

Improvisation on “Rerum Novarum”¹

Jacques-Alain Miller²

Abstract: Jacques-Alain Miller recalls the revolution caused in the Christian Church by *Rerum Novarum* encyclical and encourages psychoanalysts to renew psychoanalysis. As he states: “[...] Psychoanalysis is going to have to accomplish its *Rerum Novarum* [...] There is a historical tendency that must be interpreted, in order to be slightly ‘ahead of the curve’, as the Americans say”.

Keywords: *Rerum novarum* encyclical; applied psychoanalysis; pure psychoanalysis.

Resumo: Jacques -Alain Miller recuerda la revolución causada en la Iglesia Católica por la encíclica *Rerum Novarum* y estimula los psiconalistas a renovar el psicoanálisis. Como él afirma: “[...] El psicoanálisis debe tener su *Rerum Novarum* [...] Hay una tendencia histórica que tiene que ser interpretada con la finalidad de que nos coloquemos un poco “adelante de la curva” como dirían los americanos”.

Palavras-chave: Encíclica *Rerum Novarum*; psicoanálisis aplicada; psicoanálisis pura.

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I’m expecting a good deal from this debate, and there are many of you who expect something from it too.

We are here in a laboratory of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis does not exist in the heaven of ideas; it exists through us and with us. At the same time, it is a discourse that has its own structure, its own logic, and that develops its own consequences. We are borne up by it. We try to find our orientation in the midst of the consequences that are entailed by the existence of psychoanalysis.

We shall take as our reference the *Syllabus*.

1

The 1864 *Syllabus* marks a date in the history of the Church. The advent of something like the French Revolution, the movement of dechristianization, the systematic destruction of churches is not so far off, just two centuries away from us. The movement of dechristianization did not last very long in France, but it terrified Christianity.

More profoundly, there came about, what we can call the falling away of souls from the authority of the Church: the personal, private examination of all questions; all beliefs questioned with respect to their rational foundations; mockery distributed in response to all ritualized forms of behavior. This was the spirit of the Enlightenment — which later was to take a military, conquistador, imperial turn. Then we had Napoleon coming to take hold of the Pope by the nape of his neck and bring him to Paris to bless his accession to the throne.

Once the French follies were over, once the restoration of the monarchy was assured, there was never a return to the *statu quo ante*. The Old Regime was over and done with; French instability was to continue throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Napoleon’s nephew was seated on a second throne by 1851.

This was Italy’s chance. The great statesman that Cavour was knew how to handle Napoleon III, sending him all the envoys necessary to incite him to support the cause of Italian unity.

It was a Papacy besieged in Rome that published the 1864 *Syllabus*, the catalogue of condemned propositions that the Church would accept under no pretext. The last of these propositions, the most unacceptable, was formulated more or less

like this: “The Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church must reconcile itself with the spirit of the times”. No, never that! The spirit of the times, modernism, democracy...

There is something sublime in the *Syllabus*. The Pope, besieged by the French and the Italians, entrenched in his small Vatican island, says: “No, never!” It can be held that Pius IX was right to maintain that position in the beginning, that the status of the Church had to be confirmed. But history is dialectic.

Moreover, the dialectic of modern times, Hegel’s, is a secularized theology. It takes its source in the dialectic of the Old and the New Testament. The matrix of the *Aufhebung* is the crucifixion and the reappearance of Christ in his glory. The notebooks of Hegel’s youth testify to this. The dialectic is a meditation on the Bible and on Christic history.

The aforementioned Old Testament is a *Syllabus*. The aforementioned New Testament is the *Rerum Novarum*.

2

So there was the epoch of the *Syllabus* — the epoch of the “No!” — and then there was the epoch of *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891. Leo XIII did not say: “We must be reconciled with the spirit of the times”, but he went ahead and did it. We must, he said, take into account the working class, accept democracy, the Church is not bonded forever to the aristocracy. The aristocracy was slipping little by little out of history. To attach the legacy of Christ — we can say this in Marxist terms — to a class condemned by history would be a betrayal of the legacy handed down by the apostles.

And thus, on the gaming table of history — which we can think of as a casino table, Pascal’s wager being nothing else but eternal life represented as a green cloth — with *Rerum Novarum*, the Pope — who is sometimes called Pius IX, sometimes Leo XIII, but who is in all cases the Pope — takes the wager of the Church and moves it, from the aristocracy to democracy.

I don’t really know what the effect of *Rerum Novarum* was in Italy — I did not learn that in school — but in France, the Catholics, monarchists, reactionaries, “all the old rightwingers”, who detested the French Revolution, when they met up with *Rerum Novarum*, said to themselves: “That is not possible! How can a message come from Rome say just the contrary of what Pius IX’s message said?”

So then, what did people think in France? What rumor was spread throughout the country? That this was an imposture, that the Pope had been changed, that it was a double who had promulgated *Rerum Novarum*, while the real Pope was held prisoner in the caves of the Vatican. Is this so absurd? Today we’re told that Saddam Hussein has eight different doubles. So, it was believed that Pope Leo XIII had one.

We have a memorial to this epoch, André Gide’s novel, *The Caves of the Vatican*. It’s the story of a Frenchman who goes to Rome persuaded that the Pope is kept prisoner in the caves of the Vatican. This farce is one of the funniest things you can read and it reflects very accurately the incomprehension of the French Catholics in face of the Papal mutation, forty years after the *Syllabus*.

And yet this mutation permitted the Church to multiply its actions in direction of the working class. Social Catholicism was to enter into competition with socialism and then with communism. In France, Marc Sangnier was to create the first circle of left-wing Catholics, social Catholics. François Mauriac, who heard him speak during his youth, was left with a life-long impression, although he did not understand him, or understood him too well: his doctrine did not suit the ambitious young man that Mauriac was, and he felt contempt and aversion for him.

Marc Sangnier’s granddaughter is a member of the École de la Cause freudienne. She participated in a film on the work and life of her grandfather, to which eminent French political figures, such as Jacques Delors, brought their contribution. All this was made possible by *Rerum Novarum*. Of course there were a great many problems: the Pope even asked Marc Sangnier to put an end to his action, and Sangnier wrote a very beautiful letter of submission.

Even if it has its origin in an event that took place two thousand years ago, the Church was never encumbered by nostalgia. Its eyes are always directed towards the future. Its horizon, certainly, is beyond this earth. But, practically, it achieves its destiny by a policy of “eyes forward” and “forge ahead”. This relation is dialectic between an eternal truth and the epochs of the world, the different forms that this truth takes at each epoch.

3

Does psychoanalysis have a relation to the truth, to a truth, to a real? This can be debated. But the lesson we can draw from this somewhat rapid reminder of history is that the form that a truth takes at the moment of its emergence is not the form under which it will subsist. A truth that has emerged only perseveres in being if it is capable of an internal mutation, if those who serve it are not encumbered by a subjective inertia. When something is over, it’s over.

The aristocratic world was finished in 1789. It continued to agonize during about fifty years, or perhaps a century. But it was finished.

In fact, there is grief and sorrow when it’s all over. I am not for treating with sarcasm those unhappy people who cry over past times. Those who remain attached to old beliefs even arouse my interest and my affection. But that’s the way things are. A more powerful force takes over.

Nostalgia, during great upturnings, is often expressed with a noble pathos. Faulkner cried because the old South was no more. He who did not know the time of slavery could not know how sweet life might be. I’m not going to remake *Gone with the Wind*. Faulkner is much better than a progressivist novel.

But then, what about psychoanalysis?

Psychoanalysis is not going to last a very long time in its previous forms. It's not a question of embellishment. There are things that will never come back. We can be all the more attached to them as they will not come back. It's the fragility of earthly things that renders them so attractive. Roses wither, the colors of paintings fade, bodies crumple or are fossilized. The Palace we are now in is across from Leonardo's *The Last Supper* and what emotion was raised throughout the world when it lost its colors, and then when they were restored.

The psychoanalyst "on a pedestal", the psychoanalyst-wizard, the psychoanalyst whom no one asks to give proof of his competence because he is backed up by a powerful institution who accords him his credentials, that is all over, it's going to be over. It's over in California, so here it's coming to an end.

It would be an exaggeration to say that it was a form of aristocracy, but finally, it was something like that. There were analytic filiations as there were royal or aristocratic filiations — Freud who *genuit* Abraham, who *genuit*, etc. In California, one doesn't worry about where the therapist, the psychoanalyst comes from. One wants to know if the thing works here and now. One doesn't want to know where it comes from. That's the spontaneous doctrine of today.

This is in fact what Mister Deng Hsiao-Ping had so well explained in his time. It is he who produced the Chinese Rerum Novarum. As a result, the Chinese Communist Party now promises to attract the capitalists to China. Mao Tse-Tung, who had a good ear, immediately understood that the whole thing was contained in the sentence that I'm going to give you. Deng said: "What matters the color of the cat as long as it catches mice". But the principle of communism was that if a cat is red — let's suppose — and does not catch mice, it is worth much more than a capitalist cat that effectuates a general massacre of mice.

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In California, the patient begins by asking the psychoanalyst to present himself: "I've come to be treated by you, and you, who are you exactly? Have you really been cured, and so are able to treat me?"

I am hardly exaggerating at all what a Californian colleague of the IPA recently explained in Paris. His name is Owen Renik: he is considered with some suspicion by mainstream psychoanalysts and he is very interested in Lacan. Eric Laurent dialogued with him. The two talks will be published in *Ornicar?*, which is appearing once again as an annual revue of 400 pages. The 2003 issue has just come out and so you'll have to wait some to read these two articles.

The problem that Owen Renik meets up with is that the Californian patient wishes to be treated on an equal footing. Does he give in too easily to this demand? Visibly, respect for a psychoanalyst is not acquired from the outset; he must earn it each time. In the eyes of a European, the patients Owen Renik has to do with are insolent. Because we are still too aristocratic.

There is a famous paragraph in Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, which says: "In what sense we are still pious". Here the question is "In what sense are we still aristocratic?" We are when we read the Californians. The same process is at work among us. I've been in this business for a long time now; you cannot imagine what the psychoanalysts were like when I was twenty.

Recently, for the first time in decades, I participated in a little television talk-show. A charming young woman was there too who kept saying all the time: "As for me who am twenty, I think that..." She's a member of the French socialist party, which is really very moderate. She's a bit at the left of this party, which doesn't go very far compared with what I had met up with at her age. In addition, she kept saying — the discourse of the Other was in her mouth: "Fortunately, I have these ideas at twenty". That's probably what her mother keeps saying to her. So, at one point, between two takes I couldn't resist saying: "When I was twenty, I didn't say that my ideas were the ideas of a twenty-year-old, insinuating that they would change by the time I was forty." This quip made the people working on the broadcast laugh, and they said: "Ah, there's the psychoanalyst, always interpreting." And she said: "Oh, that doesn't impress me at all because my mother is a psychoanalyst." Which was a perfect retort.

At twenty then, I had exactly the same ideas as now, and in the beginning, I didn't at all have an unflinching confidence in psychoanalysis. I found Freud wonderful. I remember having read little Hans at fourteen, and it was like a police investigation: what was the cause of the phobia? At the same time I was reading Agatha Christie. Reading Hans was like reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. You kept reading to find out what would happen at the end.

I didn't know any psychoanalysts. They weren't as numerous as they are now. The theoretical part of Freud's work, such as it was then translated, was really nothing but gibberish to me. I preferred by far Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist psychoanalysis. I don't know what I could have read of psychoanalytic literature; I think I had read nothing contemporary until I met Lacan. The rest was dull stuff — a waste of time.

Meeting up with Lacan was something else. Making his acquaintance first through his texts — that was the surprise. It happened on him because Althusser said to me: "Read that, you'll like it." There are many things that might be said against Althusser, but he was a fisher of men. This time he was in the very least a good psychologist. And, in fact, Lacan's text, and Lacan himself, inspired in me an intellectual respect, proportionate to the total incomprehension of most of his immediate pupils.

I met up with them first in 1964. They gave the impression of understanding nothing about anything, of Lacan. Supposedly, the analyst was never supposed to speak, or else just a few enigmatic phrases from time to time, not only during the session, but also when he was at the tribune of a Congress. You can't imagine what that band was like. And yet I tried to show some respect for their white hair. But, in fact, they gave the impression of being white heads as soon as they

were forty. They acted like old people because they were surrounded by an atmosphere of respect, enveloped in mystery. In any case, they understood faster than I: they considered that I was their Nemesis, that it was them or me. They understood that well before I did. It was considered that explaining Lacan, commenting Lacan, understanding Lacan, was anti-psychoanalytic. And so, obviously, things blew up between us, just before and just after Lacan's death.

But their world is fading away.

Yes, I knew Lacan in 1964 and that is exactly one century after the *Syllabus*. I had never thought of that. It's really the time of *Rerum Novarum*. So I'd better get on with it.

5

It's not about putting on a new make-up. Make-up is something very important in modern life. Baudelaire devoted a chapter to it in the text he wrote called *A Painter of Modern Life*. What things are about now is a very profound transformation of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis must make an entirely new alliance with the form of it we call "applied". There is a form of psychoanalysis that will remain in the analyst's consulting room, a private form. And there is a form of psychoanalysis that will pass by institutions. The therapeutic exercise of psychoanalysis will tend to be concentrated in the institution; training will take place in the consulting room. I am supposing this. It's a hypothesis.

Psychoanalysis is undergoing the pressure of a criterion, of a value, of a measure that Baudelaire designated with reference to Edgar Poe.

Edgar Poe was up in the front row as a spectator of what was boiling in the American pot, and Baudelaire, who wanted to understand his times, scrutinized Edgar Poe's work as one does for the prophetic writings of a soothsayer. Edgar Poe, quoted by Baudelaire, said that the god of modern times was "immediate utility". For whatever might be presented the question is always: what use is that? And not indirectly, for later on, but for right away.

The *ratio essendi*, the essence of any thing, but also the cause that brings it into existence, that it exists for, is its immediate utility. The useless is ordained to disappear if it exists, to be aborted if it is only a project.

When we speak of the evaluation of therapeutic results, what are we talking about? You've had three sessions, do you feel better? You've had ten, do you feel three times better? And when you've had ten more, do you feel ten times better? Thus, we will be able to say at precisely what moment the relation between the number of sessions and the "feeling better" is at its peak. Let's say, for instance, it can be established at three months. Afterwards, the *ratio* goes down. So, you do three months of psychoanalysis, and stop. I'm inventing, but this must certainly have been done, or will be done. I don't want to give too many ideas to certain people.

And there we have the criterion of immediate utility. They do not talk about dialectic, of diffuse, deferred indirect effects, their aim is to quantify; the very sense of being is linked to the number.

That can be defended. It can be said that there is in fact a presence of the numerical in the phenomenology of perception itself. It is at least in these terms that Heidegger speaks of mathematics, of the *matheme*. It was as if the number was already there in the things.

Seeing a lion surrounded by three lionesses, Lacan wondered if the lionesses knew how to count to three. How did they manage to put up with the other lioness? Maybe they didn't have the means to do the addition. Only a being that can deduct itself, like the *parlêtre*, can do additions. But Lacan himself says of the number that it's a real in language.

In any case, we are at the epoch in which being is defined, circumscribed, by the number and by the quantity. It is the State that will demand an account, the medical insurance administration. No ill will there; it's the era of technology that imposes this. So, psychoanalysis is going to have to accomplish its *Rerum Novarum*.

We are not on the point of writing our encyclical. To begin with, there is no Pope of psychoanalysis to write an encyclical. There is a historical tendency that must be interpreted, in order to be slightly "ahead of the curve", as the Americans say. Do you agree? Do you understand that? That's what it's about.

There is such inertia in psychoanalysis that that's where we are now. We're beginning now. I have never before posed the problem in terms as clear as this. I who am prudent, who think that when you win something you always lose something too, and that things must not be upset just for the pleasure, that when things exist, even if they are somewhat askew, they should not necessarily be straightened out — and I believe that's the way the Freudian Field has grown, by the effect of this prudence, without absolute demands, by accepting situations, by trying to correct them on the borders — well, now I think that prudence is boldness.

We must advance in the social sphere, in the institutional sphere, and be prepared for the mutation of the form of psychoanalysis.

Its eternal truth, its trans-historic real will not be modified by this mutation. On the contrary, they will be saved, if we grasp the logic of modern times.

Already, it obliges the psychoanalyst to defend psychoanalysis, to explain psychoanalysis, while forty years ago Lacan's pupils, like everyone, thought that they could remain silent, or reserve the debate on psychoanalytic concepts to conspiratorial conclaves. There had to be a profound incomprehension of what modernity was, as well as of what psychoanalysis was, to forbid a patient to read Freud and the authors of the field until they were accorded the permission by their analyst. At the risk of disturbing the unconscious, causing it to lose its freshness.

I do not say that to make fun of this, nor to criticize it. It's poignant, very poignant.

6

What was at the origin of the decision to call this Forum? Not a reflection on the *Syllabus* of 1864. Its need became obvious to me from the experience of the ABA, which is the institution devoted to anorexia-bulimia nutritional problems. You know this Italian institution better than I do. It was created and supported by Fabiola De Clercq, who is here in the first row. [...]

7

My introduction was long because it was improvised. But it comes from my heart. Now, I shall hold my tongue. Let's get to the heart of the matter.

Decrypted by Adèle Succetti and translated by Thelma Sowley

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