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Searching for the Sacred

A conversation with Rosanna Warren

By [Anthony Domestico](#)

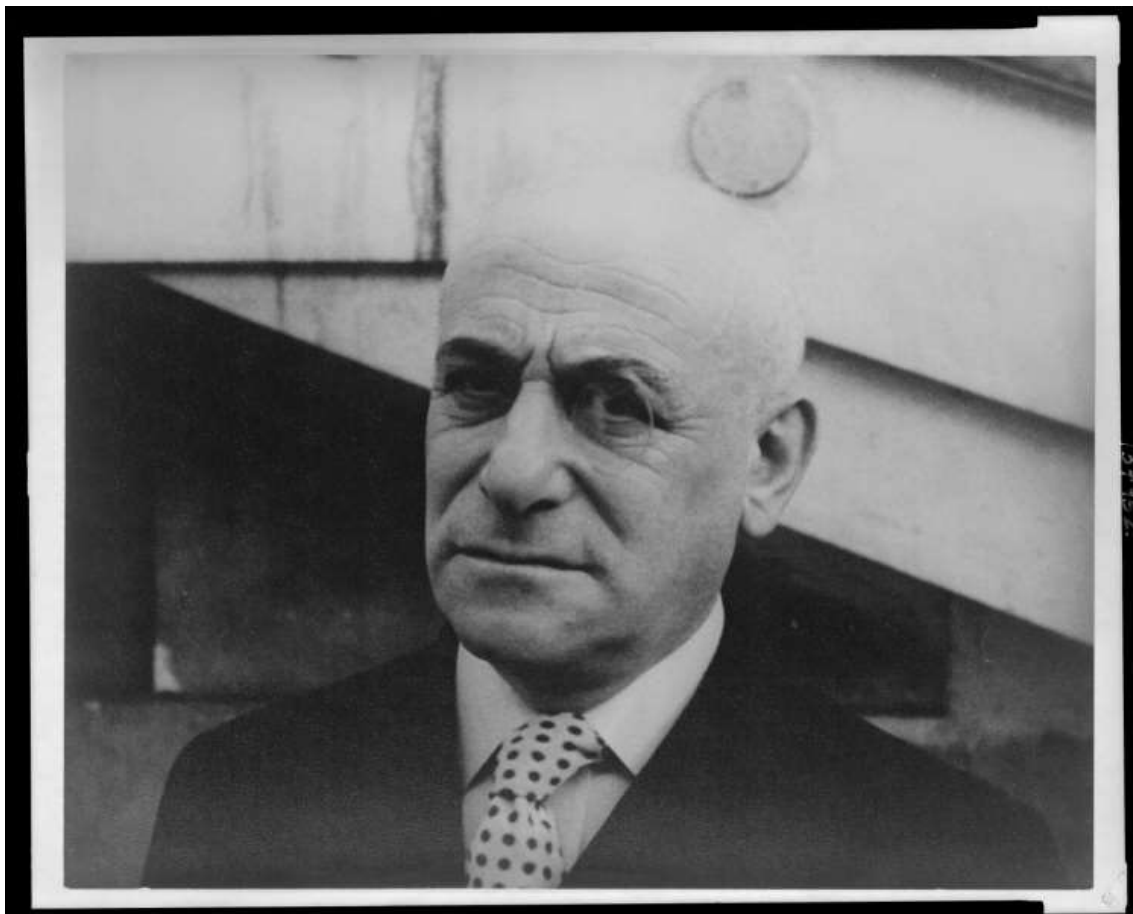
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Max Jacob, photographed in 1934 (Carl Van Vechten/Wikimedia Commons)

Rosanna Warren is a great poet. In her six collections, including last spring's So Forth, she weds formal jouissance with philosophical seriousness. Her poems are spry and stately, emerging from tradition and, as the best poems do, reshaping it. They exhibit, to use Robert Frost's phrase, "play for mortal stakes."

With [Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters](#), Warren has proven herself a great literary biographer as well. Jacob was born in 1876 to a business-owning Jewish family in Quimper, an administrative center of Brittany. He died in 1944 in a Paris internment camp. Today Jacob, a talented painter and brilliant poet, is perhaps best known as Pablo Picasso's first and best French friend. When they met in 1901, Jacob wrote, "We clasped hands with that fire of friendship one no longer experiences after one's twentieth year." The two lived together for a time in Paris, pushing formal boundaries on the canvas (Picasso's Cubism) and on the page (Jacob's fractured, visionary prose poems). In 1909, Jacob had a vision of Christ, which led to his conversion to Catholicism (in subsequent years, he attended daily Mass and spent years living at a Benedictine monastery). He wrote about this vision for the rest of his life.

As Warren argues, Jacob's art emerged from a series of fundamental tensions. He was Jewish and Catholic; he was a painter and a poet; he was a social creature who lived, for long stretches, in retreat from the social world; he was a gay man who saw his desire as both a torment and a mystical route to God. This multiplicity makes itself felt in the very texture of Jacob's writing. In his prose poems, Warren has written, "meaning leaps from unit to unit; meaning is the leaping itself, the motion." Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters shows us this leaping motion, this vital energy that is a matter of style and soul.

This interview was conducted via email.

ANTHONY DOMESTICO: In your preface, you claim, "I didn't mean to write this book. To my French friends, I call it *une biographie involontaire*. It was a case of possession." How did Jacob come to possess you?

ROSANNA WARREN: It was a spectral experience. I'd been writing since childhood: when I was seven, my father gave me an old typewriter and I taught myself to type. I created a family newspaper, *The Family Racket*, for which I interviewed the cat, the dog, and the rabbit, as well as my parents and my brother. I also wrote innumerable stories. One, novella-length, was published by Random House when I was ten. We lived in France the year I was twelve, and attending the *lycée*, I had to memorize hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lines of poetry in French, and I began writing poems in French. Throughout my adolescence, I kept writing poems, mostly in English. But I kept them private. I'd also been drawing and painting since childhood, and the discipline to which I consciously committed myself was painting. I was majoring in studio art in college, and attended serious art schools during the summers—Skowhegan, where I met my inspiring teacher the painter Leland Bell, and the New York Studio School. It was during the New York Studio School summer program in Paris that Leland asked me to translate the studio notes of André Derain, notes which had been hidden, till then, in an old suitcase in the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet.

I spent my mornings at the studio drawing and painting, and my afternoons at the august library, translating Derain's wine and paint-stained pages. And among those papers I found letters from Max Jacob, since Derain had created woodcuts for one of Jacob's earliest books, the marvelous collection of experimental poems, *Les Oeuvres burlesques et mystiques de Frère Matoriel, mort au couvent*, from 1912. I was fascinated. Jacob, like me, both wrote and painted. Like me, he was searching for the sacred. One weekend I drove down to the village of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, where Jacob had spent two seven-year periods of retreat in connection with the Benedictine monastery. I meant to draw the Romanesque capitals of the basilica, but in the little bookshop I found books by Max Jacob and was enraptured by his poems. In my sketchbook, as if a ghostly hand had seized mine, I found myself writing poems (in English) in his style, to him, about him. He kidnapped me. When I got back to college in the fall, I typed up the poems and showed them to my dean, who was also the editor of *The Yale Review*. "These are good," he said, rather severely. The next thing I knew, they appeared in print, and I was encouraged to send poems to other journals, and bit by bit, my writing was no longer secret. It took several years after my graduation from university, but I found I was spending more time writing than painting, and with grief—as in recognizing a failing love affair—I came to recognize that I would not be a painter. Max Jacob had reoriented me.

After Jacob experienced a mystical vision of Christ in 1909, he was torn more and more between his frenetic socializing and his solitary studies.



AD: One of this book's strengths lies in its rich description not only of Jacob but also of what you describe as "the loose commonwealth" of his friends: Pablo Picasso, most famously, but many others too, such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, and Jacques Maritain. Can you describe Jacob as a friend? What was it like to spend a night out with him in Paris in the 1910s? And how did these friendships help shape his writing?

RW: Jacob's nights out varied enormously depending on the friends and on the period in his life. He was a chameleon. With Picasso and Apollinaire in the 1910s, there were raucous nights up in Montmartre, eating at grubby little bistros (when often they could hardly afford a plate of beans), or at the Lapin Agile tavern, where Jacob would entertain his friends by dancing manic jigs on the table top, wrapped in a shawl and impersonating a woman or warbling lyrics from comic opera. In those years, they were all desperately poor and they depended on Jacob for entertainment. After Jacob experienced a mystical vision of Christ on the wall of his dark little room on the Rue Ravignan in 1909, he was torn more and more between his frenetic socializing and his solitary studies in religion and the occult. He was formally baptized in the Roman Catholic faith in 1915 (with Picasso as his godfather); for several years he maintained a divided life, partly engaged in penitential exercises, meditation, and prayer, and partly carousing in Montmartre and Montparnasse and pursuing fleeting erotic encounters with men. He suffered anguish and guilt at these dissipations, but he was driven to them. After 1916, his social circle expanded to include more worldly friends, such as the Prince and Princess Ghika (the princess was the famous former courtesan Liane de Pougy), and the celebrated fashion designer Paul Poiret. With these people, Jacob was a dandy, elegant, fiendishly witty. Still later, during his first period of retreat at Saint-Benoît in the 1920s, he became friendly with the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain and his wife, Raïssa. With them and with his parish priests, he was still another creature: devout, erudite, kind. With the keenly intelligent, subtle, and loyal writer and editor Jean Paulhan, Jacob was a serious intellectual and artist.

How did these friendships shape his writing? It's hard to say in any precise way, but Jacob was a wildly innovative fiction writer as well as poet, and his stories and novels are populated by a vast array of different characters. The friendship with Picasso was probably the most important relationship of his life, and it persisted, with permutations, from the early days of heroic Cubism, when Jacob was reinventing French poetry as Picasso reinvented painting, to the end of Jacob's life. The last, unfinished painting on Jacob's table, left there when the Gestapo arrested him on February 24, 1944, was a portrait of Picasso. The friendship with Apollinaire was marked by poetic rivalry, but also by affection: it couldn't develop since Apollinaire died young of the Spanish flu in 1918. The connection with Cocteau lasted for years; they understood each other's homosexuality and were less competitive poetically. They also collaborated in developing a kind of modernist classicism after the Great War in opposition to Breton's Surrealism.

AD: Jacob was turned off by the secular Judaism of his family: as a fictional version of his mother exclaims, "You know, as for me, I don't give a hoot about God!" But he became deeply interested in Kabbalah around 1901 and remained interested until his death. Why did this system appeal to Jacob, as both a mystic and a poet?

RW: You're right that Kabbalah appealed to Jacob as both mystic and poet, and the two disciplines were coterminous for him. In the version of Kabbalah that Jacob read in French translation, he found a mystical and spiritual version of Judaism that had nothing in common with his parents' shop-keeping world in Quimper, or the elite, intellectual Judaism of his cousin by marriage Sylvain Lévi, the eminent professor of Sanskrit at the Collège de France. One of the painful themes in this story is Jacob's rejection of Judaism, his blindness to possibilities of Jewish identity he might have found, for instance, in the powerful Swiss novelist Albert Cohen, whom he knew slightly. But in Kabbalah Jacob found one way to preserve his Judaism. He saw it as a vision of all creation emanating from the power of language and from the numerical values in Hebrew letters. God creates the world in Genesis through utterance: for the Kabbalist, the entire world is a magical system of language, and the initiate can penetrate to the secret essence of things through incantations. The heavens are composed in spiritual rings within rings "like an onion," and through meditation the initiate can pass beyond the surface and mingle with the divine: "Mystery is in this life, reality in the other. If you love me, if you love me, I'll show you reality." All of Jacob's life can be seen as a drive toward unifying disparate elements: Catholic and Jew, decadent and ascetic, provincial and Parisian, painter and poet. Kabbalah gave him a model of synthesis.

AD: Your first book, *Each Leaf Shines Separate*, includes two poems written for Jacob. In both, you stress the theatrical nature of his faith: "And yet / your piety is touching, though / (because?) histrionic," you write in "To Max Jacob." In

the biography, you stress this style of piety again: “The tears were real. The theater was real. Jacob’s religion was theatrical and, like all real art, a form of truth.” What made Jacob’s religion theatrical?

RW: Jacob lived in and through the imagination. For him, the imagination was a faculty for divining truth and then representing it. Art, he thought, was an illusion designed to present essential truths. This is hardly an original idea: Shakespeare plays with it endlessly, such as in *As You Like It* when the clown Touchstone tells Audrey, “The truest poetry is the most feigning.” When Jacob was acting, he was finding out what *could be real* for him, and then he made it real. In his Catholicism, this meant adopting practices of devotion and a theology—which for him was an esoteric set of stories and symbols—then radically changing his life to live into the meaning of those stories. Fourteen years spent in a parish community around a Benedictine abbey was hardly a flight of fancy. Jacob was so thoroughly an artist, I think he treated his own life like an artwork and acted out his truth.

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AD: The last pages of the book are dreadful: France falls to the Germans; anti-Jewish laws are passed; family members are arrested and sent to Auschwitz; Jacob is arrested and dies of pneumonia in an internment camp. “Yet,” you write, “Jacob wasn’t crushed. Poetry gave him a core of resilience and helped him to ‘resist.’” Just months before his arrest, he wrote “Neighborly Love.” Could you describe that poem—its structure, its shifting pronouns (from “he” to “me” to “you”), its tone—and explain how you read it as an example of poetic resistance?

RW: “Neighborly Love” is a prose poem. The title is savagely ironic: the eager collaboration of the Vichy government with the Nazis in restricting and extirpating Jewish life in France hardly presents an example of neighborly love. The poem starts with an anonymous speaker asking, “Who has seen the toad crossing the road?” The question could be felt as a challenge to Jacob’s fellow citizens in 1943: Who was seeing? Who was caring? Then we see the toad as a “tiny man,” crippled, advancing in a humiliated crawl. More questions: “Has he crawled from the sewer?” In the anti-Semitic idiom of the period, Jews were routinely portrayed as sub-human, vermin, filth. Denizens of a sewer. Then a decisive statement: “No one has noticed the toad in the street.” At which point the poem shifts its pronouns, as you saw, to the first person, who identifies with the toad: “Before, no one noticed me in the street.” And we are hurled into the present of the Occupation, the yellow star imposed on the Jews: “Now children are amazed by my yellow star.” The poem ends by addressing the toad directly, contradicting the earlier identification: now the speaker envies the toad, who has no yellow star. I think of this poem as an act of resistance because it presents the situation of oppression with concentrated imaginative force and takes possession of the symbols of oppression: Jews seen as squalid animals, the yellow star. And it forces a reader to pay attention to the horror. Who has seen? Of course, it couldn’t be published when Jacob wrote it. It came out in December 1944, after his death, in Éluard’s little resistance journal, *Éternelle revue*. I own a copy of this issue, one of my cherished possessions.

AD: You open your preface with a question: “How did the story of Max Jacob’s life become the story of my life?” This echoes the preface to another one of your books, *Fables of the Self*, where you write that your critical essays “compose an occult autobiography.” How has working on Jacob for three decades helped you to understand your own life? What aesthetic and religious questions has he clarified or complicated for you?

RW: Ah, hard to answer! In many ways, my life doesn’t resemble Jacob’s. I’m not a man, I’m not French, I’m not gay, I’m not Jewish. But all my life I’ve been seeking forms of the sacred that made sense to me. I grew up in an atheist family with Protestantism in the background, but we lived a good deal in Italy and France in my childhood. I was drawn to the crucifixes that hung on the walls of the farmhouses we rented and to the religious paintings and sculptures we saw all around us. In high school in the United States, I ransacked Dante, Pascal, Donne, Milton, trying to find—What? God? What belief might look like? Belief for me would have to come in the form of art, in the form of imaginative creations. Working with Jacob, I felt I knew from the inside out what it was to live *in the truth* of these stories. The birth of a sacred child: the constant possibility of the renewal of love. The crucifixion: the woundedness that breaks us, but can open us to radical love. At the same time, after years of trying to adapt myself to different Christian congregations—even going so far as to undergo, if that is the right word, initiation into the Catholic faith and baptism—I realized that I would always be an outsider. I couldn’t accept dogma. I was horrified by the petrification of sacrificial vision in cruel power structures, all the crueller in those years when the sexual scandals in the Church broke out, and it became clear that the Church authorities were more committed to protecting their own hierarchies than in protecting vulnerable people. I’m a lapsed Catholic convert, I guess, still living in the light of the vision but rejecting the

institution. For some years now I have lived with my beloved partner who is Jewish, and we follow Jewish ritual quite closely, which moves me and satisfies my longing for a form of worship. In any case, I have read and reread the Hebrew Bible for decades. It seems to me that the sacred is like light: its frequencies are reflected from different surfaces and are interpreted as different colors by the action of the human retina, optic nerve, and brain. Divinity enters us in many different ways and takes many forms, many different stories, in our limited human brains. I'm happy to live in this multiplicity.

AD: One of my favorite lines in the book comes from a 1922 exhibit essay Jacob wrote, ostensibly on Spanish art but, you argue, really about Picasso and, even more really, about his own poetry. The line reads, "In any case, to say mystic is to say realist." Is that statement true for you, too?

RW: I love this statement too. When I painted, I used to go into trances, sitting in a meadow, or in front of a person whose portrait I was painting: when things were working, normal selfhood ebbed away and I felt in communion with what I was trying to translate into visual marks. Something like that happens when I'm immersed in writing. I don't claim to be a mystic. But in the modest disciplines of writing poems and drawing, I try to open myself to realities beyond myself. "Realist" is the important word. It's a never-ending quest for the revelation of the real, and for a symbolic language in which to express the experience. I came close to saying what I mean in the poem "Man in Stream," from *Ghost in a Red Hat*: "I wanted a day with cracks, to let the godlight in." Max Jacob taught me about making those cracks, finding those cracks, looking for that light.

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