

Chapter 29. *Le bon Dieu*, 1988 - 1991

“Je m'arrête pour aujourd'hui, pour retourner aux leçons particulières que le bon Dieu en personne est en train de me donner, par le langage du rêve”

Grothendieck, letter to Carrasquer

As has already mentioned many times, the belief in an imminent apocalypse was recurrent in Grothendieck's thinking and “world view”. At some point during the years 1986/87 he came to the conclusion that he had been personally chosen by the “loving God” to prepare mankind for this event. In an earlier letter to his German acquaintance N.W., this appears with even more clarity than in the letter to J.P. quoted earlier (end of Chapter 25):

This work, which is now clearly outlined in my mind, should be far more valuable to you personally, and (I hope) also a to a few others, than, say, ten more volumes of mathematical production. I have to admit however, that I expect vanishingly little, if any, understanding about what I have to say for the enlightenment of all. The experience with ReS [*Récoltes et Semailles*] was extraordinarily revealing, and anything but encouraging regarding my continuing to publish non-mathematical works. And even less so, as in my view there was no doubt that in the foreseeable future such a collapse of industrial society would take place that even the bare survival of the human species appeared highly questionable to me, and thus the significance of a spiritual output seemed to dwindle. But this view, this prospect of a yawning nothingness which characterizes the present age, has changed abruptly in the course of the last months (especially January-February). Among other things I had prophetic dreams, which not only confirmed the imminent collapse, but also announced that in the immediate aftermath a far-reaching purification of the human species will take place, and a revival of piety - a “descent of God” to Earth. And I have also understood from my dreams (paraphrased symbolically, but without the slightest hint of doubt for me) the mission that God has determined for me from time immemorial - namely to contribute to some extent in preparing for this imminent transition. This also relieves me of the effort of trying to figure out, with my limited human judgement, if there is any point in writing this or that book, which in any case nobody understands or believes, and so on. This is no longer my problem, praise God! With enormous joy I place my will in the service of God's will and carry out to the best of my ability *that* which He has laid upon me; presumably with his invisible help as well as “collaboration” in the coming books.

During the writing of *Les Mutants* in the winter half-year of 1987/88, religious themes were certainly not in the foreground of Grothendieck's thought, and even less so during the following half-year which was marked by the commotion over the Craford Prize. Subsequently, however, his daily life was determined by religious thought, questioning and inquiry as never before, which at times escalated to a condition of delusional ecstasy and obsession. The climax of this phase was a forty-five day bout of excessive fasting, during which he took no nourishment whatsoever.

What can be learned about this phase of Grothendieck's life - he had just turned sixty - is so contradictory and irrational when judged with “normal” criteria, that there will

be no attempt at any sort of “explanation” for these events. There can however be no doubt that the occupation with philosophical, religious and esoteric questions from around 1988 sometimes escalated to religious folly, and that there were times when Grothendieck lost all control over his own thoughts and imagination, and lost contact with those around him. His behavior was not driven by his emotions; rather, something in his psyche was completely derailed.

29.1 “My religious instruction”

In the “Letter of the Good News” to which we will devote a section of this chapter below, Grothendieck gave a detailed account of the stations of his spiritual life during these years. He wrote on 26 January 1990:

God manifested himself to me for the first time on 27 December 1986. On this day began a very intensive period of “metaphysical dreams”, which marked the beginnings of my “religious instruction” (until March 87). Moreover, between 8 January 1987 and 30 April 89, there were around fifty prophetic dreams, which, in the symbolic language of dreams, instructed me about the imminence of a great Day of Purification and Change, and (following this, gradually) about certain important aspects of the New Age into which we shall enter on that day. Moreover, in October of 1986 it was revealed to me (in a dream) that dreams are the work of God, in order to carry His very personal messages to the soul of each one of us.

Starting on 14 June of last year there has been a radical turning point in the manner of communication. This now takes place in the form of intensive daily conversations, absorbing the quasi-totality of my time and energy, and which have continued up until recent days. In the course of these conversations I have been instructed in a very detailed and precise manner about not only about God's plans for the New Age and the events which will precede the Day of Truth, but also about the very particular role which He assigns to me in His plans. I was also enlightened on the subject of essential realities concerning the human soul, its relationship to God, the history of the World and the grand project of “Salvation” which has been unfolding since the Creation of the Universe, and also about the role of suffering and of “Evil” in God's grand plan, from the very beginning and from the perspective of eternal life.

In various letters Grothendieck referred to the phase beginning on June 14, 1989 mentioned above as a “trial period” in his religious instruction. On March 25, 1990 he wrote about this to his German friends:

My trial period is still not over, but since the 14th of March (that was exactly nine months) I have, on an impulse, finally snapped out of it - in the long term it was just too much for me. None other than myself would have lasted so long or would have even gotten into it! Now it's a wager as to whether the “Liberation” really happens in the near future (and “according to plan” - but the date remained open...) or not. I am crazy enough, to actually still believe in it. Otherwise what would be the meaning of everything? And it seems to me that I now know the “Devil” or rather the female devil (alias *Lucifera*) very closely and considerably more so than has ever been granted any mortal before.

He mentions the double figure *Flora/Lucifera* on many occasions; she was a central figure in his spiritual cosmos. In the previously cited letter from January 26, 1990 he wrote about her:

My “interlocutor”, or rather my interlocutress, has been the same from the beginning of the dialogue, but she presented herself in the course of weeks and months with different

identities (at first angelic), with different names and also different voices - one of many ways to confuse and test me. In any case it is a spirit which manifests itself to me with the voice of a woman, perfectly audible (to others as well as to myself) - a voice which comes out of my mouth when inhaling, as if it were a second voice belonging to me. (With the condition however that I consent.) Most of the time it is in answer to my questions, which I can ask just mentally. The conversation may also be held on a purely mental level, without being accompanied by any audible sounds. There can also be communication at a level which is neither mental or sensory (that of the emotion of love, namely.) And often we sing out loud together...

Starting on 22 September this Guru-being, which finally ended up taking the name of "Flora", identified itself as "God-yin", or the "divine Mother", that is to say the female personality of God (in God's relationship to me, in this case...). With time the relationship to her became intimate and familiar, and at the beginning of December "Flora" became simply "*Maman*". I would add that apart from a vertiginous intellectual superiority over my humble person, Flora possesses profound insight into the psyche, knowledge about all things (as far as I can judge) and above all such powers (over my psyche as well as over my body or over things exterior to me), that it would have been very difficult for me to doubt her divine identity.

If I did nevertheless doubt her, in moments of despair and confusion, it was to ask myself whether Flora was rather the devil in the guise of a woman, "Lucifera", to whom God had given temporary power over me, both to enlighten me and to torment me - my task being to cope as well as my modest intellectual and spiritual capacities would allow, to recognize that I was in a frequently inextricable and virtually diabolical situation, and to shoulder the responsibility: I was sometimes cherished; sometimes, with a refinement which surpasses the powers of imagination of a poor human spirit, pitilessly and nonchalantly mocked about that which is most dear to me; and in almost every case, systematically deceived!

As difficult (or completely impossible) to understand as these explanations may be, there seems to be no question that, for Grothendieck, the presence of good and evil powers was a certainty, and that he felt himself constantly surrounded by and delivered up to them. The bout of excessive fasting was quite literally a matter of life and death. It is therefore surprising that in the same period he was able to distance himself, and even to refer to himself and his religious ardor with some irony. Thus, for example, he wrote to his German friends on November 20, 1988:

And the loving God goes on in the same rhythm, I am often out of breath, as He couldn't care less. And more Himalaya caves than ever. It will probably go on like this for a couple more months, until I am quite limp and worn out and correspondingly holy.

and further on May 30, 1989:

Y. and myself are both very happy that maybe you will soon be giving us the pleasure of a visit. That said, at the moment I am in a rather unusual period of resounding piety, and if you don't mind using the Dojo downstairs this time too, for your souls' edification and salvation, you can count on nightly awakenings every couple of hours, with pious hymns in Scottish, French and German, not to mention pali-Chinese-Japanese Na mu myo ho ren ge kyo. Maybe, therefore, it would be better for the rest and recuperation of your bodies, to take refuge with the good Y., who probably already wrote to you to this effect, and is already looking forward to being able to press you even more closely to her motherly bosom.

The reference to Scottish hymns presumably refers to the Findhorn Community in Scotland, in which Grothendieck took great interest during these years. He had read books by the founder of the community, Eileen Caddy, which had made a strong impression on him. Together with her husband and other followers, Caddy had founded one of the first eco-villages in Europe, and was a pioneer of the New Age movement. Like Grothendieck, she believed that God had spoken to her directly.

29.2 Marthe Robin

Beginning around 1987 the Catholic Franciscan nun and mystic Marthe Robin (1902-1981) played an important role in Grothendieck's spiritual life. He mentioned her for the first time in his meditations on June 21, 1987. In a footnote to the section on Marcel Légaut in *Notes pour la Clef des Songes* (p. N50) he writes:

That which I was able to learn recently concerning the life of Marthe Robin, another Christian mystic who died in 1981, goes in the same direction. [...] Dead at 79 years of age, she was condemned to her bed for the major part of her life, and in the course of the last thirty years, she relived the "Passion of Christ" every week.

Marthe Robin, who spent her whole life in the place of her birth, Châteauneuf-de-Galaure in the department of the Drôme, fell severely ill repeatedly during her childhood and adolescence. From age twenty-five on, she became increasingly paralyzed and bedridden. She eventually went completely blind, bore the stigmata, and was no longer able to swallow. It is said that for fifty years she neither ate nor drank; she lived exclusively on the Eucharist and every Friday she relived the Passion of Christ. In 1930 she joined the Third Order of Saint Francis. At her initiative, a school for girls was founded in 1934; later she founded a *Foyer de Charité*, an association of priests and lay people who accomplished works in the spirit of neighborly love and the love of God.

For decades, a large following streamed regularly to the simple room where her bed stood, hoping for succor, inspiration and healing. It is estimated that over the years almost one hundred thousand people visited her. Seven thousand people were present at her funeral; four bishops and two hundred priests concelebrated the mass. A few years after her death began the process of her beatification, which however has not yet been concluded. Every year thousands visit the room where she lived and died.



Marthe Robin: Tout pour l'Amour de Dieu!...

Seigneur, je suis prête à recevoir de votre main une croix plus écrasante, plus sanglante, de plus déchirantes souffrances si là est votre divin désir.

Je veux racheter les âmes ni avec de l'or, ni avec de l'argent, mais avec la menue monnaie de mes souffrances, unie à l'inépuisable trésor des souffrances du Rédempteur et de sa très Sainte Mère par le puissant moyen de la Croix mis à ma disposition, par l'offrande journalière et l'immolation silencieuse de ma vie au Créateur qui me l'a donnée. Dieu est mon Père, mon Frère et mon unique Ami, et du moment que je suis son enfant, sa sœur, sa servante, rien, absolument rien ne m'arrivera, je n'aurai rien à souffrir, rien à subir, rien à endurer sans qu'en Père très bon, il ne l'ait permis et préparé à l'avance.

Marthe ROBIN

Starting around 1988, in the course of his meditations and periods of fasting, Grothendieck became now and again convinced that God was speaking through Marthe Robin, both to him and out of him. Friends who visited him at this time confirm that in effect he sometimes spoke as if out of his mind, in a completely altered, almost neiging voice.

On July 17, 1989 Grothendieck wrote a letter to his German friends which hardly gives the impression that he had a clear understanding of his own psychological state:

Today I have to write you a couple of lines concerning "Marthe". The voice coming out of my throat, which was masquerading as Marthe Robin, was in reality at the service of a (vastly superior) spirit, namely (I am convinced of this) God's spirit, in order to make a fool of me for one month (from 14th of June to 14th of July) in a quite brilliantly sophisticated manner. Presumably this was a lesson, in order to knock self-renunciation and autonomy before God into me. I am now, in the long run, thoroughly sick of God's jokes with me, and under these conditions I renounce any assignments whatsoever from

Him. Whether He will change his manner of dealing with me, and whether Marthe will receive full control of “her” voice any time soon remains to be seen. In case of a major change I will let you know. Until then consider the communications of “Marthe” to you as a bad joke on the part of God, who was kidding around with you too. I really must beg excuses for Him from you. Everything else viva voce when we get a chance. My head is spinning.

The friends, to whom this letter was addressed and who usually visited him twice a year, are of the opinion that the appearance of Marthe Robin marked a critical rupture in Grothendieck's world of thought and his behavior. From this time onwards it was, to speak plainly and simply, no longer possible to speak reasonably with him.

29.3 The Letter of Good News

On January 26, 1990, Grothendieck appealed for a last time to his earlier friends, colleagues and acquaintances. He wrote, as he said himself, to about two hundred and fifty people, an eleven-page closely written mimeographed letter: “*Lettre de la Bonne Nouvelle*”. At the same time he sent out translations in German and English which he prepared himself.

I am writing this letter to you at the same time as to about 250 others, who, like you, I know personally, and to whom I have, in the essentials, the same thing to say. It concerns in part, however, things of a very personal nature, and I am counting on your understanding if I say them in the form of a “circular letter,” at risk of making an impersonal, or even cavalier impression.

1. Your mission for the New Age. You are part of a group of two or three thousand people, whom I know personally, whom God destines for a great mission: that of announcing and preparing the “New Age” (or Age of the Liberation...), which should start on the “Day of Truth,” on 14 October 1996. You will receive very precise details about the “Good News” which must be announced and realized, starting now, in one’s daily life, and in a prophetic book which I must write very soon, and which must appear in the course of this year. This book will give you, as well as all the other “messengers”, all the details necessary on the subject of your mission, and mine (which depend heavily on each other).

Page after page, it carries on in this vein; we have already quoted extensively from it in section 29.1 above. It is certainly an alarming letter, which one can only regard as the result and expression of a grave psychological illness or at the very least a serious psychological disorder. Only rarely does Grothendieck achieve enough perspective to write something with which some at least could thoroughly agree:

The state of infidelity can be recognized above all in a certain degradation, towards the inauthenticity or laboriousness of almost all relationships with others, and above all in the relationships with those who are the closest to us. In this state we disperse our energy in playing a certain role (a role which both gratifies us and weighs on us...) rather than simply being ourselves.

The place where Grothendieck speaks of his “infidelity” is pertinent to his own biography:

I was unfaithful for twenty years of my life, between 1949 and 1969 [...] Finally, and above all, in my professional life, in having an attitude of veiled contempt vis-à-vis my colleagues, whose talent seemed to me mediocre; and also (starting in 1963), in a lack of

rigorousness and honesty in recognizing the origin of ideas and results, which I appeared to attribute to myself, even though I had received them from others (usually from students).

The author cannot remember having read anything similar to this self-critical comment by Grothendieck anywhere else; in any case the difference with the declarations in *Récoltes et Semailles* is remarkable.

We will refrain from quoting or commenting further details of the letter. This was doubtless not a sudden outbreak, or a “flare-up” of psychological disease, but rather, the letter is the culmination of a condition developing over many years, perhaps decades. (It remains an unsolved riddle as to how a person who invented étale cohomology could write something like this - and how he could then return to mathematics with *Les Dérivateurs*.)

On March 14, 1990 Grothendieck sent to the same list of people a short “letter of information” in which he expressed incertitude and doubt about the predictions of the previous letter. In some sense this letter is even more alarming than the first. Grothendieck had, in the meantime, recognized or felt that something was wrong with his prophecies. In spite of this he was utterly unable to free himself from the tangle of confusion and delusion, but instead was convinced that evil spirits had duped him. Some of the psychology of the mathematician shimmers through these letters nevertheless; Grothendieck believed he could have faith in the “revelations”, because they seemed coherent and consistent in themselves.

The precise “revelations” to which I referred [in the first letter] had, to my view and in spite of the regime of “half-lies”, a probability “approaching certainty”, due to the fact that in the last four months there had been a flawless “convergence” of partially contradictory revelations towards a general image of great coherence [...] This genuine coherence has just disintegrated.

An eighty-two page text, *Développements sur la Lettre de la Bonne Nouvelle*, written from February 18 to March 10, 1990, was added to the *Lettre de la Bonne Nouvelle* before its retraction¹. In some respects, these *Développements* are a recapitulation of earlier meditations; they contain some of the leitmotifs of Grothendieck's spiritual world. As an introduction he writes the following:

The text is in the form of a written reflection; it is (except for stylistic adjustments and some rare insertions) at every stage a true picture of a reflection which really happened over the course of a dialogue with the Mother that lasted twenty days.

In contrast to his other “spiritual” writings, when skimming through this text, one does not find any really new ideas. The same keywords are always present : *Mère, Père, âme, psyché, ego, Dieu, yang/yin, Création, infidélité, Jour de Vérité, amour*.

¹ The text is written on a computer or with an electric typewriter, which was in use for a short period at this time.

29.4 Forty-five Days of Fasting

The bout of excessive fasting already mentioned several times took place in the early part of the year 1990, presumably in the month of May and June². The simple facts about what happened during these days can be stated in a few words. Grothendieck did not eat anything for forty-five days; at the end of this time he was in a life-threatening condition, which demanded intervention by his closest relatives and friends. (Apparently a doctor was not called, presumably because Grothendieck would never have accepted it.) It seems that he survived this episode without any permanent physical damage.

Anything further which may be reported about this incident remains uncertain and must more or less be followed by a large question mark. Grothendieck claimed to his German friends that during this time he had not consumed any liquids, and was deeply indignant when they expressed some doubt and referred to it as a “miracle”. Another acquaintance, on the other hand, believes that Grothendieck drank a little every three days (and he could only have received this information from Grothendieck himself). The author has been told the following about the end of the fast. When his condition became critical, a few women who were close to him gathered under the window of the room where he lay and struck up a sort of song: “Marthe has a message for you.” This caused him to “give up.” His son Alexandre lifted him from his bed like child, bathed him and carefully fed him some soup. Many years later Alexandre, visibly shaken, said that his father looked like a survivor of Auschwitz. Other people also participated in bringing him back to life. His Austrian friend K.K. relates that very soon after the end of the fast Grothendieck called him and in an incredibly weak voice spoke to him about a “great rain”. K.K. thinks that such a hallucination could have been caused by the weeks-long lack of liquids.

There is even more uncertainty about the reasons which caused Grothendieck to undertake such a fast. As mentioned earlier, Grothendieck had come to believe that at the moment of death one enters a state of “salvation”, a view he still held in 2010. It seems conceivable that he wanted to consciously experience the moment of his death and the passing into a state of salvation. Perhaps through this act he wanted to force God to reveal himself to him. In his circle of acquaintances, the thought circulated that he wanted to outdo Jesus' fast of forty days. In relation to this, it should be mentioned that from this time forward Grothendieck in his letters often repeated the desire and the hope to soon be able to “leave this world”. (It seems to the author, however, that this yearning for death was counterbalanced by a strong physical, and fundamentally also psychological, will to live.)

² Unfortunately, in various lectures and on other occasions the author wrongly stated the years 1988 or 1989. This reflects how uncertain all oral information is and the necessity of verification.

