LETTER X
The Hanged Man, Arcanum of Faith
Le Pendu

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As we move into the second half of the Major Arcana, we are greeted by the first of several difficult images. After the Hanged Man, we will encounter such challenging and even frightening images as Death, the Devil, the Tower (known in the Marseille Tarot as *La Maison Dieu*, the House of God, but called "the Tower of Destruction" by our author). Granted, some of the most beautiful of Tarot images, like serene Temperance, The Sun, and The World, are also still to come. It's as if the Tarot's progression leads us into a more sharply delineated headspace where the highs are higher — but the lows are most definitely lower.

On the surface, The Hanged Man is clearly an image of violence. The hapless subject of this arcanum most certainly did not place himself in this precarious position! He is either the victim of some sort of crime, or — to my mind, just as awful — the recipient of some sort of extreme punishment. Even though as an American I live in a country where capital punishment is still meted out, we have locked it away behind prison walls and it is typically carried out in a clinical context, the condemned person strapped to a medical gurney while syringes pump poisons into their body. As I write these words, I know it is no less horrible a death than what is meted out at the gallows. But just as we have hidden the slaughter of animals away from most people, likewise we have made it easy for average citizens to ignore the violence of executions by the secluded and dispassionate manner in which they are carried out.

But *Le Pendu* takes us back not only to a time of more visceral forms of violence, but also more public — executions at the gallows were often public spectacles, a sad legacy continued by the 2006 hanging of war criminal Saddam Hussein, whose execution was accompanied by men jeering him (and this caught on cellphone video). Indeed countries like Iraq, Bangladesh, and Japan continue to execute criminals at the gallows — each of those countries have had hangings in 2022.

Then there is the grisly cousin of hanging — lunchings, a form of vigilante violence associated in the American South with racism since most victims of lynching were black or Jewish and most perpetrators were white. Lynching erases the lines separating execution from murder from sheer terrorism.

So with this horrific background, why does our author proclaim that The Hanged Man is the arcanum of *faith*?

Two thoughts are worth considering. The first, which our author explores at some length, has to do with the fact that The Hanged Man is suspended by his foot; in other words, he is upside down. In his uniquely imaginative way of reading the cards, the author describes the man as subject to a different kind of *gravitation* — a "spiritual gravitation" that pulls one *heavenward*, just as the physical gravitation of the earth pulls us toward the ground. Clearly, The Hanged Man is still subject to the inescapable force of earthly gravitation, or else the body would not suspended as it is. But our author goes on to remind us that the earth is not the center of material gravity after all, since the earth revolves around the sun; and this allows him to speculate on the nature of other "gravities" that are not physical in origin. "For what is the phenomenon of religion if not the manifestation of spiritual gravitation towards God, i.e. towards the centre of spiritual gravitation of the world? It is significant that the term 'the Fall'—chosen for the primordial event which brought about the change of man's state from that named "paradise" to the terrestrial state of toil, suffering and death—is borrowed from the domain of *gravitation*. In fact, there is nothing against the conception of the Fall of Adam as the passage from a spiritual gravitational system, whose centre is God, to a terrestrial gravitational system, whose centre is the serpent… The Fall, as a phenomenon, can certainly be understood as the passage from the one gravitational field to the other" (page 306).

The author goes on to note that "The Hanged Man represents the condition of one in the life of whom gravitation from above has replaced that from below… attraction from above is as real as that from below… This is at one and the same time a benefaction and a martyrdom; both are very real" (page 307).

Which leads us to our second thought here. The author imagines that The Hanged Man is not so much a punished criminal as a *martyr*. The word martyr literally means "witness," although we typically use it in a narrow way to describe someone who suffers or dies for their beliefs. Thus, we think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Oscar Romero as martyrs, but not Dorothy Day or Mother Teresa; even though these women were arguably just as powerful witnesses to the Christian faith as these men, the fact that the men died

violently by those who opposed or even hated their faith gives them a status that is denied to those who die serenely.

The ancient Celtic Christians were among the few followers of Jesus who understood martyrdom in its broad sense, and so in the literature of Celtic Christianity you can find references to red martyrdom, green martyrdom and white martyrdom. Red martyrs, of course, are those who shed blood for their faith, whereas white martyrs are those who express their faith by becoming exiles or pilgrims, and green (also known as blue) martyrs are simply those who commit to lives of penance and renunciation (in this sense, Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day would both qualify as green martyrs).

Nevertheless, our popular sense of martyrdom remains what it is, and for most people, martyrs are not martyrs until or unless they die, or at least suffer, for their faith (one Orthodox mystic, Maximus the Confessor, had his tongue cut out for his beliefs, but he was not killed; therefore he is known as a "confessor" but not a "martyr"!).

As our author explores his reflections on The Hanged Man, he considers faith from a variety of perspectives. He points out that Jesus walked on water (and Peter, too, at least until he doubted) because of faith. He quotes the Letter to the Hebrews, with its famous definition of faith as "the firm assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). He invokes Abraham as the paragon of faith as a key to spiritual obedience, and discusses the raptures of the mystic Teresa of Ávila to suggest that faith involves the union of the human and divine will. And even though the word "confidence" is derived from faith (confidence literally means "with faith"), our author parses out distinctions between faith as a supernatural grace and earthly expressions of confidence and trust, such as we might bestow upon our doctor or some other human authority or expert. We can trust a benevolent leader like Pope Francis but we only place faith in God, for such faith is only possible by the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Eventually the author simply ignores the violence in the image and simply focuses on the depiction of The Hanged Man as *one who is upside down*. We might take a sneak peek to Arcanum XXI, The World, which depicts a partially nude feminine figure dancing, upright, but her legs in a position similar to that of The Hanged Man: left leg extended, right leg bent at the

knee, behind the left. So we may consider that the "faith" which characterizes this upside down man ultimately finds its fulfillment in the joyful dance of the innocent figure representing The World. "The conviction of things not seen."

But that conviction in the unseen takes place in the here and now, where The Hanged Man is not only upside down, but stock — constrained, immobilized. Our author makes his case that Christian Hermeticists are "faith-ful" in this way. "Now, practical Hermeticism is—like Christian mysticism—based on the experience of authentic faith, i.e. the experience of the human being upside down, where the will is above intellectuality and imagination. Its practical aim is nevertheless to render the intellect and imagination equal companions of the will favoured by revelation from above" (page 322).

Hermeticists, like mystics (and we may assume, contemplatives in general) are those who prioritize the will (the capacity to give and receive love) above the imagination (the capacity to remember to create) and the intellect (the capacity to reason and discern). This is meaningful when we consider the symbolize associated with the chakras, the energy centers along the spine as understood by yoga and Ayurvedic medicine and embraced by many systems of esoteric and occult thought. Of the seven chakras ranging from the base of the spine to the apex of the skull, the third chakra (at the solar plexus) governs the will, the fourth chakra (at the heart) governs love, the fifth chakra (at the throat) governs creativity, while the sixth and seventh chakras (at the third eye and the crown) govern the imagination and the intellect. In other words, in a the right-side up human being, the will is foundational or beneath the imagination and the intellect; but in the upside down posture of The Hanged Man, the will (and love) are re-oriented in a superior position, closer to the "heavenly gravity" that pulls them toward God (above).

There are certainly problems with a cosmology that insists on placing God "above" — the author admits that a world-view that places spirituality "above" the material world can be distorted into dualism: "The Manichaeans straight away drew the conclusion from this that the invisible world, or heaven, is good and the visible world of Nature is bad, wholly forgetting the fact that evil is of spiritual origin, and is therefore invisible, and that good is impressed into created Nature, and is therefore also visible" (page 306). For

our purposes, this is an important reminder that *Meditations on the Tarot*, more than anything else, is an exercise of the mystical imagination: it offers many insights into the inner life, but we need to remember that it is one person's fascinating but idiosyncratic reading of the spiritual life, and therefore subject to all of his biases and limitations.

What to Look for in Letter XII:

As you read through Letter XII, here are some points that might be helpful for you as you seek to enter deeper into the wisdom of relationship between faith and the three faculties of reason, understanding, and the will.

1. On page 306, the author suggests that there are at least three types of gravitation: "physical, psychic and spiritual." Each represents a "centre" and the spiritual life, or the "domain of freedom" is "found placed between two gravitational fields with two different centres."
2. The Desert Fathers and held up as examples of Christians who orient their lives toward "attraction from above." The author compares the spirituality of the desert to yoga (page 307).
3. Jesus walking on water, and the levitation of saints like Teresa of Ávila, are offered as examples of individuals whose lives are more fully oriented toward spiritual gravitation.
4. On pages 309-310 the author reflects on the distinction between "It is I" and "I Am" as ways in which Jesus identifies himself. However, he acknowledges that in Greek, these are functionally the same sentences. So when Jesus says "It is I," we may think of him as saying "I am," thus: "I am, so do not be afraid" which is English may be more clearly expressed as "It is I; do not be afraid."
5. Page 311: drawing a distinction between *ecstasy* (moving out of one's humanity), *nirvana* (a pure passionlessness or calm) and *enstasy* (Jesus as being fully incarnate, fully present in his body and therefore fully available to those he accompanies).
6. Page 314-5: comparing earthly gravitation to *enfoldment* and spiritual gravitation to *radiation*. "Terrestrial gravitation, 'the flesh', pushes mankind towards the ideal of enfoldment, i.e. possession, power and enjoyment, whilst celestial gravitation, 'the spirit', draws mankind towards the ideal of radiation, i.e. poverty, obedience and chastity."
7. "The will is an active force; it is not naturally an organ of perception. In order for it to be able to perceive it should not—it must not—become passive, for then it would fall asleep or fade away, because its very nature is activity, and in ceasing to be active it would cease to be will; no, it should change centre of gravitation, i.e. to transform '*my* will' into '*thy* will'. It is the inner act of love alone which can

accomplish the change of centre that the will uses or around which it gravitates. Instead of gravitating around the centre 'me', it can orientate itself towards the centre 'you'. This transformation, effected by love, is what one calls 'obedience"' (page 317). This idea of the perceptive capacity of the will relates to the idea, now being taken seriously by some neurologists, that the heart has its own capacity for cognition that is more intuitive and feeling-based than the discursive reason of the brain.

8. Page 319-320: the author's description of how practical Hermeticism educates the intellect and the imagination to conform to the God-centered will is an invitation into the content-rich dimension of Christian spirituality known as kataphatic prayer.
9. The author draws a distinction between "formal logic" and "moral logic" (pages 322-323); moral logic could be defined as the capacity for reasoning and discernment as informed by conscience.
10. The author relates the number of this arcanum (12) to the signs/houses of the Zodiac. By equating the will with the Zodiac (the celestial firmament), reason with the sun, and the imagination with the moon, he makes the case that we are called to "sacrifice" the powers of our soul to heaven (page 324).
11. Page 328: "The certainty of faith springs from the actual meeting with truth and its persuasive and transforming action, whilst that of certainty due to sound reasoning is only a degree—raised to a greater or lesser extent—of *semblance of the truth*, because it depends on the validity of our reasoning, and on the completeness and exactness of the elements which serve as its basis." In other words, we need to understand the difference between the "certainty of faith" as a supernatural grace, and the "certainty of reasoning" which is a purely human capability. According to the author, human reasoning can still be subject to doubt, whereas supernatural faith is beyond all doubt.
12. On pages 332 and 333, the author extensively quotes St. Teresa of Ávila to illustrate the difference between *intellectual vision* and *imaginative vision* — a distinction grounded in the idea of the three faculties of memory, understanding and will, which has its origin in the trinitarian thought of St. Augustine. In our day, because we do not typically think of the mind in terms of different "faculties," we do not typically think of visions in terms of categories like this. Perhaps this can help us to understand the experience of visionary writers, not only like Teresa, but also Julian of Norwich, all the way down to contemporary figures like Thomas Merton or Caryll Houselander (for example, Merton's street corner epiphany could be described as an intellectual vision, while Houselander's vision of Christ as a Russian Icon in the sky is an imaginative vision).
13. "'Hallucination' and 'illusion' are not synonyms." In other words, an imaginative vision is a "hallucination of the truth" (page 336).

14. Page 337: If we have authentic faith, we do not need to scorn anything or reject anything. Faith "renders everything truly useful" and gives everything "value which they would not have without it." Is this the author's attempt to describe a Christian experience of nonduality? In other words, through the grace of supernatual grace, we are capable of seeing all things as having ultimate value in the light of God's grace and love and mercy.

Questions for personal reflection (and, if you wish, communal discussion on our Course Forum):

1. **On page 306, the author suggests that gravitation in its various forms "determines our freedom, i.e. what we are able and not able to do." What do you believe is the relationship between faith and freedom? Does the gift of faith make us more free, or less free? In what ways does faith impact our freedom? How does the author's idea of different types of "gravitation" help to explain both the scope and the limitation of human freedom?**
2. **Consider the distinction between "radiation" and "enfoldment" (page 314f). Radiation implies generosity and hospitality, while enfoldment implies withdrawal, seclusion and miserliness. But is there a way in which enfoldment is spiritually nourishing, and is there a "shadow side" to radiation?**
3. **By drawing a distinction between the "certainty of faith" and the "semblance of truth" (page 328), our author suggests that faith, as a supernatural grace, is beyond doubt. Does this make sense to you? Do you experience faith as the absence of doubt, or do you find that doubt is an appropriate companion to your faith?**
4. **On page 335, the author enjoins us to "be attentive to your heart and towards the nuances of intimate warmth which arises from its depths! Who knows who may go on his way with you without your eyes and your understanding surmising it?" How can we do this? Is this similar to the practice of Centering Prayer as a way to "consent to God's presence and action within"? Can you think of other ways to be attentive to your heart?**