

“Like Straw”: Religion and Psychoanalysis[†]



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Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Lacan make strange bedfellows. One would hardly presume to associate them together in any degree of proximity, were it not Lacan himself who invited us to do so. For in his ‘Proposition of October 9, 1967, concerning psychoanalysis in the [Freudian School],’ where he discusses his conception of the end of the psychoanalytic process, he interrupts the argument at a crucial moment by introducing a mysterious analogy: “*Sicut palea*, as Saint Thomas says of his work at the end of his life — like manure.”¹

In psychoanalytic circles, the text of this proposition is perhaps more significant for its political import than for its doctrinal content, for the entire issue of Lacan’s struggle against the International Association of Psychoanalysis is engaged in it. In the ‘Act of Foundation of the Freudian School of Paris’ (1964) Lacan had declared clearly that the only “pure” psychoanalysis is the “didactic” one, and in this proposition of 1967 he analyses the end of such an analysis as the passage from the status of analysand to that of analyst. He then introduces into the structure of his School the process by which this passage is to be institutionalized (the famous “pass”). Obviously, all this touches Lacan’s very conception of analysis in all its splendor, and the brouhaha that it stirred up within the Freudian School itself is part of the colorful history of psychoanalysis in France at the time.² But it is with regard to the doctrinal import of Lacan’s position that he cites Thomas Aquinas, and it is this that concerns us here.

[†]This article has appeared as well in P.J.M. van Tongereb et al (eds.), *Eros and Eris* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), pp. 93-104, as well as in *The Letter* (Fall, 1997).

¹J. Lacan, *Proposition du 9 Octobre 1967 sur la psychanalyse de l’École.* *Scilicet* 1 (1968), p. 25.

²E. Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France (1025-1985)*, trans. by J. Mehlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 443-461.

To begin with, Lacan vigorously rejects the idea that the end of analysis consists in the identification of the analysand with her analyst. On the contrary, Lacan conceives the end of analysis in terms of its beginning. Normally, analysis begins with the request for relief from a certain suffering that the analysand supposes is caused by a constellation of factors that determine her existence in some way unknown to her and which Lacan, following Freud, calls the "unconscious." This unconscious, insofar as it is conceived as a subject that is Other than the conscious one, is presumed to possess a kind of knowledge that includes within its scope this constellation of determining factors. It is this knowledge that is presumed to belong to the subject of the unconscious (to the Other as Lacan conceives it) that the prospective analysand seeks to understand, and the analyst, in accepting such a client into analysis, agrees to occupy the place of the subject if the unconscious with all its presumed knowledge. Through the inevitable functioning of transference, the analyst, occupying the place where this knowledge that is presumed to belong to the Other is stored, is easily taken by the analysand to be the deposit of this knowledge, i.e., to be himself the subject that is presumed to know all the secrets of the subject's hidden desire. The task of the analyst is to collaborate with the efforts of the analysand so that she may come to realize that what she seeks to know is the meaning of her own desire as desire of the Other, and that the cause of her desire is an object that has been lost in some primordial way, never to be found again.

At the end of analysis, the analysand learns how to deal with the knowledge originally attributed to the unconscious, but the process is no more gratifying for that. In effect, the end of analysis brings with it a sense of loss, and with it an experience of mourning: mourning first of all, for the analyst himself, who, having taken the place of the unconscious knowledge, becomes no longer necessary, henceforth superfluous and useless — so much rubbish (*déchet*) in Lacan's terminology; mourning, too, for the object that causes desire, recognized now as lost forever; mourning, finally, over the inevitable castration, painful and definitive, that the end of analysis implies. The end of analysis according to Lacan, then, comports a profound desolation: one's being (*être*) has become a "dys-being" (*désêtre*),³ and all the losses that have been

³ *Proposition du 9 Octobre 1967*, p. 25.

endured constitute a complete “destitution” of the subject. It is with regard to this destitution that Lacan makes reference to St. Thomas: “*Sicut palea*, as Thomas says of his work at the end of his life — like manure.”

But what is the meaning of this comparison? What is the relationship, after all, between a Thomas Aquinas — philosopher, theologian, religious believer — and the analysand, gifted though she may be, at the end of analysis? These are the questions that I would like to address here. Taking Lacan’s analogy as an invitation to interpret it, I shall try, first, to evaluate its meaning, then to situate it in a larger context that will permit us to investigate a possible relationship between religious experience as such, of which Thomas’s remark would be only an example, and the psychoanalytic experience itself as Lacan understands it.

“Like straw!” What does it mean? In the month of December, 1273, Thomas had been working hard on the composition of the third part of the *Summa Theologica* when suddenly he stopped writing. When his assistant, Reginald of Piperno, pressed him to continue, he is reported to have replied: “Reginald, I cannot, for everything that I have written up to now seems to me like straw.”⁴ What had happened?

Two years earlier, at the age of 47, he had arrived in Naples to become the regent of the Dominican house of studies and professor of theology there. During the two years that remained to him, and in addition to his professorial chores, he had elaborated the treatise on the Incarnation for the *Summa Theologica*, still unfinished; he had continued his commentaries on Aristotle (on the *Metaphysics*, the *Meteora*, the *De Caelo* and the *De Generatione*); he had continued, as well, his commentaries on the *Psalms*, the *Epistle to the Romans* and *I Corinthians*. There was good reason, then, for him to be tired. At any rate, on December 6, Feast of St. Nicholas, while celebrating Mass as usual, he was suddenly stricken (*commotus*) by an attack of some sort that produced in him an extraordinary change (*mira mutatione*) and left him in a complete state of shock (*stupefactus*). After that, he never wrote,

⁴ J. Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas d’Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1983), p. 321. See also *Fontes Vitae Sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, Toulouse. Originally published as supplements to *Revue Thomiste*, 1911-1937: 4; *Processus canonizationis Neapoli*, pp. 267-407, ed. By M.-H. Laurent, O.P.

dictated, or taught again. He hardly even spoke. Shortly afterwards he visited his sister, who was gravely perturbed by his deteriorated condition and unaccustomed silence. Nonetheless, by February he was able to depart with a few companions for France where he was to take part in the Second Council of Lyon that had been convoked by Pope Gregory X. Toward the end of that month, however, Thomas suffered an accident that left him with a severe head injury. He was received into a nearby castle, then moved to the Cistercian monastery at Fossanova, where he received the last sacraments of the Church and died tranquilly on March 7, 1274, at the age of 49. These are the essential facts.

But in such a story, Thomas's phrase, "like straw," needs a hermeneutic all of its own. In a world that antedates all phenomenology, how do we find meaning in a phenomenon such as that? For Lacan, apparently, and for those who follow him faithfully, the phrase means the total rejection of the work of a lifetime — "like manure" (*comme du fumier*), as Lacan chooses to translate it — in a word, the dys-being (*désêtre*) that Lacan speaks of, the famous "subjective destitution." Historical sources offer a less radical explanation. According to the report of the canonization process in Naples, Reginald de Pipeno insisted so strongly that Thomas resume his work that Thomas finally said to him: "Everything I have written seems like straw in comparison to what has been revealed to me."⁵ A revelation, then — a mystical experience, then — of transcendent origin, then — or so it seems. This is the sense in which the Christian tradition has always understood it. Fair enough! But if it was a vision, then a vision of what? No one knows — perhaps even Thomas himself did not know. In any case, it is certainly understandable that a vision of such a sort could very well make the normal events of daily life seem fugitive and insignificant.

But other commentators prefer a more rigorous hermeneutic. Physically exhausted by two years of indefatigable work in Naples — no to speak of the 20-odd years that preceded them — Thomas, according to this hypothesis, would have suffered a cerebral hemorrhage with its customary debilitating consequences. It would be completely possible that there be psychic reactions of a phantasmic or hallucinatory — or even depressive — nature. Such reactions could easily give the impres-

⁵*Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works*, p. 322.

sion of a mystical revelation without surpassing necessarily the native human capacities of the subject himself.

It is not the task here to decide upon the validity of either of these hypotheses, which, for that matter, do not necessarily exclude one another. That such an experience would have been able to cause a profound depression is quite possible, but that this experience would signify that Thomas totally rejected his religious thought, or his faith, "like manure," seems to me unthinkable. According to the records, Thomas could have said at a certain moment, "The only thing I desire now is that God, who has put an end to my life of writing, may put an end very soon to my life itself."⁶ If such a phrase betrays, perhaps, a profound desolation, it also bears witness to a religious faith that is lasting and salutary. As I read the text, I do not believe that what he saw provoked the rejection of everything that he had experienced up to that point, even if he did consider his works to have been "like straw."

How are we to interpret this experience? I suggest that "like straw" might be the rational synthesis of his work. Admirable synthesis, indeed, according to which the universe would have to come forth from the hand of a creating God only to return to Him as its ultimate end! As for human being, this ultimate end would be, by reason of a special gift, a beatitude which surpassed its natural capacities but which would have been rendered possible by the mediation of the Incarnate Word — His life, death and resurrection. Superb synthesis! — but perhaps a tad *too* rational, to the extent that it is founded on a philosophical and theological conceptualization that is profoundly metaphysical, in fact dominantly Aristotelian. We know that in our own day metaphysics has been severely criticized by Heidegger and, more recently, by Derrida and his disciples. According to Heidegger, metaphysics takes its point of departure from Aristotle's question: *ti to on hei on* — what are beings as beings? This question can be reduced in turn to: what are beings in their abstract generality, a question that gives us "ontology." Or it can become: "what are beings in terms of their ultimate foundation" (understood as a supreme being among the rest), and this is what gives us "theology." But since the original question passes constantly from one interpretation to the other, Heidegger calls metaphysics, by reason of

⁶ Ibid.

its very structure, “onto-theo-logy,” adding that the metaphysical god of this onto-theo-logy is not at all He “before whom David made music and danced,”⁷ i.e., the God of religious experience. I suggest, then, that what seemed to Saint Thomas “like straw” was everything that, after Heidegger, one would call “onto-theo-logy.”

In saying this, I do not mean to say that the God of the thomistic synthesis is no more than the ontic God Heidegger believes to have found in Spinoza as *causa sui*, for example. In effect, Thomas’s whole doctrine on the incomprehensibility of God,⁸ and on negative theology in general,⁹ contradicts so simplistic an explanation. Foreexample: “This is the ultimate of human knowledge about God: to know that we do not know Him” (*De Potentia Dei*, 7, 5, ad 14). The conception of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, known only negatively, is far beyond the conception of any supreme being that traditional metaphysics speaks of. However, the entire architectonic of Saint Thomas remains a profoundly rational conception, and in this sense one may speak of it as onto-theology in the strict sense. But after the vision on the Feast of St. Nicholas, the entire scaffolding, throughly rational as it was, apparently collapsed, leaving debris that seemed to have no more value than straw. According to John Caputo, who develops this thesis very carefully:

The legend of Saint Thomas does not *demonstrate* anything, but it does illustrate that the meaning, the *sens* of Saint Thomas’s metaphysics, is to be located in an essentially religious mysticism. For an effective demonstration of this thesis one must undertake a deconstructive reading of his texts ... They express in the mode of *ratio* that which altogether transcends *ratio*. The silence ... of which the legend speaks [is] to be taken, not as the contradiction of his writings, but as their innermost meaning and final fruit.¹⁰

In this perspective, if there is question of a certain destitution in the experience of Thomas, it is not at all a “subjective” one (in the Lacanian sense) but rather what might be called a “theological,” or even “onto-theo-

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), p. 70.

⁸ Karl Rahner, “Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God,” *Journal of Religion* 58/Supplement (1978), pp. 107-125.

⁹ A. Pegis, “*Penitus manet ignotum*,” *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), pp. 212-226.

¹⁰ John Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp.255-256.

logical," one, i.e., a destitution of experience in terms of his means to speak and to write (-logos) about the real God — or, rather, the God of the real (*theos-*) as center of a rational synthesis. That said, what does this analogy of Lacan teach us about psychoanalysis and the religious experience of which it would be an example? Here we must appeal to the terminology that Lacan introduced into psychoanalytic discourse: the categories of symbolic, imaginary and real. There is no need, of course, to rehearse them again here, except, perhaps, to insist once more that the real for Lacan is not at all "reality." Reality, as we normally understand the term, is already organized by the symbolic, order of the law of language, and the imaginary, order of sensible representation. The real remains the impossible — impossible to represent in any fashion — either by the signifier, or by the image. My hypothesis comes to this: the experience of Thomas to which Lacan appeals is an experience of a God of the real — it is there that the religious encounter is anchored; what had appeared as "like straw" pertained to the symbolic and imaginary orders, i.e., to the rational and metaphysical manner of speaking about reality. We have to see this a little more closely, but to begin, it is worth while recalling Lacan's attitude toward religion in general.

That attitude was not always a benign one. Recall, for example, his remarks at a press conference in Rome, 1974. To a question about the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion, he replied: "it is not very probable — I am speaking of the true religion — and there is only one that is true (i.e., the Christian religion [understand: the religion of Thomas Aquinas]) — if religion triumphs, [I say,] this will be the sign that psychoanalysis has failed."¹¹ Why is it probable that religion will triumph? Because "it's absolutely fabulous in terms of its resources."¹² What resources? Above all the power to "secrete meaning." One is capable "of giving meaning, one might say, to anything at all, meaning to human life, for example."¹³ As for the analyst, he is concerned with what "does not work."¹⁴ In other words, the real. That is why analysis is a "symptom" of the real, and it is this that "does not work." Does the mean-

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Conférence de Presse du Dr. Lacan, Lettres de l'École Freudienne* 26 (1974), pp. 6-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

ing that religion “secretes,” then, necessarily involve the repression of the real? — that is the question.

To be sure, Lacan gladly cites the text from the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). But the “Word” according to Lacan is not at all the divine creative Word (*Logos*) of St. John. The sense of the Johannine Word derived from the hebraic tradition and translates the aramaic *memra*, the hebrew *dabar*, a term used often as synonym for the divine name of Yahweh in order to safeguard his transcendence in anthropomorphic contexts.¹⁵ It is this Word that became flesh and that John knew, that he had “seen with his eyes and touched with his hands” (I John 1:1). For Lacan, the Word that “formed (man) in his image” is considered rather as language, i.e., the Other as the “place of the signifier.”¹⁶ “*Verbum* is language, and even word. In the Greek text, *logos* is also language, not speech. Afterwards, God makes use of speech — ‘Let there be light,’ He says.”¹⁷ Language (the symbolic order) precedes the use God makes of it, then, and in this sense it is ultimate in its own order: “this is what we formulate by saying that there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, [or] more aphoristically, “there is no Other of the Other.”¹⁸

No Other of the Other! What are we to do about God, then, and about the meaning that religion is supposed to secrete? Recall what the structuralists understand by the word “meaning.” If language consists in a system of signs that is essentially closed, within which meaning derives from the mutual opposition of these signs, each sign in turn is composed of the correlation of signifier and signified that are arbitrarily related to each other. For Saussure, this correlation resembles an arithmetic fraction, where the bar separating numerator from denominator indicates the arbitrariness of the relation between them. Lacan goes further. For him, this bar suggests rather “a barrier resisting signification,”¹⁹ i.e., resisting an immediate (one-to-one) correspondence

¹⁵ D. Crossan, *Logos*. In: *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1967-1979. 8), pp. 967-968.

¹⁶ Lacan 1966, 322, 813.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. by A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 317.

¹⁸ Lacan 1966, 813.

¹⁹ Lacan 1966, 497.

between signifier and signified that would make sense. The signifier is referred not to an individual signified but rather to other signifiers in a signifying chain:

... a ring in a necklace that us a ring in another necklace made of rings ... From which we can say that it is in the chain of the signifiers that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier.²⁰

Because of the constant sliding of the signified, meaning is never fixed or permanent, and its continual movement also comports an element of inevitable distortion. This is true for conscious discourse, and still more for unconscious discourse, which infiltrates conscious discourse to distort it all the more. That is why conscious discourse is never without ambiguity and unconscious discourse has no meaning at all.

For "meaning" implies a certain unity, and it is precisely this unity that is lacking in the discourse of the Other.

Discontinuity — this, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon — discontinuity, in which something is manifested as a vacillation ... Is the *one* anterior to discontinuity? I do not think so, and everything that I have taught in recent years has tended to exclude this need for a closed *one* ... a sort of doubt of the organism in which this false unity is thought to preside. You will grant me that the *one* that is introduced by the experience of the unconscious is the *one* of the split, of the stroke, of rupture ... Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge — just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes silence emerge as silence.²¹

In such a context, one understands very well why Lacan finds suspicious the "fabulous resources" or religion that "secrete" meaning. This would be the case, I suppose for the universal architectonic (creation—conservation—providence—ultimate finality) according to Thomas — myth among other myths in which Thomas simply would not have

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. by A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 153-154/502.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 25-26/28.

realized that it is the Other of language, when all is said and done, that makes possible such a myth.

Because there is no Other of the Other, what happens to God, author of this “myth” or “revelation”? If one affirmed the existence of God at the interior of this Other, one would close the signifying chain upon a center that would “hold,” where signifier and signified would be “one” in a Supreme subject-presumed –to-know (like the supreme being of metaphysics), which would thus become the absolute foundation of meaning. This is why Lacan says that “the veritable formula of atheism is not that *God is dead* ... but God is *unconscious*.”²²

In the press conference cited above, Lacan remarks: “You will see that humanity will be cured of psychoanalysis. By drowning it in meaning (religious meaning, of course), one will succeed in repressing the symptom”²³ so as to be able to ignore “what does not work.” Lacan would seem to say, then, that psychoanalysis alone is capable of facing up to the real, i.e., to “what does not work,” and that religion, whether that of St. John or St. Paul, or St. Thomas, drowns this impossible in meaning, i.e. represses it.

But is this what really happens in a genuine experience of the sacred? My hypothesis is this: the God of true believers is revealed, to be sure, through an imaged symbolic, but an encounter with Him only takes place in the real. For the real, according to Lacan, is not simply the impossible to inscribe or support, or the unsayable that is expressed in a symptom. It is simply the unimaginable — like the unknown richness of nature, for example, before it has been discovered, or the registers of the laws of science before they have been formulated. If such a thesis is sustainable, one could even understand how Freud himself was unable to put aside the God-question despite everything that he had written about obsessional neurosis, about totems and taboos, about illusion and the pathology of groups. As a matter of fact, during the last five years of his life, Freud was obsessed with the problem of Moses and his single God. The real “always comes back to the same place,” Lacan tells us.²⁴

²² *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, pp. 59/58.

²³ Jacques Lacan, *Conférence de Presse du Dr. Lacan*, p. 15.

²⁴ *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 49.

However that may be, the center of the Christian religious experience is "a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness" (1 Cor 1: 23). In him, misery and holiness are identified and the unspeakable real passes into symbolic articulation. This is the way in which the "fabulous resources" of religion give meaning to human suffering. Do they thereby drown the real in meaning and thus repress it as a symptom? I do not think so? For "the essence of repression," as Freud tells us, "lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious."²⁵ With regard to the identification of the Christian with the crucified Christ (e.g., St. Paul: "I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong" (II Cor 12:10); "I have been crucified with Christ ... It is no longer I, but Christ living in me" (Gal. 2:20). Paul does not think that the cross turns him away from misery nor distance him from evil. On the contrary, through it he faces up to evil and misery. It is a question, then, of confrontation, not repression, in the articulation of true Christian faith. Such faith as this is not reducible to one more myth that a Lévi-Strauss can absorb into an algebraic formula of the symbolic order, for it remains painfully open to the real, i.e., to the tragic, not to say terrible, silence of the hidden God. This is the silence, for example, that wrings from the Incarnate Word the cry: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15, 34).

In experiencing his works as "like straw," Thomas, I suggest, underwent another kind of suffering: the loss of the metaphysical structures that had allowed him to speak and write intelligibly about God, even if only in a negative way. In other words, the symbolic and imaginary parameters that had permitted him to construct a metaphysical scaffolding now appeared to be "like straw" in face of this experience of the real. According to this hypothesis, the real here would be the divine mystery, the *penitus ignotum* (SCG III, 49, par. 9), the God who is hidden (Is 45:15), who refuses his name (Ex 3:14), whom one cannot look upon and live (Ex 33:20), the God beyond metaphysics, "before whom David made music and danced."

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Repression* (1915), in *Standard Edition*, 14, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 147.

I suggest, then, that the religious faith of a true believer is engaged, psychoanalytically speaking, in the real dimension of the human subject where (s)he encounters God. If this dimension is experienced as an abyss which human capacities are incapable of bringing to expression, this fact would suggest a mystical dimension of human experience of which Meister Eckhart might be a more typical example than Saint Thomas. Yet this aspect of the problem is less difficult for thought than its contrary, i.e., the question as to how one may validate this encounter. How distinguish in terms of validity, for example, the grand synthesis of St. Thomas from that, say, of a Doctor Schreber? This is not a new problem, of course; it dates from the origin of revealed religion itself, where the first question to pose were always: is it truly God who has spoken to us or not? How do we tell true prophet from false? But such questions as these concern theology rather than psychoanalysis and cannot detain us here. Here it is more useful to insist on the distinction between the "subjective destitution" according to Lacan, and a "theological (or onto-theo-logical) destitution" that is much more appropriate to St. Thomas, i.e., a destitution of the means to speak and write about the God of the real as center of a rational synthesis that reconciles both reason and faith — faith that he himself, it seems, never doubted at all.

To be more concrete — and more contemporary — let us recall the experience of Teilhard de Chardin, for example. Despite the indefatigable optimism of his thought, he passed through many a dark moment. He wrote once to a non-believing correspondent: "More and more I hate almost the whole ecclesiastical world ... and yet I can not do without the Church of Jesus Christ." And to his spiritual director, Rev, Auguste Valensin, he wrote (in 1926):

I have such an impression of suffocating in the Catholic atmosphere, I feel so much the weight of the ecclesiastical body that I find myself pierced by shafts of revolt — as if the spirit of my great-uncle, Voltaire ... was extended curiously into me²⁶

But the last six years of his life especially were lived in darkness. Excluded from his native land, surrounded by people who were well-meaning but who could not share his thought, suspected by ecclesiastical

²⁶ Cited by D'Ouinice, *Un prophète en procès: Teilhard de Chardin dans l'église de son temps* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne), Volume I, 1970.

authorities in Rome, forbidden to publish, Teilhard, according to one of his followers:

..., made up in his life ... for the tragic dimension which is generally lacking in his ideas. He had experienced to the full existentialist *Angst* which he condemned ... If life were indeed absurd, could there be [given what he had been through] a stronger proof of its absurdity? And his own thirty years of exile and frustration — the seeming failure of the axis to support the spiral [of cosmic evolution] — what could be more absurd than that?²⁷

One can surmise the intensity of his interior pain from a casual but revealing remark to a friend. The friend had made a general remark to the effect that "God will guarantee that truth triumphs in the end," and Teilhard replied: "I hope so — otherwise eternity will not be long enough to hate Him in." Yet on Good Friday, 1955, two days before his death, he wrote to another friend:

What the world expects from the Church of God is a generalisation and deepening of the meaning of the Cross ... In a universe which is in the way of unification with God, the Cross (without losing its expiatory and compensatory function) becomes, even more surely, the symbol and expression of evolution as a whole ... This is what I believe, and that is what I so long to confess publicly before I die."²⁸

He died suddenly two days later, Easter Sunday. His final words were: "This time, it is terrible." Rev. Pierre Leroy, an intimate friend, comments:

No one will ever know what these last words hide: "This time, it is terrible." But we can believe that it was in anguish that he finally sank into God. As if the approach of the Absolute had demanded of him, up to the very last moment, a renouncement that was total."²⁹

In Teilhard, then, there was a spiritual destitution, hence an experience of the real, even though his works themselves did not seem to him

²⁷R. Speaight, Teilhard de Chardin: A Biography (Collins, 1967), p. 327.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 331.

²⁹Cited by D'Orience 2:256.

“like straw.” Given the man as we know him, however, the doctrine of the cross here is hardly a repression of the real but rather a manner of confronting it.

It seems quite possible, then, for religious faith to confront the real — what “does not work” — and give it a meaning, without repressing it. Such is my hypothesis. But what is the value of such a meaning? The believer will speak of it as “the truth.” As for the psychoanalyst, he will probably remain skeptical. But to exclude a possible meaning for human life — is that not as arbitrary as to impose one? In articulating his conviction, the mature believer will not trumpet his “fabulous resources” but will speak humbly of gift, submission and hope. The analyst, however, does not have such resources at his disposal. He cannot do anything more than listen and wait for truth to be revealed — painfully and in all its negativity — in the analysand. It seems that if the problem of the validity of religious experience can not be viewed in psychoanalysis as anything other than a question, this fact alone suggests that it is a question that should remain open ... up to the very end. ↪