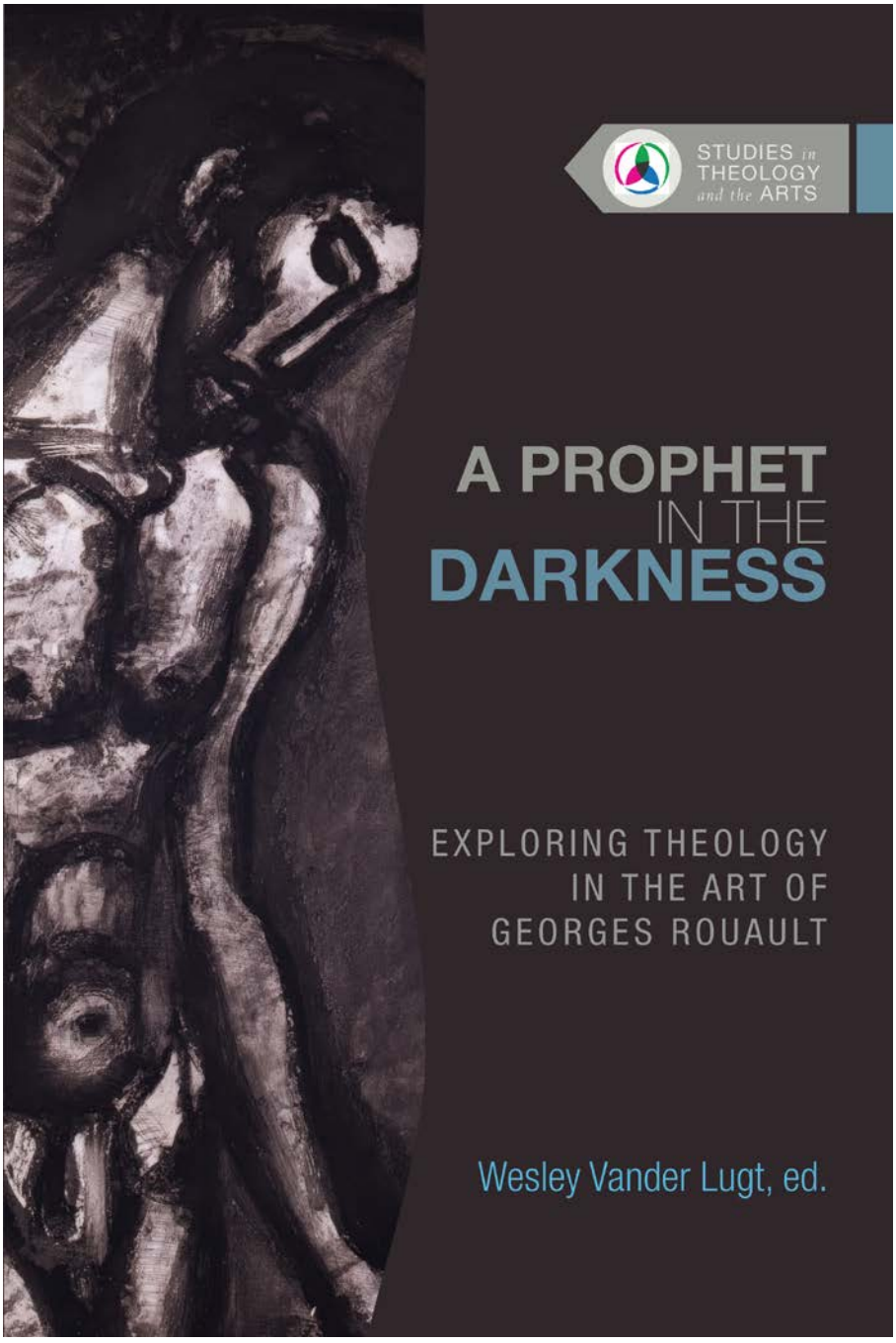

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *A Prophet in the Darkness* by Wesley Vander Lugt
Copyright © 2024 by Wesley Peter Vander Lugt
Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL
www.ivpress.com

Contents

ivp | InterVarsity Press

ivp | InterVarsity Press

1

Georges Rouault

A Personal Introduction

Philippe Rouault

Georges Rouault occupies a unique place among twentieth-century artists. He was at once an exceptional painter, draftsman, engraver, and writer. He found inspiration in the most mystical and humble subjects. His critical observation of society led him to tackle themes that remain current today: clowns and acrobats, judges and lawyers, prostitutes, migrants, and fugitives. Defying a century that was too callous for his taste, Rouault testified to an unfailing faith by illustrating the Passion of Christ. But this chapter is not primarily about the art of Rouault. Rather, my purpose is to provide a brief overview of his life along with some of the stories that have been handed down to me.

My great-grandfather Georges Rouault and my great-grandmother Marthe Le Sidaner lived together as husband and wife for half a century. They had four children and eleven grandchildren, and in my generation there are twenty-nine great-grandchildren. Georges-Henri Rouault was born in a cellar on May 27, 1871, during the tumultuous "Bloody Week" at the end of the Paris Commune, which occurred in the wake of France's defeat in the Franco-German War and the collapse of Napoleon III's Second Empire. A stray shell struck the house of his grandparents at 51 rue de la Villette in Paris, and the young expectant mother had to be moved into the cellar, where she gave birth to her second child. Georges Rouault kept a piece of this shell all his life. A month later, he was baptized in the Catholic Church of Saint Leu.

A frail little boy, Rouault spent a happy childhood in the working-class area of Belleville in Paris. He was a great admirer of his mother, Marie-Louise, initially a

ivp | InterVarsity Press

seamstress and later an administrator, who was up at dawn to take on additional work that helped pay for his education. His father, Alexandre, was born into a large family in the town of Monfort in Brittany. He worked as a carpenter and varnisher at the Pleyel piano workshop in Paris. As Rouault came from a relatively poor family, outings were rare, but occasionally a circus would come to town, and the clowns, riders, and acrobats made an impression on Rouault from an early age.

His maternal grandfather, Alexandre Champdavoine, was employed by the post office on the train between Paris and Marseille. He was an open-minded man who read Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Baruch Spinoza and collected reproductions of Rembrandt, Édouard Manet, and Honoré Daumier. When Rouault was only four years old, his grandfather found him drawing on the kitchen tiles with chalk and was delighted to see that he had talent. He greatly encouraged Rouault. They also shared a love of reading, especially of Victor Hugo, whose funeral Rouault followed across Paris, riding on his grandfather's shoulders. Rouault was fifteen at the time his dearly loved grandfather died. From that time on he wore his portrait on a medallion and kept it all his life (see fig. 1.1). He was a happy child and an excellent pupil who loved sports and was appreciated by his teachers.

Figure 1.1. Rouault with his maternal grandfather

ivp | InterVarsity Press

By the age of fourteen he was working as an apprentice to a glass painter, Tamoni, in order to earn a living. The work was hard, as he had to handle heavy lead plates. But he was full of energy. His love of sports served him well, as whenever he was sent on an errand he would keep the bus fare, preferring to run after the bus and use the money to buy paints. Following this, he went to work for prestigious glass painter and medieval windows restorer Georges Hirsch. He observed and was enraptured by the old stained-glass windows, which he meticulously detailed every day instead of having lunch. He called this his paradise hour. This period of learning seems to have been decisive and is often said to be the source of the heavy black lines that characterize Rouault's mature style. He rose at dawn to draw on an easel that his father had made for him, and in the evening he would walk to the other side of Paris to draw from antiques and from life at the School of Decorative Arts.

On December 3, 1890, when not yet twenty years old, Rouault entered the École de Beaux-Arts in Paris. For the first two years, his teacher, Elie Delauney, made him work on his drawing technique. He sat numerous exams but really wanted to paint. For that he had to wait until Delauney died and Gustave Moreau was nominated as her successor. Straight away, Rouault admired this exceptional teacher and quickly became his favorite pupil. The master sent his pupil to the opera and theater, opened his library to him, and insisted on the works of Blaise Pascal. Rouault, reflecting on his time in Gustave Moreau's studio, says, "I was mute; I would reply yes . . . no . . . that's all." But his fellow students gave quite a different opinion. One of them, Paul Baigneres, said, "We only heard him!" During this time, Henri Matisse and Rouault became very close, and their friendship lasted their whole lives. They wrote to each other for more than fifty years, and many of these letters are carefully preserved at the Rouault Foundation.[1]

Although Rouault won the Chevenard prize and the Fortin d'Ivry prize, Moreau was disappointed to see him ousted from the Prix de Rome and therefore encouraged him to continue working from his studio. After leaving the Beaux-Arts, Rouault continued to submit his work to Moreau as his patron, bringing him the fruit of his independent research, such as the painting

[1]Fondation Georges Rouault, https://rouault.org/en/.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

le Paysage de nuit—translated *Night Landscape* but also known as *The brawl on the construction site*—from 1897 (see web 3.1). For many years, this painting was the property of Henry Simon, colonial minister during World War I, and is now part of the collection at the Musée d'Orsay.

In 1898, his beloved friend Moreau died of cancer. Before his death, he made Georges promise that he would never smoke, a promise he kept all his life. Rouault said, "My old master has left me. I wasn't a novice or student to him. But the happy confidant of his conscious thoughts." And so Rouault discovered solitude. He wrote, "If my art is harsh, it is probably due to this period of my existence."

Although he came from a Catholic family, Rouault waited to confirm his faith by taking Communion until the age of twenty-four, encouraged by Father Vallee, a Benedictine monk whom he met through René Piot, a classmate at the Beaux-Arts. Moreau, while not a practicing Christian, had a deep belief in the spiritual value of art and may have had some influence in Rouault's later decision. Rouault's faith can be seen clearly in his art, and form and color are central to his thinking.

Following the death of Moreau, Rouault suffered from depression: a moral, spiritual, and artistic crisis. In 1901, he found refuge at the Ligugé Abbey near Poitiers, where Catholic writer Joris-Karl Huysmans had invited a group of artists to join him (see fig. 1.2). But following the enactment of a law targeting certain associations, the Ligugé community had to be dissolved, and Rouault returned to Paris.

In 1903, Rouault was named curator of the Musée Gustave Moreau according to the wishes expressed in Moreau's will. Rouault had on-site accommodation and an office. This office, which was previously Moreau's, has now been refurbished as it was over one hundred years ago, and it is a moving experience to visit it at 14 rue de Rochefoucauld in Paris.

From this time on, American collectors such as John Quinn, attorney general in New York, and Walter Pach bought Rouault's paintings and ceramics. In France, Gustave Coquiot, Marcel Sambat and Georgette Agutte, Henri Simon, le Docteur Girardin, and Alfonse Druet bought paintings such as *La Peniche* (*The Houseboat*), *l'Escalier* (*The Staircase*), and *Le Clown au Bandoneon* (*The Clown on the Bandoneon*). Rouault then presented works at the Salon d'Automne and at the Salon des Indépendants. He soon became a

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Figure 1.2. Rouault with others at Ligugé Abbey

member of the jury at the Salon d'Automne. His first individual exhibition of 183 works was held in the Galerie Druet in 1910.

Rouault seldom visited cafes and never really participated in the bohemian life of Paris, preferring to stay closer to Catholic circles. He took advantage of his role at the Gustave Moreau Museum to make new friends, first Léon Bloy, a Catholic writer, and then Thomist philosophers Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. The painter Edgar Degas came to meet him at the museum. He was also close to writers Jacques Rivière and Alain-Fournier (Rivière's brother-in-law) and artist André Lhote. In 1911, he met writer André Suarès, confiding in him and describing his inner creative torment. This was the beginning of a very long friendship, captured in their precious correspondence, which continued until 1948.

Rouault was particularly struck by the novel *La Femme pauvre* (*The Poor Woman*) by Léon Bloy. The book follows the miserable life of a woman named Clotilde who, animated by her strong faith, is able to endure all her sufferings, including those inflicted by Madame Poulot. In 1905 at the Salon d'Automne, Rouault shocked the public with dark and cartoonish

ivp | InterVarsity Press

paintings. Bloy reacted violently to the sight of the painting *Les Poulot* (see web 3.3), inspired by the characters from Bloy's book, which he found ugly. Nevertheless, the two men remained close friends until the writer's death in 1917.

After Rouault's parents came back to the family home from Algeria, where they had gone to help his sister Emilie following the death of her husband, his mother became his assistant, taking care of his mail and filing articles concerning him and his work. All of this documentation has been preserved and is available to consult at the Rouault Foundation.

In 1907, one of Rouault's friends declared, "No young girl from good society would want to marry you, my poor Rouault, with the painting you do." However, a year later, on January 27, 1908, at age thirty-six, Rouault married pianist Marthe Le Sidaner, the daughter of a sea captain and sister of painter Henri Le Sidaner. The young couple moved into the Gustave Moreau Museum, where their first child, Geneviève, was born in 1909. In 1910, before the birth of their next child, Isabelle, they left their lodgings at the museum and moved to the Rue Blanche in Paris. Then again in 1912, before the birth of their third child, Michel, they moved to Versailles. Marthe had given a concert there, which led to several new pupils, and for a long time they depended on her income from teaching piano.

It was also in Versailles that Rouault's father died, and he was profoundly affected. He said of his father, "As a man of common sense, he feared me being a painter. He would have wanted me to have a good job, whereas painters were very frowned upon at the time." He also wrote, "It was following the death of my father that I made a series called *Miserere*, in which I put the best of myself." In 1915, Agnès, Rouault's fourth and last child, was born.

Although he was a hard worker, Rouault remained very close to his children (see fig. 1.3). His daughter Geneviève recounts, "All four of us were disguised as clowns. He liked to paint our faces and knew how to comb and lacquer our hair. He read marvelously well. I remember 'The Gold-Bug' by Edgar Allen Poe which we listened to, lying on the floor in deep silence. Over the years we listened to him reading Victor Hugo, Balzac, Dickens (*David Copperfield*) and lastly Alain-Fournier. Sometimes, when we were in bed, not yet asleep, Papa would stand and read us poems that he had written for us" (see fig. 1.4).

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Figure 1.3. Rouault with his family

ivp | InterVarsity Press

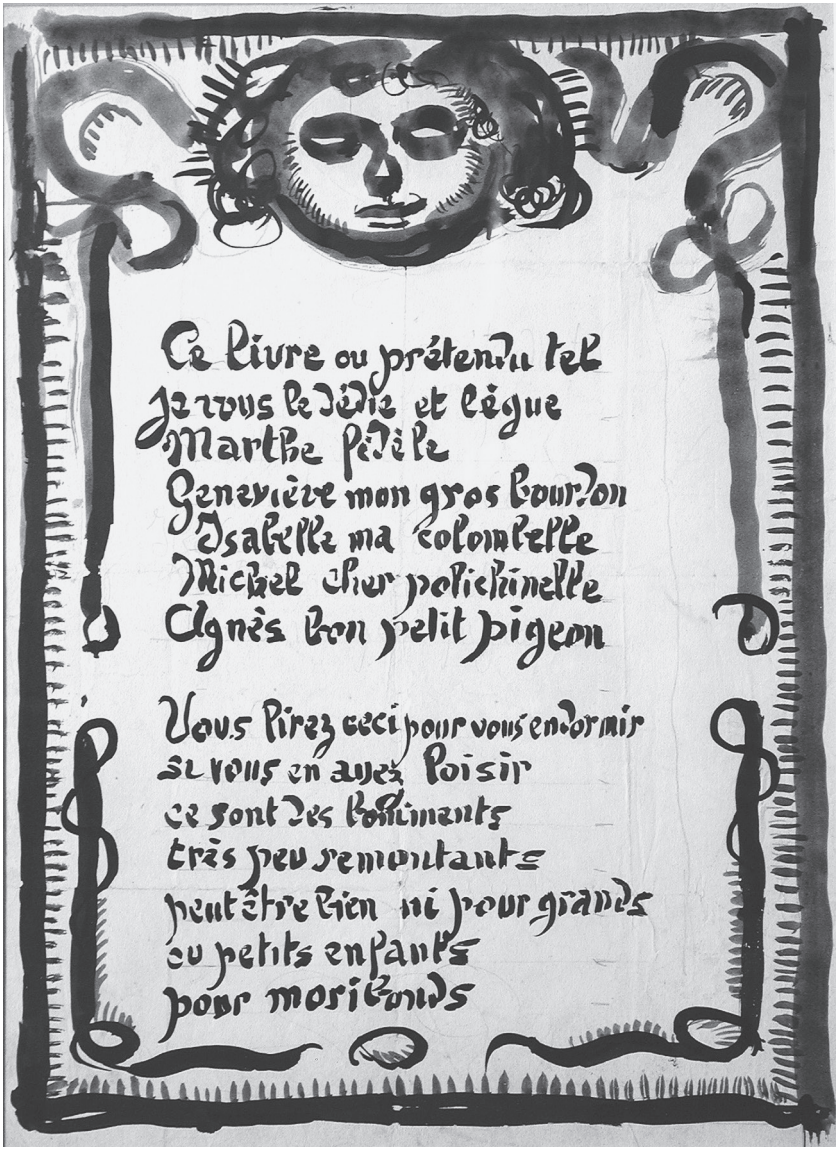

Figure 1.4. An original poem by Rouault

The year 1916 marked the beginning of Rouault's collaboration with Ambroise Vollard. In 1917, Vollard, who was one of the most prestigious art dealers in Paris, expressed a desire to buy Rouault's output. They had known each other for more than ten years, and Rouault agreed to give Vollard artistic

ivp | InterVarsity Press

exclusivity in return for a fixed salary, on the condition that he would have his whole life to finish the works he had already sketched out. The dealer made a studio available to Rouault on the top floor of his grand house. Rouault was gradually overwhelmed with work because he was required not only to paint but also to illustrate and produce books. The first book, *The Reincarnations of Pere Ubu*, was published in 1932, but Rouault had been working on it since 1917. The boards for the *Miserere* were drawn between 1922 and 1927, although the work was not published until 1948. In 1928, Rouault and Suarès completed a book project on which they had worked together for several years, but Vollard refused to publish the writings of Suarès. Though frustrated, Rouault agreed to replace the poetry of Suarès with his own writings, naming the finished book *The Circus of the Shooting Star*, published in 1938. *The Passion*, a book with writing and artwork, was published in 1939. During this period, Rouault painted less and focused on printmaking. He was more and more a prisoner in his studio, with his daughter Isabelle assisting him with administrative tasks.

His most well-known book, *Miserere*, represents in fifty-eight engravings the misery of the world and the mercy of God, evoking on one the one hand misery, pride, vice, and death and on the other hand patience, tenderness, and love. The images of Christ torn between these two contrary worlds are arranged in this book in a deeply thoughtful manner. This work, the realization of which required many years of labor, was born in the mind of Rouault in his youth but was not published until 1948 (see fig. 1.5).

In July 1939, Vollard died in a car accident, and Rouault was deeply moved. Barely a year after Vollard's death, Rouault wisely made an inventory of what he made and delivered to Vollard; it added up to around one hundred paintings. Vollard did not have any children, but he still had heirs, who sealed the studio so that Rouault could not get in to claim his work. World War II broke out, however, and Rouault had to wait to the end of the war for the trial against Vollard's heirs, who had appropriated everything in the studio and begun to sell it in America. Rouault argued with Vollard's heirs that the unfinished art that remained in the studio must be returned to him. It took a long time, but the court sided with Rouault, and the appeal court confirmed this ruling. This set a precedent for the rights of the artist, ensuring that, unless exhibited or put up for

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Figure 1.5. Rouault with *Miserere*

sale, artwork belonged freely to the artist. Rouault did not regain everything, as some works were already sold, but regarding the hundreds he did regain, he declared, "I am seventy years old; I can't finish everything myself, so out of respect for my art and to clearly show that I didn't do this for money, I will burn them." He burned over three hundred works in a factory chimney (see fig. 1.6).

Born under the bombardments, Rouault lived painfully through the two world wars. He illustrated the world's sufferings in the *Miserere* but also in paintings that are sadly still relevant today, such as *The Fugitives—Exodus* (see fig. 3.1), and *Man is wolf to man* (*Homo homini lupus*), which pictures a man hanged on gallows (see web 1.1). During World War II, Rouault left Paris for Beaumont-sur-Sarthe, then the south of France. After this

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Figure 1.6. Rouault burning his work

difficult period, he lived and worked in the apartment near the Gare de Lyon in Paris. The last years of his life were lived in serenity, surrounded by his family.

After World War II, the Vatican became increasingly interested in Rouault and his work, and a room dedicated to Rouault was opened in the Vatican Museum. Rouault was elevated to the rank of commander in the order of Saint Gregory the Great. In 1957, when French President René Coty was received by Pope Pius XII, he presented the pope with Rouault's masterpiece, the *Miserere*, specially bound in white leather and stamped with the arms of the Sovereign Pontiff. In 1965, during a trip to the United States, Pope Paul VI donated Rouault's *Christ Crucified* to be hung in the headquarters of the United Nations (see web 1.2). In 2016, Pope Francis had a reproduction of *Head of Christ* (1937) from the Cleveland Museum made in the form of a medallion and distributed a copy to one hundred thousand young people gathered in Saint Peter's Square (see web 1.3).

After Vollard's death, when Rouault regained his liberty, he received numerous requests for stained-glass windows, but he chose to engage in only a few projects, assisted by Paul Bony, and preferred to work on his unfinished paintings. In 1949, the Catholic Church commissioned four windows that decorate the chapel of Notre Dame de Toute Grâce in Plateau d'Assy. Two more windows can be admired in the church of Fontaine-la-Soret in

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Normandy. In addition, a stained-glass window is installed in a chapel built on the slopes of Mount Fuji in Japan.

Rouault painted until 1956, when he was eighty-five years old. *Sarah* is one of his last works and is part of the Rouault Foundation endowment (see web 1.4). She keeps watch over the studio and the archives that are carefully preserved in his apartment. Rouault died on February 13, 1958, and is one of the rare French artists to have had a state funeral. A commander of the Legion d'Honneur, he held many other French and foreign decorations. His works can be found in numerous museums across the world and have been shown in hundreds of exhibitions. In 1963, the family donated one thousand unfinished works from Rouault's studio to the state. An exhibition of these works took place at the Louvre in 1964. André Malraux also organized a presentation for General Charles de Gaulle at the presidential palace, where he personally thanked the family for the exceptional donation (see fig. 1.7). In 2021, a tribute to Georges Rouault was held at the Centre Pompidou on the 150th anniversary of his birth. The foundation in Paris manages the work and the archives and has a permanent staff. The Centre Pompidou permanently presents works from the donation in a Rouault room, and a Rouault Museum in Tokyo finances and presents themed exhibitions on the work of Rouault.

Figure 1.7. Rouault family with General de Gaulle

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Although I never met my great-grandfather, I feel privileged to have spent my life surrounded by his art, attending the openings of many exhibitions around the world, and seeing the impact of his art on people who are often encountering his art for the first time. In these days of conflict and division, with many problems in society, Georges Rouault is more relevant than ever in depicting the nature of suffering and what it means to be human.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

"Unrefined Impressions"

Dave Reinhardt

Undefined, blocks of color and a path—
The door beckons and ensconces those who enter.
Christ and the clown—two common cast members
haunt the canvas with their pain and with their comfort.
Fishermen along the shores of the lake
look to the Christ for sustenance only He can provide.
The clown looks to the crowd for sustenance he knows they cannot.
Impressions are made and kept in grace,
like the dancer whose form is not fully formed, and whose
face is unrecognizable to all but those who share her frame.
The fire of autumnal colors—embers now of their former flame.
Peasants and paupers overseen by farmers and the Father.
Three figures huddle together, sheltered by the seasons
of life poor and short, stooped by the winter winds.
Lines thick and unrefined, undefined by the shape of a soul,
set within, yet cast without, beyond the pale blue shadow figure.
Lost and found by threads of Passion for those hidden figures,
the God-man looks and sees beyond the scope—true hope.
Self-portrait of a man who seems sadder than the photos
which capture his visage but not his soul.
Lines colored by feelings of despair, an heir unapparent.
Christ of compassion willingly extends his hand to the man
who sees in pictures and brushes his thoughts on canvas.
Seeing anew is the gift he brings to those who come with eyes to see
vistas of the familiar—faint details bestow clarity.
The Story unfolding before the eyes of our spirit.
Indelible impressions of things seen and unseen.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/a-prophet-of-darkness