CHAPTER 10

From the ‘Hidden God’ to the Materialism of the Encounter: Althusser and Pascal

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1 Althusser in Captivity, or the Agony of Faith

In October 1943, a few days after resuming writing his diary of captivity in a German war camp, following a period of silence seemingly caused by a personal crisis and a bout of depression, Louis Althusser quotes a phrase by Pascal, from the fragment of the Pensées entitled ‘The Mystery of Jesus’. The phrase quoted, supposedly spoken or thought by Jesus himself during his agony at Gethsemane, is the following: ‘My concern is for your conversion; do not be afraid, and pray with confidence as though for me’.\(^1\)

The entire passage offers an image of Jesus ready to be ‘in agony until the end of the world’,\(^2\) sleepless and in uncertainty in order to redeem us. We can only add our wounds to his: ‘There is no link between me and God or Jesus Christ the righteous. But he was made sin for me. ... I must add my wounds to his and join myself to him and he will save me in saving himself’.\(^3\)

Yann Moulier-Boutang has suggested that Althusser’s resuming of writing in his journal followed a period during which he came close to losing his faith, hence the period of silence in the journal.\(^4\) Moreover, in his biography of Althusser, Moulier-Boutang quotes the 16 October 1943 entry as including the phrase ‘Agenouillez-vous et priez’ [Kneel down and pray]. This phrase, traditionally attributed to Pascal, although not found as such in the Pensées, was later used by Althusser as an example of the importance of material rituals in the reproduction of ideologies.\(^5\) This is its actual version in the Pensées:

\(^1\) Pascal 1966, p. 314 (L919/B553). In quoting from the Pensées, I indicate the passages in both the Lafuma (L) and Brunschwig (B) numbering.
\(^2\) Pascal 1966, p. 313 (L919/B553).
\(^3\) Pascal 1966, p. 315 (L919/B553).
\(^5\) Althusser 2014b, p. 260.
We must combine outward and inward to obtain anything from God; in other words we must go down on our knees, pray with our lips, etc., so that the proud man who would not submit to God must now submit to his creature. If we expect help from this outward part we are being superstitious, if we refuse to combine it with the inward we are being arrogant.6

Althusser’s new interest in Pascal, in 1943, coincides with a period with many references to solitude and silence, a desire to be ‘free of words’,7 an interest in Proust, and a confrontation with subjectivity:

‘Something’ that comes out as the support of silence, that is silence itself; something that could be the support of nothing, could be this nothing itself. I will call it, because it is necessary, speaking with words, that one more word takes place at the end of the phrase, I will call it: subject.8

For the young Althusser, Pascal was a constant reference in his confrontation with the agony of trying to believe. On Christmas 1943, he writes: ‘The wait, the wait ... this is how I go, repeating in order to believe in it this phrase from Pascal “My concern is for your conversion ...” How much more time’.9

In April 1944, Althusser writes about an ‘echo of Pascal’s wager’.10 Pascal’s fragment on the wager11 is not simply an exercise in probabilities theory, and how a potential wager on the existence of God can secure a greater return. For Pascal, in the end, there is no certainty, no sure bet; the only way to deal with uncertainty is to engage in the very rituals of religious belief, in the collective practice of belief, even if this makes someone closer to an animal, something that has to be accepted.

You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They

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9 Althusser 1992b, p. 140.
10 Althusser 1992b, p. 159.
11 Pascal 1966, pp. 149–53 (L418/b233).