

GWEN JOHN

Her Art and Spirituality

Tessa Frank

GWEN JOHN (1876-1939), in contrast to her famous and flamboyant brother, Augustus, was an artist almost unknown during her lifetime. In her late teens she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London, where she carried off a prize for figure composition. At the age of 22 she studied in Paris at the Académie Carmen under Whistler, who commended her for her understanding of tone. Returning to London she led a semi-subterranean life in a series of basement rooms in great poverty. Here she worked, very slowly, at paintings, mainly of women, a subject characteristic of her art throughout her life.

In 1903 Gwen went on a walking tour in France with her friend Dorelia McNeill, who later became her brother's mistress and lifelong companion. Intending originally to go to Rome, they stayed the winter of that year in Toulouse, eventually returning to Paris, where Gwen decided to stay. Here she supported herself by modelling for women artists, and then for the great sculptor Auguste Rodin. She had a passionate relationship with Rodin which caused her at first intense happiness and then, when he turned to another woman, intense grief. Remaining in Paris till 1911, she painted some of her best-known works, such as *A Corner of the Artist's Room*, *Lady Reading* and *Girl Reading at the Window*. Being poor, she could not afford models but based her pictures on herself. In 1911 she moved to Meudon, a suburb of Paris, where she was received into the Roman Catholic Church early in 1913. The nuns of the Meudon convent,¹ particularly the Mother Superior, who was her godmother, were a great support to her at the time.

By now, Augustus had introduced her to the American art collector John Quinn, for whom she produced paintings until his death

¹ They were Dominican Sisters of Charity of the Presentation.

in 1924. The annual stipend Quinn paid her eased her financial situation considerably; years later, in 1926, she bought a tumbledown wooden shack in a large tree-surrounded garden in the rue Babie in Meudon. She eventually moved into this humble home where she lived like a recluse, devoting herself to prayer, her cats and her garden. She died in Dieppe in September 1939.

Gwen's Religious Journey

Gwen John's life has been well documented in several biographies. Here I want to consider her religious journey, which began a year or two before her reception into the Roman Catholic Church. During her relationship with Rodin and while she was modelling for him she had read and translated philosophical and spiritual extracts for the seminars he gave to those around him. Father Faber, the Oratorian, was a great favourite with her; her notebooks at the time contain copious extracts from writers such as St Francis de Sales, Bossuet, St Gertrude, Dom Guéranger and many others. These extracts mainly focus on single-mindedness, silence and the desire to achieve self-control—important to a person as passionate and headstrong as Gwen.

Her great attraction was for interiority, recollection, calm and—one of her favourite words—'harmony'. Her desire to be recollected appears frequently in her letters and notebooks:

A beautiful life is one led, perhaps, in the shadow, but ordered and regular, harmonious. I must stay in solitude to do my work.

You must leave everybody and be alone with God.²

In an undated letter to her lifelong friend Ursula Tyrwhit, she wrote:

As to me, I cannot imagine why my vision will have some value in the world, and yet I know it will ... because I am patient and *recueill[ie]* in some degree.³

² All quotations refer to original letters and notebooks stored in the National Library of Wales: MSS 22280B, 22281, 22287A, 22289A, 22291A, 222301B and 222936C, unless otherwise specified.

³ Quoted in Cecily Langdale and David Fraser Jenkins, *Gwen John, An Interior Life* (London: Phaidon Press, 1987). Gwen's French was never very good and she spelt her favourite word wrongly—*recueillé* instead of *recueillie*.



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Young Nun, by Gwen John

Long before her conversion, Gwen's paintings were strongly characterized by stillness and tranquillity, from the days when she painted her own room (1907) through to the portraits, during the 1920s, of composed, meditative, seated women (for example the pictures known as *The Convalescent* series). All her life Gwen strove to develop this virtue of interiority: 'I saw that God is a God of quietness

and so we must be quiet'; 'I may never have anything to express except for this desire for a more interior life'.⁴

There were problems in attaining this inner peace, not least her unrequited love for Rodin: 'It is despised love that hurts so much'. On one occasion when Rodin apparently rejected her, she turned to God: 'I think of God more often. Oh that that thought would become my refuge, my stronghold, my *tour d'ivoire*.' More and more she saw God as a source of unchanging love.

Gwen's yearning to be a saint motivated her desire for speedy progress in the spiritual life. She made heavy demands on herself, asking, 'What pleasures and what ease can I sacrifice?', even though the conditions of her life were Spartan to a considerable degree. Trying to 'direct and control [her] thoughts every minute of the day' became an obsession, no doubt causing some of the headaches from which she frequently suffered.

Seeking Perfection in Art and Life

About the time of her conversion the nuns asked Gwen to paint a portrait of their eighteenth-century founder, Mère Marie Pousepin, and to base it on a small prayer-card picture which they gave her. For almost seven years Gwen laboured at a series of portraits of the founder, and also of other nuns in the convent, seeking perfection in her art as also in her life. During this period she suffered continual ill-health and tiredness: 'Very tired. Desire very much to finish my nun and to go to Pont l'Abbé.'

David Fraser Jenkins comments that:

Her involvement with the Church gave her the motivation to see through a task which must have been especially difficult, to complete so many paintings, none taken from life. After a period of little painting, when she might have ceased to work, these were a second start. The self-confidence required, then and later, she may well have found in her religion.⁵

⁴ Gwen John: *Letters and Notebooks*, edited by Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 53.

⁵ Langdale and Jenkins, *Gwen John: An Interior Life*, 41.

These were the war years and Gwen, who decided to stay in France, suffered from the wartime privations, which were great, as well as from her own ill-health and lack of energy. Her confidence in and awareness of God were, however, increasing:

He has filled my heart with love to-night. [Pr]ayer is becoming a joy.

Oh God, I thank Thee for the peace and sweetness in my meditation to-night.

It is my home to be near my God.

Gwen had by now a great devotion to Thérèse of Lisieux.⁶ In 1919 she visited Thérèse's shrine in the church at Pléneuf in Brittany and then exclaimed in her notes: 'I must be a saint, too. I must be a saint in my work.' She desires to be 'a child of prayer and God's little artist'. She had almost certainly read *Histoire d'une âme*, in which the saint outlines her 'Little Way' of doing everything, even the smallest things, for love. Her message spoke to Gwen, who henceforth showed its influence in her life: she asked for God's help to work 'diligently to give Thee little presents every day'. She spoke of herself as God's child with a confidence like Thérèse's:

I need not be afraid of anything. He will make me His child.

God is here. I *will* be a child of prayer. I will be a child of contemplation.

Her devotion to the saint later found expression in a series of sketches and watercolours she made of Thérèse as a child with her sister Céline, based on a prayer-card photograph of the two which she went to great trouble to find.⁷ On paper taken from Les Grands Magasins du Louvre reading room, she made febrile sketches of them all over the page, which she had divided into tiny rectangles. Her final watercolour sketches of the two are known now as *The Victorian Sisters*.

Later, in December 1927, she showed the connection of the state of spiritual childhood with her art: 'To be God's child is to think about

⁶ Carmelite nun (1873-1897) canonized in 1925 and made a Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

⁷ Her battered photograph of the two survives in the archive of the National Library of Wales.

your painting'.⁸ She is 'God's little artist—a seer of strange beauties'. These she found in the flowers and leaves of field and forest and in the peaceful beauty of her portraits. The thought that she was working to please God led her to seek even greater perfection in her paintings, as becomes clear from a notebook in the Print Room of the Cardiff Museum and Art Gallery—it is filled with sketch after sketch preliminary to the painting of a *Woman in a Mulberry Dress*.

Gwen had never been driven by a competitive spirit: now her strong motivation was to please God in her art. Sir John Rothenstein, noting the 'exceptional strength' of her later work, suggests that she gained wisdom from her spiritual 'ordeals' and that 'her goodness, which had earlier been instinctive and unfocused, became radiantly manifest'.⁹

Seeking Love

In her fifties Gwen still suffered intensely from loneliness, shyness, timidity and a lack of love in her life. She had good friends but these were mostly at a distance. The poet Rilke, for whom she felt great affection, died just after Christmas 1926 and she felt bereft. Despite her need, it is disconcerting to find someone so advanced in the spiritual life, with a strong love of God, suddenly developing a new obsessive love, this time for a woman ten years her junior, Véra Oumançoff, who was the sister-in-law of the well-known Thomist Jacques Maritain. His friendships with artists—among them Rouault—with poets and theologians, brought many interesting people to his house in Meudon. Véra, a devout, even mystical, Catholic convert, lived with her sister Raïssa and Maritain, her brother-in-law, in Meudon, in an atmosphere of rarefied spirituality. Retreats were arranged by Maritain each year in the Meudon convent for as many as three hundred people. One might have imagined that, through Véra, Gwen would have been caught up in the Catholic Revival in France, but sadly it remained a closed book to her. Wyndham Lewis' suggestion that Gwen was part of it was repudiated with scorn by Jacques

⁸ That Gwen did think deeply about her painting is clear from the numerous lists of colours and instructions she wrote for herself in many of her notebooks.

⁹ Sir John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1976 [1952]), 171.

Maritain. 'The idea', he wrote, 'considering her total solitude, is *senseless*'.¹⁰

After Gwen's first contact with the Maritains in December 1926, her relationship was only with Véra. Gwen hoped that Véra would become her spiritual counsellor. And Véra indeed helped her: 'Those new things you told me', wrote Gwen, 'made of me a new being'.¹¹ At first Véra allowed Gwen to confide in her, went



Véra Oumançoff

for walks with her, gave her chocolates, and showed concern for her physical and spiritual welfare. 'God has given you to me', Gwen wrote in a draft letter to Véra. However, Gwen's growing importunity and desire for her friend's attention and love seemed to Véra inordinate: she felt Gwen was too attached to her for her own good. She told Gwen to direct her love towards God, not towards one of his creatures. As Véra tried to keep Gwen at arm's length, the latter suffered yet once more from 'despised love', and from the apparent rebuffs; her old sensitivities reawakened and it is probable that this was one more trial she had to undergo before she finally won through to inner peace. We glimpse her suffering in a draft letter to Véra where she speaks of 'yearning': 'it is a desire for love, perhaps human, perhaps divine, of which one is deprived'.¹² In the end Véra felt compelled to break off the relationship. Years later Jacques Maritain wrote of Gwen's 'rare magnanimity joined to a passionate violence from which she was the first to suffer'. He explains:

[Her] affection was intolerably engrossing, and it was because of this, as also because of remedying the need she had of torturing

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks* (New York: Magi Books, 1984), 301.

¹¹ Author's translation.

¹² Author's translation.

herself ... that Véra had to recognise the necessity of ceasing to see her.¹³

The decision cost Véra dearly, 'and was not taken without the certitude that it was in Gwen's own interest that she acted thus'.¹⁴ He tells us that Véra prayed for Gwen for the rest of her life.

Given Véra's spiritual qualities, it is not surprising that Gwen desired her for a friend and mentor, but Véra was unable to give the intensity of love she desired. Nor did Véra seem to value the little sketches, the *dessins de lundi*—Véra had rationed Gwen's presents to one day a week, Monday—that Gwen lavished on her, any one of which would command a four-figure price today. No doubt this painful experience was one which eventually intensified Gwen's spiritual life since it threw her back on God, whose love never fails anyone.

Prayer—and Drawing in Church

Gwen was faithful to prayer throughout her life as a Catholic, although she found it difficult to pray for any length of time: 'I am troubled because my mind rises for such short moments in prayer to God', she wrote in February 1915.

Her prayer was ardent, characterized by great yearning and desire, but quite limited in its horizons. One recognises a 'Garden of the Soul' type of prayer, sound and of value but lacking biblical or liturgical dimensions. She prayed to the Father, and to the Son as Jesus; there was no mention of the Holy Spirit at a time and in a place where entire retreats were being organised by the Maritains on the sole subject of the Spirit. Neither did she appear to pray to Our Lady. The Rosary did not commend itself to her; she had several broken rosaries among her sewing cottons, but, as she told Véra, she did not use them. Gwen's prayer was simply expressed and straight from the heart. In October 1914 she wrote:

My God, I thank Thee for Thy goodness to me! Oh let me live by what I know of Thee! Oh have pity on me when I do not think of Thee! Oh listen to my prayers! I want to please Thee and live by Thy light alone.

¹³ Maritain, *Notebooks*, 301.

¹⁴ Maritain, *Notebooks*, 301.



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Drawing done by Gwen John in church

She told Véra that she drew while she was in church because she could not pray for very long at a time—an interesting admission in view of the fact that at one stage she scheduled an hour's meditation each morning. Véra, whom she consulted about drawing in church, told her that she did not think it a big sin to occupy herself thus at Mass. The *curé* said it was a sin, Gwen told her; then it must be, Véra agreed.

To salve her conscience, Gwen declared that she would draw at Vespers, Benediction and in retreats, but not at Mass. However, she held to her convictions explaining that:

Like everyone else I like to pray in church, but my spirit is not able to pray for a long time at a stretch. Now those moments when it looks at exterior things have become so long that not much time is left for prayer. The orphans with those black hats and white ribbons

and their black dresses with little white collars charm me If I cut off all that there would not be enough happiness in my life.¹⁵

Gwen told Véra that these sketches were little gifts that she made to God: 'Very little they may be but that doesn't matter—He accepts them'. From such remarks one may infer how closely Gwen lived in God's presence.

Unless one nourishes one's spiritual life, it does not grow. Gwen actively pursued her inner life by prayer and continual reading; the latter was very important to her. It is significant that a good number of her paintings show people reading: *The Convalescent*, *The Precious Book*, *Lady Reading* and *Girl Reading at the Window*, to name but a few. She had quite a large library in her house, and in it were both spiritual and philosophical works, as well as books on art. In December 1928 she thanked Tom Burns, later editor of *The Tablet*, for a spiritual book he had sent her. In a letter she mentioned a book on the Mass by Father Martin D'Arcy SJ, while in 1923 she told a priest friend that she read Father Faber's *The Blessed Sacrament* every evening. Her habit of copying extracts from her reading into her notebooks continued until the notebooks came to an end.

Gwen's Catholic Life

As a Catholic, Gwen took a full part in parish life, attending daily Mass, Benediction, Vespers, and parish retreats. She confessed to the parish priest, went on parish outings and contributed to the parish fête. She visited Lourdes twice. When she had some spare money she was very generous to those poorer than herself. Her own life was ascetic: she ate little and lived frugally, tragically neglecting her health. There are occasional frustrated outbursts, as when she exclaimed that it was almost impossible to be a true Catholic; she complains that Catholics lack simplicity and are not above telling little lies—she was thinking of Véra here. Her neighbour in rue Babie thought she remained a Protestant in some ways; for example, when Pope Pius XI died, the good lady next door was scandalized that Gwen was more moved by the death of a rather unamiable neighbour than by that of the Pope.

¹⁵ Draft fragment to Véra, see *Gwen John: Letters and Notebooks*, edited by Lloyd-Morgan, 154.

In her later years (1930-1939), Gwen seemed to live continually in awareness of God's presence, telling her parish priest, 'I think of Jesus when I start my work and when I wake up in the morning and before going to sleep'. She found that 'practical life and art don't go well together', yet she told her solicitous neighbour Mme Roche, 'my religion and my art are my whole life'.¹⁶ No paintings in oils survive from this late period of her life, though she continued to sketch and make small paintings in gouache and watercolour. In a letter she declares that she is always in Jesus' company and thinks of Him: 'Jesus is with me more frequently now ... I have no fear that Jesus will distance Himself from my life'.

After 1933 there are no more notes and jottings extant, although there are still letters to friends. Her neighbour confirmed her frugal and devout life, while the impression she made on an American, Maynard Walker, who paid her visits in 1929, 1930 and 1937, is revealed in his comments. He wrote of 'her rare and sweet humility', acknowledging her to be both a 'great artist' and 'a great person as well'. He felt peace and joy after his visits, telling her on one occasion that,

... the same spirit that emanates from your paintings is in that garden that surrounds you. I don't know whether you are religious or not, but in any case you have got a halo.

Writing after her death to Gwen's nephew and heir, Edwin, about his last visit, Maynard Walker found it difficult,

... to give you the impression she made on me and especially the beauty of that last afternoon I spent with her when she gave me tea underneath those great brooding trees at the back of that wild garden. We talked of Proust, of spirits and angels and sinners and painters, and I came away filled with the wonder of her spirit and the keenness of her intellect.¹⁷

After her death in Dieppe at the start of World War, II Augustus received the pictures that Edwin had rescued from the damp of Gwen's

¹⁶ Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters*, chapter on Gwen John.

¹⁷ All Maynard Walker quotations taken from Cecily Langdale, *Catalogue raisonné* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1987).

home in the rue Babie, declaring, 'It will be a satisfaction to show them without dreaming for a moment that their exquisite reticence will excite the multitude', though he acknowledged that a few people would possibly be 'able to receive the secret message she whispered'.¹⁸

The harmony, recollection and interior peace which emanate from Gwen's later pictures were qualities which her work had exhibited from the beginning—witness the portrait of Dorelia, *The Student*, done in 1904, or *The Corner of the Artist's Room* (1907)—but these qualities gradually intensified as her spiritual life developed. The details of the backgrounds become progressively sparer, until there is only the central figure, monumental and somewhat misty, with entranced gaze and folded hands, to focus our attention. Augustus speaks of 'peering fixedly' at Gwen's paintings; that is the way they yield up their spiritual depths.

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¹⁸ Quoted in Rothenstein, *Modern English Poets*, 173.