

A Narrative of Death and Resurrection: Emplotment and Decadence in Nineteenth- Century French Catholic Ideology

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Setting out across the Algerian plains in the autumn of 1837, Jean-Joseph François Poujoulat came across the remains of a Christian church in the north-eastern town of Thibilis. The province of Guelma in which Thibilis was located had once been the bishopric of Saint Possidius, a student and biographer of Saint Augustine during the period of Roman rule over North Africa. Experiencing a sensation of awe at the sight of this Christian vestige, Poujoulat could only bow respectfully before the “venerable debris,” observing the crumbling edifice in a meditative silence. Turning his gaze to the sky, he noted vultures circling about in a vertiginous gyre. “They represented the sense of complete destruction,” he later remarked, “on this earth where the long empire of barbarism had devastated all.”¹

A Catholic historian with a profound interest in the Christian world of late Antiquity, Poujoulat was quite familiar with the fate that Maghrebin Christianity had met during the Middle Ages when barbarian hordes and zealous Bedouins ravaged North Africa and subjected it to the “immobile destiny” of Islam, as he put it.² Yet despite the historical context which framed Poujoulat’s observations, the sense of “complete destruction” he acknowledged while gazing upon the landscape was not unique to North Africa. French Catholics hardly had to cross the Mediterranean to find Christian ruins in the early nineteenth century. “During the Revolution,” as the novelist Prosper Mérimée explained in 1834, “war was declared on all figures made of flesh just as it was on those made of stone, or at least those decorating churches.”³ Espousing a militant anti-clerical platform in the early 1790s, radical revolutionaries had carried out a reign of terror

1. Jean-Joseph François Poujoulat, *Études africaines* (Paris: Comon, 1847), 2:27–28.

2. Jean-Joseph François Poujoulat, *Voyage en Algérie* (Paris: Vermot, 1861), 7, 59.

3. Prosper Mérimée, *Notes de Voyage* (Paris: Adam Brio, 2003), 49.

on religious buildings and icons in France in an effort to destroy the nation's Catholic heritage. Visiting the cathedral of Saint-Denis which had been subject to pillaging and iconoclasm, the poet René François de Chateaubriand confessed that the cathedral's marred gothic façade evoked memories of the extreme "destruction" wrought by the Revolution. Passing by the vandalized crypts which housed the tombs of the French kings, the poet claimed he was descending "into the empire of ruins" where the wreckage of France's Catholic and monarchical past was evident for all to see.⁴

Historians have often noted that the Revolution constituted a traumatic experience for French Catholics who witnessed republicans violently attack the two most sanctified pillars of the social order, the monarchy and Church. As Peter Fritzsche has indicated, the harrowing events of the Revolution encouraged conceptions of rupture and discontinuity between the past and present which engendered nostalgic and often pessimistic outlooks among Catholic émigrés that nurtured desires for a return to a lost and mythic past.⁵ In his tirade against liberals and radicals favorable to the ideals of the Revolution, the Catholic polemicist Louis Veillot chided militants for denying France its proper Christian heritage, seething, "you represent a new France or rather a France against the grain which is severed from its great forbearers and which, in its turn, is unrecognizable to our ancestors."⁶ Staunch Catholic critics like Veillot frequently missed the irony that their own identity was rooted in recognizing the detestable Revolution as a *fait accompli* and keeping its memory alive.⁷ References to the destruction and devastation perpetrated by revolutionaries became a hallmark of Catholic discourse in the immediate post-revolutionary period, according to Darrin McMahon, transforming destroyed churches and sites of worship into

4. François-René de Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, trans., Charles I. White (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976), 523–24.

5. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

6. Louis Veillot, "A qui sont les glories de la France?" *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: P. Lethelleux, 1935), 32:251.

7. See François Furet, "The Tyranny of Revolutionary Memory," in Bernadette Fort, ed., *Fictions of the French Revolution* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

constant reminders of the errors that had led France down its wayward and iniquitous path.⁸

Yet the vistas of ravaged landscapes and ruination which permeated Catholic writing in the post-revolutionary period need not and should not be read in strictly reactionary terms. The narrative of modernity has often been construed through an idea of progress, whether in the guise of scientific positivism or Marxist socialism, both of which grew up during the nineteenth century.⁹ This narrative has, however, largely denied religious figures and thinkers a place in the making of modernity, primarily relegating them to inconsequential spectators much like rural peasants and colonial subjects. Perennially accused of harboring reactionary and “pre-modern” opinions, French Catholics have for the most part remained absent in the defining events of a modern French historiography organized around themes of increasing democratization, modernization and the emergence of a new imperial “civilizing mission.”¹⁰ This perception owes its saliency to historians and critics who have been eager to assert that the experience of the French Revolution left Catholics afflicted and inclined toward nostalgic, conservative and pessimistic outlooks, claims which tend to place surprisingly little currency in ideological interpretation.

As Ernesto Laclau has stated, ideology constitutes “a dimension which belongs to the structure of all possible experience.”¹¹ As it defines symbolic order, ideology produces a reality that constructs narrative and assigns meaning to both the present and the past while projecting itself towards the future.¹² Although Chateaubriand may have depicted a post-revolutionary present consumed by “puerile struggles,” “decay” and “numerous

8. Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 162–63.

9. In addition to the numerous works produced during the nineteenth century on this subject, see the scholarly studies: Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 144–76.

10. Works which have attempted to correct this perception, include: Steven D. Kale, *Legitimism and the Reconstruction of French Society, 1852–1883* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Paris capitale religieuse sous le Second Empire* (Paris: CERF, 2001); J.P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

11. Ernesto Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology,” *MLN* 112:3 (April 1997), 311.

12. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 56–57.

symptoms of decadence” these descriptions owed more to the idea of *décadence* familiar to French Catholic intellectuals than expressions of pessimistic despair and nostalgic longing for a lost past.¹³ Much like Hayden White’s critique of the nineteenth-century historical imagination, Catholic conceptions of the Revolution and the post-revolutionary milieu relied heavily upon “explanation by emplotment,” construing the revolutionary experience, impressions of the present and visions of the future through an overarching narrative structured around themes of death and rebirth culled from Christian humanism.¹⁴

The idea of decadence was not new to French thinkers of the nineteenth century and, indeed, possessed a long tradition rooted in modern European thought. Seeking to renew the traditions of Antiquity, the humanists of the fourteenth century constructed a meta-historical schema to explain the decline of the Classical World while setting the stage in their own period for its revival. Decadence, in this context, corresponded to a cyclical view of time and history that provided a means of attaching the past to the present through a process of incarnation. The notion of perennial return central to the outlooks of Renaissance humanists not only drew upon a rich and symbolic Christian discourse stressing notions of decay and resurrection but also harmonized a belief in progress with a notion of periodic decline, locating both within a larger historical process that was ultimately driving history forward. While certain periods may have been characterized by degeneration and dissolution, decadence nevertheless held out the eternal promise of a return or “rebirth.”¹⁵

Poujoulat summed up this decadent mentality perfectly when declaring that the march of history was marked by “a perpetual progress towards the good and perfection” in spite of being occasionally interrupted by “profound perturbations.”¹⁶ The Catholic poet and philosopher Pierre-Simon Ballanche proffered an organic metaphor in his analysis of social decline, claiming that, “the life of human societies, in their turn, resemble that of the individual.”

13. René François de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1973), 3:712–13.

14. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7–11.

15. Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 43–44; Pierre Chaunu, *Histoire et décadence* (Paris: Perrin, 1981), 52–60, 84.

16. Poujoulat, *Études*, 2:183.

Yet whereas “man eventually succumbed to old age, decrepitude, and death,” societies were, he contended, capable of “regeneration and rebirth to begin a new life” following a period of decomposition.¹⁷ For Catholics, the Revolution had sounded the death knell of an exhausted and effete society, with the years of violent struggle and destruction that followed signaling the first stages of the presaged rebirth of a new and rejuvenated world. “It is precisely because this present society is morbidified [*morbifique*] and dead,” opined the Catholic literary critic Antoine Madrolle in 1839, “that a new society is going to be born.”¹⁸ Yet between the traumas of the past and hope of the future, the present comprised a *mélange* of things dead and things yet to be, designating “a critical age of the human spirit,” in Ballanche’s estimation; “an epoch both winding down and renewing itself.”¹⁹

The attacks waged against throne and altar by the revolutionaries had effectively shattered the moral and intellectual center of society, leaving “a forlorn and destroyed world” in its wake, according to Ballanche.²⁰ “We no longer have that high idea of dignity which Christianity inspired in us,” Chateaubriand complained. The “articles of a contract” had come to replace the “sentiments of nature” in structuring social life, while “the law [was] universally made a substitute for morals.”²¹ Reflecting on the waning influence of religious authority over the course of the century, the legitimist Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet remarked in 1851, “Our society today is mired in evil. It has been progressively declining since Christianity no longer governs it.”²² Knowing neither the comfort of tradition nor the solace of God’s grace, man limped along his errant path, according to Veillot, afflicted by that “strange mix of blindness, fragility, violence, and misery that one calls the modern spirit.”²³ Amidst the landscape of ravaged churches and religious monuments symbolizing man’s wavering faith and the absence of spiritual and moral unity in society, man himself,

17. Pierre-Simon Ballanche, “Essai sur les institutions sociales,” *Œuvres* (Paris: Bureau de l’Encyclopédie de Connaissances Utiles, 1833), 2:41, 43.

18. A. M. Madrolle, *Tableau de la dégénération de la France, des moyens de sa grandeur, et d’une réforme fondamentale* (Paris: Aillaud, 1839), 173.

19. Ballanche, “Essai,” 2:73.

20. *Ibid.*, 2:87.

21. Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 502.

22. Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet, *De la restauration française* (Paris: Hervé, 1851), 347.

23. Veillot, “L’Esprit moderne,” *Œuvres complètes*, 32:448.

Chateaubriand declared, had become nothing more than “a decayed edifice,” a ruin.²⁴

If the present had “nothing but the image of annihilation” to offer French Catholics, this looming sense of destruction and anomie stemmed neither from a reactionary conservatism nor a longing for a lost and mythic Christian path associated with the Ancien Régime.²⁵ The recognition of absence and decay in the present served an important ideological function that predetermined certain Catholic outlooks to a large extent and structured their perceptions of historical and subjective experience. Using decadence as an interpretive framework, French Catholics were inclined to see a present marked by decomposition and decline as symptomatic of the ineluctable rebirth which was to follow. As Ballanche affirmed, the religious world was “working toward a new unity” as the old and moribund society proceeded to degenerate. “But,” he emphasized, “this future unity does not reside in an ephemeral reconstruction of the past.”²⁶ The task at hand, according to Chateaubriand, was to “reconstruct religion from its ruins.”²⁷ Just as it had during the period of Antiquity, Christianity would “unquestionably shed a new light upon mankind” and regenerate an effete society, giving new content and form to a dying and twilight world.²⁸ “A new Gospel is about to take birth forthwith,” Chateaubriand intimated, “placed far above the commonplaces of that conventional wisdom which arrests the progress of mankind and the rehabilitation of our poor bodies so sadly slandered by the soul.”²⁹ Like a vindicated Christ, the new Christian ethos would emerge from its tomb, arising “triumphant from the dreadful trial by which it [had] been purified.”³⁰

Employing this ideological discourse grounded in notions of death and impending resurrection, Catholic intellectuals invested religious ruins with a particular cultural significance, using them as both symbols to convey the moral and spiritual decadence of the present as well as invocations portending

24. Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 468.

25. Chateaubriand, *The Memoirs of Chateaubriand*, trans., Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Putnam, 1902), 6:158; Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 467.

26. Ballanche, “Réflexions diverses,” *Œuvres*, 6:343.

27. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires*, 3:732.

28. Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 679.

29. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires*, 3:689.

30. Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 684.

the Christian renaissance and spiritual unity ahead. As Susan Crane has argued, ruins constitute a representative object for memory, providing empty forms which are filled with meaning and designated as repositories of the past in the present.³¹ Yet if ruins furnish a tangible reference to an ostensibly authentic past, it is also important to recognize that the meaning associated with them is shaped and constructed through the discursive practices of the present, associating memory with what Matt Matsuda has identified as the “history of the present.”³² The panorama of half-raised cathedrals, gutted aristocratic chateaux and destroyed religious monuments populating the post-revolutionary landscape may have confirmed the agonizing sense of death and expiration which Catholics attributed to the present, but they equally possessed restorative and curative powers as well outside of their traumatic associations.

The debris of the past, as Ballanche explained in 1818, not only permitted one to reflect on distant historical epochs but to also “retrace a civilization which was no more and recall those memories which importune us.”³³ Leaving his diocese in the Marne to observe the work of French missions in North Africa during the 1840s, the Abbé Carron remarked on the evocative powers that the ruins in Constantine possessed while witnessing a memorial honoring Christian martyrs of the third century. As the celebration staged amongst the old churches and antique carvings of the city proceeded, “old memories mixed with current memories,” Carron noted, creating a temporal palimpsest which magically superimposed Africa’s remote Christian past onto the present.³⁴ Arriving in France’s new colony in the late 1830s, Poujoulat equally found the landscape of North Africa reminiscent of the past. “Since the day when I first set foot upon the soil of Algiers,” he later claimed, “the memories of the former Christian slaves came to me often.... I pondered over their hardships and sought out

31. Susan A. Crane, *Collecting and Historical Consciousness in Early Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 29–32.

32. Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, 177; Matt K. Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 16–17, 206.

33. Ballanche, “Essai,” 2:84.

34. Eustache-Alexander Carron, *Voyages en Algérie* (Châlons-sur-Marne: Laurent, 1859), 124–25.

their traces; I informed myself of the places which had been the particular spot of their sorrows.”³⁵

The Algerian terrain was dotted with the remains of a Christian world leveled by Muslim conquerors who, according to Poujoulat, had replaced the splendor and genius of Christian Africa with “agonies and ruins.”³⁶ Traveling from city to city, Poujoulat saw unfold before him a vista of ruins, abandoned monasteries, mosques which had once been churches and old burial grounds. With the curiosity of both the historian and archeologist, he habitually paused to observe crumbling edifices, tablets inscribed in Latin and Greek and the traces of Roman infrastructure buried beneath current Algerian settlements. In any given city, architectural remnants could be discovered strewn across the landscape like “gigantic bones protruding from beneath the earth.”³⁷ In the midst of a this landscape chronicling the death and destruction of Africa’s Christian heritage, Poujoulat confessed to being filled with a sentiment of ineffable “joy.” “Nothing is more touching and more beautiful than the vestiges of the former epoch of the Church of Africa,” he claimed, “monumental vestiges which have survived for twelve centuries during the ruin of African Catholicism.”³⁸

In these ruins, Africa’s Christian heritage became palpable and manifest despite the disparaging centuries of desuetude and Muslim domination. All one need do, Poujoulat implored, was “lend an ear to the debris in order to hear the noise of the past.”³⁹ Yet these echoes of the past also constituted the presaging sounds of the future, as France sought to “introduce life into the empire of death” by founding a new Church of Africa that would, Poujoulat proclaimed, mark “a marvelous step in the task of regenerating the African continent.”⁴⁰ Inscribed within the decadent Algerian landscape was a living history, an idea which transcended the ravages of time and pressed itself upon the horizon of the future. In spite of a past replete with devastation and ruin, the old Christian world came alive through these immemorial

35. Poujoulat, *Voyage*, 116.

36. Poujoulat, *Études*, 2:191–92.

37. Poujoulat, *Voyage*, 169.

38. Jean-Joseph François Poujoulat, *Histoire de Saint Augustin* (Paris: J. Labitte, 1845), xxxiv.

39. *Ibid.*, lviii.

40. Poujoulat, *Études*, 2:192; Poujoulat, *Voyage*, 21.

traces, providing France with an opportunity to “reconstruct the edifice of Christian faith” on the African continent.⁴¹

Poujoulat was one among a growing chorus of Catholics to impart a religious significance to France’s “civilizing mission” in Africa. Returning from a trip to Algeria in 1841, Veuillot readily encouraged French Catholics to consider emigrating to the new Mediterranean colony where they would spread the benefits of civilization and “re-conquer the tombs of their elders.”⁴² Framing France’s invasion of North Africa in terms of re-conquest or re-Christianization, religious colonial advocates and Catholic spokesmen frequently espoused a strong crusading rhetoric in articulating a new colonial identity for the nation.⁴³ Pressing the need for more missions on the continent, the priest Antoine Horner did not hesitate to refer to them as a “Catholic army... devoted to the moral conquest of our African possession.”⁴⁴ Disseminating “the great Christian idea” through its military, France was, in the opinion of one cleric, obliged to make the Orient accept the “regenerative gleam” which “the crescent of Muhammad” had extinguished.⁴⁵ More pragmatic, Henri Guys, a former diplomat who had served out his tenure in Lebanon during the 1840s, believed that the Muslim *indigènes* should be “won over to Christianity and, by consequence civilization,” and this objective, he affirmed, could only be realized through the “great zeal” of missionaries who “without any other resources than their bravery and beggar’s bag” traveled to distant parts of the globe “in the simple but beneficent grace of God.”⁴⁶

The most promising omen of France’s “civilizing” initiative remained, however, the churches and cathedrals being established in the colony. In any given Algerian city, newly-minted Christian iconography could be found adorning the minarets and walls of mosques while chiming bells summoned

41. Poujoulat, *Voyage*, 96.

42. Louis Veuillot, *Les français en Algérie: souvenirs d'un voyage fait en 1841* (Tours: Ad Mame, 1860), 53.

43. Annie Rey-Goldzeiguer, *Le Royaume Arabe: La politique algérienne de Napoléon III, 1861–1870* (Algiers: Société Nationale d’Edition et de Diffusion, 1977), 94–96.

44. R. P. Horner, *Voyage à la côte orientale d’Afrique pendant l’année 1866* (Paris: Gaume Frères, 1872), 13.

45. Antoine-François Arbousse-Bastide, *A propos de tou, quelque choses, ou mes impressions à Paris* (Paris: Meyrueis, 1857), 61.

46. Henri Guys, *Étude sur les mœurs des Arabes* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1866), 40–42.

the faithful to worship rather than the Islamic *adhān*. In 1841, the Abbé Bargès, a clerical official inspired by exalted dreams of France's spiritual mission in the world, extolled the opening of the Cathedral of Algiers, noting "a cross sits at the summit seeming to triumph over the thousand crescents which surround it on all sides."⁴⁷ Walking through the streets, Veuillot was ecstatic to hear Christian prayer emanating from a former mosque. Entering the building and noticing crucifixes hanging upon walls covered with Islamic script, he proclaimed that his heart was overcome with "the most profound emotions of the past" in seeing "the emblem of its old masters' faith" spread throughout the church's interior.⁴⁸

Attending mass in a former mosque while visiting Constantine, Poujoulat prayed for the city to "recover its Christian splendor of the fourth century."⁴⁹ Prayer was, however, secondary to the work of converting churches, founding missions and preserving the "venerable debris" which would provide the foundation of the foreordained New Church of Africa under French patronage. "You have been liberated from your tomb by the genius and faith of my country," Poujoulat commented, addressing the envisaged Church; "I am overjoyed to see you reborn under the French flag."⁵⁰ According to Poujoulat's travel accounts, his convictions were reinforced through divine injunction. While slumbering in the Algerian desert one night, he claimed to have a dream in which Saint Augustine appeared before him. "Christian Africa was sleeping in its tomb," the saint informed him; "France has sounded the trumpet of its resurrection."⁵¹

Like various Catholic intellectuals of the period, Poujoulat was predisposed to see an Algerian landscape of profound debris and emergent potential, exhibiting a worldview and ideology which interpreted the present as a wasteland of decay and wreckage. The copious ruins found in North Africa opened up a living past, however, establishing a context for themes of decadence and ruination predicated upon a familiar narrative of death and resurrection. In his reflection on ruins, Ballanche had once observed that "a

47. Abbé Bargès, "Notice sur la Cathédrale d'Alger en 1839," *Journal Asiatique* (Paris: Dondey-Dupré, 1841), 2:183.

48. Veuillot, *Les français en Algérie*, 63.

49. Poujoulat, *Études*, 2:56.

50. *Ibid.*, 2:182.

51. Poujoulat, *Voyage*, 345.

melodious voice seems to emanate continually from all this debris and give a prestigious new existence to the creations of genius.”⁵² The melodious voices that attracted Poujoulat were the echoes of a Christian world buried in the Algerian desert, a premonitory murmuring in which the exalted future of France’s colonial destiny could be discerned.

For pro-imperial Catholic ideologues like Poujoulat, France remained a “*pays missionnaire*” in spite of the devastating blow delivered by the Revolution to France’s Catholic identity and past. With the seizure of North Africa from the Ottomans, providence had called upon the French people to propagate Christianity’s “civilizing” influence across an Orient despoiled by Islamic tyranny and barbarism. Such messianic convictions were, however, persistently coupled with anxieties concerning the waning authority and influence of Catholicism at home in the years following the French Revolution. In 1814, Chateaubriand contemplated the frightening possibility of a world devoid of religious sentiments, lamenting, “Christianity falls day by day.”⁵³ Confronted with a nominally secular French state and education curriculum throughout the nineteenth century, Catholics were prompted to organize just as many *missions à l’intérieur* as missions abroad in an effort to re-Christianize the metropole.⁵⁴ As one clerical education inspector insisted as late as 1859, Catholics still needed to propagate “healthy and religious ideas” throughout French communities in order to produce “docile children ... [and] Christians faithful to God.”⁵⁵ Undertaking a “civilizing mission” to re-conquer the French hexagon and resurrect Christianity from its ruins, Algeria became an important canvas on which Catholics were capable of affirming, representing and celebrating a national religious identity that was becoming increasingly questionable as the years went on and the irrevocable achievements of the French Revolution became manifest.

Inspired by convictions that religion alone nurtured the spiritual and moral unity capable of “renewing the original energy of society,” Catholic intellectuals perpetually saw a present pregnant with internecine struggle and

52. Ballanche, “Essai,” 2:52.

53. René François de Chateaubriand, *De l’Ancien Régime au Nouveau Monde: Écrits politique*, ed., Jean-Paul Clément (Paris: Hachette, 1987), 270.

54. Mathew Borrows, “‘Mission civilisatrice’: French Cultural Policy in the Middle East, 1860–1914,” *The Historical Journal*, 29:1 (March 1986), 117.

55. AN F 17 9327, Abbé Hébert-Duperron, “Rapport sur la situation de l’instruction primaire dans le département du Jura” (1858–1859).

scenes of destruction while invoking images of a renewed and harmonious future social order inspired by the genius of Christian civilization.⁵⁶ This vision acquired a saliency among religious officials and activists through appeals to a Catholic memory and past which, when coupled with a traditional discourse culled from philosophical decadence and Christian humanism, invested ruins with a new cultural significance and meaning. Remains and vestiges symbolized the promise of fulfillment which could not be realized in the immediate present, constituting that “absent fullness” which Laclau claims is endemic to ideological discourse.⁵⁷ In structuring a horizon of meaning that was projected onto the self and society, French Catholic ideology defined itself through the recognition of deficiency and absence in the present while sketching the contours of a future which it sought to deliver as Christianity was “reconstructed” from its ruins. The mournful and elegiac sentiments that permeated Catholic discourse constructed a vision of the present which subsequently rationalized this ideological-determined future, giving rise to a descriptive language and outlook that emphasized and even exaggerated prevailing impressions of decay, decline and decomposition.

This denouement is neither to suggest that the pessimism and anguish expressed by Catholic intellectuals in the post-revolutionary period was disingenuous nor that it was the product of an ideology with explicitly political motives. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, reality cannot reproduce or represent itself without ideological mystification, entailing that ideology is written into the very essence of reality and lived experiences. An ideology is only “holding us” when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality.⁵⁸ With its slumbering ruins and sites of destruction exhibiting the “numerous symptoms of decadence” characterizing the period, the post-revolutionary landscape encountered by French Catholics was both a reality and fantasy replete with totemic reminders and imaginative symbols. In order to resurrect an injured Christian world spirit from its ashes and restore it to its proper place at the center of society it was essential to acknowledge a present populated with ruins and impending portents of

56. Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 678.

57. Jeffery Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 115; Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology,” 310–11.

58. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 28, 49.

death, for as Nietzsche once claimed “only where there are tombs are there resurrections.”⁵⁹

59. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans., Thomas Common (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 76.

