³ Maria Clara Luchetti Bingemer, "Woman: Time and Eternity: The Eternal Woman and the Feminine Face of God," in *The Special Nature of Women?*, ed. Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM Press, 1991), 102.

⁴⁴ Eamon R. Carroll, O. Carm., "The Virgin Mary and Feminist Writers," *Carmelus* 41 (1994): 54.

⁴⁵ Frederick M. Jelly, O.P., "Towards a Theology of the Body through Mariology," *Marian Studies* 34 (1983): 76.

in the New Testament) Mary accompanies Jesus in the role of a "first disciple" and embraces the female followers of her son in solidarity.

In artistic representations, especially from the seventeenth century, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is frequently depicted as a young girl on her own, "sometimes at prayer, sometimes treading on a serpent, sometimes standing on the moon, sometimes crowned with stars," but in isolation from the rest of humanity. It is a form of iconography which "signifies that Mary was conceived in the mind of God before the foundation of the world, and associates her with the figure of Wisdom."⁴⁶

Fr. Benedict Ashley accepts that many see the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as removing Mary "from her ordinary humanity," but he writes that "this is precisely to misunderstand what the doctrine means. . . . From the beginning the Spirit of God has been converting those who have not rejected His light back to God in faith, but their conversion is imperfect and they continue to struggle with sin, as the Bible shows in its narrative of human failures."⁴⁷ For a host of French Catholic writers, it is this idea of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception that is a source of inspiration.

When Jean Delannoy filmed the story of Saint Bernadette, he avoided the literal route taken by Henry King in *Song of Bernadette*, in which the uncredited Linda Darnell literally appears and audibly speaks as the Virgin to the accompaniment of a heavenly chorus. In King's film the audience is placed in Bernadette's privileged position, witnessing the apparition with her. However, in Delannoy's version, the crowd on screen (and the cinema audience) look towards Bernadette as the medium of the message. When Jean Delannoy's film was shown at a youth festival to an audience of 1,500 Muslim students at Rabat, they were able to relate to the fact that God had chosen such a humble person as Bernadette to be His messenger on earth.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Boss, *Empress*, 141.

⁴⁷ Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 541.

⁴⁸ Delannoy, *Aux Yeux du souvenir*, 234.

Delannoy searched in vain for a suitable French actress to play the role of the visionary and after about thirty unsuccessful screen tests he was ready to abandon the project, for the girls who were young enough did not have sufficient talent and those with experience did not have the necessary innocence.⁴⁹ The solution was an American actress named Sydney Penny, who was unable to speak French but who took only two weeks of coaching to learn how to utter the dialogue phonetically so that she could later be post-synchronized more successfully—this dubbing giving her a slightly otherworldly feel that distinguishes her from her peers in the film. The presence of the Virgin is represented by a wind (one of cinema's popular manifestations of the divine) and a heavenly light reflected on the actress's face—leaving the image to the imagination of the spectator.

Yet, we have Saint Bernadette's testimony as to the appearance of the Virgin and, in his controversial nineteenth-century novel *Lourdes*, the French Naturalist writer Émile Zola comments on Bernadette's description of the apparition's blond hair and blue eyes and finds particularly notable the reference to the apparition's childlike beauty and innocence.⁵⁰

However, the Church was eager to age the Virgin of Bernadette's vision, apparently feeling uncomfortable with the seer's description of her as a young girl. In her historical study of Lourdes, Ruth Harris points out that Bernadette's Virgin was "a whitened image of youth, albeit resplendent and beautifully clad. . . . She described *Aquéro* as . . . a little girl, and nothing disturbed commentators as much as this insistence."⁵¹

Harris goes on to remark that the apparition "had neither the prophetic doom of the Virgin at La Salette, nor the healing rays and rounder contours of the Immaculate Mother on the miraculous medal," and she comments on "the absolute absence from her vision of any maternal references, a pre-pubescent guise that disturbed many believing Catholics unable to separate their notion of the Virgin from that of motherhood."⁵² However,

⁴⁹ Delannoy, *Aux Yeux du souvenir*, 226.

⁵⁰ Émile Zola, *Lourdes* (Paris: Omnibus, 1998), 483.

⁵¹ Harris, *Lourdes*, 57.

⁵² Harris, *Lourdes*, 82.

as Fr. René Laurentin points out, the Virgin of Saint Bernadette's vision is the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception⁵³—and he draws attention to the famous passage in Georges Bernanos's novel *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, when the priest of Torcy describes the Virgin Mary in the following way:

Car enfin, elle était née sans péché, quelle solitude étonnante! Une source si pure, si limpide, si limpide et si pure, qu'elle ne pouvait même pas y voir refléter sa propre image, faite pour la seule joie du Père—ô solitude sacrée! . . . Le regard de la Vierge est le seul regard vraiment enfantin, le seul vrai regard d'enfant qui se soit jamais levé sur notre honte et notre malheur. Oui, mon petit, pour la bien prier, il faut sentir sur soi ce regard qui n'est pas tout à fait celui de l'indulgence—car l'indulgence ne va pas sans quelque expérience amère—mais de la tendre compassion, de la surprise douloureuse, d'on ne sait quel sentiment encore, inconcevable, inexprimable, qui la fait plus jeune que le péché, plus jeune que la race dont elle est issue, et bien que Mère par la grâce, Mère des grâces, la cadette du genre humain.⁵⁴

(For she was born without sin—in what amazing isolation! A pool so clear, so pure, that even her own image—created only for the sacred joy of the father—was not to be reflected. . . . The eyes of Our Lady are the only real child-eyes that have ever been raised to our shame and sorrow. Yes, lad, to pray to her as you should you must feel those eyes of hers upon you: they are not indulgent—for there is no indulgence without something of bitter experience—they are eyes of gentle pity, wondering sadness, and with something more in them, never yet known or expressed, something which makes her younger than sin, younger than the race from which she sprang, and though a mother, by grace, Mother of all grace, our little youngest sister.⁵⁵)

In his commentary on Bernanos's *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that it is as the priest who has written the diary approaches death that Mary "must come forth as the being who follows the path of sinners with eye and foot, walking along with them with unspeakable

⁵³ René Laurentin, "Sens de Lourdes," in *Lourdes* (Paris: Omnibus, 1998), 919.

⁵⁴ Georges Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1936), 229–230.

⁵⁵ Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 180–181.

sadness. For, can we think of a single Marian apparition where the Virgin was not seen to weep?"⁵⁶

Fr. Laurentin argues that the miracles of Lourdes are seen to lead the pilgrims to the sacraments and away from sin. The Virgin of Lourdes—the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception—comes to help sinners through the water, prayer and penance,⁵⁷ thereby ensuring that the Immaculate Conception has ongoing significance for Catholics and is not just an historical event. Within Liberation Theology there has been a reworking of the importance of the Immaculate Conception, so that it is no longer regarded purely as a dogma that makes Mary “alone of all her sex” but is seen to represent Mary’s fight “against the structures of sin in her world, against oppression, against everything which could pose obstacles to the realization of God’s plan.”⁵⁸

For many of the French poets, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is their defender in times of danger and temptation. Particularly favored is the iconography in which the serpent is crushed beneath the Virgin Mary’s feet—an image which arose from God’s curse upon the serpent after the temptation scene in the Garden of Eden. Biblical scholars have indicated a mistranslation in the verses that follow, for the Latin Vulgate Bible contained the lines: “She will crush your head, and you will lie in wait for her heel”—a prophecy that was interpreted as a reference to the Virgin Mary, whereas the verse should read: “It will crush your head/and you will strike its heel,” taking the woman out of the equation and presenting Christ as the devil’s chief enemy. However, in the Counter-Reformation period, Catholic exegetes argued that the mother of Jesus would be an active participant in the destruction of evil, and that the Marian references had justification.⁵⁹

For the poet Louis Le Cardonnel (1862-1936), who was born four years after Saint Bernadette’s visions, Mary in a cloak span-

⁵⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 175.

⁵⁷ Laurentin, “Sens de Lourdes,” 921.

⁵⁸ Victor Codina, quoted in Bertrand de Margerie, “Mary in Latin American Liberation Theologies,” *Marian Studies* 38 (1987): 51.

⁵⁹ Boss, *Empress*, 144.

gled with stars watches over the night in "Prière du soir d'été" and crushes the dragon with her immaculate foot: *Vierge toujours clémente et féconde en prodiges, / Qui foule le Dragon d'un pied immaculé*.⁶⁰ And in the work of his contemporary, Germain Nouveau (1851-1920), Mary protects the people with her blue cloak and crushes the serpent in "Cantique à la reine": *Vous qui foulez avec la tête du serpent / Le croissant de la lune*.⁶¹

While some critics have maintained that the decadent poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) was referring to an unnamed mistress in his poem "À une Madone," the work combines feelings of shame with the iconography of the Immaculate Conception. Baudelaire writes:

Je mettrai le Serpent qui me mord les entrailles
Sous tes talons, afin que tu foules et railles,
Reine victorieuse et féconde en rachats,
Ce monstre tout gonflé de haine et de crachats.⁶²

(Under your heels I'll place that gnawing Snake,
That monster puffed with venom and with hate
That eats my entrails—bruise him with your tread
Victorious Queen, redemption's fountainhead.⁶³)

Ellis Hanson argues: "Before this as yet impassive icon, [Baudelaire] presents his spiritual failures. . . . But his sins are not simply heard; they are worn by the Blessed Virgin. . . . And yet, in her silence, we might recognize that his offerings are not a desecration. Rather, they are appropriate, just as, in the confessional, no sin is unspeakable."⁶⁴

The issue of the Immaculate Virgin as the refuge of the penitent sinner is a common subject in works by French Catholic writers who have converted or returned to the Faith, such as Paul

⁶⁰ Quoted in Henri Chandavoine, *Anthologie de la poésie mariale* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993), 125.

⁶¹ Quoted in Claire Lefouin, *Marie dans la littérature française* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1998), 183.

⁶² Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964), 82.

⁶³ Charles Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87.

⁶⁴ Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 47-48.

Claudé (1886-1955), Francis Jammes (1868-1938) and Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907). Claudé interprets the message of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes as the opportunity for the pilgrims to bathe themselves in the spring water as a form of new baptism in which their souls are purified.⁶⁵ Francis Jammes also raises this theme in "Cantique de Lourdes," where he pronounces that pilgrims must go there to praise the Immaculate Virgin and to wash their souls and their wounds.⁶⁶ In his work *Les Foules de Lourdes*, Huysmans writes:

Cette Grotte, elle est le hangar des âmes en transe du monde, le hangar où tous les écrasés de la vie viennent s'abriter et échouent en dernier ressort, elle est le refuge des existences condamnées, des tortures que rien n'allège; toute la souffrance de l'univers tient, condensée, en cet étroit espace.⁶⁷

(This Grotto is the shelter and refuge of all racked with the anxieties of this world, the refuge to which all the crushed in life fly for protection and where they are stranded in the end; it is the last resort of the condemned, and of all afflictions that nothing can alleviate: all the suffering of the world is condensed into this narrow space.)⁶⁸

The sound of demonic voices at the fourth apparition (that of 19 February 1858) detracts from the "cozy" image that some have attributed to Lourdes. Huysmans writes in his novel *La Cathédrale* (1898): "À cause même de son attitude et de son langage, la Vierge de la Salette ne pouvait devenir populaire, tandis que celle de Lourdes, qui vint en souriant et ne prophétisa point de catastrophes, était aisément accessible aux espoirs et aux joies des foules."⁶⁹ ("The Virgin of La Salette could not become popular, by reason of Her aspect and address, while She of Lourdes, who appeared smiling, and prophesied no catastrophes, was easy of access to the hopes and gladness of the crowd."⁷⁰) But the reference to the confrontation of the Virgin with Satan

⁶⁵ See René Laurentin, *Marie, mère du Seigneur: Les plus beaux textes depuis deux millénaires* (Paris: Desclée, 1984), 255.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Chandavoine, *Anthologie de la poésie mariale*, 138.

⁶⁷ J.-K. Huysmans, *Les Foules de Lourdes* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1993), 84.

⁶⁸ J.-K. Huysmans, *The Crowds of Lourdes*, trans. W. H. Mitchell (London: Burns, Oates and Co., 1925), 34.

⁶⁹ J.-K. Huysmans, *La Cathédrale*, in *Le Roman de Durtal* (Paris: Bartillat, 1996), 666.

⁷⁰ J.-K. Huysmans, *The Cathedral*, trans. Clara Bell (Sawtry: Deladus, 1989), 12.

at Lourdes evokes the iconography of the Immaculate Conception (as seen in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) in which the eyes of the Virgin and the devil meet across the *Via dolorosa*⁷¹). Although this aspect is ignored by directors such as Henry King and Jean Delannoy, Laurentin explains how the Immaculate Virgin puts the devil to flight with a glance.⁷²

The Jesuit theologian Henri Holstein states that Mary's holiness should encourage Christians to seek her help and protection in their continual effort to overcome sin and sanctify their lives,⁷³ and it is a view echoed in the words of Saint Therese of Lisieux, who once exclaimed: "How I love our blessed Lady! . . . She is spoken of as unapproachable, whereas she should be represented as imitable." (As Fr. Laurentin points out, these words precede the message of Vatican II by some sixty-seven years.⁷⁴) Saint Therese continued:

I have heard preachers say her splendor eclipses that of all the saints as the rising sun makes the stars disappear. How strange that a mother should take away the glory of her children! I think that quite the contrary will happen: I am certain she will greatly add to the splendor of God's redeemed.⁷⁵

Charles Péguy, for whom the Immaculate Conception was the keystone of his religion, wrote in *Le Porche du mystère du deuxième vertu*:

Écoute-moi bien, mon enfant, suis-moi bien, c'est difficile à t'expliquer.
En quoi elle est à ce point une créature unique. Mais suis-moi bien.
A toutes les créatures il manque quelque chose.
.....

⁷¹ Michael Duricy makes this point in his review of Gibson's film on the Mary Page: "I found particularly striking a scene in which the Devil and Mary glare at each other across the *Via dolorosa*, diametrically opposed because of the quite-literal crux-of-the-matter between them. The notion of Mary as Satan's opponent has been a part of Catholic teaching, receiving special emphasis in the century or so leading up to Vatican II." <http://www.udayton.edu/mary/news04/20040305.html> (accessed 12 May 2004).

⁷² "Il reconnaît Celle qui, seule parmi les pures créatures, lui a écrasé la tête. Il crie des bords du gave: 'Sauve-toi! Sauve-toi!' D'un regard, l'Immaculée le met en déroute." See Laurentin, "Sens de Lourdes," 920.

⁷³ *Dictionary of Mary*, 194.

⁷⁴ Laurentin, *Marie, mère du Seigneur*, 227.

⁷⁵ *The Autobiography of Therese of Lisieux*, ed. Robert Backhouse (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), 207.

A celles qui sont charnelles il manque précisément d'être pures.
 Nous le savons.
 Mais à celles qui sont pures il manque précisément d'être charnelles.
 Il faut le savoir.

Et à elle au contraire il ne manque rien.
 Sinon vraiment d'être Dieu même.
 D'être son Créateur.
 (Mais ceci c'est l'ordre.)

Car étant charnelle elle est pure.
 Mais, étant pure, aussi elle est charnelle.

Et c'est ainsi qu'elle n'est pas seulement une femme unique entre toutes les femmes.
 Mais qu'elle est une créature unique entre toutes les créatures.⁷⁶

(Listen well, my child, follow closely, it's hard to explain.
 Why it is that she is unique in this respect. But try to follow me.
 In all creatures there's something missing.
)

What those that are carnal lack is precisely being pure.
 This we know.
 But what those that are pure lack is precisely being carnal.
 This we ought to know.

And she however doesn't lack anything.
 Except truly to be God himself.
 To be her Creator.
 [But this is in the order of things.]

Because being carnal she is pure.
 But, being pure, she is also carnal.

And it's for this that she is not only unique among women.
 But she's unique among all creatures.⁷⁷)

Treating this perfection and uniqueness on page and screen has proved to be a challenging task for a diverse range of French writers and filmmakers. However, despite misunderstandings and difficulties, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception continues to resonate in what is an increasingly secularized society.

⁷⁶ Charles Péguy, *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, 61-62.

⁷⁷ Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David Louis Schindler (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 46-47.