

Rejoicing

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REJOICING

Or the Torments of Religious Speech

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polity

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Rejoicing – or the torments of religious speech: that is what he wants to talk about, that is what he can't actually seem to talk about: it's as though the cat had got his tongue; as though he was spoilt for choice when it comes to words; as though it was impossible to articulate; he can't actually seem to share what, for so long, he has held so dear to his heart; before his nearest and dearest, he is forced to cover up; he can only stutter; how can he own up to his friends, to his colleagues, his nephews, his students?

He is ashamed of not daring to speak out and ashamed of wanting to speak out, regardless. Ashamed, too, for those who don't make it any easier for him, thrusting his head underwater while claiming to rescue him, or, instead of throwing him a lifebuoy, throwing words as heavy as a mooring buoy at him. Weighted with lead, that's it – they've weighted him with lead. Yes, he goes to mass, and often, on Sunday, but it doesn't mean anything. Alas, no, it doesn't *mean* anything really; it *can't* mean anything anymore to anyone. There is no way of saying these things anymore, no tone, no tonality, no regime of speech or utterance. It's a twisted situation: he is ashamed of what he hears on Sunday from the pulpit when he goes to mass; but ashamed, too, of the incredulous hatred or amused indifference of those who laugh at anyone who goes to church. Ashamed that he goes, ashamed of not daring to say he goes. He grinds

Above all do not believe

his teeth when he hears the things said inside; but he boils with rage when he hears the things said outside. All that's left for him to do is hang his head, weary, sheepish, before the horrors and misconceptions on the inside as well as before the horrors and misconceptions on the outside; it's a double cowardice, double shame, and he has no words to express this, as though he were caught between two opposing currents, with the resultant clash leaving him whirling on the spot.

It is not of the religious that he wants to speak, not of the fact of religion. It is not of that vast stratum of institutions, law, psychology, rituals, politics, art, cultures, monuments and myths; of what for so long and in all climates took hold of human beings obliged to band together in conglomerations and attend to the things connecting them – *link* and *scruple* being the two etymological senses of the word *religio*. The only thing he wants to reactivate is religious utterance, that very strange habit which developed over the course of history in the form of the Word, and which seems to him today to be so horribly confused. He doesn't want to study either the religious or religion – still less, *religions* plural – but only to disinter a form of expression that used to be so free and inventive, fruitful and saving in days gone by, but that now dries on his tongue whenever he tries to recover its movement, excitement, its structure. Why does what used to be so alive for him turn deadly boring whenever he endeavours to talk about it to others – his children, for instance? What monstrous metamorphosis makes what once had so much meaning become absolutely *meaningless*, like a blast of words freezing on the lips of convicts in the Siberian cold?

What he would need to do, first and foremost, is be able to escape the menacing choice that vulgar common sense demands of anyone who sets out to talk about religion: ‘But are you a believer or a non-believer?’ He’d like to be able to answer: ‘Obviously, I’m speaking as a non-believer.’ But what he’d mean by that word ‘non-believer’ is someone who no longer believes in belief in any way, a true *agnostic*. Well, this belief in belief is something that those inside share with those outside – it’s actually how they manage to distinguish the inside from the outside. If there’s one thing both sides agree on, it is that this line can be drawn to mark their difference: ‘You believe in it, I don’t believe in it.’ How, then, can we say that it has absolutely nothing to do with belief? And especially not with believing *in* something, in someone, in the unnameable, the unprofferable G. How can we make it clear that belief or non-belief in G. makes no difference when it comes to talking about these things, to talking *starting with* these things? That that is not where the problem lies, that it actually entails mixing up categories, misdirecting ideas, committing an error of syntax, a blurring of genres? Yes, in these matters of religion (for brevity’s sake, we can keep the word), belief in G. is absolutely not involved and, so, cannot define any kind of boundary between believers and non-believers, the faithful and the infidels. This fact already somewhat clouds the message he wants to get out before he’s even begun. So it’s hardly surprising he has some trouble speaking, since to hear him you have to be an agnostic: neither indifferent nor sceptical, but quite determined, when it comes to talking about religion again, to do without the poison of belief. Who’s up for such asceticism?

After that, do not believe in God

Especially when he'd like to make such a statement without shocking? And without shocking *twice*: first the faithful, then the infidels; first the believers, then the non-believers, those on the inside and those on the outside. He's well aware that anyone seeking to scandalize would be better off tying a millstone round his neck and throwing himself into a pond. If it was just a matter of choosing sides, it would be easy, everyone would line up in battle formation and he would bravely fire a shot as well as the next man. He would either return to the bosom of his holy mother the Church, bravely lambasting the non-believers and battling against indifference and heresy; or he would join the vast army of critics, railing against the sins of irrationality, against the 'resurgence of fundamentalisms' (at the rear, safely away from the front line, as an arbiter, journalist or savant, he could also keep score). But that's just it: for him, there is no front. Neither belief nor non-belief distinguishes those who talk about religion from those who don't. That is why he doesn't want to scandalize either those who hold on to belief in belief in 'God' as their most precious good, or those who preserve belief in non-belief in 'God' as their most sacred right. An impossible task, of course, since they are at loggerheads: what satisfies one camp will necessarily shock the other.

With such demands, how can he possibly write clear and straight? He'd like to talk about religion again, not to believe in belief, but not to scandalize, either. Such an iron collar weighs so heavily on his shoulders that he loses his footing and thrashes about in the muddy waters. Every time he opens his mouth to speak, he swallows water, then spits out toads and sticky seaweed.

If he hopes to avoid wounding, he'll have to tread so lightly that he leaves no trace in the sand; his handling will have to be so deft no one will feel the scalpel going in; he'll have to choose his words so carefully that, no matter how strange they are, they always sound right. As for the keyboard of his computer, an angel will have to come and tap away at it. What can earthlings like him do? And yet, he finally takes the plunge. Too late now to back-paddle: it's sink or swim.

And this is where he must raise a second difficulty, and do so without causing pain, the way a clever nurse rips off a painful bandage in a single swift gesture: not only does the gesture of faith make no difference, but neither does its object, 'God'. In ancient times, when people talked about the gods, believers were no more numerous than non-believers. The presence of divinities was obvious in the air or the soil. They formed the common fabric of people's lives, the primary material of all rituals, the indisputable reference point of all existence, the ordinary fodder of all conversation. Well, it's not like that anymore – at least, not in the wealthy countries of the West. The common fabric of our lives, our primary material, our ordinary fare, our indisputable framework, if there is such a thing, is the *non-existence* of gods sensitive to prayer and ruling over our destinies. Quick, rip off the bandage before the pain can be felt: that's all to the good! You don't talk any better about religion starting from the existence of G. than starting from the non-existence of G. It makes no difference, since that's not what it's about – at least, not in that way, not within that tonal range, not in that spirit.

If we really wanted to translate into today's

vocabulary what people once used to talk about when they uttered the word 'God', we'd have to look not to some new being we could substitute for him, but rather to whatever it is that gives everyone the same feeling of indisputable familiarity. For most of our contemporaries, expressions such as 'the non-existence of God', 'the banality of the world', 'indifferent matter', 'market consumerism', would be good synonyms since what would be referred to thereby would be the same obviousness, the same everyday reality, the same easiness, the same solid backing. Religious talk latches onto either term, 'God' or 'non-God', without distinction, since it needs to begin with an accepted reference point which it will shake and then rattle, in a bid to get it to say something completely different. So, the meaning of the word G. does not derive from the name chosen as point of departure but from the shake-up that ensues. It doesn't matter whether this discourse begins, in ancient times, with the familiar face of a helpful 'God' to whom you could talk through rituals, or, as today, with a 'non-God' deaf to rituals whom it would be quite mad to address prayers to: the only thing that counts is what it will cause you to be subjected to as a result of the evidence of common sense, the alarming twisting that ordinary certainties will undergo. To confuse belief (or non-belief) in 'God' with the demands of religion means taking the decor for the room, the overture for the opera. It doesn't matter what is in the beginning: the only thing that counts is what comes just after.

There you are, he's got himself into a proper tangle. Before he's really even got started, he's probably already shocked those on the inside as much as those on the out-

side. ‘What!’ they cry as one. ‘In religion, God is not the issue?!’ No, actually, but he’s going to have to think and start all over again. It’s impossible to simplify. There is no straight path. No angelic inspiration, no muse whispering in your ear. No well of clear water springing up beneath your feet. Once you attempt to start talking about these things again, you need to develop capacities for *discernment* that can only be acquired through various mortifications, the stubborn repetition of rituals, relentless pursuit of appropriate concepts. In these matters, you can’t rely on intuition. And there’s an added, contradictory, demand, which is that you not get bogged down in pointless complications: a child of seven should be able to understand everything. Every word must have a beguiling, a biblical, simplicity (even if the person who came up with the second adjective most certainly hadn’t read the Scriptures . . .). You can see why so many people turn away from this ungodly language game and abandon it, shrugging their shoulders. Better to keep quiet or to trot out the same old things, or send yourself up. There’s no means now of saying what is at issue. Or, rather, the means of talking both simply and subtly about religious matters have been taken from us. Those means have become either complicated, archaeological, scholarly, or so inane, religiose, simplistic, that you can only cry in pity over them. How can we go back over this fork in the road, retrace the route that leads to this crossroads?

Maybe the requirement of not scandalizing anyone in the slightest is too heavy, and we need to lift it to be able to speak a bit freely. The fact is there are true and false scandals, true and false translations, and we really need

to learn how to distinguish between them, otherwise no utterance will be audible. Differentiating, contrasting, verifying, accepting, rejecting – there is no other way. There is no truthfulness without meticulous sorting. There are indeed artificial scandals that we really need to point out, even if it means shocking those who take them for the very kernel of their faith. In religion as in science, there are *artefacts* that must be carefully dismantled. It's just that time passes, words that once had a meaning lose it. But, you see, the people whose job it is to change words so as to keep the meaning, clerics, have preferred piously to preserve the words at the risk of losing the meaning; they've left us, the rest of us, we latecomers, ignoramuses, stutterers, equipped with words that have become untruthful for the purposes of recording the real things we hold dear to our hearts.

For instance, the word 'God', which once served as the premise of all arguing, could have been translated, when ways of life changed, as 'indisputable framework of ordinary existence' so that we could continue to really see that what was thereby designated was merely the preliminary and prelude to a conversion of meaning. But instead of this direct, painless, progressive translation, they started clinging for dear life to the term 'God' and pitting it against 'non-God', without seeing that they were dealing with two forms about as different as *God*, *Deus* and *Theos* for translating the same everyday reality. Thinking they were protecting their heritage, they squandered it. Thinking they were doing the right thing and protecting 'God' against 'the rise of atheism', they didn't see that, as this slow drift of tectonic plates progressed, they were little by little substituting one

word for another. The term was kept for too long and turned into a nasty scandal; it was now giving off a pestilential smell. Once an indifferent preliminary, it had become a major obstacle to understanding. Whereas in the past no one balked at the word 'God' when it was shared as the starting point of all discourse, they turned it into a stumbling block that allowed them to judge the loyalty of the faithful. They made a scandal of something that used not to cause anyone to stumble. Alas, they carried their perversity a lot further than that: they thought that this scandal, artificially produced, was positive, that they'd be rewarded according to the force with which they preserved the old term 'against the dirty tricks, the downward spirals, the compromises of the age', that they would be assured of dying in the odour of sanctity, that this was what they would be judged by at Judgement Day. They believed themselves to be faithful when they were in fact abandoning the meaning (as a familiar preliminary to whatever keeps us all gathered together), which slowly, surreptitiously, gradually, went from the old term 'God' to its new formulation 'non-God'. What they should have done was the opposite, they should have leapt with all their worldly goods into the new language game before it was too late; by keeping the word, they lost the treasure that the new term was to protect. Whosoever will save his life shall lose it [Matthew 16:25].

To revive the language, to learn again clumsily how to speak right, we'd have to be able to say: atheism forms just as perfect a point of departure as belief 'in God'. And even a preferable point of departure – since it provides an indisputable framework for common

An ungodly vocation

action and thereby more closely resembles the expression ‘helpful God’, from the days when people raised their hands towards the heavens in the presence of misfortune – than any current invocation to a ‘God’ whose life-form has passed. But how can we utter this phrase without scandalizing either those for whom ‘God’ is an obvious fact or those for whom ‘non-God’ is an obvious fact – the first, because they believe that only the beginning matters, the second, because they don’t want to hear what follows? He is committed to not shocking on both fronts; so he has to avoid impious new inventions as much as ghastly apologetics, all the while distinguishing with the utmost care between shocks necessary to understanding the message and artificial scandals that get in the way of understanding that message. By dint of piling on all these contradictory demands, he is going to make himself dumb; by dint of wearing his eyes out trying to distinguish between true and false scandals, he is going to make himself myopic. Yet, he has no other option than to keep going. Meaning is lost if you stop gathering it, collecting it – *religiare*, as the Latin says, speaking of religion. But to do this, you always have to start again from scratch, say the same things in a completely different idiom – yes, the same things; yes, but in a completely different idiom. The first time you hear it, any fresh revival of an old theme will necessarily sound shrill, intolerable, inaudible, cacophonous. You have first to get the ear used to the new sound, to the revival in a new key of the exact same old tune.

‘There is no God’, says the sensible man in his heart of hearts, and that’s all to the good: everything is cleaner, more precise, more definite. And so, there is no belief

in G. anymore either. That is the sticking point; his tongue forks once more, it's forked like the devil's feet, within spitting distance of his perdition, and yet he has to go down that perilous path, he has to go through that narrow gateway: we can no longer address ourselves in the *vocative* case to someone who might hear us, listen to us and console us. We are no longer like children, talking loudly in the dark to stop from being frightened. The 'God' we once invoked no longer has hands, or eyes, or ears, and his mouth is forever sealed.

In the little church of Montcombroux, built in the year 1000, when I speak, on my own, it's my voice I hear, my voice alone, and words fail me, alas, for none of the prayers presented to the pilgrim on little cards eaten into by the damp corresponds anymore to the language game in which I wish to find myself involved. It would be so easy, of course, to fall sobbing before some pillar and, faltering, trust to the invocation: 'Thou, O "my God", hear my prayer' – but what a lie that would be, what a piece of fraud, for I would then lose those who haven't followed me into the nave, those who'd laugh at me, those who believe I believe, that I invoke and pray. And I have to go on addressing them, equally. The temptation has to be resisted. I've got better things to do than return to the fold, for it's no longer one sheep that's gone astray, the whole flock has been lost along the way, together with the mountain pasture, the valley, the mountain range, the entire continent; yes, it's up to the shepherd to rejoin the flock, it's up to the fold, the sheepfold, the farm, the village, to set off once again and make up for lost time, to regain the Promised Land they left behind, lying fallow. Is it my fault if I'm forced to

address a 'non-God' through prayer, as they did in the days when the presence of a consoling 'God' was taken for granted? If I'm required to recite the same words in the silence of a country church as those words which, a thousand years earlier, stirred the Bourbonnais peasants who had come to protect their harvests during Rogation time? The world has 'lost faith', as they say? No, 'Faith' has lost the world.

The second person singular 'thou' used to have the force of an obvious fact, but those days are over. The invocation dries on my tongue. I can't say it. It sticks in my throat. So what's to be done now? Should I go away? Admire the Roman vault? Bemoan the restoration work? Aestheticize? Historicize? Touristicize? Mythologize? Demythologize? No, wait a bit, let's try again, sit back down. I manage to murmur, shaking with fear and ridiculousness: 'I address thee, thou who don't exist. I address myself alone, I who don't exactly exist either, and I know full well that I'm no longer master and owner of my words, that thou has no presence beyond my broken voice stammering under the vault.'

Could we hear ourselves at this price? Hear ourselves speak? Double abandonment: of the vocative which has become impossible ever since 'non-God' took up residence on earth; of mastery of language by a free subject in full control of himself. Of course it's I and I alone who am speaking: do you take me for a madman who thinks he's addressing some absent being who might answer him through the intermediary of silent stones? Of course it's I who am speaking when I speak: do you take me for a madman who lives in the illusion of self-transparency

and who might know in advance what is going to come out of his mouth? Not in front of, not above, not inside, but beside, askew, coiled in my hesitant speech act, another hesitation is raving. No, it's not the returned echo of my words, for an echo would repeat, simply amplified or distorted, what I've cried out; no, it's not ventriloquism, for the conjuror controls both voices, his and the one he so cleverly projects towards another body; no, it's not bad faith getting me to mistake for a foreign voice what another part of me is softly uttering. No one is speaking but me, but all the same, this me has become all twisted, it's not itself, it's surprised, slightly alienated, let's say, rather, *altered*. What has happened? Weird things are being said in here. How am I going to express my surprise in the face of these words that I utter without knowing I'm going to say them?

Sympathize with me now in my misery: to articulate the first language game, the one involving the consoling 'God', the faithful have at their disposal six thousand years of poets, preachers, inspired psalmists; to articulate the second, the game involving non-control of words, I have nothing, no breviary, no psalter, no song book, not the smallest image, nothing but myself, I who am nothing – not even a believer. And yet, the old term has indeed become unutterable, unsituatable, unjustifiable – except inside the narrow fold, among those in the habit of praying among themselves. Now, what I really need is something new, I need that psalter no one has set to verse, that collection of songs no one has compiled, of holy pictures no one has coloured in. It's not surprising that I'm dying of thirst, that my tongue is coated with dust and sticks to the roof of my mouth. All the words

The translation arrears

offered to me to introduce me to prayer assume prior acquiescence to a language that has become foreign. It's not the object of prayer that has died out, it's the prayer form itself that has become outmoded. And if I did finally decide to read the naive lines written under the awful plaster statues, I would become an impostor twice over: if I uttered them, when they no longer have any meaning; if I didn't utter them, when I find myself alone in a church, in summer, praying prayerlessly, before these icons. Whether I speak or keep silent, I'm forced into blasphemy: I say G.'s name in vain.

You who are on the inside, don't condemn my lack of faith too quickly; you who are on the outside, don't be too quick to mock my overcredulity; you who are indifferent, don't be too quick to wax ironic about my perpetual hesitations. Think of all the *arrears* I have to pay on top of the words, formulae, turns of phrase that I draw out of my meagre fund: yes, arrears, deficits, unpaid translation debts. Changes of epochs have caused the strata of discourse to slide, slowly and inexorably, just like the rocky plates along the San Andreas fault line, so much so that half the church now finds itself several dozen metres away from the other half. All that's left is two gaping ruins: the one for sheltering the people on the inside, the other only good for expelling the people on the outside. How many centuries ago did you stop rebuilding the nave to prevent it collapsing? Stop shifting it out of line and propping it up again without let-up, the never-ending resumption of work accompanying the slow shearing away that more and more contorts the gaping lips of the fault? Two, three, four, ten centuries? Even if you've only left it ten years,