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Apologetics in literary thought and fiction, or on the Sillon's reception of Blondel

ABSTRACT

The Sillon was a French Catholic lay youth movement which, from 1899 to 1910, worked on building a democratic community anchored on Christian values. The purpose of my essay is to analyze how this aim, inspired by the apologetics of Maurice Blondel, took form in Sillonist literary theory and fiction: in the Sillonists' wish to create a popular art and in the preference they gave to psychological realism. My analysis is based on the movement's journal and on a novel by Henry du Roure, *Life of a Happy Man*.

Key words: Christian democracy, *renouveau catholique*, secularization, social catholicism, Maurice Blondel

INTRODUCTION

When in August 1910 Pope Pius X accused the Sillonists of modernism and charged them to dissolve their movement, they received this verdict on their knees and thus completed what a well-known historian of the movement has described as "an explosion of love" [Barthélemy-Madaule 1973: 206], and Joseph Folliet, as "one of the most beautiful pages of religious history" [quoted in Barthélemy-Madaule 1973: 283].[1] The Sillonists prove to have had a particular aura, and Émile Poulat gives us details about

[1] All English translations of quotations are mine. The original text is provided in the notes for primary sources.

it. "Each time you saw a former Sillonist," he said in an interview in 1994, "perhaps there are not many of them any more now, you recognized him almost outwardly. […] Not only because for a long time some of them still wore the Lavallière […], but at the same time by their welcome, a sort of spontaneity that came from their inner generosity, a veritable spontaneity" [Poulat 1997: 237]. The Sillon was a Catholic lay youth movement founded in 1899 by the then 25-year-old Marc Sangnier and some friends. Most of them came from the educated upper middle class and had attended the same Catholic private school in Paris, the Collège Stanislas, where since 1893 the first traits of the movement developed. To these roots, the Sillonists remained true. Ever since they considered their movement a friendship, a common soul, and based on very little administration, it rapidly covered all parts of France.

This was the France of the Third Republic, at a time when the French Church saw itself being marginalized by the effects of dechristianization. Whereas most French Catholics continued to favour authoritarian regimes, the republicans, after their election victory of 1879, started to create a secular democracy. Religious practice declined in most parts of France at this time, notably amongst the working class, increasingly attracted to socialist propaganda. Facing this and the rise of positivism and scientism, the Church felt threatened. The *Syllabus of Errors*, which in 1864 "denounces the entire aggressions of any kind suffered by Catholicism just as much as doctrinal errors" [Langlois 1980: 392], is to be seen in this context; as is the modernist crisis, with modernism being condemned in 1907 and the Sillon in 1910. But the Church also tried to dialogue. In 1892 Pope Leo XIII advised French Catholics to accept the Republican constitution, while in *Rerum novarum* he legitimized what had already been evolving under the name of social Catholicism. Inversely, through the Dreyfus affair, the Church was backed by national conservatives, who considered Dreyfusism a menace to the nation and Catholicism a warrant for social order and cohesiveness. And then there was the *fin de siècle* spirit. Intellectuals and in particular writers felt morally disappointed in science and re-entered the Church. They adopted antimodernist and often monarchist views and together formed the nucleus of what came to be known as the *renouveau catholique*.

Knowing that the Sillon was condemned for modernism, it is no surprise to find it in the left-wing spectrum of the picture drawn above. The Sillonists were republicans at heart. They felt enthusiasm for *Rerum novarum* and consistently made their newly founded movement serve the cause of workers' education. In 1899 they started organizing popular conferences on socio-political and cultural subjects and in 1901 inaugurated their own adult education classes, while at the same time they visited already existing Catholic youth clubs in order to foster creating independent workers' study circles, circles which to a large extent, from 1902 on, then affiliated the Sillon. In growing numbers Sillonists now originated from the working class and, says Jeanne Caron [1967: 151], the social education of a working-class youth directed by a student youth that had been the original aim of the Sillon evolved in an effort for a mutual democratic education of all of its members.

The Sillonists held an ideal of Christian democracy that wanted to exceed social welfare. In their eyes the Church and the Third Republic had to reconcile politically, and this is why, from 1906 on, they were thinking about founding their own party, which they intended to nourish by opening up the Sillon into a non-confessional, democratic republican opinion-forming movement called the greater Sillon. Themselves being organized on a cooperative basis, their wish was to deeply transform the capitalist economic order, to create a new democratic society, a democratic community for which people still had to be educated because it would need common moral ties. Marc Sangnier indeed used to define democracy as follows: "Democracy," he said, "is the form of social organization that tends to maximize the civic conscience and responsibility of everyone" ["Le Sillon" 1904 (1): 202][2]. The Sillonists wanted citizens to actively participate, and as a tool for bringing individual claims in harmony with common good, they proposed common Christian values. It seems to me that democracy, in Sillonists' eyes, was really a logical consequence of the Christian grace of charity.

In my essay, I would like to explore what these Sillonist ideas meant for Sillonist literary thought and fiction. For this, I will first take a look at the Sillonists' aesthetic conceptions and goals by basing myself on the journal they published. Second, as I assume that the Sillonists' ideas can be parallelized with the thought of Maurice Blondel, who for some months was a teacher at the Collège Stanislas, I will give a brief insight into Blondelian apologetics. And third, I aim to put these steps together in order to take an approach to Sillonist fiction, in fact a novel that I think can serve as a case in point. My conclusion shall be simple. It is supposed to give a first draft of answers to the question of what our present democracies might want to learn from the Sillon, even if they do not define themselves as essentially religious.

SILLONIST LITERARY THOUGHT

Aesthetic thought, of course, often plays a significant part in social movements. What is less common in the case of the Sillon is that here it provided the theoretical frame. In 1894 two of the later co-founders of the group, Paul Renaudin and Augustin Léger, had launched a small literary journal called "Le Sillon", and it was this journal that in 1899 gave the Sillonists their name and main ideas. The journal, now the group's organ, came to focus on socio-political issues. But at the same time, it kept taking a position on current literary and aesthetic questions and continued making efforts to formulate its own aesthetics. Art, for the Sillonists [1904 (2): 452–457; 1907 (2): 184–188], had above all to become a medium of democratic spirit. They wanted to create a popular art, an art that would emanate from the people's soul and express their striving for a higher life, return to them by elevating them, by educating them

[2] "La Démocratie est l'organisation sociale qui tend à porter au maximum la conscience et la responsabilité civiques de chacun".

and by sowing ideals, and whose aesthetic properties would by no means be separable from its ethical demand. Let's take these points one by one:

(1) The Sillonists wanted an art that would emanate from the people's soul and express their striving for a higher life. The journal they published was intrigued by all genres of art, but I have the impression that it gave special attention, in reflecting on the art to pursue, to the novel. To account for this, it might be helpful to recall with Malcolm Scott that the rise of the novel and its nineteenth-century flowering have often been linked to secularization, that is, attempts to not only describe, but explain man's being in this world without transcendent reference. "It was," says Scott, "when the novel emerged as a literary form capable of serving as the vehicle for just such a total world-view, a structure in which every element of the culture could be housed […] that its challenge to the former great totality, Christianity, became necessary […]" [Scott 1990: 2]. Now, according to Scott, what representations of reality in realist and naturalist novels are about "is a code of probabilities of what might happen or be expected to happen, based on the evidence of the senses, and especially of the eyes" [Scott 1990: 2]. And this is why he argues "that the very notion of an invisible, spiritual order was a threat to the novel's claim to represent totality, and that the novel adopted a defensive scepticism, a refutation of Christian supernaturalism necessary to its pursuit of a sense-based realism" [Scott 1990: 2]. It seems to me that the Sillonists sought to respond to this refutation. They, too, wanted a realistic art, but they wished it to *include* supernaturalism, in a way that one contributor to the journal described as follows: "[…] what will be, I hope," he wrote, "our originality, what will make, I also hope, our works useful to the good is that we will approach, with full knowledge of the facts, the unexplored terrain of Catholic psychology. […] Bringing Catholics to life in the novel, Catholics such as we see around us, exposing for all the world to see the fights, the defeats, and the victories of their conscience, above all analyzing their faith and its effects, there you have a totally new work, a work that can be ours. And this accurate, sincere depiction of reality will be the best of propagandas" ["Le Sillon" 1896: 29–30][3].

(2) The Sillonists wanted an art that indeed would return to the people by elevating them, by educating them and by sowing ideals. This is, of course, what edifying literature is all about, among which can be found in France, since the 1830s, the Catholic popular novel. Its stories, situated in historical, exotic, or idealized rural settings, fitted with various types of role model characters, were designed to pass

[3] "[…] ce qui fera, je l'espère, notre originalité, ce qui rendra, je l'espère aussi, nos œuvres utiles pour le bien, c'est que nous aborderons en connaissance de cause le terrain inexploré de la psychologie catholique. […] Faire vivre des catholiques dans le roman, des catholiques tels que nous en voyons autour de nous, exposer au grand jour les luttes, les défaites et les victoires de leur conscience, surtout analyser leur foi et ses effets, voilà une œuvre toute nouvelle et qui pourra être la nôtre. Et cette peinture exacte, sincère, de la réalité sera la meilleure des propagandes".

Catholic norms to a large popular audience, yet wanted to be different from catechetical expositions. In a society that was undergoing deep transformations, says Loïc Artiaga, "the fictional element first of all allowed to 'play' situations of everyday life and to decline or present attitudes and ways of being, with regard not to the cult, but within the world" [Artiaga 2007: 144]. Thus, according to Artiaga [2007: 17–18], the Catholic popular novel was an active response to the emergence of the serialized and the popular novel, which the Church violently condemned for moral reasons, but whose narrative structures it now adapted to apostolic purposes. The Sillonists [1898: 155; 1909 (2): 184] were dissatisfied with popular fiction altogether. They found it platitudinous or immoral. Still, admiring Zola's powerful prose did not make them accept his philosophy [1902 (2): 252–258]. They did take a great interest in the works of the authors of the *renouveau catholique*, and namely those of Paul Bourget, in fact to an extent that his earlier psychological novels seemed to them an outline of the exact propaganda art they wished for [1900 (2): 283–284]. They dissociated themselves from his later novels, though, and as a reason alleged, not his rapprochement with the Action française, but the fact that in these novels they found at work a socio-political thesis and not a moral message any more [1907 (2): 18–22].

(3) The Sillonists wanted an art whose aesthetic properties would by no means be separable from its ethical demand. As soon as an art form is supposed to have a social impact, it will probably reach out for large audiences. Thus it can be assigned to what Pierre Bourdieu [1998: 192–233, 353–365], in analyzing the structure of the French literary field since the 1880s, refers to as large-scale production. According to Bourdieu, large-scale production complies with economic and political rather than aesthetic criteria, which is why he calls it 'heteronomous', a notion that, in accordance with Michael Einfalt [2001: 6], I here enlarge so as to include *all* non-literary principles in literature. 'Autonomous', on the contrary, is the term Bourdieu uses to describe autotelic art, art whose aesthetic qualities pretend to stand for their own and are enjoyed by only very few. In France at the end of the nineteenth century, this restricted production was first of all represented by Parnassian, Decadent, and Symbolist poetry, that is, by art for art's sake, a conception of art that gave expression to what came to be called, in *fin-de-siècle* France, dilettantism. And dilettantism has been classically defined by Paul Bourget. "It is", he wrote, "much less a doctrine than a disposition of the mind, at once very intelligent and very voluptuous, which inclines us in turn towards the various forms of life and leads us to lend ourselves to all these forms without giving ourselves to any" [Bourget 1919: 55][4]. To the dilettante, everything is right, but nothing is valid. Life for him is an enjoyable game, but it has no sense. In his life there is form, but no content and no moral message at

[4] "C'est beaucoup moins une doctrine qu'une disposition de l'esprit, très intelligente à la fois et très voluptueuse, qui nous incline tour à tour vers les formes diverses de la vie et nous conduit à nous prêter à toutes ces formes sans nous donner à aucune".

all. And this is why the Sillonists again and again tried to refute dilettantism, and dilettantism in art.

BLONDELIAN APOLOGETICS

Blondel's teaching experience at the Collège Stanislas, in 1891, is of more than anecdotal interest. He encouraged and gave advice to the founders of the Sillon, Renaudin and Léger, who had been his pupils, and then all the way through kept a friendly critical sympathy for the movement. In fact, the more he developed his philosophy, the deeper his influence on the Sillonists grew, to the point that, as a former Sillonist put it, "for a very notable group of young Catholics at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth, the Sillon movement and the philosophy of action presented themselves, in a way, as a connected set" [Archambault 1928: 121]. Blondel, too, was an advocate of social catholicism. He meant his social philosophy to give answers to current questions and composed it almost exclusively in circumstantial writings. But in doing so, he always insisted on the basic conception of community that he had drawn in his thesis and main work, published in 1893, *Action. Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*[5]. Here Blondel wanted to philosophically justify the human dignity of Catholic practical faith and take it as a base for responsible public action by departing from a phenomenological analysis of human action *per se*. Thus, in Blondel and the Sillon we find, according to Paul Archambault, "the same concern for apologetics and conquest, the same effort at raising man above himself, but this, because only this makes apologetics effective, by initially taking him as he is" [Archambault 1928: 121]. For the purpose of my essay, I will point out, in a very simple way, three central assumptions Blondel tried to prove:

(1) Striving for a higher life is a fact that underlies all human action. In his analysis of human action, Blondel [1950: 43–322] proceeds in five big steps, which I would like to illustrate with an example that does not appear in his book, and that is this journal. What can we do with it, and what can it tell us about our human condition? In the first step, we can take it in our hands, touch it, and make it an object of our sensual perception. Second, we notice that to touch this journal, we need to have the motive to touch it, which for Blondel means launching free will. Third, to exercise what Blondel calls our free will, we have to incarnate it and set our bodies in motion. Fourth, by now holding this journal in our hands, we become aware that it has been brought to life by authors for readers, all human action, says Blondel, relating to and having an impact on other men. In the fifth and final step, we realize that this journal and its reception have been made possible by harmoniz-

[5] The French title is *L'Action. Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*.

ing individual wills into one collective will. Men, according to Blondel, strive to coordinate their actions. Social groups, says Blondel, such as families, nations, and humanity, ground themselves in customs, moral precepts, and metaphysical ideas. In his five-step analysis of human action, Blondel shows us a sensual perception that needs a motive, a motive that needs a body, a body, or a human being, that needs other human beings, and human beings together who need something bigger than themselves to relate to. In Blondel's thought, you cannot want step one without wanting them all, and you cannot want to act without striving for something bigger than humanity. So what do you want and why do you want it? Blondel suggests that what human will wants in the end is something non-finite, is God, and that it is this God, too, who makes it want. For Blondel, there is no natural order without a supernatural order being inherent to it, and, as he later puts it, "we cannot think and act anywhere as if we did not all have, as a fact and a necessity, a supernatural destiny" [Blondel 2000: 32][6].

(2) Another important assumption in Blondel [1950: 357–388] is that this striving for the supernatural inherent in human action is what only gives fulfillment to it. If human will, as Blondel thinks, is driven by divine cooperation, it will never be complete by only sticking to the finite, that is, on its own. And this is why, according to Blondel, it will have to decide. "Either," points out Peter Henrici, "it will insist on its autonomy and autarky and thus close itself to the possibility of reaching fulfillment, or it will renounce autonomy and autarky to keep itself open to a fulfillment it cannot reach on its own but only by a gift of God" [Henrici 1987: 558].

(3) Blondel [1950: 1–22] assumes that the form of human action cannot be separated from its content and by this wants to explicitly refute dilettantism. For him, dilettantism is an attempt to do something, but not to want anything by it, that is, to reduce action to its form by emptying it of any sense and content, that is, trying to stay autonomous by not only sticking to the finite, but by not wanting whatever finite thing it might be. Yet if man, as Blondel suggests, is by nature a *wanting* being, dilettante autonomy must end up in contradiction.

SILLONIST FICTION

The aim of my essay is not to do a genetic study of how the Sillonists, and Sillonist novelists, took in Blondelian thought. Renaudin and Léger, aware that they did not entirely seize it, desisted from reviewing *L'Action*. But even more important is that the Sillonists never wanted to shape their thought into a system. Their doctrine

[6] "[…] on ne peut penser et agir nulle part comme si nous n'avions pas tous, de fait et obligatoirement, une destinée surnaturelle".

might more adequately be described as the result of an interplay between strong intentions and their bringing into practice, but all aligned the same way: in wanting to build a democracy anchored on human consciences related to metaphysical values, "this ideology," says Jeanne Caron, "illustrates the fundamental intuition of Blondel" [Caron 1967: 14]. There is explicit evidence that Blondelian apologetics mattered for Sillonist literary thought, too. In an appraisal of Bourget's earlier novels, the journal imagined Bourget to continue like this: "Through the simple study of what could be called the spiritual realities – and of the other realities too – he will create a sort of apologetics of life, basically adjacent to the one of Mr. Ollé-Laprune and Mr. Blondel, but accessible to a larger number of minds" ["Le Sillon" 1900 (2): 284][7]. My impression is that this wish then helped to forge, rather than Bourget's later novels, Sillonist fiction, and I start from here to analyze a novel by Henry du Roure, published in 1915 and entitled *Life of a Happy Man*.[8] What I would like to point out is this:

(1) The novel's story takes place in the core of human experience and human longing. Set in different parts of France, it is told by a first-person narrator, Robert Lescœur, who, in a fictitious diary, relates to us how his life is going and what his inner life looks like. He indeed very much behaves like the hero of a psychological novel. Robert is an advocate who has distanced himself from the Church, and he begins his diary by telling us that he is happy. He has fallen in love with Louise, a young woman of deep faith. Louise, however, has to obey her mother and marry Georges, who is a careerist. Robert engages in a liaison with a theater singer, has a daughter with her, then they separate. His marriage of convenience with Élisabeth will not be happy, either. Shortly after their son has died, Élisabeth passes away too. In all these years, Robert has become a politician of stature but is now quitting politics

[7] "Par la simple étude de ce qu'on pourrait appeler les réalités spirituelles – et aussi des autres réalités – il créera une sorte d'apologétique de la vie, voisine au fond de celle de M. Ollé-Laprune et de M. Blondel, mais accessible à un plus grand nombre d'esprits".

[8] The novel's original title is *Vie d'un Heureux*. Henry du Roure wrote it in 1914. He fell in the First World War the same year, and his work was published by two of his former fellow Sillonists. Henry du Roure was a chief figure in Sillonist propaganda and notably helped bring to life in 1910 a Sillonist daily, which was authorized by Pope Pius X to carry on the political activities of what had been the Sillon. The Sillonists ascribed the dissolution of their movement, not to doctrinal errors, but to misunderstandings they felt responsible for having provoked, and historical research tends to see them in the right. This is why I extended my text corpus to include five novels written by former Sillonists in the direct aftermath of 1910, all the more that their authors – Henry du Roure, Amédée Guiard, and Marc Sangnier – happen to have unarguably been protagonists of the Sillon. In fact, for methodological reasons, I came to concentrate on them: given that the Sillon did not have membership registers, I based my nearly completed search for Sillonist fiction on the names of the contributors to the journal and up to now found some forty novels by about twenty authors out of more than five hundred, novels, though, which almost exclusively appeared at times when their authors happened to not contribute to the journal. Detailed research on each of these authors is needed to verify if these novels can be considered representative of Sillonist thought.

altogether. He still loves and longs for Louise, who is still married but still feels love for him too. On this grows a very tender and platonic loveship. Yet Robert, struggling with belief in this love, wants more, obtains it, and loses it all. Louise retreats into a convent. And Robert, who had already earlier been asking himself: "[…] what then is this wish behind all my wishes?" [du Roure 1915: 193][9], now comprehends. He decides to retrieve his daughter, who has become a novice nun and tells him, in a letter, that she has found real happiness in faith. On his way to her, Robert dies. He carried with him a religious book of his mother's.

(2) This story has a message. It abounds in religious details, which are bound to direct the reader, such as, for example, the setting of the *innamoramento*. Robert falls in love with Louise in a small village church, when she is completely absorbed in prayer. And just as she talks to her God at the beginning of the story, Robert is searching and approaching him at its end. On the last page of the novel appears a second narrator, who is the fictitious editor of the diary. And this editor concludes: "The one who today publishes these notes, a Christian and a Catholic, has the firm confidence that God will have welcomed this soul into the bosom of his mercy, this soul who in a confused way was searching for his light, through the dense shadows of bodily life" [du Roure 1915: 331][10]. To approach real happiness, Robert had to allow for the idea that all his longing came from God and led back to him.

(3) The story sheds light on where Robert went wrong. "[…] my vision is not from this world: a maiden's face under a large straw hat, a muted silhouette, airy, in a dress of white voile" [du Roure 1915: 5][11], this is how Robert presents Louise in his diary after addressing her an imaginary apostrophy that reads like this: "Come here, I want to adore you. I will place you on an altar that has been waiting for you since the day you were born…" [du Roure 1915: 3][12]. Robert wishes to make absolute his love for Louise, as a man of a constantly deceived and constantly renascent ardour who feels an inner emptiness. And he is lucid about himself. "This […] ardour […]," he writes, "I have put it into games, holiday ventures […], jealousies, hatreds, affections, very boring tasks, and even disinterested works. I have applied it on nothings, or at least on things that in themselves did not matter to me at all, as if, in these wishes whose object was vain, I had pursued nothing but the painful joy of wishing. […] My friends have been joking on me saying: 'This thing you wanted at any price, now you have it, and you do not care about it any more?' They are wrong," says Robert,

[9] "[…] quel est donc ce désir sous tous mes désirs?"

[10] "Celui qui publie aujourd'hui ces notes, chrétien et catholique, a la ferme confiance que Dieu aura accueilli, dans le sein de sa miséricorde, cette âme qui cherchait confusément sa lumière, à travers les ombres épaisses de la vie charnelle".

[11] "[…] elle n'est pas du monde, ma vision: un visage de jeune fille sous un grand chapeau de paille, une silhouette légère, aérienne, dans une robe de voile blanc".

[12] "Viens, je te mettrai pour t'adorer sur un autel qui t'attend depuis ta naissance…"

"it is not this thing I wanted, but something, I do not know what, that I hoped to find in it, but which was not there" [du Roure 1915: 35][13]. Henry du Roure's novel tells the story of someone leading a dilettante's life, but who is suffering from it, of someone desperately trying to find happiness in finite things, then to compensate his disenchantment by means of an idolatrous worship, wishing for all sorts of possession only to drop or lose them afterwards, and approaching real happiness only when he understands that what he wanted to find might have been the infinite force that had made him want to find.

CONCLUSIONS

"His pen, as well as his spoken word, had been nothing but a weapon dedicated to the cause he served like a true knight" [du Roure 1915: I][14]. This is how du Roure's former fellow Sillonists present him, in an editors' note and moving obituary to his novel. Sillonist fiction, as well as Sillonist literary thought, was meant to serve the Sillonists' cause, that is, the democracy they wished for, by means, though, not of political propaganda but of Christian apologetics, in order to shape the values of a community everyone would be able to relate to and by addressing those concerned: men. This is the fundamental intuition shared by the Sillon and Blondel. They both take man seriously. They take seriously his being in the world, his needs, his wishes, his longing for finite satisfactions, and for always something else on top that they think of as God, as the force that makes him long and gives sense and content to his longing.

Marc Sangnier once explained this fundamental intuition and its seat in real life as follows, and I will start from his exposition to reflect on the question of what our present democracies might want to learn from the Sillon: "From the history of the Sillon", he said, "it results that it has never been anything but two things: 1° a patrimony of ideas, aspirations, common doctrines; 2° a friendship, a wish to work within the closest of intimacies to realize these common ideas. When one wants to expose the ideas of the Sillon, it is important not to immediately put forward our preferences for the republic or for cooperation. These are just the consequences of a deeper principle that could be expressed like this: it is of importance to raise the intellectual and moral value of every human being and to develop at the same time the love among men. We

[13] "Cette […] ardeur […], je l'ai apportée à des jeux, à des entreprises de vacances […], à des jalousies, à des haines, à des affections, à des travaux très ennuyeux, et même à des œuvres désintéressées. Je l'ai appliquée à des riens, ou du moins à des choses qui m'étaient en elles-mêmes absolument indifférentes, comme si, dans ces désirs dont l'objet était vain, je n'avais poursuivi que le douloureux plaisir de désirer. […] Mes amis m'ont plaisanté là-dessus: 'Cette chose que tu voulais à tout prix, tu l'as, et tu ne t'en soucies plus?' Ils ont tort; ce n'est pas cette chose que je voulais, mais je ne sais quoi que j'espérais trouver en elle, et qui n'y était pas".

[14] "Sa plume, comme sa parole, n'avait été qu'une arme vouée à la cause qu'il servait en vrai chevalier".

want beings who grow not solitarily, but fraternally. And we want to put all material realities into the service of this human ascension" [Sangnier 1907: 19][15]. I would like to comment on this statement in three very brief steps which are supposed to just give a glimpse of what would have to be developed in an essay of its own:

(1) "When one wants to expose the ideas of the Sillon, it is important not to immediately put forward our preferences for the republic or for cooperation. These are just the consequences of a deeper principle". What is today's citizens' attitude towards the highly industrialized and bureaucratic democracies they live in? It tends, says Charles Taylor [2002: 13–16], to be instrumental. Citizens expect their government to provide a fair playground for the pursuit of their individual aims and wishes and in return are supposed to accept certain limits to their political participation so as to not disturb the government's sensitive balancing of interests. But, as Taylor insists, they will see no strong reason to identify with their political community as such. I wonder if the ongoing standardization trend within today's democracies – as expressed in the German *Leitkultur* debate for example – can be seen as the attempt to secure the cohesion of a community by external means when apparently it is fading away internally. But what about, then, the pertinence of such an attempt if it finally means protecting communities against their own citizens? The Sillonists recommended not to have recourse to structures first, but to think of those by and for whom they are made: men. So what does it take to bring together individual longing and creativity to form a whole that means something to those who take part in it?

(2) "It is of importance to raise the intellectual and moral value of every human being and to develop at the same time the love among men. We want beings who grow not solitarily, but fraternally". Of course, this kind of instrumental relationship between citizens and their community might not occur by coincidence. Capitalism in general tends to drive humans to instrumentalize other humans, "to treat them purely as means or (in economic rather than moral language) as commodities" [Berman 2010: 99], in order to make them serve individual wishes, which then often turn out to be material in nature, thus countable, controllable, finite, and home to new coercions where freedom was sought. The Sillonists invited men to discover and embrace their longing for something of an *immaterial* kind bigger than themselves. Their aim was

[15] "De l'histoire du Sillon il résulte qu'il n'a jamais rien été en dehors de deux choses: 1° un patrimoine d'idées, d'aspirations, de doctrines communes; 2° une amitié, un désir de travailler dans la plus étroite des intimités pour réaliser ces idées communes. Lorsque l'on veut exposer les idées du Sillon, il est important de ne pas mettre immédiatement au premier plan nos préférences pour la république ou la coopération. Ce ne sont là que les conséquences d'un principe plus profond qui pourrait ainsi s'exprimer: il importe d'accroître la valeur intellectuelle et morale de tout être humain et de développer en même temps l'amour entre les hommes. Nous voulons des êtres qui grandissent non solitairement, mais fraternellement. Et nous voulons mettre toutes les réalités matérielles au service de cette ascension humaine." By 'Sillon' Sangnier refers to the movement.

to make them wish to work on common ties they could identify with, and as such they suggested common moral values, which first of all comprised a feeling for the worth and dignity of man.

(3) "And we want to put all material realities into the service of this human ascension". A material reality that is classically associated with the transmission and creation of values is the domain of education and especially the humanities. Yet it is exactly here that the possibility of founding and justifying binding values has become highly controversial. The postmodern quest for tolerance in a pluralistic world seems to have been widely replaced by an "aestheticist surface pluralism" [Verweyen 1995: 28], in fact a sort of nihilism in the perception of which "the belief in unconditioned values, now lacking proof of legitimacy before public reason, is able to affirm itself only in a fundamentalist way" [Verweyen 1995: 29]. We are facing, as I think, a crisis about the educational mission of the humanities that might have contributed to clear the way for their economization, that is, for an idea of education that now prefers to quantify human growth by basing it on the transmission of pre-defined amounts of knowledge supposed to serve the needs of highly industrialized and bureaucratic communities people tend to not identify with.

The currently increasing desire for more direct political participation, the apparently growing demand for spirituality, religiosity, and, in general, sense, as well as enlarging criticism on the Bologna process – all these might be counter-reactions that, as I have the impression, would have pleased the Sillonists, who believed in the creative energy and aura of every human being.

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