JEAN-LUC NANCY

Noli me tangere

On the Raising of the Body

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Translator's Note

The phrase "the raising of the body" is a translation of *la levée du corps,* whose figurative meaning, "funeral," is entirely lost in translation. Specifically, it refers to the ceremonial transport or removal of a corpse from the mortuary to the funeral site.

The reader should also be aware that the idiomatic play of the French verb *toucher* can only be approximated in English. *Toucher à,* for instance, is an expression that can mean "to touch on" but also "to tamper or meddle with." *Le toucher* can be the substantive form of the verb—"touching"—as well as the infinitive form with a direct object, "to touch him." Finally, *se toucher* can either be reflexive or reciprocal in the third person or the infinitive, "to touch oneself" or "to touch each other." Because all of these dimensions of *toucher* are relevant to Nancy's analysis, I will insert reminders here and there to signal nuances that might have been muted in translation.

I am grateful to Jeff Fort for his careful vetting and suggestions.

Prologue

Without a doubt, every single episode in the history or legend of Jesus of Nazareth has been represented in the Christian and post-Christian iconography of both the East and the West. In the age of these images, moreover, an entire society and an entire culture identified themselves as "Christendom." From the announcement of Christ's conception right up to his departure from this world, painters, sculptors, and, to a lesser extent, musicians took up each of the moments of this exemplary account as a motif in their work.

This account is presented as a succession of scenes or pictures: the properly narrative thread connecting them is very loose, and the episodes are less moments within a progression than stations for exemplary illustrations or spiritual lessons, the two most often being combined in the form of the parable. This is the form explicitly designated in the evangelical texts as the proper mode of Jesus' teaching, or at least

of his public sermons.[1] But it is not impossible to say that the entire evangelical account presents itself as a parable: if the parable constitutes a mode of figuration by means of a story charged with representing a moral content, then the entire life of Jesus is a representation of the truth that he claims himself to be. But that does not simply mean that this life illustrates an invisible truth: rather, this life *is* precisely the truth that appears [*se présente*] in being represented [*se représentant*].[2] This is, at least, what is proposed in Christian faith: one has faith not only in truths that are signified, translated, or expressed by a prophet, but primarily, and in fact perhaps exclusively, one also has faith in the effective presentation of truth as a singular life or existence.

To that extent, truth itself becomes parabolic: the *logos* is not distinct from the figure or the image, since its essential content consists precisely in the *logos*'s figuring, presenting, and representing itself, announcing itself like a person who appears unexpectedly, who shows himself and, in showing himself, shows the original of the figure: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou *then,* Show us the Father?"[3] There is nothing and no one to show, nothing and no one to unveil or reveal. A thought that conceives of revelation as bringing to light a hidden reality or as deciphering a mystery is only the religious or believing modality (in the sense of a form of representation or subjective knowledge) of Christianity or of monotheism in general. But in its deep, nonreligious, and nonbelieving structure (or in accordance with the auto-deconstruction of religion that it puts into play[4]), "revelation" constitutes the identity of the revealable and the revealed, of the "divine" and the "human" or the "worldly." For the same reason, "revelation" also carries along with it the identity of the image and the original, thereby implying—in a perfectly

logical manner—the identity of the invisible and the visible.

It follows from this that the evangelical account, considered as a parable of parables, is simultaneously offered as a text to be interpreted and as a true story, the truth and the interpretation being made identical to each other and by each other. Not however, in such a way that truth would appear, finally, in the ground [*au fond*][5] of interpretation, nor in that other way according to which the truth would be as infinite and multiple as are the interpretations always begun anew. The identity of the truth and its figures needs to be understood otherwise, in a sense that is made manifest precisely by the thought of the parable.

When Jesus is asked by his disciples to explain his use of parables, he tells them that they are meant for those to whom it is not "given . . . to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."[6] (Those to whom this knowledge is given are the disciples.) Meant for those who "seeing, see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand,"[7] the parable might be expected to open their eyes, informing them of a proper meaning through its figurative system. But Jesus says nothing of the sort. To the contrary, he says that, for those who hear them, parables fulfill the words of Isaac: "By hearing, ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive."[8] And it is precisely in this context that he makes one of his most well-known and paradoxical statements: "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath."[9] Thus the objective of the parable is first to sustain the blindness of those who do not see. It does not proceed out of a pedagogy of figuration (of allegory or illustration) but, to the contrary, out of a refusal or a denial of pedagogy.

It should be pointed out, moreover, that "those who seeing, see not" is exactly the phrase used in other texts of the Old and the New Testaments to refer to both the idols and their worshippers.[10] The cult of the "idols" is not condemned as a relationship with images; rather, it is condemned to the extent that these gods and the eyes that make a cult of them did not first welcome sight into themselves prior to all that is visible, through which alone there can be divinity and adoration. That is why one must already have in order to receive: precisely, one must have the receptive disposition, and this disposition itself can only have already been received. This is not a religious mystery; it is the condition of receptivity itself, of sensibility and of sense in general. The words *divine* or *sacred* may never really have designated anything other than this passivity or this passion, initiator of every kind of sense: sensible, sensory, or sensual.

The parable does not go from the image to sense: it goes from the image to a sight or to a seeing, which is either already given or not. "But blessed *are* your eyes, for they see,"[11] Jesus says to his disciples, and there is this other, oft-repeated formulation: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."[12] The parable only speaks to those who have already understood it; it only shows to those who have already seen. From the others, it hides what is to be seen, hiding even the fact that there is something to be seen. The most unfortunate, narrowly religious interpretation of this thinking would be that the truth is reserved for the chosen ones, who, moreover (according to the text), will always be in the minority. The moderate religious interpretation amounts to saying that the parable offers a provisional and attenuated vision, one that prompts further search. Although this interpretation is common, the text very clearly rules it out. On the contrary, we are obliged to think of the parable and

the presence or absence of "spiritual" seeing as being directly or immediately correlative. There are not several degrees of figuration or literalness of sense; there is a single "image" and, facing it, a vision or a blindness. Certainly, it happens more than once that Jesus translates one of his parables for his disciples. However, in doing so, he is only restoring to them the sight they already had. Again, the parable restores sight or blindness. It gives back the gift of sight or its privation, in truth.[13]

The parable is thus not to be situated in the relation of the "figure" to the "proper," or in the relation of "appearance" to "reality," or in the mimetic relation: it is in the relation of the image to sight [*la vue*]. The image is seen if it is sight,[14] and it is sight when vision creates itself in and through it, just as vision only sees when it is given with the image and in it. Between the image and sight, then, there is not imitation but participation and penetration. The participation of sight in the visible and, in turn, the participation of the visible in the invisible is nothing other than seeing itself. (The *methexis* in *mimesis* is doubtless one of the terms of the Greco-Judaic chiasmus in which the Christian invention takes shape.)

For this reason, the parable is far from allowing itself to shrivel into the formula of an allegory. It partakes of the gift of seeing and of this "more" assured to those who already have. In the parable there is more than a "figure," but there is also—as though conversely—more than a first or last sense. There is an excess of visibility or, more precisely, there is a double excess of visibility and invisibility.

It is in this manner that parables have retained their force well beyond the sphere of religion. In the names or expressions of the "rye grass," the "Good Samaritan," the "prodigal son," or the "workers of the eleventh hour," a singular

brilliance shines, a supplement of utterly irreducible significance resonates not only for the Christian religion but also for the secularized morality that an educated European still knows to attach to these figures. Admittedly, as cultural deposits they are scarcely different from mythological figures such as "Hercules at the crossroads" or "the wood nymphs" and "the nymphs of the springs." But on another level, a difference does leap into view: whereas Hercules and the nymphs, arising out of a mythic and ritual context, are immediately allegories that present themselves as such, parables in some way remain obstinately "tautegorical"—that is, expressing themselves and not something else—according to the term coined by Schelling to characterize, precisely, myth in its proper force. In this regard, the same goes for fables as for parables: there is more to "The Grasshopper and the Ant," for instance, than the opposition between insouciance and the industriousness of foresight. There are figures, silhouettes, names, and sonorities that endlessly revitalize the resources of sense that concepts cannot allow to burst forth. In the end, the truth of the fable is still always in excess of the meaning that provides it with a "morality." Beyond sense: invisible right in the middle of visible figurality. But with fables—from Phaedra to La Fontaine—it is only a question of a characteristically disenchanted truth. In this sense, the fable is the inverse side of myth; it is a lesson without sacred grandeur (whereas the myth would have been immortal grandeur with no other lesson than the tragic striking-down of mortals).

The Christian parable opens up another avenue, one to which all modern literature quite possibly bears some essential relation (perhaps also all modern art: in a sense, this little book is attempting to clear the way, however slightly, for this hypothesis). The excess of its truth does not have the indeterminate character of a general lesson that, in some

way out of proportion with each particular case, would suggest a regulatory principle. Its excess is always primarily that of its provenance or of its address: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." There is no "message" without there first being—or, more subtly, without there also being in the message itself—an address to a capacity or an aptitude for listening. It is not an exhortation (of the kind "Pay attention! Listen to me!"). It is a warning: if you do not understand, do not look for the reason in an obscurity of the text but only within yourself, in the obscurity of your heart. More than the detailed content of the message, the following prevails: there is a message there for those who want to and who know how to receive it, for those who want to and know how to be called. The message says nothing to a closed ear, but to the open ear it gives more than a lesson. Less or more than sense: nothing at all or the entire truth, suddenly present and singular each time.

Thus, before its proper sense (or else infinitely beyond it), the text—or the speech [*la parole*]—first demands its listener, he who has already entered into the proper listening of this text and has therefore entered into this text itself, into its most intimate movement of sense or of passing beyond sense and into its *unworking.* By the same token, this demand also means that the parable waits for the ear that knows how to hear it and that only the parable can open the ear to its own ability to hear. As will be said very much later, an author must find his own readers or, what amounts to the same thing, it is the author who creates his own readers. It is always a matter of the sudden appearance of sense or of beyond-sense: of a singular echo within which I hear myself addressing myself and responding to myself in the voice of the other, to the ear of the other as if to my own, more proper ear.

Would this not be what distinguishes faith from belief, without possible reconciliation of the two? While belief sets down or assumes a sameness of the other with which it identifies itself and in which it takes solace (he is good, he will save me), faith lets itself be addressed by a disconcerting appeal through the other, thrown into a listening that I myself do not know. But what thus distinguishes belief from faith is identical to what distinguishes religion from literature and art, provided we hear these terms in all their truth. It is, in fact, a matter of hearing: of hearing our own ear listening, of seeing our eye looking, even at that which opens it and at that which is eclipsed in this opening.

On the Point of Departure

One episode from the Gospel of John gives a particularly good example of this sudden appearance within which a vanishing is played out.[15]

It is not a parable spoken by Jesus; it is a scene from the general parable that his life and his mission make up. In this scene he speaks, he makes an appeal, and he leaves. He speaks in order to say that he is there and that he is leaving immediately. He speaks in order to say to the other that he is not where he is believed to be; he is already elsewhere, while nonetheless being present: here, but not right here. It is up to the other to understand. It is up to the other to see and to hear.

This episode is known under the heading *Noli me tangere,* particularly in painting, where it has often been taken up—though obviously much less often than the great canonical episodes of the annunciation or the crucifixion, and less often even than the Emmaus episode, to which it

is similar.[16] It is, doubtless, the only "scene" whose title is an uttered phrase. (It is true that on rare occasions painters have chosen the title *The Resurrected Lord Appears to Mary Magdalene.* Rembrandt, for instance, situates the moment of his scene slightly before the *noli* utterance, perhaps out of a desire to avoid or displace the subject of *touching.*) Although other phrases of Jesus (or those of other characters) have also taken on the status of an exemplary citation or a fixed phrase (like "Zacchaeus, come down!" or "Lazarus, come forth!"), they have not, for all that, become the title of a scene and then of a pictorial motif. By contrast, *Noli me tangere* has achieved this to such a degree that it is possible to speak of "a *Noli me tangere*" just as one speaks of "a *Resurrection*" or "a *Supper at Emmaus.*" Better still, the formulation (how to designate it? it is more than a word without being a saying . . .) has had the good fortune to be occasionally taken up as a title for works that bear no explicit relation to the evangelical scene,[17] even to the extent that a plant has had the honor of being given the name.[18]

Let us not immediately seek to give a reason for such a favorable destiny, certainly one of the least religious there is for an expression from the Gospels. *Noli me tangere*—"Do not touch me"—calls to mind a prohibition of contact, a question of sensuality or violence, a recoil, a frightened or modest flight. But it evokes nothing that would give it a properly religious or sacred (much less theological or spiritual) character so long as these words are mentioned without explicit reference to the context in which John wrote them. Everything happens, in this case, as if it were not primarily a matter of a word taken from the Gospel, but rather of a word that the Gospel itself would have taken from elsewhere, from a common language—a little in the manner in which it takes up stories from folklore (a wine grower, a

young gambler, a traveler under attack) in order to make parables out of them.

"Do not touch me" is not a remarkable linguistic formulation, nor is it some kind of idiolect. But it is a phrase that, on its own, gives the indication of an at least vague context. While an equivalent phrase, such as "Do not talk to me," remains suspended as it awaits a context ("I need silence," "I don't want to listen to you," "I won't believe you," or, on the contrary, "I've already understood you"), at the very least "Do not touch me" is necessarily in a register of warning before a danger ("You're going to hurt me" or "I'm going to hurt you," "You're challenging my integrity" or "I have to defend myself"). To say it in a word, and making a kind of saying out of it—difficult to avoid—"Don't touch me" is a phrase that touches and that cannot not touch, even when isolated from every context. It says something about touching in general, or it touches on the sensitive point of touching: on this sensitive point that touching constitutes par excellence (it is, in sum, "the" point of the sensitive) and on what forms the sensitive point within it. But this point is precisely the point where touching does not touch and where it must not touch in order to carry out its touch (its art, its tact, its grace): the point or the space without dimension that separates what touching gathers together, the line that separates the touching from the touched and thus the touch from itself.[19]

If art and culture have seized upon this phrase, it has doubtless been to recover something in the Gospel that the latter had been seeking outside of itself, in this gap intrinsic to touch, in this insurmountable edge-to-edge that has also made touching, as Freud picked it up,[20] a major stake in taboo as the constitutive structure of sacrality. The *untouchable*—of which, to our Western eyes, the Hindu figure of the *pariah* is the most striking example—is everywhere

present wherever there is the sacred, that is, wherever there is withdrawal, distance, distinction, and the incommensurable, with all the emotion that accompanies them (or that constitutes them).

It is remarkable that when Oedipus—another inaugural figure, along with Jesus, of our Western (de)sacrality, if not his other figure, indeed his double par excellence—retreats toward the grove near Colonus where he about to die, he says to those following him: "Come on, but touch me not."[21]

But in a certain sense, nothing and no one is untouchable in Christianity, since even the body of God is given to be eaten and drunk. Of course, various rituals (especially those of the Catholic and Orthodox churches) have participated in the most common of religious regulations by laying down bans on touching or on touching without precautionary cleansing. But this does not mean that the thought or the essential motion of Christianity belongs to this order. To the contrary: in a certain sense, Christianity will have been the invention of the religion of touch, of the sensible, of presence that is immediate to the body and to the heart. As such, the scene of *Noli me tangere* would be an exception, a theological *hapax,* or it would demand that the two phrases *Hoc est corpus meum* and *Noli me tangere* be thought together, in a mode of oxymoron or paradox. And perhaps it is precisely a matter of this paradox.

What is properly exceptional about this scene as it is treated in the evangelical narrative is the following: Christ expressly rules out the touching of his arisen body [*son corps ressuscité*]. At no other moment had Jesus either prohibited a touch or refused to let someone touch him. Here, though, on Easter morning and at the time of his first appearance, he suppresses or prevents Mary Magdalene's gesture. What must not be touched is the arisen body. We could just as

well understand that it must not be touched because it cannot be: it is not to be touched. Yet that does not mean that it is an ethereal or immaterial, a spectral or phantasmagoric body. What follows in the text, to which we shall return, clearly shows that this body is tangible. But it does not present itself as such here. Or rather, it slips away from a contact that it could have allowed. Its being and its truth as arisen are in this slipping away, in this withdrawal that alone gives the measure of the touch in question: not touching this body, to touch on [*toucher à*] its eternity. Not coming into contact with its manifest presence, to accede to its real presence, which consists in its departure.

In the original Greek of John, Jesus' phrase is given as *Mē mou haptou.* In a similar usage, the verb *haptein* ("to touch") can also mean "to hold back, to stop."[22]

Christ does not want to be held back, for he is leaving. He says it immediately: he has not yet returned to the Father, and he is going toward him. To touch him or to hold him back would be to adhere to immediate presence, and just as this would be to believe in touching (to believe in the presence of the present), it would be to miss the departing [*la partance*] according to which the touch and presence come to us. Only thus does the "resurrection" find its nonreligious meaning. What for religion is the renewal of a presence that bears the phantasmatic assurance of immortality is revealed here to be nothing other than the departing into which presence actually withdraws, bearing its sense in accordance with this parting. Just as it comes, so it goes: this is to say that it *is* not, in the sense of something being fixed within presence, immobile and identical to itself, available for a use or a concept. "Resurrection" is the uprising [*surrection*], the sudden appearance of the unavailable, of the other and of the one disappearing[23] *in the body itself and as the body.* This is not a magical trick. It is the very

opposite: the dead body remains dead, and that is what creates the "emptiness" of the tomb, but the body that theology will later call "glorious" (that is, shining with the brilliance of the invisible) reveals that this emptiness is really the emptying out of presence. No, nothing is available here: don't try to seize upon a meaning for this finite and finished life, don't try to touch or to hold back what essentially distances itself and, in distancing itself, touches you with its very distance (in both senses: touches you with and from a distance). It is as though it were touching you while permanently disappointing your expectations, touching you with what makes rise up before you, for you, even that which does not rise up. This uprising or insurrection is a glory that devotes itself to disappointing you and to pushing your outstretched hand away. For its brilliance is nothing other than the emptiness of the tomb. The "arisen" does not mediate the one through the other: he exposes (he "reveals") how they are the same absenting, the same gap that one dares not touch, since it is this gap alone that touches us to the quick: on the point of death.

Death is not "vanquished" here, in the sense religion all too hastily wants to give this word. It is immeasurably expanded, shielded from the limitation of being a mere demise. The empty tomb un-limits death in the departing of the dead. He is not "dead" once and for all: he dies indefinitely. He who says "Do not touch me" never ceases to depart, for his presence is that of a disappearance [*la disparition*] indefinitely renewed or prolonged. *Do not touch me, do not hold me back, do not think to seize or reach toward me for I am going to the Father, that is, still and always to the very power of death. I am withdrawing into it; I am fading away into its nocturnal brilliance on this spring morning. I am already going away; I am only in this departure; I am the parting of this departure. My being consists in it and my word is this: "I, the Truth, am going away."*[24]

Finally, if Jesus says that he is going "toward the Father," this means that he is *leaving,* absolutely: the "father" (with or without capital letter: the Greek does not stipulate it here) is none other than the absent and the removed, precisely the opposite of "my brethren," those present, those whom the woman can and must go to find. He is departing for the absent, for the distant: he is going absent [*il s'absente*]; he is withdrawing into this dimension from which alone comes *glory,* that is, the brilliance of more than presence, the radiance of what is in excess of the given, the available, the disposed. If he could say "Who has seen me has seen the Father," then the latter is not an other, nor is he elsewhere. He is, here and now, what is not seen and what nonetheless shines, what is not in the light but behind it. That is why this glory shines only insofar as it is received and transmitted. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *even* as by the spirit of the Lord."[25]

The resurrection is not a return to life. It is the glory at the heart of death: a dark glory, whose illumination merges with the darkness of the tomb. Rather than the continuum of life passing through death, it is a matter of the discontinuity of another life in or of death. If during the Lazarus episode Jesus says "I am the resurrection,"[26] what he means is that the resurrection is not a process of regeneration (like that of the mythologies of Osiris or Dionysius, for example), but that it consists or, rather, that it takes place in one's relation with he who says, "I am the resurrection." The rest of the verse declares: "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." To place one's trust in him and to be thus within faith is not to believe that a

corpse could be regenerated: it is to hold oneself [*se tenir*][27] firmly in the assurance of a stance [*une tenue*] before death. This "stance" is literally the *anastasis* or "resurrection," that is, the raising or uprising ("insurrection" is also a possible meaning of the Greek term).[28] Neither regeneration, reanimation, palingenesis, rebirth, revivification, nor reincarnation: but the uprising, the *raising* or *the lifting* as a verticality perpendicular to the horizontality of the tomb—not leaving it, not reducing it to nothingness but affirming in it the stance (thus also the reserve, *restraint*) of an untouchable, an inaccessible.

This *lifting* is not a *relève* in the sense given to this word by Derrida to translate the Hegelian *Aufhebung.* It does not carry extinguished life to the power of a higher life; it is not a dialectics of death, neither does it mediate death. It makes the truth of a life rise in it, the truth of all life insofar as it is mortal and of every life insofar as it is singular. It is vertical truth, incommensurable with the horizontal order in which dead life is reduced to material remains. But it is also incommensurable with every representation of a passage into another life: after the resurrection, the dead no longer live in a kingdom of shadows and they are no longer tormented souls wandering along the shores of a Lethe.[29]

In the Lazarus episode, the dead man leaves the tomb bound in his bandages and wrapped in a shroud. This is not a scene out of a horror movie; it is a parable of the lifted and upright stance in death. Not an erection—either in a phallic or monumental sense, although these two could be taken up and worked with in this context—but a standing upright before and in death. There is something here that resonates both with the tragic heroism of "dying upright"[30] and with the life that is maintained in the death of Hegelian spirit.[31] The difference, though (a slight difference, difficult to discern), has to do with what *anastasis* is not or does not

bring about from the self, from the subject proper, but from the other. *Anastasis* comes to the self from the other or arises from the other within the self—or again, it is the raising of the other in the self. It is the other that rises and resurrects [*qui se lève et qui ressuscite*] within the dead self. It is the other that resurrects for me, more than he resurrects me. In still other terms: "I am resurrected" does not signify an action that I would have accomplished but rather a passivity to which I am subjected or that I receive. "I am dead" (an impossible statement) and "I am resurrected" say the same thing, the same passivity and the same passion. In the same way, to be able to say "I am dead" one would have to be "resurrected," which is generally how the depictions of a religion of natural miracles understand it. Nonetheless, the coincidence of the two statements does bear witness to the impossibility that death, just as little as life, be simply identical to itself and contemporaneous with itself: neither dead nor living, there is quite simply only a *present.* But always a presentation of the one to the other, toward the other or within the other: the presentation of a parting.

In a word: two meanings, made inextricable, of the expression *the raising of the body* [la levée du corps].

Mē mou haptou—Noli me tangere

Let us now read the entire text of the episode.

Mary arrives at the tomb. She finds it empty, with two angels occupying it.

And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my lord, and I know not where they have lain him.

And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing and knew not that it was Jesus.

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast lain him, and I will take him away.

Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself and saith unto him, Rabboni, which is to say, Master.

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I

ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.[32]

The scene is organized around vision: Mary has first seen that the stone of the tomb had been removed and the entire scene unfolds from there, in relation to the empty tomb, to desire and to the fear of going to look. Mary will see Jesus. He will allow himself to be seen by her because she will have known to look into the tomb. To see what is not to be seen, to see what gives itself to be seen only to a capable gaze, with eyes that have already known to see into the night of the invisible: such are the stakes whose central motif is *Noli me tangere:* "You see, but this seeing is not and cannot be a touching, if touching [or touching him, *le toucher*] itself had to figure the immediacy of a presence; you see what is not present and you touch the untouchable that holds itself beyond the reach of your hands, just as he whom you see before you is already leaving this place of encounter."

If painters have been drawn to this episode, whose theological importance is slight in comparison with the great symbols of faith (annunciation, birth, passion, the resurrection "properly speaking,"[33] ascension), it is because it puts into play a particularly delicate and complex exercise of vision. On the one hand, everything takes place before the empty tomb, in a reversal of the gaze from the tomb. On the other hand, the vision that is given is complex: first indecisive, then supplemented by speech, and finally held at a distance, able to see only the time of knowing that this vision must be allowed to leave.

When painters represent the resurrection "itself," they depict an episode that is nowhere given to be seen, nor is it

even suggested in the Gospels. Their paintings are thus an attempt to confront the invisible head on, as it were, and to take the gesture of seeing and of making seen to the point of dazzling the gaze and rendering the canvas incandescent (this is exemplified by Grünewald). At the same time, this spectacle is often accompanied by the confusion and surprise of the guards who are placed in front of the tomb: the resurrection is put forth as the spectacle of an extraordinary force that rolls the stone aside and strikes men down [*terrasse les hommes*], making a mockery of the precautions taken by the priests and the Pharisees to prevent the disciples from stealing the body away and simulating a resurrection.[34] Here painting wants to raise itself up to the measure of a blinding force and a silent din wherein the first day of the saved world suddenly appears, sovereign.

But the scenes in the text where the arisen appears are otherwise; they are more discreet and less flamboyant.[35] They are organized precisely around the "natural" rather than "supernatural" character of the coming of the arisen, around the familiar rather than the spectacular.[36] When there is astonishment and fear, it is because the disciples think they are seeing a spirit. So Jesus invites them to touch him and to be assured that he really is there in flesh and blood. Belief waits for the spectacular and then invents it when needed. Faith consists in seeing and hearing where there is nothing exceptional for the ordinary eye and ear. It knows to see and to hear *without tampering* [sans y toucher]. This is also the substance of the Emmaus episode.[37] Two disciples speak with the arisen for a long time without identifying him, and when they recognize him as he breaks bread, he immediately disappears from their sight.

Between the scenes—outside the text—of the resurrection and the scenes of encounter with the arisen lies the entire difference separating an imagination from a narrative.

The former blends together symbolic, allegorical, and mystical features to solicit representation, while the latter invites us to understand what no representation can sustain, that is, to understand that no presence presents the distancing whereby the truth of presence itself goes absent.

In this regard, *Noli me tangere* constitutes the most subtle and reserved scene. This is why painters have been able to discern in it not the ecstatic vision of a miracle but a delicate intrigue that takes shape between the visible and the invisible, each of the two calling and repelling the other, each touching the other and distancing it from itself. Rembrandt captures this intrigue with the greatest clarity. By elevating the tomb to the high point of a garden, he places the dark opening of the cave facing us on the right at the same level as the powerful light of a sunrise on the left, whose golden whiteness absorbs Jesus' clothing (while Mary's coat seems to sink into the shadows and to spill over onto a cloth—perhaps the empty shroud). The whole painting comes close to composing a face from very close up, one eye dark and the other shining (like a kind of wink from the painter). Between the two eyes, the division [*le partage*][38] of shadow and light forms the overhang of the rock within which the tomb is carved out. It exactly divides the face of Mary, captured in the process of turning around at the instant when she discovers him whom she does not yet recognize.[39] Her eyes are turned toward him who is also looking at her. But the painter arranges it so that we are offered their two faces almost head on, as well as that of the angel on the left, who is also turned toward Jesus, while the angel on the right—our representative in the canvas—views the entire scene.

In fact, as I have already pointed out, Rembrandt did not entitle his work *Noli me tangere,* and he situates the scene,

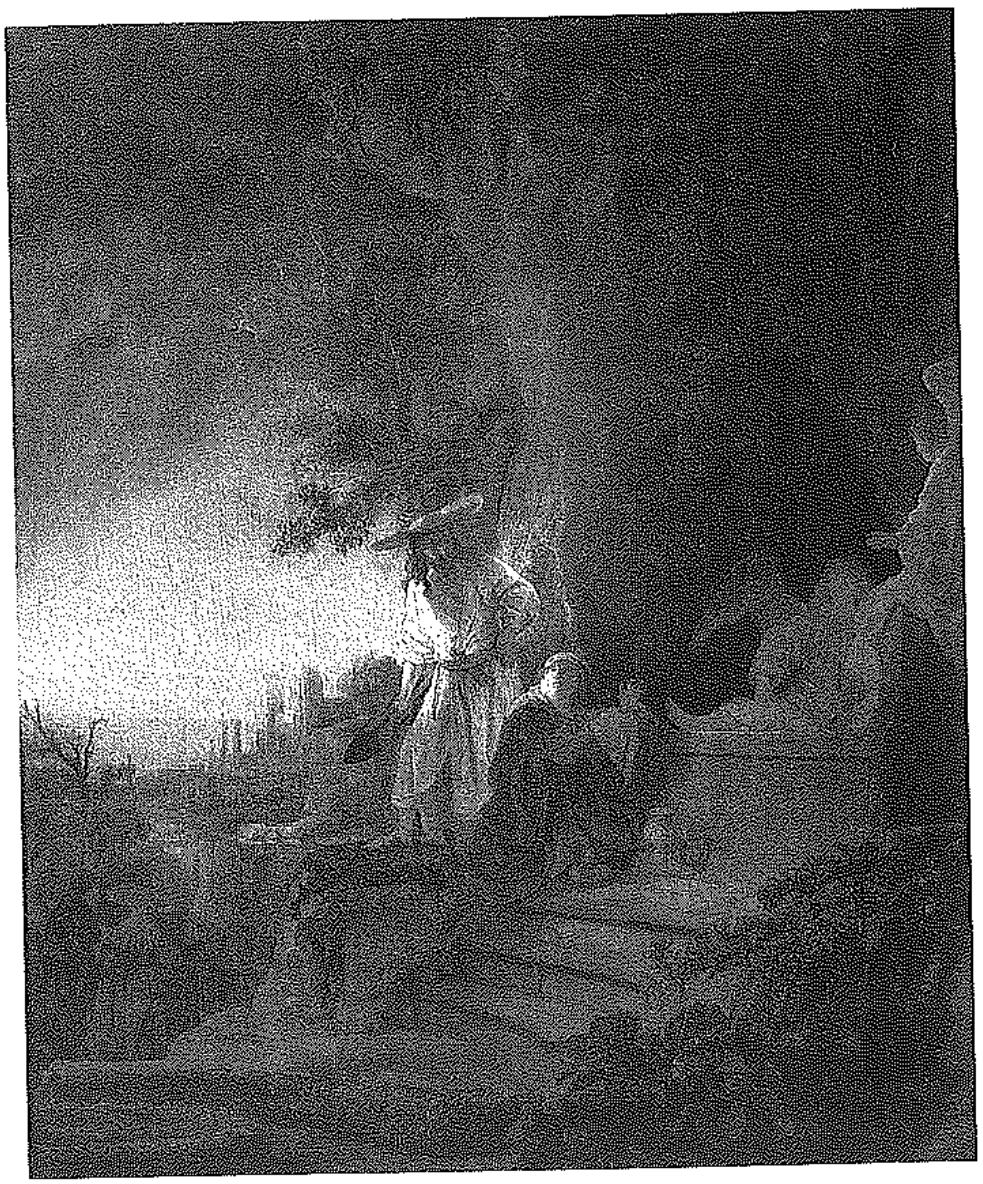


Fig. 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ and St. Mary Magdalene at the Tomb.* The Royal Collection © 2008 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, London.

entitled *Christ and St. Mary Magdalene at the Tomb,* an instant before these words are spoken, though not without subtly indicating the motif of touching between the two characters (as we shall see). But in this first moment of the scene, it is the impossible contact of day and night that occupies the painter: their tangency without contact, their

Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, thirty-second block in the woodcut *The Small Passion.*

commonality without mixing, their proximity without intimacy. Thus all supernatural magic is ruled out: the arisen is not coming out of the tomb but is coming from the other side, just as the day is not coming from the night but confronts it without, for all that, dissipating the profound darkness of the cave. The mystery of the resurrection is not

conjured up by some glorification of reconstituted flesh (as it is when Christ is represented as mostly naked, by Titian, Perugino, or Balthazar of Eschave): it is illuminated where it is hidden, in a point of tangency withdrawn behind the canvas as though into the silence of the text, where light and shadow interact without touching each other, where they are shared out and divided [*se partagent*], each pushing the other away—where the one is the truth of the other without mediation or without conversion of the one into the other.

Dürer's engraving (many details of which make it likely that Rembrandt knew it) gives a version of the mystery that is perhaps even more subtle (if the mystery is what is illuminated on its own, or what shines from the depth of the shadow, or what of the shadow shines). The rising sun striates the night with its rays, illuminating Jesus' back and right arm. His right hand is about to touch Mary, whose face is illuminated and whose back is in shadow, the opposite of her Lord. The risen body remains earthly and in the shadow: its glory does not belong to it and the resurrection is not an apotheosis; to the contrary, it is the *kenosis*[40] continued. It is in the emptiness or in the emptying out of presence that the light shines. And this light does not fill in that emptiness but hollows it out even more, since in Dürer we could venture to discern it in the proximity of the sun to the gardener's (the gravedigger's?) shovel. The glory of the glorious body radiates like the opening of the tomb, and not against it. (In Fontana Lavinia's painting, one could almost think that it is this paradox that is represented.)

The Gardener

Another aspect of the intrigue of vision involves the mistake Mary Magdalene initially makes when she thinks she is seeing the gardener. For this mistake to be possible, Jesus must not be recognizable, or at least not immediately so. Mary Magdalene has known him for long enough; it is unlikely that she would not be able to recognize him. The reasons for her mistake must remain undecided: either in her certainty of no longer seeing him alive, she does not even have at her disposal this "pre-vision" or this schema that is prior to the image and that would permit or impose the identification;[41] or else Jesus himself is not recognizable at first, while nonetheless indeed being himself.[42] As we have already pointed out with respect to the meeting in Emmaus, other scenes where the arisen appears are marked by a difficulty in recognizing him, indeed, by the suggestion of a change in his characteristics.[43] Conversely, in the scene

from John that follows our own, the recognition of his appearance will not gain the support of Thomas without the disciple first touching the wounds of the afflicted.

The difficulties involved in recognizing Christ have a twofold significance.

On the one hand, it is as if his resemblance to himself were a suspended and floating moment. He is the same without being the same, altered within himself. Is it not thus that the dead appear? Is it not this alteration, at once imperceptible and striking—the appearing of that which or of he who can no longer properly appear, the appearing of an *appeared and disappeared* [*un apparu et disparu*]—that most properly and violently bears the imprint of death? The same is no longer the same; the aspect is dissociated from the appearance; the visage is made absent right in the face; the body is sinking into the body, sliding under it. The departing [*la partance*] is inscribed onto presence, presence is presenting its vacating. He has already left; he is no longer where he is; he is no longer as he is. He *is dead,* which is to say that he *is not* what or who he, at the same time, is or presents. He is his own alteration and his own absence: He is properly only his impropriety.

On the other hand, the difficult and uncertain recognition bears the stakes of faith. It does not consist in recognizing the known but in entrusting oneself to the unknown (certainly not in taking it as a substitute for the known, for that would be belief and not faith). In this regard, the sequence of episodes in John is instructive. First, there is the disciple (John himself) who "sees and believes" before the empty tomb with the abandoned bandages and shroud. He understands without seeing, but nothing is said of the content of his faith. It is as if this faith consisted in trusting the emptiness as such, without searching for what has become

of the dead. Beyond the *noli,* there will also be the Thomas episode: Jesus says to him that he is blessed to have believed, but not as blessed as those who have believed without seeing ("seeing" and "touching" are posed as equivalents in this scene: touch is a confirmation or accomplishment of sight). Thomas's faith is stated in formal terms. He says: "My Lord and my God."

Between the two, Mary Magdalene's seeing without clairvoyance is turned around (to use a word of which the text makes subtle use[44]) by the voice of Jesus. She did not recognize him the entire time she was addressing him as a gardener, asking him if he knows where the body of the Master is. But when, instead of answering her, he says her name ("Mary"), she recognizes him and calls him (in Hebrew, as is specified in John) by the name "Rabboni," which marks both her respect for and her familiarity with him. It is as if Mary Magdalene neither places her faith in the emptiness nor has she the kind of devotion brought about by a proof. She believes because she hears. She hears the voice that says her name. She hears this voice that contradicts the appearance of the gardener but, even so, it is not said that her seeing changes. She is responding only to the voice of he who maintains the same appearance.

The painters have most often interpreted what is at stake with the "gardener" by giving Jesus the attributes of this métier: a shovel, a spade or hoe, a straw hat. When his face is in shadow, as with Dürer, the intention could be to suggest the difficulty of discerning his characteristics. Alternatively, it could be that the shovel and the hat belong only to the thinking of the woman, who believes it is the gardener. These attributes would be the image's representation of belief or illusion. Regarding faith, the image involves precisely what belief can neither supply nor withhold [*décevoir*].

On rare occasions, the attributes of the gardener are absent. Such is the case, for example, with Giotto, Duccio, or Schongauer. Jesus appears in those works exclusively as Christ, Messiah, and Savior. The juxtaposition of works depicting Christ with the signs of a messianic royalty and those more numerous works portraying a gardener[45] is revealing. In one sense, it is the same Christ. In another sense, the Messiah as arisen (that is, the disappointment of the Messiah triumphing on earth[46]) is none other than the first gardener to have come along. There is nothing changed in his appearance. Thus there is nothing to change in Mary Magdalene's seeing, and this seeing is not a mistake. Indeed, as Dürer draws it, the shovel that digs in the earth is near the rising sun. Indeed, Mary sees the gardener, an ordinary man who comes after that other ordinary deceased man, whose gaping tomb exposes unfathomable absence.

Mary's faith consists in her trust that he who calls her calls no one other than her and that there is a fidelity to this naming. "Mary" resonates here just as "Abraham" had done long before. "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" means above all: let him (her) hear who hears that it is addressed to him (to her), that is, to no one else. "Hear that I call you, and that I call you to leave and to tell the others that I am leaving. Hear nothing else: you, you alone, and my departure. I give you nothing. I reveal nothing to you, for you see only the gardener. Go and repeat it, that I have left." And like Abraham, Mary does not demonstrate her faith through statements, hypotheses, or calculations.[47] She leaves. The response to the truth that is on the point of departure [*en partance*] is to leave with it.

The Hands

In placing the accent on touching, the Latin and then modern translations necessarily appeal to the characters' hands. It is with the hand that one touches, and it is the hand that one first touches. In numerous cultures and, in any case, in that of modern Western painters, to touch the hand is the minimum of touching, one involving no intimacy. It does suggest a peaceful disposition though, even a beneficent one (In classical French, one used to say *Touchez là!* in order to conclude an accord or terminate a disagreement).

In its pictorial representations, *Noli me tangere* usually gives rise to a remarkable game of hands: approach and designation of the other; arabesque of slender fingers; prayer and benediction; suggestion of a light touch; a brushing; an indication of caution or warning. These hands always form a promise or a desire to hold each other or to hold each other back, to join together with others. Not only are they often at the center of the composition, but they are actually

like the composition itself, like the hands of the painter, who organizes and manipulates the flourish [*le délié*][48] of their fingers and palms. In classical painting, the hand has often played a decisive role in the organization of the design, like a second-degree sign arranging, indeed indexing, all the scene's other gestures. In this particular scene, everything often seems arranged to start with the hands and to come back to them: in effect, these hands are the gestures and the signs of the intrigue of an arrival (that of Mary) and a departure (that of Jesus). These are hands ready to be joined but already disjoined and distant, like the shadow and the light, hands that exchange greetings mixed with desires, hands that show bodies but that also point to the sky.

Mary Magdalene's hands are reaching toward Jesus in a posture of demand: most often open, with palms raised, they reach toward him, seeking to grasp him or at least to welcome something of his presence, along the edges of his body or his clothing. Jesus' hands, on the contrary (these hands that the painter sometimes marks with the stigmata from the nails), often reach toward the woman in a gesture of remarkable undecidability: he is blessing her at the same time as he is holding her at a distance. We are certain that he will not take hold of her, that he will not even take her hands in his. If he greets her with her name and makes a gift of his appearance to her, it is not to keep her but to send her to announce the news. Just as he leaves, so too must she leave and announce the news. Here it is she who is the first envoy, the first messenger before those—the "brethren"—who will be given the task of spreading the message. The two hands of Christ are often at an angle, pointing in two directions: one is pointed toward the sky, and the other is stopping the woman in order to return her to her mission.

But it also happens that their hands come to touch. It is not always easy to decide this, for in certain paintings the superimposition of planes without clear depth makes it impossible to know whether a hand touches or whether it is only located in a plane closer to the foreground. Titian is exemplary in this regard. In his version, the woman's right hand could be seen either as passing in front of the cloth or as brushing against it, especially since Jesus is gathering the cloth to him as if to protect his body (indeed to protect

Fig. 3. Titian, *Noli me tangere.* © National Gallery, London.

his sex, which the classical *epizōnion* of the crucified already recovers and even emphasizes—an exceptional enough occurrence in the *Noli* series). The same difficulty arises in Pontormo, in Alonso Cano, and even in one of Giotto's frescoes, where Mary's hands come into contact with the rays of glory. Though not strictly necessary, it is advisable—if I may say so—to assume that the ambiguity is intentional and that we are asked to take every superimposition of planes as possessing the value of a contact. It is as if the painters have sought to revolve around the narrative and semantic ambiguity of the phrase "Do not touch me." For one could assume that it comes after a contact, after an initial furtive gesture from Mary that took Jesus by surprise, or that it is uttered to prevent a gesture that he sees coming. This second version seems to be the one that painters have most frequently adopted, but these works are far from being the most remarkable.

On the contrary, the proper force of a particular painting often goes hand in hand with a particularly audacious treatment of this touching or this touch. This happens when the two characters touch or brush against each other (Pontormo, Dürer, Cano) or when Mary Magdalene, in an approximately equal number of cases, touches Jesus (Titian, Giotto) or, finally, when, in a few exceptional cases,[49] Jesus touches the woman in a manner that one might be tempted to call pressing. This happens in Pontormo (copied by Bronzino[50]), who dares to paint the index finger of Christ as it grazes Mary's breast, as well as in Dürer, Cano, and the anonymous painting in the Église Saint-Maximin, where Christ visibly (if not conspicuously) places his hand on her head.

Nothing prevents us from thinking that, in order to stop or gently reject the woman's gesture, the man ends up having to touch her. It would, however, be more likely for him

Fig. 4. Jacopo da Pontormo, *Noli me tangere.* Casa Buonarotti, Florence. Photo Credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

to achieve this by withdrawing his hands from her. In making any other gesture, he becomes the one who touches, and accordingly the meaning of his phrase is shifted: "Don't touch me, for it is I who touch you." And this touching can be understood—if one indeed wishes to go

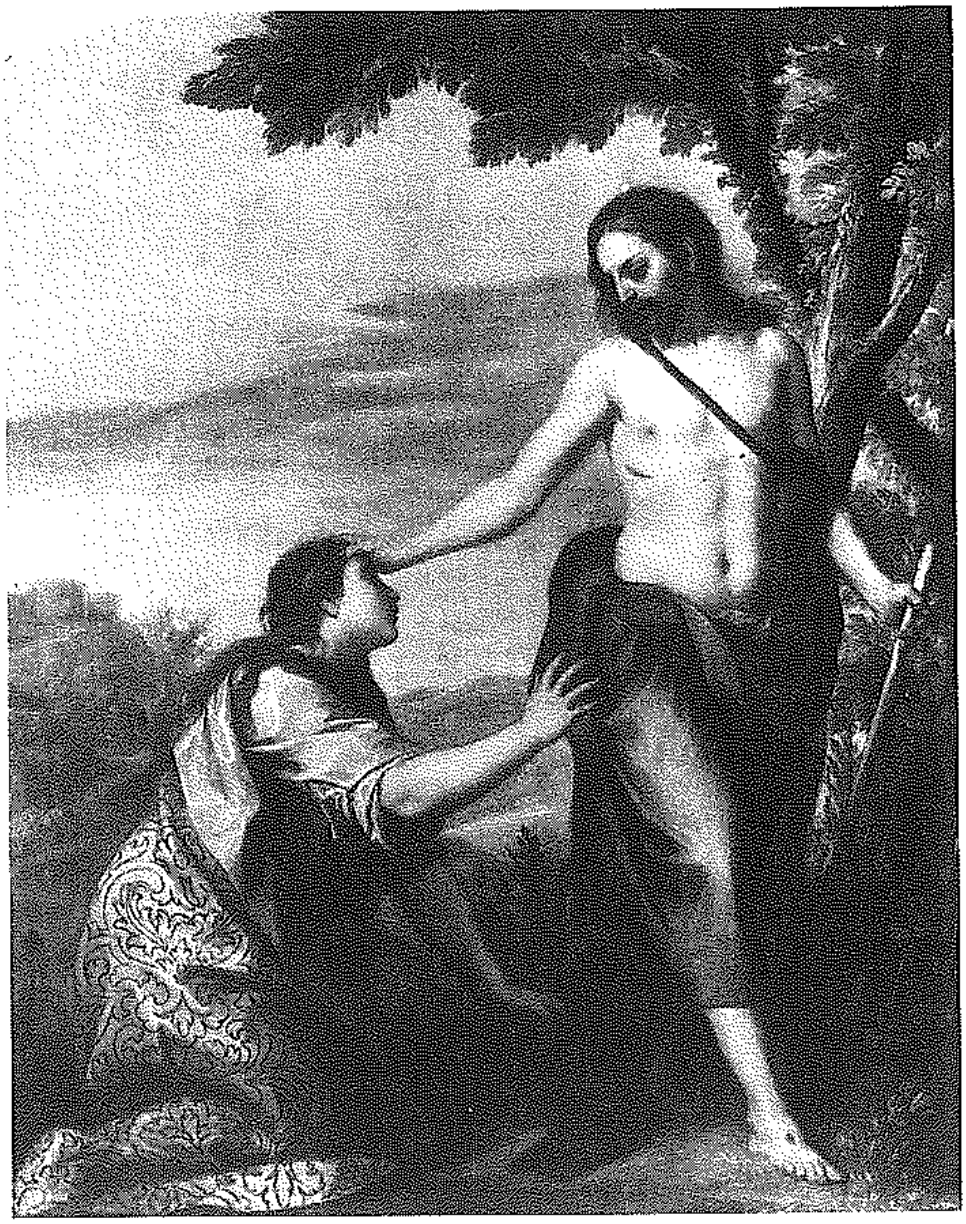


Fig. 5. Alonso Cano, *Noli me tangere.* Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

from one painting to another in thought or to superimpose their motifs—as a very singular combination of distancing and tenderness, benediction and caress. "Don't touch me, for I'm touching you, and this touch is such that it holds you at a distance."[51]

Love and truth touch by pushing away: they force the retreat of those whom they reach, for their very onset reveals, in the touch itself, that they are out of reach. It is in being unattainable that they touch us, even seize us. What they draw near to us is their distance: they make us sense it [*sentir*], and this sensing [*ce sentiment*] is their very sense. It is the sense of touch that commands not to touch. It is time, indeed, to specify the following: *Noli me tangere* does not simply say "Do not touch me"; more literally, it says "Do not wish to touch me." The verb *nolo* is the negative of *volo:* it means "Do not want."[52] In that, too, the Latin translation displaces the Greek *mē mou haptou* (the literal transposition of which would be *non me tange*).[53] *Noli:* do not wish it; do not even think of it. Not only don't do it, but even if you do do it (and perhaps Mary Magdalene does do it, perhaps her hand is already placed on the hand of the one she loves, or on his clothing, or on the skin of his nude body), forget it immediately. You hold nothing; you are unable to hold or retain anything, and that is precisely what you must love and know. That is what there is of a knowledge and a love. Love what escapes you. Love the one who goes. Love that he goes.

Mary of Magdala

Mary of Magdala—whom we call "Mary Magdalene"—has every reason to be the first to whom the arisen shows himself, even if it be to slip away from her just as quickly. She also has every reason to be the one to whom he gives the task of announcing what she has seen or what she thinks she has seen.[54]

The story of Mary of Magdala during Jesus' life prefigures the meeting in front of the open tomb in two ways.[55] On the one hand, she is Lazarus' sister, and it is she who had rushed to Jesus so that he would bring her brother back to life.[56] Thus she had already shown the kind of trust she places in her Lord. It is not the naïve credulity with which some regard the alleged *thaumaturgists;* rather, she is assured that the dead brother can still rise and walk, that he has actually not ceased doing this, as do all the dead, for they all walk with the living. The dead are deceased, but as deceased, they do not cease accompanying us, and we do not

cease leaving with them. To leave nowhere: to leave absolutely or to go from the ground [*le fond*] of the tomb to the ground without ground [*au fond sans fond*][57] upon which one does not cease moving forward, without for all that heading toward some destination.

Fallen at the feet of Jesus, Mary had said to him: "Lord if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Without knowing it, she is echoing the phrase that Jesus had said to her sister Martha a little earlier: "I am the resurrection."[58] In his presence, death cannot be restricted to the cessation of life: it becomes life even in the unremitting imminence of absenting [*l'absentement*].

Later, Jesus had come back to Bethany, where he dined with his disciples, Martha, Lazarus, and Mary. Mary had taken out a costly perfume with which to anoint Jesus' feet, before drying them with her hair. One of the disciples, Judas,[59] reproached her for using this perfume wastefully instead of giving the money to the poor. Jesus replied: "Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this."[60] Mary Magdalene has always been in close proximity to death in general and thus also to that of Jesus. She who, in another equally well-known episode, had "chosen that good part"[61] by remaining seated near the master instead of busying herself with household tasks like her sister Martha, has always distinguished, understood, and chosen the part that is not of this world. That she is otherwise considered to be a woman of ill repute[62] answers to the following paradox: the "good life" is not a life that conforms to good morals (one can also think of the adulterous woman, the prodigal son, etc.) but is that which, in this very life and in this world, keeps itself in close proximity to what is not of this world: to this outside of the world that is the emptiness of the tomb and the emptiness of god, the emptiness

opened up within god or as "God" by the birth of man, by the birth of the world [*par la mise au monde de l'homme, par la mise au monde du monde*].

Mary Magdalene is the one who has touched Jesus the most conspicuously, anointing him with a perfume—or an unction, which corresponds to the title of "christ" (anointed, *messiah*). But she does so in a mode that is completely reversed (parodic? critical? deconstructive?): the holy oil is replaced by a sensuous perfume and the unction is made on the feet and not on the head. It is a true unction, nonetheless: an unction that will have embalmed the body of Jesus in advance, anticipating his death and his resurrection, anticipating his glorious body by conferring on it during its life the insane glory of being perfumed by an amorous woman.

Rembrandt, to refer to him again, is perhaps the only painter, if not to have remembered the perfume episode, then at least to have known to recall it in the tomb scene. In several other *Noli* paintings, Mary Magdalene is accompanied by the vessel of perfume, which is also one of her canonical emblems in paintings where she is alone (the *Penitent Mary* paintings among others, such as those by Raggi, Juan de Flandres, or Lavinia Fontana). While this vessel is also present in Rembrandt,[63] he is the only one to recall the story of the perfume by placing the leg and extended foot of one of the angels close to the woman's left hand, arranged as if to be washed and anointed.[64] The angel's pose and the substitution of the angel for Jesus give the allusion a playful character, almost as if it were composed as a veiled reference. But this does not make the allusion any less elaborate in its particulars; indeed, it is all the more so: the foot that the woman's hand could touch is extending out of the tomb, or rather, marks its threshold. The hand, the foot, the vessel, and, again, the cut of the division between

shadow and light (at the edge of the tomb) gather into this area of the painting what relates the entire scene to that of the unction: "Do not touch me, for you've already touched me and I keep your perfume on me, just as it keeps me in death, just as your embalming keeps me dead and looks after this insane truth of the tomb. Don't touch me—it's already done. Your precious perfume has spilled; let me leave. And in turn, you too: go and announce that I'm leaving."

Furthermore, we must not forget that, in the context of the sepulcher, these aromas or perfumes are destined to anticipate what Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov,* will call "the odor of decay." It has been said of Lazarus that, on the fourth day following his death (one day more than for Jesus . . .), "he stinketh."[65] For his part, Jesus will not have smelled. Mary Magdalene's perfume will have given off its "odor of sanctity"in advance, which is another aspect of the glorious body.[66] Nietzsche's madman cries out to himself: "Do we smell nothing yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead."[67] Without a doubt, God remains dead. But Jesus' death is nonetheless carefully distinguished from this divine putrefaction, both in its principle and in its incessant movement of auto-deconstruction. The death of Jesus does not revive God any more than it does a man, though: it speaks of another death and another life, of an *anastasis* or a *glory* that would form something like the scent—the sensitivity, the sensuality—of insensible and irreparable death, would form its "divinity" as its "femininity," that is, to take up this word again, its "sanctity."

But sanctity must still be seen or sensed. It must still be touched upon. Mary Magdalene is the only one here to have seen the angels in the tomb. The disciples who had

come before her had eyes that did not see in this darkness. She, on the other hand, does see there. She does not dispel the night of the tomb: she sees there the presence of those who guard the absence and who keep it absent. Having been able to look into the tomb, just as earlier she had already been able to see the body of he who was still living as already dead and to perfume it, she is now able to hear the voice that calls her by her name. She sees life in death because she has seen death in life. Not that the one would be the truth of the other. To the contrary, by separating the two, the truth does not allow itself to be brought back to the one or to the other. The truth does not allow itself to be brought back, absolutely. It does not allow itself to be touched or held back. It is not a question here of seeing *in* the darkness, that is, in spite of it (as a dialectical or religious resource). It is a question of *opening one's eyes in the darkness* and of their being overwhelmed by it, or it is a question of sensing [or smelling, *sentir*] the insensible and of being seized by it.

If Mary Magdalene is such a character, so singular among those of the Gospels, and for that reason so often painted as penitent or repentant, praying in the desert near a skull, almost always with disheveled hair and without a veil—these are signs of her amorous life as well as of her gesture at the feet of Jesus, marking this strange gesture with both grace and sensuality—it is for no other reason than this: she joins caress and homage like life and death, like man and woman, like lightness and gravity, like here and there, without simply going from one to the other but rather by sharing them out without mixing them, the one against the other, through a touching that, of itself, distances and impedes itself. In a way, she becomes the saint par excellence because she holds to this point where the touch of sense is

identical to its retreat. It is the point of abandonment: she gives herself up to a presence that is only a departing, to a glory that is only darkness, to a scent that is only coldness. Her abandonment stems as much from love as it does from despondency, without the one relieving, restoring, or sublating [*relève*] the other. Rather, the simultaneity of the two constitutes the raising [*la levée*] of this very moment—a lifting that disappears as it arises.

Do Not Touch Me

This would be a parable. The arisen would be like the gardener of the garden at the tomb. He knows the emptiness well, the emptiness of this tomb, and he does not fear it. He maintains the garden and tends the borders of death without, for all that, presuming to have access to it. He knows that the dead do not return. He looks after the appearance of what surrounds their absence. He cultivates not their memory but what is immemorial in parting and in provenance, the one mingling with the other. He does so in such a way that its edges remain calm and clear, without prodigious desires and shady resuscitations, free of noxious odors but also of heady incense. The resurrection is not a resuscitation: it is the infinite extension of death that displaces and dismantles all the values of presence and absence, of animate and inanimate, of body and soul. The resurrection is the extension of a body to the measure of the world and of the space in which all bodies meet [*côtoiement*].

The gardener's care does not form a cult; rather, it forms a culture. Culture in general—all human culture—opens up the relation to death, the relation opened by death, without which there would be no relation at all: there would be only a universal adhesion, a coherence and a coalescence, a coagulation of all (a putrefaction that would always be vivifying for new germinations). Without death there would only be contact, contiguity, and contagion, a cancerous propagation of life that would consequently no longer be life—or rather, it would only be life and not *existence,* a life that would not at the same time be *anastasis.* Death opens relation, that is, the division [*partage*] of departure. Everyone is endlessly coming and going, incessantly. Even that which appears as the end reveals itself without end. But this revelation reveals nothing, above all not a transfiguration of the dead into the living. (The "transfiguration" or "metamorphosis," which is the Greek term, is an entirely different episode of the legend that is set up to anticipate the glory of the dead Christ. But precisely this episode shows that it is not a question of establishing oneself in glory:[68] one can only fleetingly be exposed to its brilliance. Fleetingly: very exactly between life and death, or between the touch and the retreat.)

Revelation—this revelation of which the resurrection must be the summit and the last word—reveals that there is nothing to show, nothing to make appear out of the tomb, no apparition, and no theophany or epiphany of a celestial glory. Thus there is no longer a last word. There is not even a "farewell" [*"adieu"*] or a "salut"[69] between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. And if a great many traditions and poems present their coupling as a pair of mystical lovers, these lovers take pleasure in each other by leaving each other.

The glorious body is the one that leaves and at the same time the one that speaks, that speaks only in leaving, that withdraws, withdrawing as much into the darkness of the tomb as into the ordinary appearance of the gardener. Its glory radiates only for eyes that know how to see, and those eyes see nothing but the gardener. But the gardener speaks, and he says the name of she who mourns the departed. To say the name is to say that which both dies and does not die. It is to say what leaves without leaving (and what often remains engraved on the tomb). The name leaves without leaving, for it bears the revelation of everyone's infinite finitude. "Mary" reveals Mary to herself, revealing to her both the parting of the voice that calls her as well as the dispatch to which her name commits her: that she, in turn, is to leave and announce the departure. The proper name speaks without speaking, since it does not signify but designates—and him or her whom it designates remains infinitely in retreat from all signification.

Every one resurrects [*chacun ressuscite*], one by one and body for body. This is the obscure and difficult lesson of monotheistic thought, as it has been cultivated from Israel into Islam, passing through the Gospel. The resurrection designates the singular of existence, and it designates this singular as the name, the name as that of the dead, death as that which separates signification from the name. To be named is to be on the point of departure and to quit sense at its border, a border that, in truth, has not even been reached.

The truth here is that one will not have tampered with [*toucher à*] sense, and that is what produces the gaping but indestructible sense of *life/death, garden/tomb.* One must have ears to hear what the gardener says, eyes to see (into) the radiant emptiness of the sepulcher, a nose to smell what smells of nothing.

"Do not touch me, do not detain me, seek not to hold or retain, renounce all adhesion, think not of a familiarity or a security. Don't believe that there is an assurance of the kind Thomas wanted. Don't believe, in any manner. But remain firm in this nonbelief. Remain true to that alone which remains in my departure: your name, which I utter. In your name, there is nothing to grasp and nothing for you to appropriate, but there is this: that it has been addressed to you, from the immemorial and up to the unachievable, from the ground without ground that is always in the process of leaving."

Two bodies, the one of glory and the other of flesh, are distinguished in this departure and in it they belong, partially but mutually, to each other. The one is the raising of the other; the other is the death of the one. Dead and raised [*levée*] are the same thing—"the thing," the unnameable—and not the same thing, for there is no sameness here. What happens with the body and with the world in general, when the world of the gods has been left behind, is an alteration of the world. Where there used to be one same world for gods, men, and nature, there is henceforth an alterity that passes through, and throughout, the world, an infinite separation of the finite—a separation of the finite by the infinite and thus of the flesh that glory separates from itself. The possibility of carnal decay is given there, along with the possibility of glory. Far from a morality emerging in order to repress the flesh, the constitution of the flesh in division from itself makes the invention of such a morality possible. This division—sin and salvation—comes from nowhere other than from the fading of the divine presences that ensured the homogeneous unity of a world.

Likewise, it follows that the "divine" henceforth no longer has a place either in the world or outside it, for there

is no other world. What "is not of this world" is not elsewhere: it is the opening in the world, the separation, the parting and the raising. Thus "revelation" is not the sudden appearance of a celestial glory. To the contrary, it consists in the departure of the body raised into glory. It is in absenting, in going absent, that there is revelation, but it is not he who leaves that reveals; it is she upon whom the task is conferred to go and announce his departure. Finally, it is the carnal body that reveals the glorious body, and this is why the painters knew to paint the sensual body of Mary Magdalene even when she was near death in her penitent retreat.[70] *Noli me tangere* is the word and the instant of relation and of revelation between two bodies, that is, of a single body infinitely altered and exposed both in its fall [*tombée*] as well as in its raising.

Why, then, a body? Because only a body can be cut down or raised up, because only a body can touch or not touch. A spirit can do nothing of the sort. A "pure spirit" gives only a formal and empty index of a presence entirely closed in on itself. A body opens this presence; it presents it; it puts presence outside of itself; it moves presence away from itself, and, by that very fact, it brings others along with it: Mary Magdalene thus becomes the true body of the departed.

Epilogue

The painter who paints the scene adds the following: my hands reach out toward the apparition that does not appear, toward the departure that undoes the entire scene, toward the resemblance that does not allow itself to be recognized, toward the darkness that shares with the light its concealment from representation, toward a canvas and a motif that repeats for me: "Do not touch me."

It is essential that painting not be touched. It is essential that the image in general not be touched. Therein lies its difference from sculpture, or at least sculpture can offer itself up to the eye and, in turn, to the hand—as when one walks around it, approaching to the point of touching and moving back in order to see. What is seeing if not a deferred touch? But what is a deferred touch if not a touching that sharpens or concentrates without reserve, up to a necessary excess, the point, the tip, and the instant through which the

touch detaches itself from what it touches, at the very moment when it touches it? Without this detachment, without this recoil or retreat, the touch would no longer be what it is, and would no longer do what it does (or it would not let itself do what it lets itself do). It would begin to reify itself in a grip, in an adhesion or a sticking, indeed, in an agglutination that would grasp the touch in the thing and the thing within it, matching and appropriating the one to the other and then the one in the other. There would be identification, fixation, property, immobility. "Do not hold me back" amounts to saying "Touch me with a real touch, one that is restrained, nonappropriating and nonidentifying." Caress me, don't touch me.

It is not that Jesus refuses Mary Magdalene. The true movement of giving oneself is not to deliver up a thing to be taken hold of but to permit the touching of a presence and consequently the eclipse, the absence, and the departure according to which a presence must always give itself in order to present itself. One could analyze this at length: if I give myself as a thing (according to the common understanding of such a formula) or if I give myself as an appropriable good, I remain "me" behind this thing and behind this gift. I survey them and distinguish myself from them. (And perhaps I even do this when, as they say, I "sacrifice" myself, for in "sacrificing" myself I also give myself a sacred value and the gift returns to me with interest . . . This is at least an interpretation that could never simply be excluded.) If I give myself by pushing the touch away, by thus inviting a search further or elsewhere, as though in the hollow of the touch itself—but isn't this what makes up every caress? Isn't it the beating rhythm of the kiss or of penetration that the caress sets aside and withdraws?—I do not master this gift, and he or she who touches me and withdraws, or whom I

hold back before his or her touch, has actually withdrawn a flash of (my) presence from me.

The painter painting Mary's outstretched hands, thus painting his own hands stretched out toward his picture—toward the right touch, made up of patience and chance, made up of a living withdrawal of the hand that sets it down—holds his image out to us, not for us to touch it or retain it in a perception but, to the contrary, so that we will step back to the point of putting back into play the entire presence of and within the image. This painter puts the truth of "resurrection" to work: the approach of the parting, in the ground of the image [*au fond de l'image*], of the singular of truth. It is thus that he *paints* (but here the verb can unfold its meanings to the point of touching on all other modes of art[71]), which is primarily to say that he "represents" in the proper sense of the word: "to intensify the presence of an absence as absence."

But let us not, for all that, cease to hear the harmonics of the words *Noli me tangere,* for they continue to resonate. Let us recall first of all—in order to emphasize this point—that the Latin translation of the Greek *haptō* as *tango* opened up a unique line of interpretation by making use of a verb that does not have the double meaning of "to touch" and "to hold back."[72] A constraint of language merged here, as though diabolically, with the muted attraction opened up by the account itself, and by the good fortune of John's sensibility. For Mary Magdalene's sensuality corresponds to that of John himself, the author of the account, who had just designated himself, a little before this scene, as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."[73] As is well known, it is John who is leaning "on Jesus' bosom" at the time of the Last Supper.[74] John and Magdalene, the one by the pen of

the other, but the other perhaps in a competition or conjunction of love—masculine and feminine—for the one he presents as saying: "Continue ye in my love."[75]

Christian love is an unlikelihood; it is a commandment whose "sublimity,"[76] at least according to Freud's piercing gaze, masks less than it reveals the "un-psychological character of the cultural super-ego," for which the commandment is "impossible to fulfill." Without entering further into an examination of this imperative—in which Freud also recognizes the "special interest" of pointing out, in sum and without detours, "the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction"—I will simply insert this remark: the impossibility of Christian love could be of the same order as the impossibility of the "resurrection." Their common truth would hold to this impossibility itself, though not in the sense that some miracle, here psychological, there biological, would return the impossible to the possible. Rather, it is a matter of holding oneself [*se tenir*] in the place of the impossible, without making it possible but also without converting its necessity into a speculative or mystical resource. Holding oneself in the place of the impossible comes down to holding oneself to where man is at his limit, that of his violence and his death. At this limit, he collapses or exposes himself and, in one way or another, necessarily loses his bearings. That is why this place can only be a place of vertigo or of scandal, the place of the intolerable at the same time as that of the impossible. This violent paradox is not to be resolved; it remains the place of a gap that is as intimate as it is irreducible: "Don't touch me."

This paradox takes us back once again, in a seemingly more elementary register, to the double meaning of the phrase.

Either it resonates with the threatening tone of an affront: don't touch me; don't even try to touch me, or I'll

strike you. You won't be spared! Don't touch me; you have no idea how much violence I'm capable of. It is a final warning, like a final summons and the final limit at which the law will give way to force, to a force that will be legitimated through the violence of the other or through what one will have designated in advance as its violence, precisely by issuing the warning. In this sense, the interjection or the injunction itself constitutes an incitement to violence. It could be that he who issues it is one who wants violence.

Or else, the phrase resonates less as an order than as a plea made in an excess of pain or pleasure [*jouissance*]. Don't touch me, for I cannot bear this pain on my wounds any longer—or this intense pleasure, aggravated to the point of becoming intolerable. I can no longer suffer it or enjoy [*jouir*] it. But suffering and enjoying necessarily get carried away by a logic—or by a patho-logy far removed from the domain of medicine—of excess at the extreme of which each one ends up crossing the other, while also pushing it ever farther away. It is a point of intersection, not of contradiction (either logically or dialectically), a point of contraction, retraction, and attraction. It is the explosion in which suffering can enjoy and enjoying can suffer. Don't wish it, don't even try to touch this point of rupture, for indeed, I would be shattered by it.

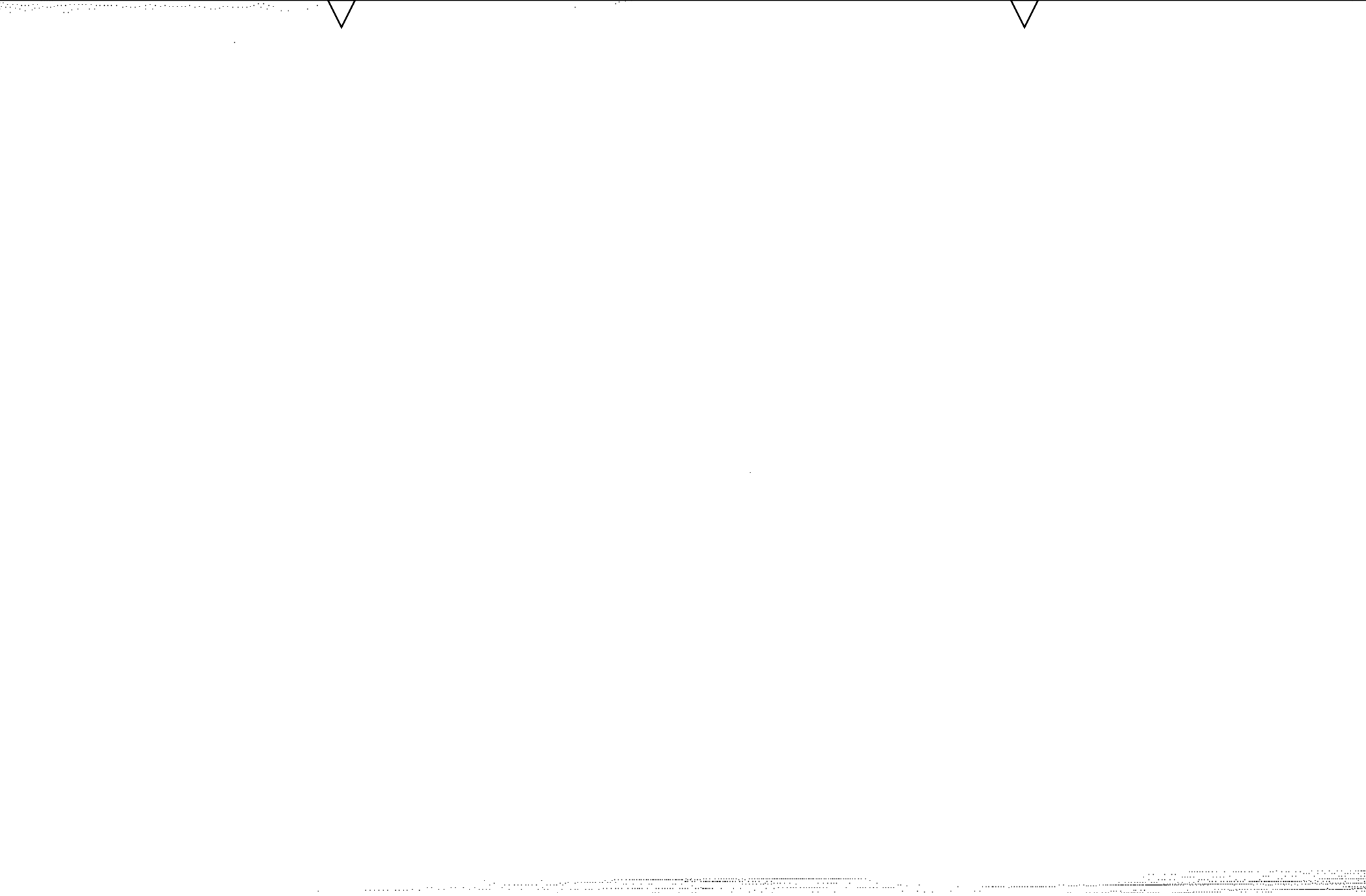
I am not trying to attribute these connotations or these harmonics to the unconscious of John or Jerome. That would be ridiculous. I simply want to point out that they are at work in the readings, the representations, and the solicitations of their text and of the episode to which it gives the substance (even in spite of itself) of a strange scene, wherein a glorified body presents itself and refuses to give itself to a sensate body. Each of the two exposes the truth of the other, one sense brushing against the other. But the two

truths remain irreconcilable, each pushing the other away. Back away! Stand back! Restrain yourself! (Hold me back?) Withdraw!

Such a discord at the very site of the embrace [or the stranglehold, *l'étreinte*] endlessly defines and ruins the truth itself, its suffering and its *jouissance*—the raising of the body.

—Translated by Sarah Clift

Mary, Magdalene



Mary, Magdalene

1

Mary of Magdala: she's the woman with the beautiful hair, with the long, beautiful hair so carefully braided to attract men. She's the one with the beautiful braids undone so as to let men breathe in their fragrance. The name *Magdala* speaks of both hair and water; it speaks of flowing, of libation, of effusion. It also speaks of images and of figures, of portraiture, of the beautiful woman beautifully adorned.

Mary of Magdala, or whatever her real name is, whatever town she is really from, is a sinner, the woman given over to the flesh for pleasures to be purchased by men.

She is not a sinner because she prostitutes herself; it's the other way around: she prostitutes herself because she is a sinner. She is a sinner because she does not know love. She does not know love because she is abandoned. She is abandoned because she is far from God. She is far from God because she is a creature, a part of creation.

Far from God, she is without love and allows herself to be paid in order to procure the simulacrum of love. But among creatures there are nothing but these kinds of simulacra. For love is of God; it comes from God; it is God himself in truth.

But God leaves his creature to its creaturely abandonment, and Mary is the one who knows to what extent she has been deserted. Abandoned by love, Mary is given over to the simulacrum of love. Yet in every simulacrum there is a similarity; there is in the fleeting embrace something that resembles love.

She braids her hair with care, this long hair that was given to her as her adornment; she gives it the curves and entwinement of voluptuous abandon. Her braids are for her like demons, like seven demons that caress the bodies of the men come to have sex with her. She sells them the voluptuousness of a brief shudder in place of a shattering or an overwhelming. But they are still moved by what they take surreptitiously from beneath her dress.

Mary is a sinner; she knows that her caress has no love in it. She knows that her hair is arousing, intoxicating, and without love. She knows that she must not expect anything from either men or herself, nothing other than money, jewelry, and ointments.

When she sees a man, a son of man, who seems to be abandoned like she is, one who does not seek to buy her charms but looks at her gently, she brings out her best perfume and uses it to bathe his feet, which she then dries with her hair. She purifies his feet with the accoutrements of sin. Already she purifies the sin by touching these feet, by touching their humility.

The companions of the son of man grumble about this absurd extravagance. But he tells them that she has loved greatly. She loved him, she bathed and dried his feet. She

sanctified her hair by rubbing it against toes made callous by endless walking.

She loved him, and in loving she ceased to be in sin. It is not by leaving prostitution that she would leave sin behind; for it is a matter of leaving oneself, and that can happen only in love.

But she loved him because she knew that he loved her. She knew it or else she believed it: it makes no difference here. The love that had abandoned her returns to her in her abandonment. For love cannot love unless it can go all the way to where it is lost, to where it got lost.

She knew that he loved her because he asked nothing of her and proposed nothing to her. He didn't propose paying for a little taste of love; he simply loved her. He did not love her out of any feeling of tenderness, compassion, or fervor: he asked for nothing and in asking for nothing he was already making room for her. And already this made for love, this made love without words or movements, with nothing other than a perfume.

2

Mary the sinner was not forgiven as if she had committed some transgression. She was not redeemed or given a new life: she was simply touched there where she sinned, that is to say, at the center, in the soul, in the very place of her abandon. In this place of abandon where sin traversed her, there and nowhere else, grace entered in.

There, in that place, she was touched, and this touch makes her as pure as the other Mary. As pure as the one who has no sin in her, who was not conceived in sin, who was kept apart from the condition of creatures, who was created as a sign of exception so as to point out from within abandon or abandonment the hidden face of abandonment

itself, the face that abandonment never completely abandons.

Mary-Magdalene is pure in the impurity of her flowing hair; she is holy in her sin. She is nothing other than the exposure of sin to grace.

That is why the son of man sends her far away when he himself withdraws toward his father—toward man, therefore, but infinitely withdrawn beyond men. He withdraws and forbids her to touch him, for he no longer offers anything to be touched: he has already gone, it has already come to pass, but she too must leave, in the opposite direction, so as to announce him. He goes away and she goes away, the one like the other set free while living: set free from wanting to be free, set free from wanting to be themselves.

She goes all the way to the desert in Egypt. She lives off scarabs and prickly pears. She grows thin and begins to wither away beneath her head of hair, which is for her a cape and a cover. And yet she remains beautiful, and camel drivers passing by often desire her. She takes them with love, offering them her affections for nothing. She loves their fingers touching her breasts. She remembers the feet of the son of man.

She makes her way up to the coast and sets sail for Alexandria; she wants to go even further away; she wants to leave penitence itself behind. She is still beautiful and pleasing to sailors. She is put ashore on the coast of Provence.

3

There are painters there who desire to paint her because they see her hair and her breasts. They see the cherished little perfume jar she keeps always at her side. And they see especially her eyes lit up with a glimmering they have always sought.

They know that she is the answer to their desire to paint. She answers through the very thing that constitutes the sole object of this desire: the grace of giving oneself up, the grace of abandon.

Magdalene amidst her hair, Magdalene with perfume, Magdalene who touches and caresses: she has been since the beginning made for painting, since the beginning she has been a painting. She was brought into the world in this state: already bending over the feet of the one she is welcoming, her long hair falling to the ground as she leans over, almost prostrate, not praying, no, but pouring the fragrant oil before taking the feet into her hair.

She pours the oil like a high priest presiding over the anointing of a king or a prophet, the unction of a *Messiah,* of an Anointed One—that is, of one who would be marked by the chrism, the oil of benediction and consecration, and who through this anointing is destined to open a door in time, a door of arrival and of departure, the cracking open of a door through which enters a moment of eternity, a moment out of time, outside all foreseeable and ordered time.

Mary out of step with her time and out of her assigned place: the whore officiating over the feet as Melchizedek or Aaron would have officiated over the head. A high priestess with neither temple nor ceremony, whose only breastplate or pectoral was her bust, without any Levitical lineage behind her, without servants and without candlestick.

She alone is the temple and the arch, the harp and the ceremony. She lets her hair down to form a veil, and the scrolls of the law become one with her hips.

She alone stands for the arch and the golden cherubs. And she stands for the people as well: she represents their gaiety and their hope. She gives them a stage, makes them into a living picture: here is the little world of the streets and the taverns, here is the world of petty commerce and

bawdy jokes, here is a two-penny bacchanalia and a mutual offering of bodies. Here are her painted eyes, her mouth so red and her low-cut dress, her slashed sleeves, her bracelets and her high boots, her petticoats and her lace. Here she is: the Magadalena, the Magdalona, the Magdalouna.

Mary-Magdalene, her petticoat all of crinoline/Mary-Magdalona, her petticoat and the songs they sing about her—songs by Piaf and by Dalida, by Brel and by Dassin, and so many others, and even the bawdy ones, and some very old ones like the one that recounts how:

Mary-Magdalene
Travels the lands

Marie-Madeleine
S'en va par les pays

singing:

The earth that carries me
Can no longer carry me there

La terre qui me porte
Ne m'y peut plus porter

The trees that look at me
Now only tremble there

Les arbres qui me regardent
Ne font que d'y trembler

But rather than replace everything—temple and Messiah, prayer and virtue—Magdalene ends up giving it all up. She does not replace anything; she is completely beyond this kind of maneuver. She comes from nowhere and she will go nowhere—nowhere, to the desert of Egypt or else to Baums. She is not on a mission; she is simply passing through. She is passing through places where men sometimes pass by, or, sometimes, where only serpents do. She

welcomes both, the former as well as the latter, the former as the latter.

4

She thus exhibits yet another series of paintings: an open cave, sands strewn with bleached bones, a pervasive thought not of death but of how small man is. Magdalene stands on the edge of the human; she goes alongside it by coming from elsewhere in order to go elsewhere. She does not say where, and that should be of no importance to us.

She comes out of the painting only to return to it again. She develops her image only to be enveloped in it again. A Magdalene is a moment of insolence, of grace, of tears, of abandon.

In this moment—her hands resting on the feet she is drying or else folded over her bosom—she holds together the world and the outside of the world, presence and absence, the violent forgetting of intense pleasure and the shudder at the bottom of the image.

The old song says:

My hands once as white
As a fleur de lys
Are now as black
As axle grease

Mes mains qu'étions aussi blanches
Que de la fleur de lys
Maintenant sont aussi noires
Que du cuir bouilli

Of all the people in the painting, she is the only one there just for herself, absolutely. Not for a son, like the other Mary, not for a father or a lover, but only for herself. Or else for the one who is not her lover but her dear

teacher—"Rabboni!" she says—for love, then, and the love of love, for the absoluteness of love, for the absolute relationship of love to itself.

This absoluteness is nothing other than a complete upheaval. It is what never ceases to overwhelm her, to knock her down, to drop her to her knees at the feet of the son of man, at the foot of his cross, before the empty tomb, at the knees of the gardener, on the sands of Kattera, on the beach of St. Maximin: each time the Magdalene is bowing, kneeling, sometimes prostrate, often meditative; she does not stand on the earth, for that is not her office; she crouches down and curls up; she brings her humility into contact with the earth, with the humus.

But she is humble without being humiliated. She weds her truth, which is precisely to receive her truth from elsewhere, not from her humility. She is received, she receives herself, and she is only in this receiving; on her own she has but the consistency of reception. She is the creature who knows herself to have been created, who knows that she has been thrown onto the earth and for nothing other than the earth itself, for its beauty and its barrenness, its pleasure and its pain.

5

Everything about Mary-Magdalene is contained in her hyphen: grace and sin, pleasure and penitence, holiness and vice, the virgin and the tramp, the tightly plaited hair and the flowing hair, the suckling breast and the voluptuous breast, the birth of the son and service to the son, the intact or the untouched and touch. But the hyphen does not make anything else appear and does not set into motion any dialectical machine. It remains a line of separation, keeping each at a distance from the other. Each is the truth of the

other, Mary of Magdalene, and Magdalene of Mary, but they remain each the other, gazing at one another, worried by one another at the same time as they bring comfort to one another. Mary-Magdalene is neither one nor the other; she withdraws beneath her hyphen, overwhelmed by being exposed in this way.

Mary—dash—Magdalene. Mary separated from Magdalene by a hyphen or a dash. Mary drawn or withdrawn from Magdalene. And Magdalene from Mary. The Magdalan, the Mary who comes from Magdala. Magdala was a town; its name might be related to a tower, the tower of the Fish or tower of the Dyers, depending on the source. In any case, a tower over water. Or else the name of this Mary has another etymology having to do with headdresses and hair. She would be the woman with beautiful braids, or the one who makes beautiful braids, a hairdresser for festival days. Water or hair, in either case it is a question of elemental waves, of a depth that comes to the surface and forms undulations; it is a question of an emergence, a floating, a pooling or a bathing.

It is a question of Mary, Myriam, Meriam, MRAM, the feminine tetragram floating on fragrant waters. The Magdalan makes woman float: between grace and sin, creator and creature, she makes the dash float, this unifying dash that thus disunites.

Like an unstable gangway between the *nihil* and the *something,* between the abyss and existence, this woman (perhaps woman *herself?* but stretched into two, her unity withdrawn in the between-two) introduces the irruption of something in the midst of nothingness and, reciprocally, the eternal return of the nothing in every thing.

The same line or dash traces something in nothing and nothing in something: that is the line, the trait, the traction,

of Mary-Magdalene. It is the attraction of Mary for Magdalene and of Magdalene toward Mary. Each draws the other to herself, each attracts the other in turn, from one side and the other of the same threshold—never truly abolished.

The old song concludes:

Mary-Magdalene
Off you go to Heaven soon
The door's been opened
Since yesterday noon

Marie-Madeleine
Allez au Paradis
La porte en est ouverte
D'puis hier à midi

—Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas

In Heaven and on Earth

Publisher's Note

From 1929 to 1932 Walter Benjamin wrote for German radio a series of programs aimed at children. In the form of stories, discussions, and short presentations, these programs were later gathered together under the title "Enlightening Children."

Montreuil's Center for the Dramatic Arts and its director, Gilberte Tsaï, have decided to adopt this title for the "Little Dialogues" series they organize each season for children age ten and up and those who accompany them. The aim here is simply to enlighten or awaken. Ulysses, the starry night, the gods, words, images, war, Galileo . . . there are any number of possible topics, but one indispensable rule: the speaker must do his or her best to address children, avoiding the most conventional paths, in a spirit of friendship that crosses generations.

Because the experiment was so successful, it was only natural to want to transform these oral improvisations into little books. Such is the motivation behind this collection.

—Éditions Bayard

Author's Note

The following text is a transcription by Delphine Deveaux of a talk given in Montreuil's Center for the Dramatic Arts as part of a series entitled "Little Dialogues." Organized by Gilberte Tsaï, the Director of the Center, the series was designed to address children. (Several other talks in this series have been published in the same series.) The transcription was done with care and precision, and I would like to express here my gratitude for this work. It is nonetheless the case that a transcription can never capture the rhythm or the tones, to say nothing of the whole pragmatic context, of a talk, which themselves always convey a great deal of information. As we well know, "communication" is inseparable from its event. This is all the more true for a talk addressed to children and for the exchanges that follow. The children, both girls and boys, were all between six and twelve years of age. They were extremely attentive during my entire talk and, as you will see, they were not without

questions at the end. What this encounter might have meant to them, I cannot say. All I know is that it was for me a risky endeavor. That is why it is not without trepidation that I am allowing this transcription to be published. It should thus only be read, it seems to me, in an attempt to hear something of its actual "articulation." This was also the result of difficulties inherent in the theme I had chosen. I had selected it because of certain philosophical interests I have tried to develop in the course of a work I have elsewhere called a "deconstruction of Christianity." But since it was out of the question to introduce this theme or this concept as such, it was necessary for me to proceed without offending the religious convictions of the children but also without giving in to any simplification (it being the case that for me "atheism" and "theism" are but two symmetrical and connected postulations, both based in the same metaphysical presuppositions with regard to being). A transposition into writing of something that was not at all a text and that was the result of a very particular form of address risks at each step erasing both the difficulties encountered and the precautions taken. I can do nothing but warn the reader of this here at the outset.

—Jean-Luc Nancy

In Heaven and on Earth

Yes, I am going to speak to you about god, but first I am going to speak to you about heaven [*ciel*]. You know why, of course. If god exists, he is in heaven.

The word *ciel* is a rather odd word in the French language because it has two plurals, which some of you children may know. There is the plural *cieux,* which you probably know, and then another plural, *ciels,* which many of you probably don't know because it is used only in reference to painting. One speaks of the *ciels,* of the skies, of a painter, the *ciels* of Vermeer, for example.

Cieux is an exclusively religious word. One says "*dans les cieux*"—that is, "in the heavens" or "in heaven." It is a word familiar to those in the Christian tradition or with a Christian background. One says, for example, "Hosanna in the highest heaven [*des cieux*]." *Hosanna* is a Hebrew word that comes from the religious vocabulary of Judaism.

The plural *cieux,* which, again, has its origin in an exclusively religious vocabulary, has to do with the fact that, in antiquity, it was thought that there were many *cieux,* many heavens. It was thought that the *ciel* was a sphere, that what we see as the *ciel* was a sphere surrounding the earth, and that there was a set of concentric spheres one inside the other.

There are different versions of this belief, but according to the best known there were seven heavens—the number seven having always had a sacred value—with the seventh heaven being the highest. Sometimes still today when we want to say that we are absolutely delighted or ecstatic we speak of being in "seventh heaven."

There are thus many heavens [*cieux*], as if to indicate the extreme or utmost nature of the highest heaven, the highest heavenly region. And this plural exists in French because the French comes from Latin, which comes from the Greek, which comes from the Hebrew of the Bible. The same plural also exists in the Arabic of the Koran.

As for the other *ciels,* those of painting, this refers to the way in which a painter represents the *ciel,* that is, the sky. But why is there a plural unique to painting? No doubt because the *ciel* is a dimension or a particular element of our vision, of our perception of the world, and of our way of being in the world.

There is the earth, there is what we see on the horizon, and then there is what is above. The sky [*ciel*] appears far away, at a distance, elevated, transparent, translucid, almost immaterial. We might say that the sky is on the side of the open. It is the dimension of opening. When we look at the earth before us, on the other hand, everything is always closed, everything stops at a certain distance. We will come back later to what is involved in this dimension of the *ciel,*

to the place of the *ciel* in our experience, and in relation to the role it plays in religious traditions.

But for now, let's ask about what's in heaven [*le ciel*]. Already I am speaking the language of religion, or at least of the three great so-called monotheistic religions, that is, those religions with a single god, the three great religions that predominate in the West. Later on I will say just a word or two about those religions that are not monotheistic.

"In heaven" [*"au ciel"*] is also a phrase that belongs to religious language. It is often said in religion that those who have died or the souls of those who have died are "in heaven." It is also sometimes said that angels are "in heaven." I won't be speaking to you today about angels, however, or about the souls of the dead, though we can discuss this later if you want. Finally, it is also said that god is "in heaven."

So let's just note this: "in heaven" [*"au ciel"*] has to do with god, with the realm of god, with what is divine. Indeed the divine is the heavenly, the celestial [*céleste*]. The adjective *céleste*—heavenly—is also a word that is more or less restricted to a religious vocabulary, though it also sometimes appears in a certain poetic language. *Céleste* is also a first name, a girl's name, with the diminutive *Célestine* and the masculine *Célestin.* Perhaps there are some Célestes, Célestines, or Célestins here in the audience, though I myself have yet to meet anyone with this name.

The heavenly is the dimension of the divine, the divine as what is elevated, lifted up above the earth, and also, as a result, so elevated and so immaterial that it is infinitely distant. Finally, heaven [*le ciel*], like the seventh heaven of antiquity or the seventh heaven in the Koran, is always the highest, the most elevated. It is the place of the one who is called in the Bible "the Most High," the one who is absolutely high.

Now, this is not unique to the three great Western monotheisms. There are many religions in which god or the gods bear the name of height. To give just one example: the main god of the Iroquois Indians, at least in their traditional culture, is called or used to be called "Oki," which means "the one on high." There are many other religions like this, in many other cultures. I know I have probably not yet said anything that surprises you. Heaven [*le ciel*] is divine and, reciprocally, the divine, which has to do with god, is celestial.

Today, in the twenty-first century, what is up there in the sky, in the heavens [*le ciel*]? We all know quite well what's up there. There is a whole bunch of things that are not at all gods. There are clouds, airplanes, and, further away, satellites and spacecraft; there are all the other planets of the solar system; there are all the other systems beyond our solar system, and then a very large number of other systems called galaxies. It's hard to get an idea of the magnitude here, but I know that with a telescope—you may have heard of the Hubble telescope, which is currently in orbit and was just recently repaired with considerable effort—one can observe what is very very far away, I don't know exactly how far, but it's at an enormous distance. You know that we measure these things in light years, that is, the distance that light, or a photon of light, which travels at 186,000 miles per second, can travel in a year.

As far as we can see, there are things, but there is no god; no telescope has ever seen god. You will, of course, say that this is to be expected because you all have some sense, whether you are believers or not, whether you come from a religious family or not, that god is not visible. So it's perfectly to be expected that we don't see him. But that also means that heaven [*le ciel*], in the religious sense of the term, is not the heavens [*le ciel*] above, what we see with

our eyes or through a telescope. You know that some time back we sent to Mars a little space probe, which could be seen trekking across the surface of the planet. Someday soon we may be able to send something even further away. It's thus not the same *ciel.*

When religions speak of heaven [*le ciel*] and of the height of the heavenly [*céleste*], of the Most High, they are not speaking of what is up above. In fact, our sky or our heavens [*le ciel*] are not above, either, because they are also below. All you have to do is dig through to the other side of the earth to see the heavens above the Australians, who are below us, as you know, because they are in the southern hemisphere, in the land "down under," as we say.

So the heaven [*le ciel*] of religions means something else, *le ciel,* or *les cieux,* the celestial, the most high. It means a place very different from the world as a whole. In this sense, we have to say that the sky or heavens [*le ciel*] of airplanes, spacecraft, and galaxies, the heavens of the astronomers, are a part of the world. They are part of the world, part of what is called, as you know, the universe.

This religious idea of heaven [*le ciel*] refers not to something in the world, something higher than everything else, nor to another world, a world that would be above the world, because that would just be the same thing. It designates, we might say, a place different from the world as a whole. But a place different from the world as a whole means a place that is different from all places. That, then, means a place that is not a place. Playing a bit with the French word *endroit,* which, as a noun, means *place,* and, as an adverb, *on the right side,* I would say that it's a place that is not a place, not even a faraway place, but not an *envers* or flipside either. It is not a place in the world, but it's also not as if we were going to the other side of the world, as if we were looking at another side or face of the

world. As if this other side or face were god, as if the face of god were on the backside of the world, like the backside or hidden face of the moon.

You know, perhaps, that we always see the same side or face of the moon because of the way it turns around the earth and the way the earth turns on itself. Only spacecraft circling the moon have been able to photograph the other side. But it's still another side, whereas in the case of the world, the world in its totality, the universe in its complete totality, assuming we could get to the end of it in every direction, there is no other side, by definition. Since space ends at that point . . . there are no other spaces, places, or locations. There is no place outside the world.

So, when we say heaven [*le ciel*], or the divine as what is in heaven, we are talking about something that would be nowhere, in no place, and at the same time, as a result, everywhere. Something, assuming we can say "something," or "someone," who would be nowhere and everywhere.

And since being nowhere and everywhere means, strictly speaking, nothing when we are talking about the things of the world, this means that the heavenly or the divine designates something that is nothing. We really don't have any other way of saying this. Something that is not a thing, neither a thing nor a person, in the sense that a person is a thing. For a person is there just as much as this glass is. So we are talking about something with another manner or way of being than the being of all things and all persons.

To give you an analogy, it's a bit like air, which is more or less everywhere and nowhere, though this isn't completely true because there are places where there is no air, where matter is so dense that a molecule of air cannot penetrate. But if you find the analogy at all helpful, you can use it, so long as you remember that air itself is nonetheless something.

This something or someone that would not be outside the world, because there is no outside of the world, but that would be something other than the world as a whole, other than all things, is nowhere, neither within nor elsewhere, and it is at the same time present everywhere but in a very particular mode of presence—and that's what religions call god, or the gods.

What can we say about god or the gods if we don't start with religion, if we don't place ourselves in a religion that says "god goes by this name and has these characteristics"? For instance, some say that god goes by a name that one is not allowed to pronounce. This is the Jewish god: four letters that must not be pronounced. Or else he is simply called god—we will return to this—and that's the Christian god, along with the question of Jesus Christ, which we can also return to later. Or else god is called Allah, the god of Islam. Or else he goes by many different names in all those religions where there are many gods, in what are called polytheistic religions. In these cases, the gods have proper names. For example, in the Shinto religion of Japan there are millions of gods. The way in which god or the divine is everywhere can be seen there in the way gods are everywhere, on every corner and in every place. In the streets of Japan you see statues of gods or of divine beings more or less everywhere.

But I'm not going to get into this difference between polytheistic religions, those religions with many gods, and monotheistic ones, religions with a single god, because this would be much too long and complicated. For our purposes we can assume that god or the gods play the same role or have the same function more or less everywhere, at least up to a certain point, and that we can try to think what this means in the same way.

From here on, I'm going to stay within the framework of our Western, Mediterranean, European culture, and thus within the framework of the three religions with a single god, within the three monotheisms, and these are the Jewish religion, the Christian religion, and Islam. And I am going to ignore all the internal differences, the internal divisions, within each of these religions.

Common to this group of religions is the notion that there is only one god. And in each of these religions god is called "god." Notice here that *god* is a rather peculiar name: *god* is a common name—"a god," or "the gods" in polytheistic religions with many gods, for example, in the Greek and Roman religions of Western antiquity. One thus spoke of "the gods," but no god was called "god." Zeus, for example, was a god, and, even before Greece, the Egyptian Osiris was a god and Isis a goddess. But none of these gods was called "god."

When we use the name *god* as the name of the one god, we are doing something rather unique, since we are saying that there is a divine, heavenly being who goes by the name of all divine beings. It is as if we were to say that the name of a "poplar" tree is simply *tree.* As a result, the name *god* perhaps does not name someone, it is not the proper name of someone, but names the divine as such, the divine as a unity or single thing, as if it were a person. And this is the case, let me say in passing, of *dieu* in the French language, as well as for all European languages, and it is also the case for *Allah,* which is the name of the god of Islam. But *Allah* is a transformation of a very old common name or noun of Semitic origin, namely, the word *el,* meaning "god." This language is the origin of a group of common languages that then gave rise both to Hebrew and to Arabic and other languages. Already in very ancient civilizations, then, there was

a supreme god who was called precisely *el,* "god," and *Allah* is a transformation of *el.*

But now we come to the key question: Does god exist? I hope you have already understood that this question is perhaps not the right one. Asking whether god exists in this way would be a bit like asking whether Célestin Dupont exists. Is there someone named Célestin Dupont? I could look on the Internet, I could look at all existing names, and I either will or will not find a Célestin Dupont. But to ask whether god exists is to ask the question of whether there is, somewhere, a someone or a something that would answer to the name of god.

When religion says that god exists, it perhaps never says exactly that. But let's say that the religious answer more or less comes down to affirming: "Yes, god exists." If that is the case, let me assure you that among all religious people, and not simply among theologians, that is, scholars who study various aspects of religion, but among priests, imams, or rabbis, those who are not necessarily scholars but who are concerned with what religion represents and with the relationship between religion and the people of a particular religious community, there are very few people today who would say: "Yes, god exists, and he is in fact right up there, in the seventh heaven, all you have to do is go up there and you will see him. He has a face with a long beard . . ." A Muslim especially will not say that. It is perhaps in Islam that there is the most acute sense that god looks like nothing, absolutely nothing. This is repeated throughout the Koran.

More generally, what religion says in this form can be understood, I think, even outside religion. I myself, for example, am speaking to you completely outside any religion. We can thus understand these things in a different way. Finally, in speaking of god, we are speaking of this name that

is like a proper name and yet is not a proper name since it does not name someone who would be somewhere, someone who would have certain characteristics proper to him or her, like those of Célestin Dupont. But god names the possibility that there exists for us collectively, as well as for each of us singularly and individually, a relationship with this nowhere and everywhere. In other words, god, or the divine, or the celestial, would name the fact that I am in relation not with something but with the fact that I am not limited to all those relations I have with all the things of the world, or even with all the beings of the world. It suggests that there is something else, which I will here call "the opening," something that makes me be, that makes us be as humans open to something more than being in the world, more than being able to take things up, manipulate them, eat them, get around in the world, send space probes to Mars, look at galaxies through telescopes, and so on. It suggests that there is all this but also something else.

What is this something else? We have some idea of this other thing, and perhaps more than an idea, a feeling, through the fact, for example, that we know what it is to feel great joy or great sadness, what it is to feel love or, I won't say hate, but at least a feeling that is very far from love. When I have such feelings or moods I sense that there is something immense, infinite, which I cannot simply locate somewhere. For when I feel joy or sadness, love or hatred, force or weakness, there is in all this something that infinitely exceeds what I am, my person, my personality, my means, my location, my way of being someone in a particular place in the world. In all this there is some kind of opening. Now, the god of the three monotheistic religions, and all the other gods as well, god himself, represents nothing other than this.

To take the three monotheistic religions in their historical order, what is the Jewish god? We might say that the Jewish god is the Father, but perhaps that's not the best image. The Jewish god is essentially the Just One. He is Justice, the Judge, not in the sense of the one who brings justice but as the one who appreciates the just or right measure of each and every one. In the Bible, he is the god who "trieth the hearts and minds" (Psalm 7:9). But that does not mean he's a super-cop who looks into and knows what is deep within your heart. It means that each one, with his own heart, that is, with what each is most profoundly, most personally, has a measure, an absolute measure in himself and for himself of justice. I am myself, and each is him or herself; and this way of being absolutely oneself, of having for oneself a unique and singular measure, one that distinguishes each absolutely from all others, but that can only be put into action in one's relationship with all the others, that is what is meant by the justice of god.

The Christian god is Love. This is a phrase from what is called the New Testament: "god is Love." It means that god is not someone but is, instead, love. "Love" is a unique relationship between someone and someone else, a relation that goes far beyond everything else. It is not a relationship of pleasure, of getting along, of liking one another—"I like you, you like me." It is the fact of recognizing in the other what is absolutely unique about them. This is actually the way parents love their children. They don't love them because they are beautiful, kind, charming, and so on, since when they come into the world they are not yet any of these things.

The god of Islam is the god who is called the Merciful at the beginning of each chapter—or *sourate*—of the Koran. The Merciful is the one who acknowledges in each man his

shortcomings and frailties, and who gives him the possibility of standing tall and worthy despite his shortcomings and frailties.

The Just, Love, the Merciful—that is in the end what heaven is, or the celestial in the sense of the divine. This brings us back to the image of the sky or the heavens, that is, to the fact that, above the earth, there opens a dimension that is no longer even a dimension but the opening, wide open and bottomless. There is nothing to see at the bottom of those heavens, just as there is nothing for our physical eyes to see at the bottom or end of the sky. It's not a question of sending space probes or of looking through telescopes. There is nothing to see at the bottom of this sky or this heaven [*ciel*]. But what has to be seen, or known, or understood, or felt is that there is this dimension of opening. At this point, at least for the moment, it matters little whether one is a believer or a nonbeliever. It matters little whether one belongs to one religion or religious community rather than another, or to none at all. Of course, this does become important later on, and there is much to say about it. But at the point we are at right now, I would say that this doesn't matter. What matters instead is understanding that what is at stake here is the impossibility of closing this opening. That is, the impossibility of being a human being as one might be a stone, a tree, or perhaps also an animal. I say "perhaps" in order to simplify things, because there are some people who would be unhappy to hear me make such a sharp distinction between human beings and everything else. To be a human being is to be open to infinitely more than simply being a human being.

You are probably going to say to me: "This is a very general idea, and I understand what you are saying here. One can call this idea Love, Justice, Mercy, or the opening." According to Pascal, who was a thinker, philosopher, religious

figure, and very learned man of the seventeenth century, "man goes infinitely beyond man." You are going to tell me that these are all just ideas. Why call any of them god? Why have religions used this word *god?* Why even outside of religion is it not so easy to do without naming god in one way or another? Because it is not enough to use abstract names like Love, Joy, Mercy, or Justice in order to name this dimension of opening and of going beyond. It is necessary to be able to address oneself to or to relate to this dimension. Why address oneself to this dimension or establish a connection with it? In order to be faithful to it.

What does it mean to be oneself as much as possible, and thus to be as much a human being as possible? It means nothing other than being faithful to this opening or to this infinite going beyond of the human by the human. It means being faithful to the sky or the heavens, in the sense I've spoken of. This fidelity might look like a fidelity to someone, just as infidelity is usually understood as an infidelity to someone. The religious name of this fidelity is "faith" or *foi,* from the Latin *fides;* this same word and this same notion of fidelity can also be found in the word *confidence.*

Faith is the relationship of fidelity. As a result, as a relation of fidelity to . . . , faith takes the shape of a fidelity to someone, someone who is not of this world, and who as a result is not some person outside the world either, but who is to be understood, as I just said, in terms of this relationship of fidelity. This faith, fidelity, or confidence has, in a certain sense, nothing to do with what is called belief.

In religion, there is belief. When one believes, one says that god does this or that. In Christian belief, for example, which is probably the one most of you know best, it is said that god has a son, Jesus Christ, who was incarnated and who died on the cross to save mankind. And then there is a

third person called the Holy Spirit . . . There are so many things that could be said about this. But all that is the content of belief, that is, the way things are presented in a particular religion, the way one explains the reality of god. But belief can always lead to thinking that things are like this.

One imagines a father and a son. How is the father able to have a son when the father is a god and the son is a man? The Christian religion here speaks of a mystery. Islam, on the other hand, says that this simply cannot be, that it runs absolutely contrary to the nature of god, that it is impossible for god to be in many persons, that he is absolutely one, that it is impossible for god to have a human son, and so on.

This huge opposition is in the end an opposition only in the way of presenting things. It has to do with belief. And belief has to do with a way of presenting things. I believe that right now it is nice outside, for example. It's a supposition; I would have to go outside to know whether it's true. If, on the contrary, I say, "I don't know what it's like outside, but I am faithful to the idea that it's nice out. [This is of course absurd!] And so I am going to go out in short sleeves and I won't take a raincoat or an umbrella." Yes, I would be taking a big risk, and that would be rather silly. But that's fidelity. Fidelity does not consist in believing, and thus in supposing, in accordance with what we know, that things will be in conformity with what we believe. Fidelity means not at all knowing about this. When one is faithful to someone, one does not know in the end about this person at all, nor about what he or she will become later on in life. But if one is faithful to him or her, one is faithful without knowing.

Let me stop here. One can say at least that in the name of god and in the name of god as the celestial or the heavenly there is at least the indication of the possibility, perhaps the necessity, of being faithful without any knowledge

or even any quasi-knowledge, and thus any belief, of being faithful to what I called the opening, without which we would perhaps not even be human beings, but simply things among other things within a world closed upon itself.

—Montreuil, May 4, 2002

Questions and Answers

Q: You said that in the Jewish religion god is just. But if god is just, why are there children born with handicaps or things like that?

J-LN: Well, you're right. You are asking one of the most important questions in relationship to god, a question that has often been asked since the beginning of modern times. It's a question that has often appeared since the eighteenth century, though it was also raised before that.

Why is there evil? In the three great monotheisms there is a single, common answer. In religious terms, it is said that if god creates man, it is in order to create a free being, one that is left to be or to become what he is. And so if god guaranteed human beings in advance all the conditions of a perfect existence, one that required no questions, then we would obviously not be free.

You are among those who were born handicapped. Two things might be said here. It is possible that certain people seem to be more unjustly treated than others by god or by nature. But this goes hand in hand with the fact that men have been able to invent all sorts of solutions to problems of handicaps and diseases, even if we are very far from solving all these problems. But man is also the one who can allow a handicapped person to realize himself as a person, whether this be by medical means, technical means, or some other.

Justice, in the sense of divine justice, justice for the whole world, does not mean that everything is evenly distributed and that nothing else needs to be done. That would be to imagine the creation of the world as a sort of Lego game where there is nothing left to do.

Q: Where does the sky, or where do the heavens, begin?

J-LN: I heard just a little while ago an extraordinary phrase from an astronomer who was here earlier.[1] He said that someone had told him that "The heavens [*le ciel*] begin right at ground level." This wonderful statement suggests that the sky begins right on the ground. I'm speaking in an imagistic and symbolic way. It means that where the earth ends, the sky or the heavens begin, that is, the dimension of opening begins. At the same time, wherever there is ground, however close to the earth we may be, there is sky.

This question might suggest something else, precisely in relation to painting and to the skies we spoke of earlier in painting. Try to look at the way the great landscape painters, like the Flemish painter Jacob Ruisdael or the English painter John Constable, worked with landscapes. You will see there precisely this relationship between a big sky, often

full of clouds, and the earth. It is as if the whole painting were done simply to show this opening of the two, and thus the line that runs between them and keeps them apart [*qui les partage*].

Q: When you were speaking earlier about the god of the Jews, why is one not allowed to pronounce his name?

J-LN: Because that's the Jewish way of saying things. The Jewish god is the first in the history of monotheisms. All monotheisms in fact have a common source; they all come, according to the account in the Bible, from Abraham; they are all Abrahamic religions. And each subsequent religion recognizes the others as its ancestors. As for the last one, Islam, the Koran speaks of Jesus Christ, of Moses, and of Abraham.

The Jewish god is the first who is presented as singular, as unique. First of all, he is not exactly claimed to be the one and only god for all men, but the one god of the Jews of Israel, the god of Israel.

Like the gods of other religions, then, he has a name, but his particularity resides in the fact that his name, since it is the name of the Most High, is a sacred name, a name different from all other names, and thus it is not to be pronounced.

In the Bible he sometimes goes by the name that we pronounce "Yahweh." It is made up of four letters in Hebrew, and when it is pronounced with the vowels it makes "Yahweh." But there are other places in the Bible where he is called, as I mentioned earlier, *el,* or in the plural *eloïm,* but it's the same thing.

One might say that this is the first step toward the disappearance of the proper name of god, and the replacement

of the proper name by a common name, which then itself becomes a proper name.

Q: Why and how does god exist?

J-LN: Oh boy.
(Laughter.)

You're making some people laugh. I said earlier that the question of the existence of god cannot be asked. It's such a hard question.

There are two aspects to your question. First, as I was saying earlier, god does not exist as some thing or some person. So far so good? Thus even if I say that god is nowhere, he is at the same time everywhere. If I say, as Christians do, that "god is Love," then love is at the same time nowhere and everywhere. You no doubt love certain people; you understand quite well that love is not a thing that can be located somewhere. Sure, you can send a card with a heart on it, but this is just a sign of love, not love itself. And so, in this sense, god does not exist.

And when you ask why or how god exists, then you have already begun to think of a person, a very powerful person who created the world—and this is something I haven't spoken about at all yet. Isn't that what you are thinking of? Now if one imagines god as someone who created the world, and if one understands creating the world to mean making it, then it's a little like imagining god to be like the person who made, well, this bottle. In fact this is a good example. Who made this bottle? A machine, a set of machines, no doubt, along with people in a factory. Probably few people and many machines. If I imagine that god created the world in this way, then this means that god is an enormous machine, with a very small brain somewhere,

perhaps, but especially a very powerful machine able to make this huge thing in which we find ourselves. But that's going to pose all kinds of problems. Because we would then immediately have to ask who made the machine. It's for that reason that in the three monotheisms the question of creation is one of the most fascinating, the question of creation out of nothing. We usually use a Latin expression for this, creation *ex nihilo,* which means creation from nothing. That does not mean that god is a huge machine that makes a world with nothing as material. It means precisely that there is nothing there behind it all. It means: the world is there. When the world is there, there is thus either god, or the question of god, or what I tried to speak of earlier, the possibility of religion. But in everything I've said to you, it was never a question of the creation of the world.

What is interesting is that in other religions, in polytheistic religions, there is no creation from nothing; there is always something there. It might be called chaos, primary matter, or, for example, the great originary cow whose flowing milk makes the world. The cow and her milk, that's the first state of the world. This representation of god as maker of the world, of god as machine that fashions the world, was no doubt necessary, inevitable, so long as we did not have the knowledge of the world that we have today. That is why god was not. Because if he had been, if he had begun to exist, what would there have been before him?

Q: You were talking about the name of the Jewish god. How can people know how he is called when no one can tell them his name?

J-LN: That brings us right into the thick of religion. In the religious narrative of the Bible, god said his name to Moses. He told him, all the while telling him that one must not

pronounce his name. That means that god alone reveals himself, that he is the only one able to reveal himself, to be able to say a name that at the same time is unspeakable.

Q: From where do we get the idea of believing in god? Because if god in the beginning created the world from nothing, who created him?

J-LN: I was trying to address that just a moment ago, but we would really have to have another talk just on creation.

Believing in god is something that is a part of all civilizations, all human societies, except our own modern or contemporary society, which no longer believes at all in god, or at least not in the same way. There are, of course, exceptions, people who are completely within a particular religion, who take up all its terms, who speak, for example, of the world being created by god. But today even someone who represents things to him or herself in this way understands, or at least should understand, that creation, or what is called creation, has absolutely nothing in common with the making of some thing. Do you understand that? It's not as if creation were just a bigger and more powerful making. If it were, it would mean that we were imagining god as a someone with great means at his disposal. The creation of the world is a way of saying that the world is there. There is nothing to look for before, because there is no before. There is nothing to look for outside, because there is no outside. Yet there is still the inside to be asked about. What is happening inside? What is happening is precisely that it opens, that it opens up, that it opens infinitely to something other than the things of the world.

This is very difficult, I grant you. But that is what a creator god means in the end. This creator is not something that can take the place of what physicists have analyzed as

the first moments of the world. You've probably heard people speak of the big bang, or of what some physicists even call the first void of the world, which is never completely a void. None of this prevents there being something given at the beginning of the world. If it is given, you can always say to me that it is given by someone. It is indeed given. But the giving of this donation, of this particular gift, has nothing to do with an operation that would have taken place at an earlier time by another being from another world, because then all we are doing is pushing things back in an infinite regress.

Nothing: what is that exactly if it is nothing? I wish I had with me here an enormous book I received a couple of months ago from a German colleague in philosophy, a huge, five-hundred-page book called *Nothing, Nichts* in German. Your question is really right on. Let me try to say this. Nothing is the something of that which is no thing. Hence it is not something. And yet it's not nothing. It's the fact that there is something. For example, I can say to you that that glass there is something. If I take the glass away, there is no longer anything. For the glass to be there, there also needs to be nothing, otherwise I cannot place the glass there. If there is a bottle there, I cannot put the glass in the same place. If there had been something in the place of the world, the world could not have been placed there. Hence there is, precisely, the nothing. And the world comes in this nothing.

There is a very beautiful story in religion, in what is called a mystical form of the Jewish religion known as Kabbalah. It says that god created the world not at all by making something but by withdrawing, by breathing himself in, by emptying himself. By hollowing himself out, god opens the void in which the world can take its place. This is called the *tsim-tsum* in the Kabbalah.

I cannot even really say that the world comes out of nothing, that the world is in nothing. Nothing is everywhere. It's the fact that you can be here, that I am here, that the glass is here, that the world is here, and so on. Nothing is the fact that there is something in general, all of us. This fact, the fact that there is the world, has no rhyme or reason. But what's the point, one might then ask? God is perhaps always a way of answering: there is no point, no rhyme or reason, and that's why it is good. It is open, it is available. Available for any number of things, but at the same time for nothing.

Sometimes what we do best is nothing, doing nothing, letting things be. Now I am not telling you to do nothing. I'm not saying that the best thing to do in school is to do nothing—god forbid! Nor am I saying that when there are elections the best thing to do is to do nothing. But, more deeply, when one really thinks about one's life, about what one does . . .

A little while ago, when I spoke to you about joy or love, even about justice in the sense I tried to describe, what is all that about? It is really nothing. What do people who love each other do? Nothing, nothing but love each other. That doesn't mean that we must do nothing.

Q: Will we ever be sure one day that god exists or doesn't exist?

J-LN: No, never, because that is not the question. I can see that this is a very difficult question because it keeps on coming back.

If god exists in the way religions say, then this would be precisely the only existence of which we cannot be sure, about which it is not at all a question of being sure, not at all a question of knowing. It is simply a matter of being

faithful. Let me return one more time to the example of love, or justice, or mercy. To be just, or to be not exactly in love but loving, to be in friendship. When we have friends, we are often operating in the realm of knowledge. We say: "I know that this friend has done this or that, and so I don't like him any more, he is no longer my friend." This is normal, and I'm not saying that there are not sometimes reasons for saying this. But nevertheless one also sometimes says: "If you are my friend, you are going to get over this, you are going to forgive me for this, you are going to understand this." In such cases it is not at all a question of proving the existence of something or other.

That is why, from this point of view, it can truly be said, and we would be in agreement with many people, with the greatest thinkers in all the great religions, that to claim that god exists or that he does not exist really comes down to the same thing. When one says that he does not exist, one is saying that he does not exist like someone or something that would be comparable to everything else that exists, but simply in a greater, more powerful and higher way. And when one says that he exists, one is saying more or less the same thing; one is saying that he exists differently from everything else that exists. One is saying that his presence, his existence, is a reality with which we have a relation that has nothing to do with any of the other relations we have with things in the world.

Q: Why are there people in some religions who believe in many gods?

J-LN: I went by this pretty quickly, so you're right to want to come back to it.

First, I would say that this shows that god can take on many different forms or faces. This does not mean that god

is a being capable of metamorphosing himself, of transforming himself and taking on all kinds of guises or disguises. It means, rather, that one can relate to the principle of the divine, to what is absolutely different from the things of the world, through a plurality of gods. It is at this point that they become persons, or quasi-persons, each with a distinct name and each identified with a particular function. One calls on each god in a particular circumstance; for example, there is a god whom one calls on for births, another when there is a death, another so that the harvest is good, another so that a voyage is successful, and so on. These are gods from whom one asks something. In this asking there is always an appeal to what is completely other.

There is, of course, a great difference between religions with many gods and religions with just a single god. Everything I have said has been from the perspective of monotheism, that is, of religions with a single god. But, on a deeper level, there is something in common. We should also speak here of a very important form of thought that I don't quite know how to address. I am speaking of Buddhism, which is not a religion with a relationship to gods or to the divine, but which can nonetheless be presented as a form of thought or of spirituality absolutely without god. But it would take too long to develop this in any detail.

Q: How was god able to open the void for the earth when he was already in the void?

J-LN: Precisely, he couldn't. He didn't do anything.

That's what I was talking about earlier with the *tsim-tsum*. At that moment, god did not open the void to the earth; rather, god is the void that is opening up. This will always be a rather poor way of putting it. You could ask me how it is that the void is able to open up. If I myself want

to open up . . . But one cannot treat this as if it were the action of some person. You say: "How was he able?" but one might just as well say that it is a question of a sort of nonability or powerlessness.

Q: And what about the underworld [*les enfers*], and everything that happens after one is dead?

J-LN: Yes, the underworld. You are right to ask about that.

It's interesting that you put this term in the plural, because *les enfers* is an expression from antiquity and, before that, from Greek, Roman, and Egyptian religions. It has to do with the idea of justice, an idea of justice translated into human terms, that is, the idea of a justice that rewards and punishes. And so it's the idea that god, as judge, says: "You've done wrong, you are condemned to this punishment." Or else the opposite: "You have done nothing wrong and you are not condemned." It is a way of imagining or representing things.

It is in fact rather remarkable just how large a role this representation has played in certain religions, and especially in certain forms of the Christian religion, even though it plays a much less important role in contemporary Christian religion. But while this representation of hell and of the devil has much less currency today, it still has meaning. It's just that it does not have to do with saying, "After death you will be punished or rewarded for what you have done in life," but rather, "Are you able during your lifetime to be faithful to what I tried to explain earlier, that is, are you able to remain faithful to something that infinitely exceeds you?" This is hard. And it's just as hard for me as it is for you and for everyone else. Hell means that if you are unable to do this, you are condemned. It means that you condemn yourself. You condemn yourself not to burning in hell

among a bunch of demons that torture you but, rather, you condemn yourself to shriveling up and withering away as you are, in your life, right now.

Q: When you believe in one religion, why can't you believe in another religion at the same time?

J-LN: This is complicated. In America there are Jews who call themselves "Jews for Jesus." In America it's sometimes a little like those restaurants that serve Cambodian-Basque cuisine. If you want to be strict about things, this is absolutely impossible.

I don't know exactly how this works for these "Jews for Jesus." It's certainly respectable, but it's contradictory, because the Jewish religion says that it awaits the Messiah, who will be sent by god, and Christianity says that the Messiah has already come, and that he is Jesus. Now, I might very well say, if we had the time, that the fact that the Messiah has come does not mean that he has truly come.

Within a particular religion, there is a precise way of figuring or representing god, what he is, what he does, and so on. So, normally, one cannot mix everything up. Yet there is something common to all religions, as I tried to bring out earlier. So I can understand why people would want to take a little of this and a little of that, why they would like one aspect of one religion and another aspect of another religion. At that point there is no contradiction. It means that one is not of any particular religion.

In any case, we would have to distinguish between the fact of being of a particular religion and belonging to a particular religious community. If you belong to a religious community, if you are Jewish, for example, if you are a little Jewish boy, you must be circumcised. If you are a little Christian boy, this isn't an issue, though you do have to be

baptized. The two things are not mutually exclusive. So it's possible to do all kinds of different things. If you are a little Muslim child, you must pray five times a day. It is not the same prayer that it would be for a Jewish or Christian child; you are not going to call on god in the same way. So if you want to belong to all three religions at the same time, it's going to be a little complicated.

There are some people who do this very well. I'm thinking, for example, of the Japanese. There are many Japanese who are at once Buddhist and Shintoist. I won't even mention those who are also Christian, because they are really Christian only for certain ceremonies.

There is no contradiction in being both Buddhist and Shintoist. For the Shintoists, there are millions of gods who are present everywhere, in everyday life, presences of an order different from any other presence, but presences nonetheless, whereas, for the Buddhists, there is no presence at all. And these two things are not contradictory; each can very easily be related to the other.

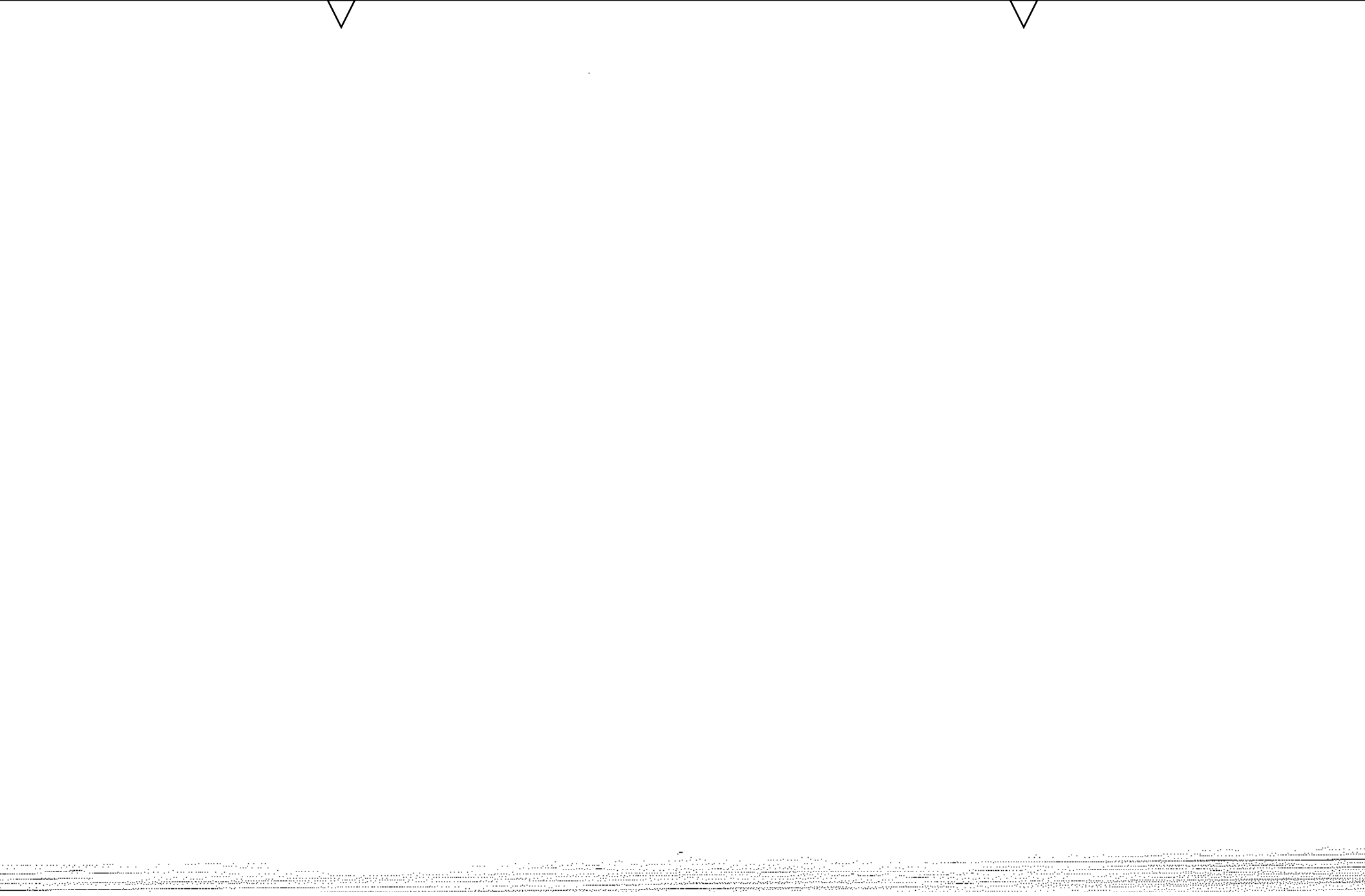
Within monotheism this going between religions can get rather tricky. There is, for example, the case of a very great Muslim mystic named al-Hallâj, who was condemned by the Islamic authorities of his time, that is, long long ago, because he had practically become Christian from within the Islamic religion. There are texts of al-Hallâj that address Christ, all the while remaining within Islam.

While there are very clear differences in the way things are represented in the three great monotheisms, and even some very big differences between the three major forms of Christianity—Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy—there is at the same time something that runs through all these monotheisms from the very beginning of Western civilization, and that is precisely the notion that god is the one who is not there, who is not someone, who

is somewhere else, always somewhere else. In this regard, there is truly a great proximity between the Jewish god, the Christian god, and the god of Islam. It's even because of this that between the three the worst sometimes happens. At the same time, these three religions are incredibly close to one another.

—translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas

Appendix



Works Depicting *Noli me tangere*

So that the reader can see other pictorial (and sometimes sculptural) examples for him- or herself, I have listed the works (including those chosen for the iconography of this volume) that I have been able to see either in the original or, more often, in reproduction. In some cases, however, I found information without any image (some of these references are to books and others are to Internet sites). This compilation does not aspire to be scientific: I have limited myself to minimal references, enough to orient an investigation. Certain names of museums are lacking. Some of the works' titles are not *Noli me tangere* but *Christ and St. Mary Magdalene at the Tomb* (e.g., Rembrandt) or *Easter Morning* (e.g., Burne-Jones), which, as I have noted in the text, corresponds to a certain discrepancy in the choice of the moment depicted.

Fra Angelico: Florence, San Marco

Anonymous: I can only indicate that, for France, the Ministry of Culture's "Mémoire" site has compiled a list of dozens of works,

along with images in black and white. As examples, I could also mention a column in *Autun,* a fresco from the fifteenth century in the Cathedral in Constance and another at the choir enclosure of Notre Dame in Paris, but above all the painting in the predella of the cathedral in Saint-Maximum.

Fra Bartolomew: Paris, Louvre

Barrocci, Federico: Florence, Uffizi

Botticelli: an image credited to him, unlocated and of doubtful attribution

Bronzino: Paris, Louvre

Bruegel the Younger: Nancy, Museum of Lorraine

Burne-Jones: not located

Cano, Alonso: Budapest

Caracciolo, Battistello: Prato, Galleria Communale

Correggio: Madrid, Prado

Denis, Maurce: Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Musse du Prieure

Duccio: Siena, Museo del Duomo

Dürer, Albrecht: 32nd plate of *The Small Woodcut Passion* (no. 47 of the Bartsch catalogue)

Eschave, Balthazar de: Ibia, Brazil

Etty, William: London, Tate Gallery

Ferrari, Gregorio de: Bologna, Musei Civici

Ferrari, Gregorio de: Genoa, Palazzo Bianco

Fontana, Lavinia: Florence, Uffizi

Giotto: Assissi, Capella Santa Magdalena

Giotto: Padua, Capella Scrovegni

Holbein: Hampton Court

Huetter, Lucas: Eger (Hungary), Megyei Korhaz

Hunt, William: not located

Ivanov: Saint Petersburg, Hermitage

Juan de Flandres: Madrid, Prado

Lorrain, Claude: Frankfurt am Main

Magnasco: Pasadena, Getty Museum

Mengs: London, National Gallery

Metsu: not located

Mignard: not located

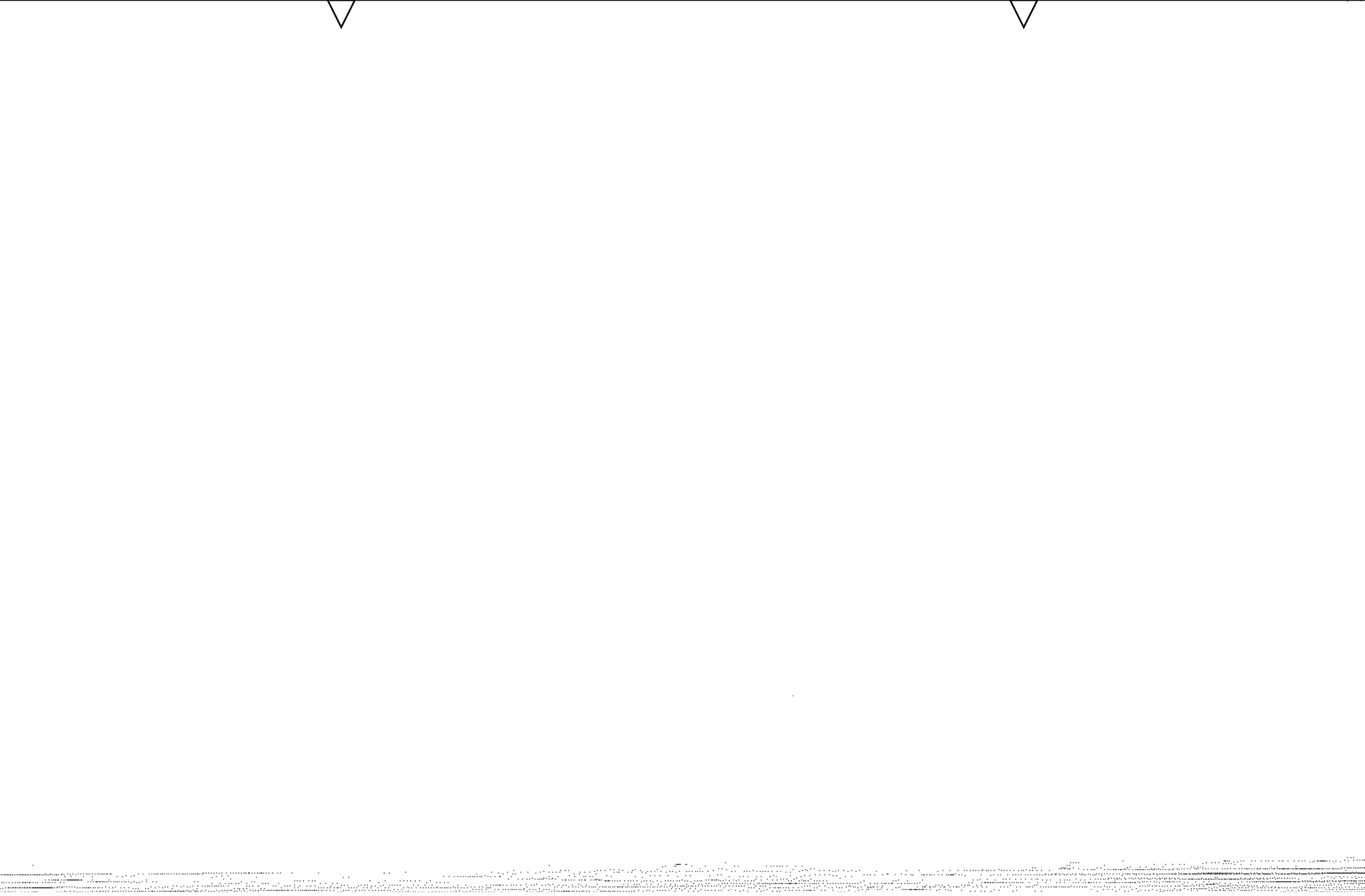
Nardi: Toledo, cathedral

Nardo: Florence, Santa Maria di Novella

Perugino: Chicago, Art Institute

Pontormo: Florence, Casa Buonarotti

Pontormo: Milan, private collection
Pontormo/Franco: Florence, Casa Buonarotti
Poussin: Madrid, Prado
Raggi, Antonio: Rome, San Domingo & Siste
Ramenghi, Bartolomeo: Modena, Collection of the Banca Popolare
Rembrandt: London, Buckingham Palace, Collection of Elizabeth II
Rubens: Munich, Old Pinakothek (a particular case: three Apostles are present in this allegorical scene)
Sarto, Andrea del: Florence, Palazzo Pitti
Schongauer: Colmar, Musée d'Unterlinden (a painting and an engraving)
Sirani, Elisabetta: San Marino, Basilica del Santo
Spranger, Bartholomew: Bucharest, National Museum of Rumania
Tisi, called Il Garofalo: Ferrara
Titian: London, National Gallery



Notes

Noli me tangere

NOTE: I first learned of the work by Marianne Alphant, Daniel Arasse, and Guy Lafon, *L'apparition à Marie-Madeleine* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 2001), as this book was going to press. I regret not being able to make reference to it here.

1. Matthew 12:34–35; Mark 4:33–34.

2. Parable thus clearly distinguishes itself from allegory. In this, I share the conviction of Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, who has taken up Charles Harold Dodd's exegetical argument, in *La parabole ou l'enfance du theatre* (Belfort: Circé, 2002), 50–65.

3. John 14:9. (As a general rule, I will follow Jean Grosjean's translation, *La Bible: Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, 1971). I will refrain from entering into discussions about the attempts to retranslate these texts. The artists whose works in some way accompany and inform this essay had no knowledge of such discussions. [The English translation will follow *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).—Trans.]

4. With "deconstruction of Christianity" I am attempting to designate a movement that would be both an analysis of Christianity—from a position presumed to be capable of moving beyond it—as well as the displacement, with modifications, proper to Christianity, itself moving beyond itself, inclining toward resources (ones to which it gives access) that it both conceals and recuperates. It is essentially a matter of the following: not only does Christianity detach and exempt itself from the strictly religious, but it also marks out intaglio, beyond itself, the place of what will finally have to abandon the simplistic alternative of theism or atheism. In fact, this deconstruction is at work, in various modalities, throughout the monotheism of the "religions of the Book" as a whole. This work always corresponds to the following: the "One" god is no longer precisely "one god." I will come back to this in a more thematic way elsewhere. This short essay is in keeping with this theme, but in a tangential way.

5. [*Le fond* means "bottom" or "depth" in the spatial sense and often refers to pictorial space, i.e. "background." The expression used here, *au fond,* means "at bottom" or "in the end" in the logical sense, but Nancy often uses it in the more spatial sense of "at the ground" or "in the depth."—Trans.]

6. Matthew 13:11.

7. Matthew 13:13.

8. Matthew 13:14.

9. Matthew 13:12.

10. On this question, allow me to refer to my study "Forbidden Representation," trans. Sarah Clift, in *The Ground of the Image,* trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 27–50.

11. Matthew 13:16.

12. Matthew 13:9.

13. How are we to think the contingency of this gift or deprivation? It would be necessary to open up the question of chosenness or grace here, but that would take us beyond the scope of these remarks. Let us simply say that in our immediate context

the disciples—who are always appointed or chosen without convincing reason, indeed, counter to reason—are not chosen because they already have "sight" but, to the contrary, they receive sight because they are chosen.

14. [The phrase that Nancy uses here, *l'image est vue si elle est vue,* creates a double ambiguity: it can also mean "The image is sight if it is seen."—Trans.]

15. [The French title to this section is *En partance.* Followed by *pour,* it usually means "bound for" a destination, the implication being that departure is imminent. Throughout the essay, Nancy also uses the substantive form *la partance,* which has been translated as "the departing" or "the parting."—Trans.]

16. It is also similar to the episode in which Thomas touches Jesus' wounds; however, it is not possible for me to evaluate the many paintings that are devoted to each episode. The quantitative difference has as much to do with the theological or spiritual importance of the scenes as it does with their repercussions in the figurative order—or with what they call for in or call forth from painting. In the particular case of *Noli me tangere,* an ambiguity of the sensible can also be at stake. We shall speak of this ambiguity here, touching on the sensuous connotations of the scene and of the Mary Magdalene character.

17. It has been used, for example, as the name of a celebrated novel by the Philippine writer Jose Rizal (which has also been brought to the screen and made into a musical), as well as many contemporary art installations (by Arman, Seyed Alavi, or Sam Taylor Wood, among others), a book comprising accounts of sexual abuse (Mary L.), a film by Jacques Rivette (*Out 1: Noli me tangere*), works of choreography (Charlotte Vincent), a poem by Wyatt for Anne Boleyn, armor-insignias, a secessionist flag from 1860, and the name of a pedigreed cat. In medicine, it is also used as the name for certain tumors that are better left untouched if one cannot operate to remove them completely, for fear of stimulating their growth. Few phrases from the Gospels have been so widely disseminated. One even finds it in a story by

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, "Maryelle," whose heroine is a *femme galante.* It begins thus: "The death of Mabille, her new allures, the discrete elegance of her dark clothing, her air, finally, of *noli me tangere.*" Regarding music, see n. 72, below.

18. *Impatiens noli tangere,* a variety of the impatiens family (Balsaminaceae), is a plant that reacts to contact; it loses its seed when touched.

19. This entire problematic of touching is clearly indebted to the work of Jacques Derrida in *Le toucher—Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2001). Derrida mentions the episode of *Noli me tangere* in evoking the more general role of touching in the Christ legend. This evocation is inscribed in the question that I have called "the deconstruction of Christianity." Derrida intends to touch on this question with a skeptical or rabbinical distance, one that I hope not to have treated too reductively here.

20. Cf. Freud, "Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence," in *Totem and Taboo,* in *The Origins of Religion,* vol. 13 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1990), section 2, 79ff.

21. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus,* trans. David Grene, vol. 3 of *Greek Tragedies,* ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1760. Sophocles uses the verb *psauō,* which is rarer in prose than is the verb we will discuss, *haptō.* The meaning of the latter is situated more in the register of "to bind, to link"; that of the former is in the register of "to brush up against."

22. ["Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not" is the King James Version; "Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold me'" is the Revised Standard Version of John 20:17.—Trans.]

23. [The substantive here is *le disparissant,* which means both "the disappearing" and "the dying." Nancy also uses other words with the same double connotation: *disparaître* ("to vanish, disappear" and "to die"), *le disparu* ("the dead, departed" and "missing person") and *la disparition* ("disappearance" and "death").—Trans.]

24. [Nancy's phrase here, *Moi, la vérité, je pars,* plays on Lacan's famous utterance: "Moi, la vérité, je parle (I, the truth, I speak)."—Trans.]

25. Paul, 2 Corinthians 3:18.

26. John 11:25. Certain manuscripts add "and life" (*ego eimi hē anastasis kai hē zōē*).

27. [*Se tenir* has been translated here as the third-person reflexive form, but the reciprocal form is also possible—i.e., "to hold each other"—as is the passive "to be held."—Trans.]

28. The Hebrew term *qum,* which indicates a lifting or setting upright, is used in texts that articulate a Jewish thinking of "resurrection." The use of the word *anastasis* derives from it, as does the verb *egeirō,* which has a related meaning.

29. Christ arisen is occasionally compared to a "ghost" in certain texts of the Apocrypha (e.g., *The First Epistle General of Peter,* 11). This is rare, however, and the comparison does not appear in the canonical corpus.

30. This is not just a matter of imagery associated with a warriorlike bravery, but of the fact that tragic death is always an upright death, i.e., a violent death that does not come at the end of a natural process of morbidity: the man is stricken or struck, the woman hangs herself. Is it even necessary to recall? When Antigone is imprisoned in the cave that is to become her tomb (along with Haemon), she is alive and standing upright. It is as hanged that Creon will find her body in the cave, after having revoked her condemnation too late.

31. "But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it" (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A. V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 19).

32. John 20:13–18. The episode of Thomas touching the wounds follows immediately. (I will refrain here from commenting on the translation or on comparisons with the synoptic gospels, beyond those that could be necessary for my purposes—just as, regarding the paintings, I do not aspire to the commentary of an art historian, and it will happen that I leave out one or another feature of the works).

33. If this expression is even possible! What I mean, of course, is Christ's departure from the tomb as it is represented by Piero,

Grünewald, and Mantegna, among a great many others. But, as I will briefly suggest, these representations themselves would have to be analyzed in order to show how they are often distanced from the figure of "regeneration." In particular, one again finds the motif of "standing upright" in Christ, who exits the tomb upright (like Lazarus) and not as someone asleep or sick, who would have to get up from his bed. To say it once more: this is not an erection but a pivoting of planes from the horizontal to the vertical, a change in perspective on the same tomb and the same death. Onto the *horizon* of finite life (the "horizon" is the limit) is superimposed, without being opposed, an infinite raising. To climb to the heights and to descend into the depths is to go toward the same *altitudo,* in the double sense of the word. But the double and vertiginous "altitude" also comes back to proximity: the truth is held right within arm's reach, even though it cannot be grasped (cf. Paul, Romans 10:6–8 and its source in Deuteronomy 30:11–14).

34. Matthew 27:62–66. This episode is absent from the other Gospels.

35. In Matthew 28:2–3, an angel is dazzling but not the arisen, who is not visible.

36. Luke 24:36–43, of which the Thomas episode in John is a development; we will return to this. But the term *natural* here must not be understood in the sense of a self-evident miracle—that is, of a "supernatural" upstaging of "nature," in defiance of its proper order. To the contrary, I want to point out that nothing contravenes nature here, although something is shown that is completely other than "nature" or "supernature."

37. Mark 16:12–13 and Luke 24:13–35.

38. [A term used extensively in Nancy's writings, *partage* means "division" but also "sharing" in the sense of "sharing out."—Trans.]

39. When she does recognize him, whom does she see?—certainly always a gardener, according to his appearance (which Rembrandt renders with precision). Consequently, she doubtless also always sees *the* gardener, indeed. It is equally through his

mouth, through the mouth of whatever living man, that the dead Christ announces his departure.

40. Cf. Paul, Philippians 2:6–7: *theos ekēnosen,* God emptied himself, hollowed himself out into man.

41. [Nancy is referring here to Kant's "schematism," which he treats in "Masked Imagination," in *The Ground of the Image,* trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 80–99.—Trans.]

42. In order to remain closer to the text that clearly identifies Jesus, I am neglecting the riskier hypothesis suggested above, that it is solely a matter of the gardener. Be that as it may, it is remarkable that painters have so often taken care to recall the appearance of the gardener (at least by a shovel or a spade), an appearance that is sometimes difficult to discern at first glance. I will return to this point.

43. The disciples from Emmaus, Luke 24:16.

44. Delicate interpretive stakes are involved here: depending on the version (Greek or Syrian), Mary Magdalene turns around either a single time or twice.

45. One can hardly claim that the depiction of the gardener becomes more pronounced as one moves away from Giotto, for it is also found in the illuminations and in the earlier engravings. The depiction of the gardener does, however, involve a picturesque and anecdotal aspect, which is more seductive for painters who are at a distance from religion. In any case, it would be necessary to consider all the various mixtures that are put into play: half-gardener, half-Messiah, half-dressed (which must be the gardener), half-naked (which must be the body removed from its shroud), and the combinations in which these elements serve as an important resource for pictorial design and color. It is fascinating that here a theological problem—How should this glorious body be depicted?—comes to supply and combine so many pretexts for iconographic developments.

46. The one whom the disciples will still be awaiting in the final moment before his departure and who will respond to them by saying that it is not a matter of this triumph, or not as they still imagine it to be (cf. Acts 1:6–8).

47. She does not think, "If he says my name, this means that . . . etc.," any more than Abraham calculates, "If God is God, he will save my son"; they both leave, *ils y vont,* as they say . . . (cf., in this regard, the difference between the interpretations of Abraham by Paul and by James: for Paul, Abraham's faith is like an assessment that allows him to "believe" that God will be beneficent; for James, faith resides entirely in the act of leaving at God's order, not in a reflexive operation). (I make this analysis clear in "The Judeo-Christian," trans. Bettina Bergo, in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida,* ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly [New York: Fordham University Press, 2007], 214–33; rpt. in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity,* trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith [New York: Fordham University Press, 2008], 42–60.)

48. [Meaning literally "untied" or "unbound," the word *le délié* also refers to a thin "upstroke" in writing.—Trans.]

49. Should a reminder be necessary, I neither presume to have made an inventory of all representations of the scene in the history of painting nor have I found the images for all the references that I could have obtained (e.g., those of paintings by Metsu and Mignard). Furthermore, it was impossible to include all the images in this volume.

50. Pontormo's version was itself a copy of a painting, now lost, by Michelangelo.

51. In the Saint-Maximin basilica in Provence, where, according to legend, Mary Magdalene arrived after having come out of the Egyptian desert, there is a glass vial that supposedly contains a fragment of her skin. This relic is called "the *noli me tangere.*" The anonymous painting mentioned above is located in the same place.

52. Moreover, its second-person present indicative has as its form *non vis.*

53. If Jerome's compilation of the Latin text follows common usage here, however, *noli* is the expression of a refusal or of a courteous prohibition, exactly like our "Veuillez ne pas toucher."

Placing the emphasis on "do not wish" is a matter of interpretive violence. It is legitimate, on condition that it is not concealed. [The English equivalent of this phrase, "Please do not touch," contains no such reference.—Trans.]

54. On the origin of the tradition that makes her into the first witness of the resurrection and that at times identifies her in this role with the mother of Jesus, see *Écrits apocryphes des chrétiens,* vol. 1, ed. François Bovon and Pierre Geotrain (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), notes to 8:2 and 11:1–3 of the Book of the Resurrection by Bartholemew and to 8:2 of the Acts of Philip.

55. This is another violent act of interpretation. One common practice is to assimilate into the single figure of Mary of Magdala characters in the texts that may be different. The figure of the woman to whom *noli* is addressed is thus rendered even more remarkable and complex: its singular history becomes a parable threaded along the entire length of the Christ story. Discussions about the identities of the various Marys (apart from Jesus' mother) are well documented in the exegetical literature. Cf. the recent work by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, *L'invention de Marie-Madeleine* (Paris: Bayard, 2001). Obviously, even here I am not doing a personal exegesis: I am freely extrapolating.

56. John 11:31–32.

57. [The expression *fond sans fond,* translated here as "ground without ground," is an allusion to Blanchot's *La communauté inavouable,* about which Nancy comments: "When Blanchot speaks of the ground without ground of communication, there are no verbal acrobatics and no mysticism. We know very well what this ground without ground of communication is: it is the without-ground where all exchange ends up, not in an impasse but in an opening that is precisely the opening of the one onto the other or the opening of the one to the other" ("La question de la communauté," in "Un siècle d'écrivains: Maurice Blanchot," 1996; http://remue.net/spip.php?article44, accessed February 2008).—Trans.]

58. John 11:25.

59. The text then specifies "he who went to deliver him" (John 12:4). The episode is actually situated a little before Easter.

60. John 12:7. According to the apocryphal book *Arabic Gospel of the Childhood* (7:1–2), this vessel of perfume contained the circumcised foreskin of Jesus (see the text in *Écrits apocryphes des chrétiens,* ed. Bovon and Geotrain).

61. Luke 10:38–42.

62. On the one hand, the practice of making her into a prostitute is based on Mark 16:9: "Now when *Jesus* was risen early the first *day* of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils" (cf. also Luke 8:2). On the other hand (and foremost), it is based on Luke 7:36–49, which features an episode of a "sinner" pouring perfume onto Jesus' feet. The confusion of the Marys also involves an unnamed woman . . . And *the* exemplary Mary Magdalene—born of the development of the legend throughout the texts of the various Gospels, which are themselves heterogeneous—will be depicted as penitent in the desert in Egypt, coming to establish herself and to die in Provence, etc. As is well known, the motif of the Magdalene in the desert has proliferated in painting, bearing the oxymoron of sinful flesh and ardent faith. Painters often place a skull near the desert penitent at the same time as they strip her half-naked under a head of hair. (Exemplary in this regard is Titian's *Penitent Mary Magdalen,* whose eyes are turned toward the sky and whose mane of hair is drawn down over her breasts.) Flesh, death, and love, together composing being-in-this-world-outside-of-the-world: that is the cipher of Mary Magdalene. It is also one of the ciphers of the Gospels, in which prostitutes are together with the poor and, according to a tradition begun in the Old Testament, are nearest to the "Kingdom of God."

63. Moreover, the same vessel could represent both the one in which Nicodemus brought the herbs to the tomb in the earlier scene (John 19:39) and that which serves as an emblem for Mary Magdalene.

64. Magnasco also places one of the woman's hands close to a foot of Jesus, not far from the vessel. But the allusion is less clear in this case, for the foot is resting on the ground. Conversely, the foot of the angel in Rembrandt has no visible reason for being posed as it is; one could even call it a little forced.

65. John 11:39.

66. This expression, created much later, conveyed the belief that the cadaver of a saint does not emit the smell of putrefaction but has a pleasant odor. Cf. J.-P. Albert, *Odeurs de sainteté: La mythologie chrétienne des aromates* (Paris: EHSS, 1990).

67. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), 181.

68. Cf. Matthew 17:2ff. and Mark 9:2ff. On the subject of untouchable glory, one could refer to the chapter from *Totem and Taboo* mentioned above (see n. 20) and relate "glory" to the "exceptional positions" or "states" discussed by Freud.

69. [The word *salut* is an informal gesture of greeting and/or farewell; it also means "salvation."—Trans.]

70. Some of the *Magdalene in the Desert* paintings show an aged body, wizened but still seductive, indiscernibly voluptuous and ascetic. In this regard, see the painting by Ribera in the Fabre Museum in Montpellier.

71. [In French, *peindre* means "to paint" and also "to depict," "to render," and "to portray."—Trans.]

72. Some translations refuse this line of interpretation and choose the other: even the "Jerusalem Bible" specifies "Do not hold me," adding a note to indicate that Mary is embracing the feet of Christ, as is the case in Matthew 28:9, where Jesus appears to the "saintly women." In this manner, the translation tries to link philology with Christian spirituality and thereby cleverly suppresses or elides (without liability) a connotation that had been inferred by all previous translations and that painting had seized upon. One could imagine that a similar reasoning has discouraged musicians from taking up the episode, whereas they have often made Magdalene sing "at the foot of the cross" or "at the feet of Christ" as a penitent in the desert (Agneletti, Rossi, Frescobaldi, Caldara, etc.). How is one to risk the musical sensuality of a *Noli me tangere* sung by Christ? Nonetheless, the episode was sung in several liturgical dramas of the Middle Ages (like the *Rothomagensis Gradual*) and in contemporary music, several instrumental compositions bear this title (by Erkki Melartin or Hirosuke Yamamoto, among others). As well, Jules Massenet's

oratorio *Mary Magdalene* is based on a libretto written by Louis Gallet, in which the garden episode is depicted. It is not exactly a matter of "sacred" music, but it is all the more remarkable that Mary Magdalene figures within a body of work that includes Thais, Sappho, Manon, and others. Mary Magdalene is also depicted as the amorous worshipper in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar,* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice.

73. John 20:2; John refers to himself (without ever using his own name) seven times throughout the course of his Gospel.

74. John 13:23.

75. John 15:9. This is an insistent theme in John.

76. Cf. sections 5 and 8 of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents,* trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), 55–63, 81–92, to which I will refer in what follows.

In Heaven and on Earth

1. The astronomer in question was Daniel Kunth.