

Prénom: Marie

They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves, to an unknown fear.

—Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*

AT THAT TIME I WAS GLAD FOR the invitation to prepare an introductory note for the volume Maryel Locke and Charles Warren were proposing to put together on Godard's *Hail Mary*, the idea of which, and now the materialization of which, are both so excellent. But I can only use the occasion of its appearance to congratulate them publicly, together with their coauthors, on the condition that now, in a time not essentially different, however broken it seems, from that in which I agreed to write, I find something worth saying beyond the private salute. I will not date my search beyond noting that today is Friday. Let's see what the weekend brings.

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Of course I am at once attracted to the idea of the ordinary, we may say the banal, as scandalous, hence to the fact that *Hail Mary*, in its ordinariness, its smallness, caused a version of the scandal it depicts. (I am thinking of the scandal as tripping up settled ideas of importance, hence of interest and of destruction. Christianity has been a way to this unsettling. Philosophy has had its ways, as in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* [sec. 118]: "Where does our investigation get its importance from since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important.") And I am of course attracted at the same time to the interpretation of Mary and of touching Joseph as simultaneously a story of psychic trauma and of skepticism.

I begin by recalling that at the late birth of film into the shared intellectual life, such as it was, of the American 1950s, and then into its unshared political life, such as it may have been, in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s, Godard, I suppose more than any other filmmaker, was throughout in attendance. How far from that time was the appearance of the dual films *Prénom: Carmen* (*First Name: Carmen*) and *Je vous salue, Marie* (*Hail Mary*) in, respectively, 1983 and 1984? If you were inclined to side with the earlier Godard's politics, so with his apparent enlisting of art in the service of politics, then you are apt to sense a falling off, or backing off, in the later work, and become disappointed or disaffected with its apparent avoidance or evasion of politics. If, contrariwise, you were inclined against Godard's earlier politics, and perhaps sensed his hatred of hateful, exploitative society as a cover for his spiritual coldness and isolation, then you are more apt to feel, and welcome, a redemptive move in the later work, a search for perspective on the individualities of his work that signals an affecting effort to take responsibility for it, for its irresponsibilities that are as necessitated artistically as they ever were politically. But in that case *Hail Mary* will have traveled the familiar route from a totalizing politics to a totalizing religion, and from an apparent quest for a transcendence of the self (if just from one circle or stance to the next) to a self-indulgent transcendentalizing (or philosophizing) of nature or retheologizing of science.

Suppose, though, that *Hail Mary* is not an evasion of politics but a critique of it, of what Godard had at some time named politics. (Can we bear to hear those words of Marx again: "The critique of religion is the beginning of all critique." But shouldn't the ending, in principle, have been the critique of critique itself, of the claim to have found a position from which to measure the cost of accounting for the costs of other people's ideas, of all but your own? This ending is so easy to postpone.) And suppose that Godard's criticism of his irresponsibilities is a continuation of a mode of criticism there in his work from the beginning—since the later films are recognizably continuous with the earlier, bearing no different

signature. Then from what perspective is such an effort at truth to be assessed? Does philosophy provide one?—call it thinking. (We were duly warned in *First Name: Carmen* that something basic, banal, is amiss with our registration of our experience into, for example, a division of politics and poetry. In that film, the line "Beauty is but the beginning of terror," remembered from the *Duino Elegies*, is dangerously tossed into a context invoking terrorism.)

If Godard is thinking, and his thinking is to provoke thought, then he must be thinking about film and about films; about, let's say, the conditions of their possibility. Wasn't he always? But in *Hail Mary* his thinking is not expressed by more or less routine showings of his hand, self-reflections on the fact of a film's making, of the sheer fact that what he has produced is a film. Because the question he is raising at that time is precisely whether this that appears is, or what it means to say that it is, a film—it is unlike other things so called. The question raises others—whether it is comprehensible that those responsible with him for it can want it, as it is; whether it is something to be proud or ashamed of, encouraged or disheartened by, an opening or a closing of further work, of others' work, scandalous or glib.

In this film Godard is thinking whether thinking, say spirit, is representable on film, and in which ways film represents body, say flesh. Is a quick young woman (with organized help, but against opposition), shooting the moon through a basketball hoop, thinking? Are a man called Gabriel and a young girl, having just landed on earth, stopping to retie a shoe using one hand offered by each of them, thinking—stopping to remind themselves, awkwardly—that "one mightier than I cometh, the lachet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose" (Luke 3.16)? When a woman asks a man called a professor what's on his mind and he answers, as the woman shows she knows, by quoting late Heidegger, and the man goes on to say, "I think politics today must be the voice of horror," is he in a state of physical revulsion? The woman, called Eva, probes the authenticity of the man's reaction by asking, "The voice, but the way or the word?" This echoes Mary's probing (or postponing) of the earlier, annunciatory "Follow Thy way" by asking, "My Way! But the voice or the word?" Does Eva's invocation of Mary's words receive them as underwriting her voice (as of all women), or as undermining Mary's? Leaving the question open, the man's revulsion from politics is hardly to be understood as an avoidance of it. It is much rather a claim that the victory (in fact and in theory) of what is at that time called politics over religion, over philosophy, over art, was (is) a voiding, unassessed, inexpressibly so, since it leaves nothing to assess itself with. Or does the matter reduce itself to showing that the exciting linking of politics to philosophy and horror was a matter of a sublimated turn of seduction, since the professor goes on to

propose, and the woman concedes, that time and space have conjoined for them to expect the advent of sex?

If Godard is observing, in this man and woman, difficulties of thinking politically, the end of the film finds him observing in Gabriel and Mary difficulties of thinking religiously. Gabriel—which man not?—standing beside his car with something on his mind to say to a woman in the street, calls to her and then says, “Nothing. Hail Mary.” But now, with her child taken over by the world, having nothing at this interval to do with her (“Jesus sayeth unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come” [John 2.4]), she seems to take Gabriel’s salute as a sublimated turn of seduction. Is it that she is free now to respond this way, hence free not to? Or is it that she is bound, if despite all she is responsive to a man, to make herself comprehensible to men, hence to renounce, or to rename, the man’s way of comprehending her? Either way, her invitation of lipstick poses the question of who is called Gabriel, who assumes, or arrogates, the right to hail Mary, to voice an opening word.

In my imaginary of Godard as touchingly, awkwardly, addressing this question to himself, to his own right of hailing, I accept it as a turn I had missed in his work at that time, a couple of hundred full moons ago, when I wrote of him, with stuffy admiration: “I do not wish to deny Godard’s inventiveness, and no one can ignore his facility. But the forms of culture he wishes to hold in contempt are no less inventive and facile. . . . An artist, because a human being, does have a position and does have his reasons for calling his events to our attention. What entitles him to our attention is precisely his responsibility to this condition. . . . One reads the distance from and between his characters [not, as has been claimed, as a Brechtian discovery but] as one does in reality, as the inability to feel; and we attribute our distance from the filmed events, because of their force upon us, to Godard’s position toward them” (*The World Viewed*, pp. 99, 98, 97). Now I would like to imagine the maker of *Hail Mary* as genuinely surprised by the scandal his film occasioned, both because, as implied, the Christian project understands itself as scandalous beyond any further complications, and because Godard’s film seems to me understandable as before all scandalous to himself: it would no doubt, if it could, constitute a stumbling block to all the dances of death, say to the world’s inability to stop and think; but surely before that to his own terrible facility in explaining this inability.

Then what is called Joseph? When he says to Mary that he’ll go jump in the lake, she instructs him that he is in effect calling himself by the wrong name: “Ophelia’s no role for you.” She would have learned this philosophy of naming—that we are called by the names we give ourselves—from Carmen, even Godard’s Carmen, who had asked her own Joseph

what comes before a name. He had given her the answer “*Prénom*,” what we call a Christian name, or now more usually I expect a given name; in any case, another name. This also smacks of theory, this time of names as radically arbitrary. (That on a certain picture of exiting there is no exit from the store of names does not mean that we have not had to break into the store. Hence perhaps the sense of ourselves as extraterrestrials. Since I and language precede one another, there is no beginning to us.) Carmen rejects this theory, demanding to be called on her own terms. To me this seems a welcome rejection of the current notion according to which (if I understand its implications) declaring one’s subject-position is supposed to exhaust one’s subjectivity.

How has Mary so called herself? Is she going on her willingness to trust—and not to trust—her own innocence, to be possessed by no man but by an idea, say a word? Does she put before all her willingness to let something matter, to happen to her unforgettably? But these attributes resemble those Godard’s Carmen assigns herself in taking Carmen on. They seem attributes of philosophy. Here the question whether Mary skirts skepticism may come to the fore. Unlike Kleist’s Marquise of O—, Godard’s Mary seems never to be driven in her unfathomable position to the shore of madness. Yet we see her thrashing on her bed, sheets twisted more or less around her, as if eventually and equally to swaddle or to shroud—as if soul should become body, or abandon body, hence yield the desire to know beyond itself. The Marquise of O— is drawn to madness by her questioning how this pregnancy has happened. Godard’s Mary is kept sane by the acknowledgment that it has happened, while shaken by the question why something so disproportionate has happened to her. It may become anybody’s question.

The idea of a body “having” a soul is apparently so banal from Mary’s perspective that she turns the words into the question of a soul having a body. Her doctor is impatient with her for this confusion, even though he has just verified that she is bodily both virginal and pregnant, which could be explained as her being immersed in the spirit, a state describable not as a spirit possessing the body but perhaps as spirit enveloping the body, so in this way having it—whether as a plan has risks, or a person has premonitions, or as a pond has fish, or the hand has fingers, or as the mind has mountains. Perhaps what the obstetrician lacks is the concept of being born again. Death and departure are as different in the case of the soul as in the case of God. What prevents the announcing of the death of the soul? Or was this Nietzsche’s question?

Isn’t Mary serious in her speculations? Doesn’t her life depend upon them? That Wittgenstein takes the idea of the soul as “having” a body to

be philosophically arousing (*Investigations*, sec. 283) is encouraging but not decisive. The body's having a soul suggests that in the array of bodies we encounter, certain among them may not have souls, an idea of the presence of humanoids or other aliens of some other species, zombies, golems, automaton, an inhabitation of eternal death. We do not, not even a Mary among us at this time, I assume, have an analogous idea of our familiarity with an array of souls some of which are fated to be encountered in the presence of bodies. Accordingly, the idea of the soul having a body seems rather my idea of what makes my body mine, and of the change it will suffer at my death, should it survive me. Then, in a word, it would be I who have a soul—or not—something else besides an ego, so to speak. Then self-intimacy seems, paradoxically, to ease my imagination of others, to reach them without attempting to overcome their distance or separation from me—as if knowing others, whatever men think, is not entering them but bearing them, bearing their annunciations of us, so renunciations.

I used Mary's invocation of Shakespeare to justify my calling, in my epigraph, upon Shakespeare's words on miracles—all but beaten into banality by fame—from another play of and about the mystery and magic and trick of marriage, and of the irony of human identity, especially of the identity of husbands and sons and kings, and of the defiling of a woman that is no defiling. We would ask, were there time at this time for philosophical patience, what idea of miracles Godard's Mary's Joseph has that backs him in claiming, "Miracles don't exist." To retrieve the picture would take the patience Kierkegaard exercises, in his book on Adler, in claiming that the church has lost or forgotten the concept of revelation, so that it is religiously in the position, awkward for this church, of knowing that it necessarily cannot recognize anything that happens—however interesting or important or destructive—as a revelation. Yet in a time and place closer perhaps to Kierkegaard's than ours, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* calls marriage "the miracle of miracles," and its heroine's justification for walking away from her sacred duties as wife and mother depends on acknowledging that under that concept she has not been taken in marriage.

If we may still, barely, take Ibsen seriously on such a matter, with or against what grain can we take the moment in Cukor's smallish film *Adam's Rib* in which Eve, I mean Amanda, the wife-attorney (Katharine Hepburn), amazedly asks of a dainty hat given her by her husband-attorney (Spencer Tracy), "Isn't that a miracle?" The seriousness or banality of that description (of the hat and of its gift) doesn't really come into question until the ending sequence, where the husband and the wife, about to disappear into bed, are both wearing hats, so that a miracle and the echo or contest of a miracle are associated with the possibility of marriage. If, further, we remember Freud's listing the hat, in his *Interpretation of*

Dreams, typically a woman's hat, as a symbol for the male genitals, then we may pose for ourselves the following question about our experience of this pair's disappearance into their marriage. Do we experience their joining the struggle between the sexes as a contest over who wears the hat? Or do we instead understand them as joining to contest this concept of the struggle? The scandal in such a (Hollywood) film's accepting marriage as a struggle against so-called marriage took some four decades after the making of such films to recognize, and they still hardly constitute big news. That Godard's small, thoughtful film, with its plain events and its reconceptualizing, or say recalling, of a popular set of names, caused its scandal almost at once, as part of its reception, is, to my mind, glad news.

A parting memory. Of the pieces of Bach called upon for the sound in *Hail Mary*, the choice underscoring the early basketball sequence is the opening Prelude of the first volume of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. It is—how may we forget it?—the piece appropriated by Gounod to which, on which, to set his "*Ave Maria*." Godard's charming identification here of his work with Gounod's asks us to think of the exploitation of Bach but also of the insight in Gounod's seeing that that piece of Bach's is interpretable as an accompaniment (an accompaniment to *that*, to hailing Mary, which Godard accepts as imperishable, but contests). And, I suppose, asks us to think further that these small insights may blur Bach's insight into smallness, or plainness—that this minimal figuration of C major in the opening Prelude is not fragmentary, not lacking; it is intact and open, virginal and pregnant. (Mary said, "Being a virgin should mean being available, or free. Not being hurt.") Blank of signature, and its dozen accidentals heard to be movingly necessary, the Prelude's indestructibility as a field for generations of child's play (each learning to position herself or himself at that initial, unprotected, middle C) confirms its right to continue into a pair of volumes whose demands and possibilities circle, and again circle, inexhaustibly, the universe of the major and minor keys. Men's insights seem in general not to contain such patience.