

2015 - Issue Four

Rediscovering the “Language of Wood”: Why Can’t We Just Substitute “Be Fruitful and Multiply” with “Connect and Download”?

FABRICE HADJADJ

The plough is [no longer] worthy of any honor, our lands [are] neglected, robbed of farmers, and the curved pruning-hooks [are] beaten into solid blades. (Virgil, Georgics, I, 506-508)

Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. (Isaiah 2: 3-4)

It may be that we have not so much lost the spirit as matter. It may be that the loss of meaning we talk so much about today is not the loss of the meaning of spirit, so much as that of matter.

When someone loses the spirit, there is still his body, his body which remains as an anchor, an access point, the hope of a return: the hope that he be reborn, that through contact with the flesh and the senses, he return present to the world, to his neighbor, to everything that is offered to him. But when someone loses matter, when a man, who is not an angel, leaves the body, when a man, who is not a beast but always still an animal, and not a pure spirit, when a man becomes disincarnate, and tries to dematerialize, what is left for us to take him by the hand? What is left for us to embrace him? What is left for us to touch him, for the warmth, for the simple presence without words? So maybe he has not so much lost the spirit, as the base of his spirit, the anchorage of his spirit: the weight, the thickness, the concreteness, the sensitivity, the touch, and, I would even say, the fabric of his spirit.

The fact that we have lost touch with materiality can be seen in a particular way in the modern university.

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The modern university is scientifically, voluntarily, ostentatiously a block of glass and functional cement. Its high-tech structure, connected through and through to the future, rises with pride. We make jokes about the old stone as with so many *stelae* of the past. This functionality, experts tell us, is the best thing for teaching: it is apt for electric sound, for a smart board, for an uninterrupted network with a search engine that delivers all the texts and images of the cultural and scientific inheritance in two clicks. We are in the *e-school* which practices *e-learning* in view of an enhanced humanity, humanity with a boost.

But you see immediately that in such a context the very nature of teaching changes. What is presented on your screen are not the works, but the scanned images of the works: a Pietà without marble, a Sistine Chapel without the chapel, a *Summa Theologica* reduced to a sum of formulas; a *Divine Comedy* without the time and space that would allow for a real—vocal—unfolding of its *canti*. Teaching has at this point been reduced to the transmission of information, and no longer opens us to the truth of things.

Indeed in order to begin to open ourselves to the truth of things we would have to be surrounded by things that invite us to do so through their density. In order to open ourselves to the truth of things, we would have to be surrounded by things which, by their very hospitality and beauty, make us consider things with respect. Some might think that there is no difference between the library of Trinity College and a database. One might argue that the database is more useful, because it can be carried in a pocket on a USB stick or on an external hard drive. But can you live in an external hard drive? With the library, there is the large park outside, the useless vastness of the halls and of the large windows, the humble solemnity of the slabs of rock which hold the memory of the forests, the hammered leather of the bindings which preserve the memory of the animals, and the physical closeness of the teacher, the physical closeness of that fellow-student or of that pretty co-ed we don't know; and then the pen, the ink, the heavy paper which forces us not to waste and on which we cannot write just anything: all things which don't serve us in our work, which don't provide information for our topic of research, but which sustain us in our presence to the world, and which remind us of the generous density of existence.

The voice amplified with the microphone and not with the nobility of the place and of the materials that provide the shield for the human voice, the amplified voice in a functional space has already lost its authentic range. There is no longer the table of the *Symposium* nor the garden of Epicurus, nor the room of the Academy with a sanctuary dedicated to Athena, nor the boulevards of the Lyceum where Aristotle taught walking, nor that portico of the stoics where a fresco recounts the battle of Marathon. Above all, there is no longer that boat on the shores of Lake Tiberias, nor the mountain of the Sermon on the Mount, nor the colonnades of the Temple nor the house of the Upper Room where I imagine a very simple and beautiful drape made of lamb's wool. The words might be the same, but you don't hear them in the same way any longer. They are no longer surrounded by the same things; they no longer keep company with the same imagination: because imagination constitutes the borderline for a creature who is at once rational and animal. The imagination constitutes the hinge that joins our intelligence and our senses. When the Sermon on the Mount is recaptured in a block of cement, when the *Symposium* is explained from a lectern and students are tested on it with a quiz, when the *Nichomachean Ethics* are divided up on a slide in a Powerpoint presentation, the words are perhaps the same, but the meaning is changed, because the setting, or, the matter, has been changed. Knowledge has lost its savor. The texts have lost their texture. We move along without ever having gotten into the material.

Let us now consider the two terms at the heart of our topic: "crisis" and "culture." For a modern person the word "crisis" refers above all to the medical field, to that decisive moment in the course of a disease that can lead either to the restoration of health—in that case we have a "happy crisis"—or mortality—in which case it is a fatal crisis. Currently the word refers to the economic or financial crisis, and for deeper analysts, to an anthropological crisis, with the difference, however, that the crisis perdures, instead of being temporary, having lost its character of "judgment" or "discernment," suggested by the etymology. The journalist declares: "We are in a situation of crisis" and wants to say simply that things are going badly, and all the way down to the very structures of society. Our imagination turns immediately to the indexes of the stockmarket, a rise in the price of gasoline, lines of unemployed

persons in front of the employment office, problems getting consumer credit for Christmas.

As far as the culture is concerned, this term evokes above all a “diaporama” of museums, theatres, cinemas, books, concerts, and even good wines. To be cultured consists in having read great authors, seen great films, listened to great music, tasted the great vintages, and being able to speak about these in the best of company. In this manner, culture is reduced to a sum of cultural products such that the most you can expect is that they be available to the greatest number, namely, distributed to the supermarket and possibly downloadable. From this point of view, the internet, iTunes or BitTorrent have contributed enormously to the diffusion of culture, and probably more than any professor whose mission would be only to transmit these products.

Now, here is what I think: this way of understanding “crisis,” and of trying to resolve it, is already the sign of an even greater crisis; and this way of understanding the word “culture,” and of singing its praises, is already the sign of the greatest unculture. In both cases we interpret the words having lost the image of that to which they originally referred, namely the agricultural image. The word “crisis” derives from the Greek *krino*, whose oldest usage is found in the *Iliad* (V, 500-502): “while men stand winnowing the crop, when Demeter, with her golden hair, separates (*krino*) the grain from chaff in the rushing breeze, and piles of chaff grow whiter...” These verses are difficult to grasp. I buy bread at supermarkets which are far from peasant life. I belong to a generation that has never seen anyone winnow, and that doesn’t have a clear idea of what straw is or the action of separating the grain from it, a generation that doesn’t see what the the original “crisis” is.

As for the word culture, its tie with agriculture, lost to our imagination, is still immediately audible in the word itself. Some cultural sources, moreover, have told us that it was Cicero, in the *Tusculanes*, who transferred the term from the cultivation of the land to the cultivation of the soul. The famous citation can be found on all the search engines such as Google, Ask and Bing: *Cultura animi philosophia est* (*Tusc.* II, 13). But as always happens with search engines and encyclopedias, it’s really an avalanche [picconata], not a hearing, a sampling not a reading. (Let us observe that the term “reading” also refers originally to a rustic action, that of gathering fruit from a tree, or of picking ears of wheat to bind them in sheaves.)

When Cicero defines philosophy as the “cultivation of the spirit,” it is to respond to the objection of the interlocutor. According to the latter, it is impossible to praise philosophy because “its most able teachers are not always honest persons.” Thanks to the agricultural analogy, Cicero is able to respond in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, in cultivation, it is not enough to sow a seed; one must also prepare good earth, because the best grain cannot grow in a barren field. (It is a suggestion which will be appear in the Parable of the Sower). On the other hand, to philosphyze is not to fill one’s head, but to cultivate one’s own soul so that it can give (just as it is said of good earth, that it *gives*). After all, it is a matter of an immanent operation. In this matter, the so-called “world of culture” is the opposite of authentic culture, because the latter is not exhausted in the accumulation of works of art and of worldly evenings, but in the unfolding of human nature, in the care of souls, in the concern that persons grow and bear fruit.

It is evident that the modern “world of culture” is placed exactly at the opposite end of this care and concern; it is an immense diversion, a flight from the hard work of cultivating oneself, which implies turning over the earth of our spirit, and pulling the bad weeds, eliminating the dead wood, pruning, thinning the epicormic branches, turning the small branches in the direction of better exposure, cutting the wood buds in the old tree unrelentingly in order to privilege the flower buds.

These considerations might appear unusual, not pertinent, incongruous, barely philosophical. On the

contrary, nothing is more philosophical—if we believe Cicero—than going back to agriculture. Almost all of the great Latin authors passed through it, Virgil certainly, but also Cato, Varro, Columella, Palladio, Pliny. They left us a great number of treatises *De Re rustica*. As though the *Res rustica* were an inevitable preliminary condition for the *Res publica*. Cato the Elder, in the preface to *De agricultura*, makes this significant observation: “When our ancestors wanted to praise a good citizen, they gave him the title of a good farmer or a good steward: these expressions were for them the ultimate horizon of praise.”

These considerations might appear to be strange, out of place, out of date, barely theological. In truth, nothing is more theological than *taking into consideration the lilies of the field*. Nothing is more theological than *meditating on the shoots that are cut off because they don't bear fruit, and those that are pruned that they may bear fruit*. (No one is spared using shears.) What we are talking about is connected to the first word, the first commandment, the first blessing, what Adam heard just after his creation: the commandment that precedes the ten commandments. It is connected to the word of Genesis 1:28, by which man's ear was opened: *Be fruitful*.

Strangely, the Hebrew gives to man and woman, as the first commandment, to fulfill a deed which concerns a tree. And not of just any tree. A fruit tree. The kind of tree that we would see growing in an orchard that demands pruning every year. Fructification is essentially an operation of nature, certainly, but an operation that also demands the care of cultivation. And we know the importance of this verb in the Gospel. It is the word of the Word, so to speak, the word of the One who is the way, the truth and the life, “fructification” gathering in some way these three terms, implying the path of the sap, the disclosure of the flowers and the gift of the juicy cluster of grapes. Jesus never stops reminding us that it is not enough to follow him or be bound to him: the disciple must also bear fruit. *It is the glory of my Father that you bear much fruit and become my disciples* (Jn 15:8). To speak about the glory of heaven, the Word uses the words of the earth. To speak about spiritual life, he returns to a material, vegetable life. It is as though our ascent could not happen without the fruit tree. As though there were wings only for the boorish.

Why? Why always the vine, the olive tree, the fig tree, the field of wheat in Christ's discourses? Couldn't an image besides that of a tree work? Isn't this privilege just circumstantial, referring to a past era? Couldn't we substitute *Be fruitful and multiply* with *Connect and download*? Or at least this obscure imperative—*Be fruitful*—with a transparent imperative, such as, for example: Fabricate: make, multiply articles and fill stores and subject everything to your extraordinary productive apparatus? After all, Jesus was a carpenter. He would have been able to use the vocabulary of an artisan, of construction, of fabrication. Why did he always prefer that of cultivation?

Because He knows that at the origin it is not written *Fabricate* but *Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth and have dominion over it*. Try to put *fabricate* in the place of *be fruitful*, and the sense of this domination of the earth is completely turned upside down. Domination through fabrication, this domination which is the current form of domination, is not domination through fruitfulness. In fruitfulness one dominates the earth through a prior respect for the earth, since it is by virtue of an operation of the earth that this domination is expressed. In fabrication, at least in the kind which is not based on fruitfulness, that which doesn't retain the primacy of fruitfulness in its imagination, one dominates the earth without respect, because earthly matter is no longer perceived in its fecundity, but as simple matter, manipulable according to our whims and all the more exploited, exhausted, deconstructed, decomposed and rearranged, the more we are deafened to and flee from the demands of fruitfulness, of cultivating ourselves.

The crisis of the crisis is here. The unculture of the culture is here. We no longer hear words in the echo of the first word. We have lost the imagination of the soil. We have lost the sense of this arboriculture, which must be the base of all human activities: because starting with the paradigm of arboriculture, we see that art consists in accompanying the development of a given natural form. Without that paradigm, or rather, substituting it with the paradigm of engineering, art no longer imitates, accompanies and prolongs nature. It breaks with it, dismantles and reconstructs it, accosts it and robs it in view of our Babelic projects, our Pharaonic plans, our machinations as enslaving as they are proud.

In a recent memoir, the academic Jean Clair shows that this change in paradigm, this loss of the agricultural reference to the farmer in favor of the technical one, is the biggest event of the twentieth century. “The real misery was discovered in the city by those first immigrants looking for work, in those closets where they found refuge—where they would bump up against the walls with furniture made of fake wood, reduced to size so that it could be carried through the doorway.....”

The misery is described here as a loss of meaning understood as the loss of the earth, a loss of proportion and loss of material. A loss which culminates in the “fake wood,” that is reconstituted wood, first laminate, then ply-wood, then particle board, then plastic with imitation wood grain, then, finally, the background of the electronic screen showing a forest or a beautiful landscape with trees and fields. The attribute, first of industrial society, then, even more, of the information society, is not simply to destroy nature, but to reconstruct it, to fabricate a pseudo-fruitfulness, to set aside “green spaces,” to invent transgenic essences and illusory wood, more adapted to the conditions of production and pollution.

The art of the farmer has already been absorbed by the technology of the engineer. The carpenter of yesterday, the kind that Jesus was, worked the wood in view of fruitfulness. He drew a piece of furniture out of wood as if he were drawing out a marvelous fruit, and the pieces of furniture retained the memory of the first commandment. Today wood-working is done with machine production and computerization in mind. The piece of furniture is not a marvelous fruit; it is the result of calculation. In the best of cases it is a merely functional product. In the worst, it is a cog in a machine. In any case it is never that which is given to us to inhabit the world in its texture, in its generous density.

The Word became a carpenter. Here is a point on which we don't insist enough. The Word became a carpenter. He didn't become a philosopher or a lawyer. He didn't even become a potter or a stone-cutter. Why, though, wasn't he a vine-dresser, or at least a shepherd, or a fisherman, as were some of the apostles? Why a carpenter? Was it not perhaps because of the irony of the cross: to be nailed on that wood that he had just nailed together, to be worked by that wood which he had just worked? It seems above all that it is because, in this case, it is a matter of an in-between trade, a crucial trade, at the crossroads between arboriculture and craft.

The work of the carpenter is placed at this hinge: between the forest and the house, the tree trunk and the roof. This is because he works on material par excellence, the material that carries in itself the memory of fruitfulness. The word *bois*, in French, indicates at once the living trees (the *woods*) and the material taken from those trees (*wood*). In Greek, “matter” is *hylè*, which also refers to wood. In Latin *materia* still means wood as material, but in its power to generate layers, to make small branches sprout: in its maternal potency, since it is the same root which is heard in *mater*—mother, and in *materia*—matter. Through this maternity of the woody material, the carpenter, the joiner, the cabinet-maker are invited to be fathers and not simply experts, to proceed in the manner of generation, not merely construction.

The move from *materia* as wood to *materia* as material in general allows us to see that, for the ancients,

wood is the material *par excellence*, the substrate, the material cause. This material is not the material of the moderns, formless, malleable and good for anything, a mere effect without its own causality. It has something of its own to say. It retains the memory of the first commandment.

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Modern matter bends to all of our whims; but its submission is also our defeat because it deprives us of contact with a substantial world. What counts now is the “molecular institution.” Living forms have disappeared; there is only inert matter, an atomized, mechanized space, molecules or elements which are there to be recombined, and which undoubtedly appeal to our creativity; but suddenly our creativity gets flabby, subsides, and becomes itself insubstantial, being deprived of the variegated forms of nature; our imagination becomes mute. When one pretends to be the absolute creator, one is no longer able to have an imagination. When one loses the spirit of matter, one also loses the spirit of the spirit. Now we can see in what way a great part of the evils which characterize our time come from this loss of the spirit of matter. I refer specifically to the evils which characterize our age. Rediscovering the spirit of matter would not liberate us from every evil. The ancient evils would still be there: cruelty, hatred, contempt..... Rediscovering the spirit of matter would only liberate us from that very contemporary evil which doesn't need cruelty or malice to spread itself, which spreads even through ethics, proliferates thanks to morality, and advances its devastating effects through the demand for justice. Because here the problem is not first of all a moral one, but a physical one: it corresponds to our vision of nature, of matter, of that fact that precedes our projects and choices. If our vision is false, great moral zeal will only carry us toward catastrophe. Now the vision that dominates today in the face of the fact of nature is not that of a *donum* but of *data*. Nature is reduced to elements which we can try to reconstruct on the basis of our desires. It is the kingdom of the “Meccano” kit. We don't just put the cart before the horse, we put the computer before the cart, and binary electronics before the computer. Matter is broken down into atoms, the living into genes, intelligence into neurons, society into individuals, who for their part are broken down into a sum of functions whose communication is broken down into bytes. Starting here, morality is broken down into negotiable values. And we are invited to remake everything better, to make a new, better man, no longer through fruitfulness but through fabrication, no longer as the fruit of one's loins but as a product of synthesis; because, from the moment that our vision of the elements win over natural form, we can no longer generate anything other than the synthetic, beginning with a re-assemblage of those same elements.

This is as much the principle of liberalism as of totalitarianism: in each, man does not appear as a child in a given community, but as an individual, an element in a constructed community, either by theory or by contract, through the State or the Market. This is the principle of *gender theory* which is not about making the sexual fact fruitful, since sex in this case has become only material to be reoriented or reestablished according to the norms or tendencies of the moment. This is the principle of the economic crisis where the scope is the unlimited growth of the GDP, of production, and not growth in terms of the maturity and fruitfulness of persons. So much is this the case that the very word “economy” has lost its vegetative meaning, both sexual and agrarian, the meaning that recalled the ancients to the government of the family (*oikos*) and of the management of the agricultural environment tied to it. This is the principle of the culture of death, the unculture which is hidden behind the multiplication of cultural products, founded on the model of engineering and not on that of agriculture. This is the principle of the spiritual crisis where one is at once lost in an atomistic materialism, and in an ethereal spiritualism, because having lost the spirit of material we no longer know how to approach the History of Salvation and the Mystery of the Incarnation.

At the heart of it, my thesis is very simple: in order to get away from a wooden language, we must

recover the language of wood, the word of the vineyard, the grammar of fruitfulness. In fact, if we don't recover the meaning of material, if we no longer reintegrate the imagination of the stock, the vine-shoots, the cluster and the press, how can we feel its concrete resonance in the words of Christ in St. John (Jn 15:1): *Ego sum vitis vera et Pater meus agricola est—I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-dresser?*

*Fabrice Hadjadj is the director of the **Philanthropos Institute** of Fribourg. He is the author of over ten books and plays. He was born in France of Jewish parents, from Tunisia. He defines himself as “a Jew with an Arab name, belonging to the Catholic faith.”*

