

## **TOWARDS A BIBLICAL AESTHETIC**

### **What we require of a poetic thing**

Of a poetic thing we require that, through its variously transparent and available power of showing forth, it witness a spiritual world (breviter a world) and the existence of whoever has made it. Its witnessing includes that segment of intentional and regulated becoming, which is the production praxis with its needs and norms; we call it "poetics". The poetic thing witnesses by irradiating and by absorbing tropes, so that in the poetic thing, itself a trope, the spiritual world confronts itself, making unions and contrasts. So much takes place for immediate sensorial perceptions, which are themselves generated and expanded into ever-new experiences; so much takes place for things biblical.

Let's suppose that such and such a word, like a mirror set on pivots, by reflecting discursive light, illumine some of its "proper" meanings upon which it is fairly steadily oriented. If we change its orientation so that it illumines other "improper" meanings, we have a trope, which, when it is well-chosen, ornates our discourse. But what meanings of a word (how, how much, and why?) are *not* proper? Is it possible to set a rhetorical poetic zero, against which we can determine whether a discourse is tropic, and how much? Is this zero as hardly reachable as the zero degree in temperature? Are there any rhetorical-poetic degrees available, which can serve as points of reference, however blurred and changing? Are meanings themselves parts of discourse, no less than words?

In the biblical text, both the words and the meanings - things in general, actions, the outcome of doing - are ever tropic; they say more than the poetic-rhetorical zero, which would be made of unrevealing and unrewarding signifiabiles and terms.

### **Considerate lilia agri**

Bunches of flowers or plants in pots are frequently presented and warmly accepted as welcome gifts at birthday parties, wedding

ceremonies or on other occasions. Givers and receivers alike admire and appreciate them, not only as tokens of kindness and warm regards, but also as artifacts, provided they are arranged satisfactorily. They may even impress by their showiness, their peculiarity, quantity, and price. A bouquet of wild flowers will not tell of any remarkable floricultural expertise nor will it remind anyone of an individual florist. Yet, going into the countryside beyond the waste of metropolitan areas in order to pick them, when the law allows us to, entails a great deal of hard labour and some painful migrations. Such a bouquet some may call “original” or even “moving” ; in any case it is imbued with less authority than have romantic roses or glamorous orchids.

Christ, however, states that the lilies of the field have a greater glory than we can conceive. On this occasion he is urging us not to lay up for ourselves treasures upon earth: a strange and stern warning, since to treasures laid up in heaven are usually preferred those upon earth, which, corruptible as they are, are ready at hand. His listeners have got tired of long reasonings; they feel they are too new and conducted with stern logics. Some even disapprove, in secret or openly, of such nonsensical ideas. Indeed, there is little faith to be found on the earth. The Lord then has recourse to one of his wonderfully winning examples, which he introduces in the form of a command: leave aside all kinds of argument, look away, even from me, simplify your thoughts about a reality you have not yet become aware of, no matter how close to you it is: *considerate lilia agri, quomodo crescunt*.

They remind us of the motley vegetable swards that bloomed soon after the earth was separated from the waters. Just like them, they owe it to God that they exist and grow. If not to God, who else to? Not to gardeners, not to a hidden immanent physis, a stranger to the biblical mind. Their spontaneous growth is not the outcome of the *conatus vivendi* of some secret mysterious Force. Leaving aside all such sundry analogies and distinctions and arguments, good enough for whoever will and can think them out, our Lord makes a brief announcement of the only acceptable truth: the *lilia agri* need not worry how to provide for themselves: *Non laborant, neque nent*.

There is a second truth, lying open enough to anyone that set their eyes on the lilies of the field. Besides making them grow, God

dresses them in such glory, ornament and splendour that far exceeds any sort of glory, ornament and splendour we could possibly imagine. How great this excess is is made explicit through a comparison, which any Jew can easily understand, with the greatest of all Jewish kings: at the peak of Jewish prosperity he would receive gifts and make purchases from a number of neighbouring regions and peoples, whether they were his allies or subjects. His state robes have been by far the richest and the most elegant. But wild flowers are dressed far better than he was. Such is the worth of the divine gift!

The examples having been given, the truths having been branded on the heart, Christ can start his argument, which runs into a precept. If God is just, he no doubt cares for you more than he does for pretty flowers. No matter how richly-dressed they are, they are but short-lived grass; not even good enough as fodder, they can at best, when made dry, set a fire ablaze in an oven. But God, being just, knows what is just and what you need. Therefore you can trust him: he knows how to dress you far better than the lilies of the field, far better than Solomon. And so, do not behave like the Gentiles, do not take thought for your life. To conclude: your Father very well knows what is good for you. Trust him, cooperate with him, set up his kingdom and his righteousness; everything else is superfluous.

More precepts and warnings can easily be drawn from our Lord's speech. The glory of flowers and of Solomon is an apt metaphor for the body of glory reserved for anyone that seeks God's righteousness and works for his kingdom. If flowers, which are by no means responsible, get destroyed, how much more devouring will be the flames awaiting you, who *are* responsible, if you think you can have a better life only by seeking what you shall eat and what you shall wear. You deceive yourselves if you think you can decide and value, without God's help, what your needs are, and act accordingly. Your Father knows them and will satisfy them. Which does not entail, however, you should live hand-to-mouth, unawares, like the lilies of the field. You shall act in the world, in perfect trustful freedom, according to your Father's will. The subtle argument, embossed with its strong persuasive force within the noble set of the New Law, is grounded on the example of a seemingly-humble object: the *myrica*e of wild flowers make a rather common, uninteresting sight,

especially for those who have seen so many of them while wandering with Christ in the Galilean fields, far less attractive than the show of Christ himself, the Teacher and the miracle-maker.

The lilies, however, evoked by our Lord from our oblivion and un-care, force themselves upon the soul like an irresistible aesthetic experience, urging her to raise herself and to choose for herself the inconsumable treasures of the Father. *Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur*<sup>1</sup>.

## **Aestheticism inadvisable**

The pretty wild flowers make the garden of the beautiful grand mansion which is the world. Whoever is no such fool as to say in his heart that there is no God<sup>2</sup>, will say: *Domine, dilexi decorem domus tuae et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*<sup>3</sup>. He who thus recognises that the house is God's and loves it, imitates God, who saw the works of his own hands and found them good: *Viditque Deus cuncta quae fecerat; et erant valde bona*<sup>4</sup>. And, since he imitates God, he can himself say: *Opera Domini universa bona valde*<sup>5</sup>.

The architectural formula upholding the house, *Omnia in mensura, et numero, and pondere disposuisti*<sup>6</sup>, is warmly welcomed by popular aesthetics, eager for mathematical calculations. Mathematics however objectifies its own data, making them virtue-less, devoiding them of good and evil, contrary to biblical ontology. Whose rules state a *concinnitas*, by which everything is assigned the importance it deserves, while its purposes and time are set their own proper limits: *Omnia tempus habent, et suis spatiis transeunt universa sub caelo... Cuncta fact bona tempore suo*<sup>7</sup>.

Here may yawn a chasm, however. It is a holy thing to see in the beautiful, majestic artifact the evidence of the Artificer's wisdom:

1 Rom. 1:20.

2 *Dixit insipiens in corde suo: Non est Deus. Ps. 13:1.*

3 *Ps. 25:8.*

4 *Gen. 1:31.*

5 *Eccl. 39:21.*

6 *Sap. 11:21.*

7 *Eccl. 3:1-11.*

Confessio et pulchritudo in conspectu eius<sup>8</sup>...a magnitudine enim speciei et creaturae cognoscibiliter poterit creator horum videri<sup>9</sup>. Vana est pulchritudo<sup>10</sup>, however, in its seductive spell wafting from the days which dissolve like the smoke of burnt grass. Aestheticism is to be refuted, idol-makers are to be denied, and pre-made speeches cannot but sound hollow. Pleasure itself, if enjoyed in itself, will lessen the full aesthetic experience, which is never disjointed from a sense of awe and respect: Pulchra es amica mea, suavis et decora sicut Ierusalem; terribilis ut castrorum acies ordinata<sup>11</sup>.

Once these precautions have been taken, the biblical world brightens up with luxuriant plants, shining metals and glorious stones. In utter astounding simplicity Christ has warranted his blessing even on the humblest wild herbs.

## The well-watered soul

In the biblical passages dealing with production, work, far from being an accident or an incident, constitutes the essence of our present human condition. It is cast in the form of a duty: busy yourselves *de labore manuum*<sup>12</sup>, bear all heavy burdens. You will then be satiated with bread, while the *stultissimus*<sup>13</sup> do-nothing will starve. Or worse, whoever eats and refuses the daily labour is guilty of practical atheism, since he disobeys the commandment: In laboribus comedes<sup>14</sup>, and overlooks the exhortation: Non oderis laboriosa opera, et rusticationem creatam ab Altissimo<sup>15</sup>.

In doing this duty we are unforgettably reminded of a doing at the beginning, whose value is still with us. God himself, having created the world, imposed a twofold production on solidified matter:

- 8 Ps. 95:6.
- 9 Sap. 13:5.
- 10 Prov. 31:30.
- 11 Cant. 6:3.
- 12 Tob. 2:19.
- 13 Prov. 12:11.
- 14 Gen. 3:17-19.
- 15 Eccl. 7:16.

agricultural and plastic. Both avail themselves, as a not abstract possible, of the earth, whether it is the barren, muddy, clayey ground or the fertile soil. In the one case, man is shaped; in the other, an orchard is planted. A farmer's hard labour has a stable genetic stock at its disposal, since every herb and every plant produces fruit *juxta genus suum*<sup>16</sup>; on the other hand, and through no contradiction, the shaping of man is a type of all sorts of artifice, in that it makes a new being by imitating a mental essence coincident with its own conscience, as God made man in his own image.

Those who, being the outcome of God's exemplary plastic making, have been appointed to take, are devoted and responsible pickers<sup>17</sup>: it is up to them to watch over and keep the Garden, with its natural inventory for future knowledge and naming. The Paradise of delights provides them with everything they might want to meet their primal needs, such as life, pleasure, freedom and knowledge; nonetheless, they do not pass the time away uselessly, gorging themselves with delicious fruits. They are to work, though painlessly.

The successive pain of living soon after dwindles away, the trace of its original value appearing once again. Cultivating the land is imitating God, who had willed forth the virescent grass. True, at the time of punishment, a diet had been imposed on the thorns and thistles of the garden<sup>18</sup>; but now the Lord himself instructs the plowman to discretion<sup>19</sup>, urges him to richer and more desirable fruits, promises wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, and oil. The plowman must be quick then to free, with dark ploughs, hoes and scythes, the soil he has conquered while wandering and fighting against the Canaanites and their war chariots; he must be quick to make good earth of the stony and hilly ground, *de caelo expectans pluvias*<sup>20</sup>, hardened with thorns<sup>21</sup>, so different from the water-sodden Egypt land, where Joseph stored away superabundant wheat. Yet the children of Israael shall not muzzle the ox treading

16 Gen. 1:11.

17 Picking is feminine: *Mulier... tulit de fructu*. Gen. 3:6.

18 *Comedes herbam terrae*. Gen. 3:18.

19 Is. 28:26.

20 Deut. 11:11.

21 *Novate vobis novale, et nolite serere super spinas*. Jer. 4:3.

out the corn, and king Hezekiah has stores built for the wine, the wheat and oil that he owns in excess.

Soon after agriculture was started, vines began to be planted, with vineyards stretching away from high Samaria down to Tamnata, Engaddi and Baal-Hamon. A stone wall will protect the well-kept vineyard, in whose middle a short tower and a little hut will house a wine-press; sun-blackened watches will guard it against foxes. It is run by sun-tanned<sup>22</sup> women and royal surveyors<sup>23</sup>, when Solomon has not rented it out to a profit. The owner of a vineyard can afford to pay his labourers exorbitantly<sup>24</sup>.

This profitable culture is to be highly valued. If it fails, it is a disgrace, no worse than consumption, fever, carbuncle, an ulcer in the legs, delirium and blindness, sand rain, and a defeat in war. Much worse, should the olive trees fail, which were found at the time when the land was conquered, you would lack the material for the sacred oil and the ointments, the fuel for the torches in the Temple. A wasted town is not unlike the poor olives that are shaken after the harvest<sup>25</sup>.

The memory of the vegetables of Egypt, with its cuets and melons, its leeks, onions and garlic, would tempt us to turn back in our march through the desert, back to a pampered slavery. We used to have good gardens in watered Babilonia too. Our present gardens, however, are rich in species that yields fruits, give out scents, or are just ornamental: Eden and Canaan fig-trees, almond trees, pomegranates, hazel-nuts, apple trees, sycamores, lavender, crocus, cinnamon, incense, myrrh, aloe, lentisks, ilexes. The passion for gardens may overdo things, when, in order to take possession of a garden and a vineyard, it goes as far as stoning to death its owner; such was Achab's guilt. Kings and princes, like Joachim and Xerses, delight in gardens; in a garden lies buried Manasses. Jericho is a garden-city; it's all a palm-grove. One of the king's gardens (his public gardens?) can be seen in Jerusalem, next to the intermural door. The Lord would walk in a garden in the open air.

22 Decoloravit me sol. Cant. 1: 5.

23 Semei surveys David's vineyards, Zabdi his cellars. 1 Par. 27:27.

24 Mt. 20:1 and ff.

25 Is. 17:6. Is. 24/13.

All fertile fruit gardens call for abundant water, whether it springs from perennial sources or it spills from cisterns made on purpose, as is made clear in the Book of the Ecclesiastes. In a garden pool one may bathe, like Susanna. Whoever betrays the Lord becomes an un-watered garden, as dry as a leafless oak-tree. Whoever meditates on the law of the Lord and sitteth not in the seat of the scornful nor walketh in the counsel of the ungodly is like a tree on a river bank, whose leaves will live for ever, and yields fruit in his time. His soul shall be as a watered garden<sup>26</sup>.

When we recall the idrography and the botany of Eden, we cannot but see that there flows through it a rich stream that feeds the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Fison, and the Geon, and reaches the lands of gold, of bdelium, and of onyx, from Assyria to Ethiopia (we would fain believe the four rivers make a cross). In a simple taxonomy all vegetable species fall into two categories: they are either nice to see; or delicious to taste; they even include the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The cultivation of gardens, from whose pools or springs in their middle irrigating springs are let out through rivulets at sunset, shows that the original pattern has not got lost; indeed, it analogically feeds our hope for the salvation we have been promised: Zion shall be comforted, her desert shall be turned into a place of delights, her solitude shall become a garden; the day shall come when every hill shall be cultivated and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and the people shall build gardens and eat the fruits thereof; the barren earth shall be turned into a garden of delights, for so God has made it. After crossing the purifying fire of the desert, they now enter a cold Carmelite land, to eat the fruits thereof. Such a pattern recalls the original Garden, where, but for one exception (which was not respected), everything was allowed: *ex omni ligno comedere*<sup>27</sup>.

## **The food of the innocent man**

Two landscapes of cultivated land, the one well-ordered in the time of works and days; the other running wild at the time of sabba-

26 Jer. 31:12.

27 Gen. 2:16.

tical rest and of jubilees. Their festive patches dot all the desert yet not infertile area; they make good pastures, with herds of 14000 sheep, 6000 camels, 2000 bulls, and 1000 she-asses; less happy areas have 3000 sheep and 1000 goats. Work, transport, meat, milk: all good and useful things, none of which will fail if God stands by<sup>28</sup>.

Meat, simply boiled or roasted, is consumed at Nehemia's bountiful table, much meat at the great king's court. Meat is expected to appear in the course of extraordinary events, like those that happened to Abraham and Abigail; or like when David distributed the meat of oxen in Jerusalem. At Easter, when unleavened bread, bitter herbs and roasted lamb are served, the consumption of meat has its greatest value, since it fixes the gestures of a memorable day, a lasting memoir of a permanent feast. The consumption of meat, however, is not always to be recommended. The impurity that hovers about it entails severe limitations and overexact instructions. To be sure, the Lord sends his people quails; but he does so to meet their needs, when they, longing for meat in their frailty and weakness, regret Egypt, which, though it kept them captive, could satisfy them easily.

The milk-honey of the innocent man has no impurity and is desired with no inordinate greed. Milk and dairy products figure among the primal needs - along with fire, water, iron, salt, flour, wine, oil, clothes - as well as whenever great personages host one another in grand hospitality. Abraham gave some to the three messengers. Jael gave milk to those who wanted water, and cream in a princely vase (but the holy woman deceived them). David, the anointed king still in disguise, took some cheeses to Saul's general. When he became the acknowledged king and found himself in straits, he was comforted with milk and cream.

Milk is so abundant that it can be exported to Tyrus. Wild bees make honey in all places, even inside the carrion of a beast on behalf of Samson or in the ground. And Jonathan need only dip his stick into the honeycomb and lick it: he is soon restored with such sweetness as is only inferior to the judgement of the Lord<sup>29</sup>. Eze-

28 Dominus regit me, et nihil deerit: in loco pascuae ibi me collocavit. Ps. 22:1.

29 Dulciore supra mel et favum. Ps. 18:11.

chiel filled his bowels with the roll of revelation, and it was in his mouth as honey for sweetness<sup>30</sup>. A sweet voice: Mel et lac sub lingua tua<sup>31</sup>. From honey tempered with cream the Immanuel learns how to taste the supreme sweetness of good and by contrast - not knowing it directly -, he may learn how to refuse evil<sup>32</sup>.

## **Et panis cor hominis confirmet**

The earth is all here, ready to nourish you: fresh vegetables, broad beans, lentils, chickpeas, wild pumpkins. Abigail feeds David with emergency victuals: bunches of currants, pressed-dried figs, wine, mutton, strength-giving bread<sup>33</sup>, pinguis panis<sup>34</sup>. Above all of them stands out this bread, which is made not only of wheat, but also of barley, broad beans, lentils, millet seeds and vetches, and is quickly baked under ash kept permanently warm.

Bread is the fundamental staple. It goes with Esau's lentils and Rebecca's fricassee. When anticipating a banquet, Raguel calls first of all for much bread. Habacuc feeds Daniel with the soup of bread he has prepared for the reapers. Gideon wants loaves of bread for his men. Bread nourishes just and holy men. Crows provide Eliah with bread; Abdia gives bread to the hundred prophets he has hidden; Jeremiah in prison is delivered a loaf of bread a day. In Gideon's dream a cake of barley bread is his sword.

Bread is to be broken: Panem tuum cum esurientibus et egenis comedere<sup>35</sup>. Occasionally, and for good reasons, it is not to be broken, as by David in mourning or by Moses, who fastened fourty days and nights and drank no water. Bread makes a good provision<sup>36</sup> and

30 Ez. 3:3.

31 Cant. 4:11.

32 Butyrum et mel comedet, ut sciat reprobare malum, et eligere bonum. Is. 7:15.

33 Et panis cor hominis confirmet. Ps. 103:15.

34 Gen. 49:20.

35 Tob. 4:17. Similarly Ps. 131:15. Prov. 22:9.

36 On her way to Holofernes's camp Judith takes some bread with her. Judith 19:5. The Gibeonites, in order to make people

a pleasant gift<sup>37</sup>; which is to be seen in the manna, the dewy condensation in the desert aptly described by the following metaphor: *Iste est panis quem Dominus dedit vobis*<sup>38</sup>. The working of bread, already diminished in the unleavened viaticum, is now completely dismissed in the new metaphorical bread and every Easter the slight impropriety of the unleavened bread still forebodes its higher metaphor.

During the great famine in Egypt bread was worth more than cash money, more than cattle, more than personal freedom. Whoever lacks bread resembles a leper<sup>39</sup>, so that the people regret the time of slavery, when they could have their fill of bread, and go begging for it from loathed Assyrians. No wonder hunger could drive David to eat hallowed bread.

When one's days have been consumed like smoke, one eats no bread but the ashes of one's own existence:

Defecerunt sicut fumus dies mei,  
et ossa mea sicut cremium aruerunt.  
Percussus sum ut foenum, et aruit cor meum,  
Quia oblitus sum comedere panem meum...  
Cinerem tamquam panem manducabam<sup>40</sup>.

Hence, by opposing the contraries, one may argue that bread, a concrete universal of work and consumption, concentrates and diffuses positive values.

## **Wine, feast days, and danger**

Wine at meals: Jacob gave some to his blind father to drink. Xerses drank a lot at Judith's banquet. At Nebuchadnezzar's table

believe they have been travelling for some time, take with them some dry and moulded bread. *Jos. 9:5.*

37 As a prophecy of his ointment as king, Saul receives two loaves of bread. *I Sam. 10:4.*

38 *Ex. 16:15.*

39 *II Sam. 3:29.*

40 *Ps. 101:4-10.*

the young men are allowed to taste the very best wine. Wine goes with bread<sup>41</sup>, wine makes a good offering: for David, for instance, when he is anointed king<sup>42</sup>. There drink of it David with his men on his way back from the desert, Holofernes and his court, the reckless rich that are at ease in Zion<sup>43</sup>. Old wine is highly esteemed<sup>44</sup>. There are wines spiced with the juice of fruit<sup>45</sup>, or with honey<sup>46</sup>; there are wines from Lebanon and from Damascus. Isaiah deplores wine mixed with water. Indeed, life that lacks wine is no life.

Wine maketh glad the heart of man<sup>47</sup>; so does music: harps, lyres, timbrels and trumpets. While a party are drinking merrily (yet moderately), the wine sets a concert<sup>48</sup>, just as gold sets a gem; both joyfully mount a ladder leading up to wisdom<sup>49</sup>. Wisdom itself lays wine on her table, asking anyone to drink that wants to become wise. The wine of joy, of mirth, of wisdom and of the aesthetic experience is apt to turn into a liturgical offering: witness Melchizedek who as a high priest and a messiah offers bread and wine.

Some men and women, however, consecrating themselves to God, avoid wine and everything that goes with it, including grapes, must, vinegar, and every intoxicating beverage. Neither Melchizedek nor Aaron nor any other priest would be allowed to drink inside the Temple. Look at the wine shining in the glass, taste it: it goes so easily down your throat, where it stingeth like an adder, running through your veins like a poison. Thy eyes shall behold strange women, thy heart shall think and utter perverse things; you seem

41 The unfortunate Levite takes some with him, Jud. 19:19; so does prudent Judith, so do the deceiving Gibeonites.

42 I Par. 12:40.

43 Am. 6:6.

44 Veterascet, et cum suavitate bibes illud. Eccli. 9:15.

45 Poculum ex vino condito, et mustum malorum granatorum. Cant. 8:2.

46 Bibite mulsum. Neh. 8:10.

47 Ps. 103:15. Bibe cum gaudio vinum tuum. Eccl. 9:7.

48 Comparatio musicorum... numerus musicorum. Eccli. 32:7-8.

49 Vinum et musica laetificant cor; et super utraque dilectio sapientiae. Eccli. 40:20.

to lie down in the midst of the sea. You awake, and you seem as if they had beaten you, and you felt it not. And you say: as soon as I recover, I will seek it yet again and drink more<sup>50</sup>. It is not for kings to drink wine, as it makes them lose their heads, talk too much, forget the law, and pervert the judgement of the afflicted<sup>51</sup>. To degrade oneself thus, one does not have to be an inveterate elitist or a great man in the world: as a matter of fact, you can't grade the drinking of wine, and who has not experienced it, tends to exaggerate, as did Noah, who well showed what the consequences might be. For divine service and every other serious call the Holy Writ - always so serious in its ideal of humanity - requires appropriate clean-headedness, refusing dionysiac states of mind or nihilistic resolutions: "We come from nothing, and will return to nothing; let us take therefore the good things of today, let us use them, let us fill ourselves with the best wine among wafts of perfumes, let us be merry all together" . That is a wine-soaked speech indeed<sup>52</sup>. *Vae qui potentes estis ad bibendum vinum!*<sup>53</sup>.

Bread and wine are surely pleasing and comforting. So valuable are they that the Lord promises to send the autumn and spring rains they need. But wine is not on the same level as bread; being a dangerous gift, it is entrusted to the responsible freedom of whoever receives it, who is to use it according to the law.

## **Omnis lapis pretiosus**

The Law is to be consulted in the stones on which it was written and is still kept. When promising to give the Law, the Lord showed how he would write it: *Mandata quae scripsi*<sup>54</sup>. "With his own finger"<sup>55</sup> he wrote it: meaning that his word, far from making use of any instrument, directly carved the stone. The hardness of the stone

50 Prov. 23:31-35.

51 Prov. 31:4-5.

52 Sap. 2: 6-9.

53 Is. 5:22. Prov. 5:3.

54 Ex. 24:12.

55 Ex. 31:18.

cannot resist it (the Pharaoh's heart had been hardened far more) and cannot alter the words it has received: the graphemes are identical with the phonemes. When Moses tries to rewrite the words himself, he has to learn a stone mason's craft. Josuah, Moses' minister, followed his instructions and wrote the words in the book of the law of God: a fine transmission of a craft and art.

Stone is the best material for lasting artifacts:

Ecce ego mittam in fundamentis Sion lapidem,  
Lapidem probatum,  
Angularem, pretiosum, in fundamento fundatum<sup>56</sup>.

The foundation stones of Solomon's house, made to last for ever, are made of massive quoins of choice stone, hewn and squared and connected *ad normam et mensuram*<sup>57</sup>. The hardness and duration metaphor suggests that, if the people's heart is hard, Ezechiele will be harder and will cut into them like a flint and a diamond; and if the people's heart still disobeys and refuses the Law, their heart will be torn out, to be replaced with a heart of flesh that welcomes the Law.

Hardened by a fiction into believing it is divine, stone may even pretend to be adored. Beware!<sup>58</sup>. Only that stone is worth being valued that receives the Word, and keeps it more safely than the mesopotamic clay, provided an angry Moses does not break it. As a stone receives the Word and gives out water to the touch of Moses' rod, so Jacob sets up a stone for a sacred pillar, pouring a little oil upon its top: it is this meek willingness to receive and keep whatever is permanent that makes stones and stony heaps be as many witnesses in the covenant between Laban and Jacob.

**56** Is. 28:16.

**57** III Reg. 7:9-10. Jonathan too fortified Jerusalem with squared quoins, I Mach. 10:11. See also Arfaxad's many-towered walls in Ecbatana. Judith 1:2, and the four offering tables *de lapidibus quadris extractae* in Ez. 40:42.

**58** *Non facietis vobis idolum, et sculptile, nec titulos erigetis, nec insignem lapidem ponetis in terra vestra, ut adoretis eum.* Lev. 26:1.

Josuah takes a great stone and sets it up under an oak tree, that is by the sanctuary of the Lord: a witness that it has heard the Word<sup>59</sup>.

Maybe stone is just stone, maybe the altar is made *de saxis informibus et impolitis*<sup>60</sup>. The stone that is just stone, collected from the first torrent one comes across, contains a tremendous missile energy in the hands of David, who slings it and hits the Philistine, so that the stone sinks deeply in his forehead. Another stone, cut out of the mountain by no hand, breaks in pieces the great image of metals and clay in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and the stone that smites the image becomes a great mountain, and fills the whole earth. Thus the kingdom of God strikes, smites, and remains for ever.

A whole cohort of precious stones, ornamental or at least desirable, comes from Ethiopia, from Syria, from the emporium in Tyrus. King Hiram's fleet brings them from Ophir. Twelve stones, as many specimens of a holy gemmology, are carved with the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. Such stones Aaron wears on the shoulderpieces of his ephod before the Lord: agate, amethyst, beryl, crysolite, jasper, hyacinth, onyx, ruby, sardonyx, emerald, topaz, saphyre. Less precious, but still valuable, are rock crystals, *lapides stibini*, marble.

Gold is worth the stones; when these give themselves up to it, we have light given over to purity. In gold are set Aaron's engraven stones; David's gold crown is set with precious gems; hyacinth is often set in gold rings; a vase of massive gold set with all kinds of stones is on a par with the morning star, a rose in the winter, and a blazing fire. Stones set off clothes: the garment of the king of Tyrus is set with all kinds of precious stones: the purple canopy under which Holofernes lies is interwoven with gold, enamel and other precious stones. Bright ivory is at its best when it is overlaid with sapphires<sup>61</sup>, before it reddens over with the passing of time<sup>62</sup>. Reckless companions in Zion lay themselves down on ivory couches. In Xerxes' mansion the curtain cords run through ivory rings. Solomon

59 Jos. 24:26-27.

60 Deut. 27:6.

61 *Venter eius eburneus, distinctus sapphiris*. Cant. 5:14.

62 *Rubicondiores ebore antiquo*. Lam. 4:7. Thus the Vulgate.

imports masses of ivory from Tarsis by sea and has an ivory throne built for himself, overlaid with pure gold: an artifact like it had never been seen before. Ivory inlays wonderful Phoenician ships<sup>63</sup>.

The Temple is rich in Parian marble, onyx and all sorts of precious stones. Xerses' palace has a floor of Parian marble and emerald. These factual experiences are interpenetrated with splendid visions: under God's feet is a flat surface wrought in sapphire, azure and transparent as the sky; another sapphire takes the shape of a throne. And Jerusalem, the newly-redeemed holy city, is founded on sapphire, fortified with jasper; its gates are of sapphire and emerald, its walls are all of precious stones, its squares are all of pure white marble. A certain man is clothed in linen; his body is like a beryl, his face shines forth as lightning, his eyes are lamps of fire, his arms and feet are the colour of polished brass. A revealing vision shines like a gem.

## **The greatness of clay**

By contrast what poor stuff clay is, on which no trade can possibly thrive. Clay is found in clammy holes in the ground; it is clay Adam's children get when they build a Tower on the plain of Shinaz, to make their bricks, using slime for mortar: poor surrogates for stones, and limestones. In Egypt the people are forced to make unbaked bricks (a job for servants and slaves, which David enforces once again) at unbearable conditions. No fortifications, temples or kings' mansions are made of clay; baked or unbaked-brick masonry is for the people; whenever possible, houses of clay

63 *The Tyrus hypermarket.* If you want to buy or sell valuable things, go to Tyrus, where wares pour in abundance from Egypt, Lybia, Araby, Mesopotamia, Greece, and from Israel. You can exchange slaves, horses, mules, lambs, rams, and goats; purple cloths, straight or embroidered, fine linen, silk, white wool, carpets; balm, honey, oil, resins, wheat, wines; cedar wood, wrought iron, tin, lead, vessels of brass; spices, ivory, coral, ebony, silver, gold, gems. Ez. 27:2-24.

are rebuilt in stones<sup>64</sup>. The statue Nebuchednazzar dreams of is frail, since it is made of clay. Mud, in which all men are equal<sup>65</sup> and which is trodden in the streets and squares, is a clammy hyperbole of mankind. Mud desperately lacks foundations: “I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing; I am come into deep waters, where the floods overthrow me”<sup>66</sup>. The flood forced everybody and everything to return to water and mud, and of this return there is no oblivion. Even today, salvation is similar to getting out of miry water<sup>67</sup>. And when water evaporates under the scorching sun, all bricks crumble away: “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”<sup>68</sup>. The baking process, already practised when the Tower of pride was built, will not give clay the purity it does not have; it gives it a very precarious hardness; pride and obstinacy shall be broken up like earthenware vases. Up to this point there are no metonymies favourable to such material. Nonetheless clay, muddy and humble as it is, as long as it is not cracked by fire and obstinate presumption, remains the only concrete thing that is possible; its very abjection rescues it, for, if man is but fictile clay in the hands of God, God who made it can always remake it. This possible, with no right of its own to existence, is but a nought: *Substantia mea tamquam nihilum ante te*<sup>69</sup>. In spirit of great and appropriate humility Moses raises an altar of humble earth.

The Lord God made man, he made his body with the dust of the ground, his soul by breathing into his nostrils the breath of life, thus making him in his own image, after his own likeness. An image is something standing for something else; a likeness entails having something in common with something else. This enables a likeness to make an image and impose it (as a matter of fact, we know man stands, within obvious limits, for God in the created world, while at the same time he, a living soul, resembles God): the whole pro-

64 Brick houses on clay foundations are soon crushed. Job. 4:19. *Lateres ceciderunt, sed quadris lapidibus aedificabimus.* Is. 9:10.

65 *De eodem lutu ego quoque formatus sum.* Job 33:6.

66 Ps. 68:2-3.

67 *Eduxit me de lacu miseriae et de luto faecis.* Ps. 39:3.

68 Gen. 3:19.

69 Ps. 38:6.

cedure is analogical. Once God realises that his plan has been a successful one, and ceases to create, his work will be continued by man. This shows how great is the worth of dust: it receives with all its analogies the act of God in the same way as the stones of Sinai have received his Word. Thus dust was not so barren after all, when it was the only possible concrete left over after the creation of the world! Among its possibilities lies man as a living soul.

## **Poi s'ascese nel foco che li affina**

Most of Dante's *Inferno* is wrought in various shades of black, ranging from stark black to dun and pale: black slime, black bitches, black air, dark, brown, starless, black breezes, sombre, heavy and black, dark colours, brown waves, grey sands, water more dark than lost, grey waves, iron-coloured stones, gloomy rocks. Dante's "dark world", however, does not imply difficulty in seeing. This may depend on other causes, like the density of smoke, more sombre than "the darkness of Hell", or even on an unbearable excess of light: "the face could not bear" ... "my eyes, overcome, could not bear". Actually, the very situations in Hell call for a keen sight, as happens to Chiron or Brunetto, or to ourselves even, if we are to perceive and appreciate the *Inferno's* fine texture of black on black. "Dark" means "dead"; the "dun-coloured words" are a "dead writing". The black air is "dead". But "dead" means "deprived". Hell is the place that, having taken less of glory, movement and light, is more than any other devoid of them. Hellish black is objective black; it is a privation, not a colour.

It is not, however, "devoid of all light", for, if privation was utter, black would be metaphysically inconceivable, and poetically there would be nothing worth narrating: in the "dark valley" there glimmers therefore a diffused light. Privation itself is not uniform, either, for, in direct proportion to glory, it penetrates "here more and less there", so that the work in black will acquire a valuable variety. What little light there is is usually reddish: vermilion, burning hot, the colour of fire, of blood. It is the extremity of colour, verging on privation and thick with the sweat of sinning man, as Isaiah would have it. Portraits in red and black: red hot eyes and black

beards, or, in the dunn-coloured breeze, a face dirty with blood dripping from stumps. One devil is black, another is called Rubicante. Wherever the privation of light penetrates most deeply, souls grow “black” . In this place devoid of light, in this place where rotten limbs are the organs of corruption, sounds alter and disconnect. Confused sounds are heard, along with an animated fire “roaring” ; there sound améch zabí almí, aleppe, dun-coloured words, as well as yells, blasphemies, and sighs; we can hear dogs growling, sullen thunders rolling, the din of fear and fright, shameful songs, and wanton riots. One gurgles a hymn from under the mud where he lies buried; others yell lewd dissonant songs and applaud one another obscenely. Such is the music of Dante’s work in black. In contrast to the alchemic work, it has no return: “eternal sorrow... abandon all hope” . When such is the human condition, affliction will not purify, for refinement requires that some change keep the possible open. Here instead there is hardly any movement; necessity prevails, sealed up in the conclusive ice.

But when privation fails and the objective positive comes on in its full glory, then the pleasant colours of beauty bloom: “he was fair and beautiful and gentle” . A rich palette of white, scarlet yellow, indigo blue, and emerald green. The gold reflects the sun; a ruby kindles from the concentrated sun it hides in itself. Transparency and whiteness, variously wrought like as many colours, produce terse glasses, clear waters, sunrays in pure water. Tours de main: Cato’s portrait in white on white and light; the luminous white of a pearl on the opaque white of a forehead; white-melting iron against its own fire; coal enlivened in its own flame; day on top of day. No more harsh, shrill rhymes: “Let dead poetry rise” . In this improved human condition, becoming is music. “As the sweet organ strain strikes my ear, so comes time to my eye” . “Sweet” is the ticking away of the clock. Ever since Casella starts, the sweet songs will never cease. Dante meets Arnaut Daniel who walks through the fire, cries and sings; and, while singing, confesses and commends himself to the brother poet’s memory:

"Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;  
 consiros vei la passada folor,  
 e vei jausen lo joi qu’esper, denan.

Ara vos prec, per aquella valor  
que vos guida al som de l'escalina  
sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor!"  
Poi s'ascese nel foco che li affina<sup>70</sup>.

Dante's purifying fire reminds us of its numerous biblical sources, which in their turn get the regenerating *transire per flammis*<sup>71</sup> from the copellation of precious metals.

First, building materials can be found almost ready at hand. Instead, metals have to be collected and wrought. They resemble agricultural produce, which, like metals, comes from the depths of the earth. God made them similar, since he promised, along with wheat, milk, vinegar, oil, and honey, mineral oils as well. From a chronological point of view, metals go with music, since, owing to a technical revolution, Jubal was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ, while Tubalcain was the instructor of every artificer in brass and iron. Such progress was made even before "the sons of God" saw that "the daughters of men" were very fair and before there were giants in the earth and before the earth was flooded and Noah began to be a husbandman and planted a vineyard.

In vague terms we could say that we take iron out of the earth, and that fire proves its hardness<sup>72</sup>. In more precise terms we could say that certain stones are iron, while out of certain rocks one can get copper<sup>73</sup>. Heat melts stones to copper or bronze<sup>74</sup>, depending, as we now well know, on whether the mineral contains tin or lead besides copper. One can tell which is which from the way they are

70 Purg. 26, 145-148.

71 Num. 31:23.

72 Ignis probat ferrum durum. Eccli. 31:31. Probat means something between «refines» and «tests». According to the old procedure, iron drops its dross and improves by being heated and beaten repeatedly.

73 Cuius lapides ferrum sunt, et de montibus eius aeris metalla fodiuntur. Deut. 8:9. Maybe these stones of iron are meteorites?

74 Lapis solutus calore in aes vertitur. Job 28:2.

wrought. Apart from other uses it can be put to, for instance as a help to writing (as a matter of fact, it is traded in Tyrus), lead is so heavy<sup>75</sup> as compared to silver that it is something impure and unpleasant, to be purged with fire, along with tin, its iniquitous cognate.

Well-polished vases of copper shine like gold. In earthen moulds is molten bronze for capitals, conchs, and other ornaments in the temple, and for a serpent that gives life. In bronze are written the decrees of Rome. Percussion instruments are aes sonans. Bronze, gold, and silver are warmly welcomed and largely employed in the construction and furnishing of the Temple, in spite of the fact that they are sometimes used to make idols like Aaron's molten calf.

Ornaments, implements, treasures of gold and silver (silver is the currency): the world of the Scriptures glitters with, and approves of, gold and silver. The veins of silver and the dust of gold in the ground are well-known to the prospector, who has overturned the mountains from the roots, digging trenches and tunnels, abscondita in luce produxit<sup>76</sup>. Rich gold veins, close to onyx quarries, could be reached from the paradisaal park through waterways: the Romans are known to have mined gold and silver in Spain. Property is a running source of gold transformed. The amount of Israel's gold, carried through the Sinai desert as personal property, is not heavily diminished by Moses, whose strong hands have broken the Tables, taken the calf Aaron has molten with the golden earrings of the wives, their sons and daughters, burned it in the fire and ground it to powder, strewed it upon the water and made sinners drink of it: there still remains enough gold for the Temple. Abraham is well-provided with gold and silver. David has rich stores of gold, silver, and copper. Solomon masses huge gold reserves by imposing taxes and tributes, by purchasing good and importing shiploads from Ophir.

Heat is needed for the refining, no less than for the testing<sup>77</sup>. As soon as a draft of air is forced in medio fornacis, or into the core of a

75 Super plumbum quid gravabitur? Eccli. 22:17.

76 Job 28:11.

77 Probatur in conflatorio argentum et in fornace aurum. Prov. 27:21. Conflabo, et probabo. Jer. 9:7. Igne probatur argentum et aurum camino. Prov. 17:3. And similarly passim.

heap of burning coals, or even into a crucible which can be held with tongs for the casting, the pure metal can be seen to shine and glow, while the surrounding frame has absorbed the molten dross, where the less valuable metals accumulate. It is thought to be degraded silver<sup>78</sup>: the process resembles, and reverses, that of the stone which, when it is molten, changes into copper. According to another theory, the dross is but earth expelled by the heat.

Silver tested by fire, deprived of earthen dross, refined many times<sup>79</sup>, is an apt metaphor for the absolute purity of God's word. And for those whom the Highest has found righteous in their intentions, will and dispositions: *Tamquam aurum in fornace probavit illos*<sup>80</sup>. And within his own conscience one knows the test and knows (with no pride) that he has passed it: *Ignem me examinasti, et non est inventa in me iniquitas*<sup>81</sup>. The Lord, the Mighty Tester, speaks: "Zion, thou art dross. I will test thee with fire, I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross"<sup>82</sup>. The extremity of pain is fire, which tests and refines in the furnace of affliction<sup>83</sup>: "As gold and silver are tested in fire, so the men dear to God are tested in the furnace of affliction"<sup>84</sup>. When he sets out to purify the children of Levi and purge them as gold and silver<sup>85</sup>, he finds them to be dross. Then he puts them all together, the inferior metals and the silver, and puts them into the furnace of his ire. Not everyone is acceptable; it may chance that only the "third part" is brought through the fire<sup>86</sup>, it may chance that the Tester rejects the outcome: *Argentum reprobum vocate eos, quia Dominus proiecit illos*<sup>87</sup>. This testing fire is identical with the divine glory shining out: *Species gloriae Domini, quasi ignis ardens*<sup>88</sup>. The glory

78 *Argentum tuum versum est in scoria. Is. 1:22.*

79 *Argentum purgatum septuplum. Ps. 11:7.*

80 *Sap. 3:6.*

81 *Ps. 16:3.*

82 *Is. 1:25.*

83 *Is. 48:10.*

84 *Eccli. 2:5.*

85 *Mal. 3:3.*

86 *Zach. 13:9.*

87 *Jer. 6:30.*

88 *Ex. 24:17.*

advances like affliction that purifies. Arnaut Daniel dives back into that fire which refines them.

Hammers, nails, blades of axes, gravers, files, agricultural implements; iron bars barring bronze portals, war chariots. When the enemy seize all the iron things, Saul and Jonathan manage to keep for themselves their sword and their spear: for only iron sharpeneth iron<sup>89</sup>. Thus iron, because it is so strategically useful, is not rejected. It is new, however, and therefore suspected. Not long before monstrous Goliath, whom a huge stone has hit and smitten, has come forward in his coat of mail, brandishing his iron sword. Iron is no good for holy things: it smacks too much of the hateful warlike idolaters. Among the metals employed for the Tabernacle are numbered silver, bronze, gold; iron is never used. Iron never cuts away the foreskin, for the circumcision knife must be made of stone. Hezekiah ran a tunnel through the rocks with iron picks, but it was a conduit, which brought water to the city. Iron is not to be used for carving holy stones; or at least it is to be kept at some distance. The Phoenician who is asked to come and work in the Temple must, and does, know about iron<sup>90</sup>; iron nails are needed, and David gets them in great quantity; however no tinkling of iron tools is to be heard during the construction of the holy building. Stones and the flesh alike are not to be touched by iron.

## **Zion's precious garments**

Let's leave the flames of purifying fire and the cold glitter of metals for the softer time for sewing<sup>91</sup>; it is connected with breeding and agriculture, with which it vies in importance. Christ, who says *non laborant, neque nent*, puts the work of the husbandman and that of the spinner on the same level. Teamwork is very much preferred: skilled women meet and voluntarily contribute to the furnishing of the Temple with their coverings either dyed or white. They work at home. Rahab lays her retted flax to dry on the roof of her house. Young Samuel's mother makes his tunic; Tabitha

89 *Ferrum ferro exacuitur. Prov. 27:17.*

90 *II Par. 2:7.*

91 *Tempus consuendi. Eccl. 3:7.*

makes tunics and other garments in her own house. The products are either utilised on the spot or sold. That virtuous woman<sup>92</sup> seeketh wool and flax, which she makes into fine linen and girdles to be sold unto the merchants; she maketh herself coverings of tapestry and clothing of silk and purple. She runs a family atelier<sup>93</sup>, which resembles the one where Anna of Tobiah earns a living for herself and her family. *Mulieres texebant*<sup>94</sup>; however spinning is also *opus viri sapientis*<sup>95</sup>. Some spinners are mentioned: Beseleel, Aholiab. Paul of Tarsus is a rope maker.

Humble people wear warm woollen clothes<sup>96</sup>. The hair of goats may be used too; not always is it put to a humble usage, though, since the screens covering the Tabernacle are woven with it. Flax from Egypt<sup>97</sup> is good for the fine and light garments of fine people; who may not wear, however, garments of both wool and flax.

Joseph wears fine linen of Pharaoh's flax. David wears a stole of linen and an ephod of common flax, the rest of his garment being of linen. The veil in the Temple with its cherubim is a good specimen of skilled tapestry. It being abominable to God that sexes exchange their clothes, women and men are to dress differently; this does not entail, however, that a woman should renounce byssus and purple clothes. The kings of Madian are dressed in purple clothes; more luxuriously, Mardocheus goes about in silver and purple. As to the priest, he is to go dressed in linen; and the heavenly hosts are clothed in fine linen, white and clean<sup>98</sup>.

Jerusalem, all in finely-woven veils of many colours, walks in purple shoes; she wears bracelets and a necklace, earrings and a crown on her long hair, and a nose ring; she is beautiful, proud, and guilty<sup>99</sup>. The vainglorious and impudent daughters of Zion adorn

92 *Mulier fortis. Prov. 31:10.*

93 *Cognitiones domus operantium byssum. I Par. 4:21.*

94 *IV Reg. 23:7.*

95 *Eccli. 45:12.*

96 *Job 31:20.*

97 Flax was grown in Egypt at the time of the plagues. *Ex. 9:31. In Egypt, operabantur linum. Is. 19:9.*

98 *Apoc. 19:14.*

99 *Habens fiduciam in pulchritudine tua fornicata es. Ez. 16:13-15.*

themselves with jewels: gold collars, which make them look like Madian camels<sup>100</sup>, bracelets, anklets and rings, gems on their foreheads, hat-pins and crimping-pins. They wear ornate sandals, mantles and caps, elegant summer clothes, headbands, underclothes; they are all perfumed, they look at you with wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go<sup>101</sup>.

Solemn and in harmony with the holy instructions in every detail is instead the garment which it was ordained should be a glory of beauty and whose making was entrusted to a team imbued by God with a spiritual and wise skill. Aaron wears linen breeches of fine twined linen and a tunic over them with a girdle of fine twined linen. After he has put on the tunic, he gets his head through a collar (woven, not applied) made in the large purple cloth of his robe, on whose hems are pomegranates of blue, and purple, and scarlet. Between the pomegranates they put bells of pure gold; their jingling will tell anyone the High Priest is about to enter or to leave the holy place. For the garment to be worn later on, the inspired artificers have beaten gold into thin plates, and cut it into wires, to work it in the fine linen. The ephod is made of two pieces, the one on the back, the other on the breast, with shoulderpieces to couple them together. On each shoulderpiece they wrought an onyx stone enclosed in an onche of gold, graven with the names of six of Israel's tribes. The breastplate is foursquare; a span is the length thereof, and a span is the breadth thereof; it is tied to the ephod by chains, the wreathen work of pure gold, and by rings of pure gold. It contains twelve stones carven with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, which the Priest is to remember always before God. On his mitre they put a plate of pure gold, tied with a lace of blue, and wrote upon it a writing, Holiness to the Lord<sup>102</sup>. Needless to say, the gold employed for such garments was the purest that fire could possibly purify.

## **The red and the white**

100 Jud. 8:26.

101 Is. 3:18-24.

102 Ex. 28:1-39. Ex. 39:1-31.

Wonderful stones glitter in their various colours: black, green as grass, blue-green, yellow-green, dark blue, pure azure, reddish-purple, red, pink, and honey-yellow. There are coloured metals too: copper red, the greenish hue of bronze, gold, silver white, grey as rusty iron. Then textiles and dyed stuffs: purple screens, the gamut of purple, red, scarlet, white. Judas Macchabeus loots the camp of Gorgia: he seizes gold, silver, stuffs dyed in violet and purple. By selecting fleeces, brown or black stuffs can be variously obtained. Mardocheus shines out in his hyacinthine and azure garments: something for the extremely wealthy. Truly, we are in Persia. In Xerxes' mansion there are azure tents. This is all part of the chromatic message conveyed to Israel by the various activities of dyeing, working metals and making textiles. As to freshness, it is admittedly inferior to that of lilies, which far exceeds the glory of Solomon and of all his arrays.

Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool<sup>103</sup>. Here are the extremes of colour: "red" and "white"<sup>104</sup>. The red includes red hues proper and its purple, scarlet, and crimson shades, the violet of the dyeing art (to be seen in the Tabernacle and in the priest's garments); the white ranges from the dubious white of wool scoured, washed and cleaned in the sun, to the glittering white of snow. Its equivalent in garments is to be found in the holy linen of the angels. The disjunctive ethical and logical opposition between purity and sin changes into the concrete opposition between "red" and "white". Washing a "red" cloth white<sup>105</sup> is like, indeed it is more difficult than, washing the leaden dross off silver<sup>106</sup>. In its turn, silver, when duly polished, adds its own shining whiteness<sup>107</sup>. Blackness does not oppose it as much as redness, for blackness can be comely<sup>108</sup>.

103 Is. 1:18.

104 Together they make a good contrast: *Dilectus meus candidus et rubicundus*. Cant. 5:10.

105 *Lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor*. Ps. 50:9.

106 *Quasi herba fullonum emundans argentum*. Mal. 3:2-3.

107 *Aufer rubiginem de argento, et egredietur vas purissimum*. Prov. 25:4.

108 *Nigra sum, sed formosa*. Cant. 1:4.

## Holy oils perfumed

It seems to be a permanent feature of human behaviour that our dresses should be completed and exalted by a suitable perfume. Indeed, the perfume adheres to our body, it makes a second dress. I run after the perfume of my beloved<sup>109</sup>. My perfume surrounds me and sends forth its smell<sup>110</sup>.

The wealthy use too much perfume<sup>111</sup>. They scent their garments with myrrh, cassia, incense. Isaac in his blindness thinks he can tell Esau by the smell of the venison and of the field: a real perfume for an old breeder and husbandman like him. Beds smell of myrrh, aloe, and cinnamon. Not to anoint oneself for three weeks is a sign of mourning. A packet of myrrh perfumes the skin; when anointed, cheeks resemble flowerbeds of balm.

Oil, which fixes perfumes, preserves the body. A sorry wound is to be allayed with oil. The sufferer with wounds and bruises and putrefying sores, which have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment, stands for the People<sup>112</sup>. Bleeding Jerusalem is told: Unxi te oleo<sup>113</sup>. Besides being a medicinal ointment, oil is a cosmetic as well, and is poured on one's hair. One's face, smeared with it, shines. In Xerses' gynaeceum the king's female guests are massaged with oil for six weeks; for another six weeks they are massaged with powdery fragrances and ointments. Only after they have been treated like that can they be taken to the king. Judith takes a bath, anoints herself with an excellent perfume, combs her hair, puts on a nice bonnet, puts on her sandals, her best clothes, and wears her jewels. The perfume contributes greatly to the incomparable alluring splendour with which Judith seduces Holofernes' host.

109 *Post te curremus in odorem unguentorum tuorum. Cant. 1:3.*  
Thus the Vulgate.

110 *Nardus mea dedit odorem suum. Cant. 1:11.*

111 *Am. 6:6.*

112 *Is. 1:6.*

113 *Ez. 16:9.*

Wash thyself and anoint thyself, Noemi tells Ruth. Yes, one must wash oneself white, before one perfumes oneself with a scent related to the Holy Oil. One must wash oneself inside: *Lava a malitia cor tuum, Jerusalem*<sup>114</sup>.

Aloe, sweet calamus, frankincense, scented wood, myrrh, lavender, sapphire, cassia, galbanum, onycha, stacte, balm, bdellium, gutta, resin, storax: they all came on camels' back de Saba, de terra longinqua<sup>115</sup>, from Galaad. They all mix together harmoniously<sup>116</sup>: in the solidity of thymiama, and in the liquidity of the holy anointing oil. In order to obtain good thymiama, an apothecary will beat equal weights of galbanum, frankincense, onycha, and stacte to powder to be offered to God in front of the Tabernacle. The thymiama is most holy, and is dedicated to God only: no one shall make the like unto it<sup>117</sup>. *Uret thymiama sempiternum coram Domino*<sup>118</sup>.

The various components of a perfume are not themselves holy, since they can be components of a cosmetic as well. They become holy when they mix up, amalgamated by the oil which melts the scents and unifies them. Thus unity and variety combine in the ointment. The holy oil requires two weights of myrrh, two of cassia, one of cinnamon, one of calamus; all of them come together in olive oil of the best quality. With the holy oil (never made for men) are anointed the Tabernacle, the ark, the table with the vases, the candelabra, the altars with the thymiama, and all the furnishings in the Temple. Maybe the scents have reached this point after being purchased and transported from afar. Maybe the aromatic fraction has been extracted during the making of the ointment or even before it, through the vegetables being kept in cold oil for a long time, like a sort of enfleurage. Other products require cooking: *Unguenta bulliunt*<sup>119</sup>.

Jacob pours oil on the stone which he puts for his pillow, when dreaming of the ladder with the angels of God ascending and de-

114 Jer. 4:14.

115 Jer. 6:20.

116 *Compositio odoris. Eccli. 49:1.*

117 Ex. 30:34-38.

118 Ex. 30:8.

119 Job 41:22.

scending on it, and has made it the house of the Lord. Mixed up with the exquisite scents that it binds and fixes together, the anointing oil streams down Aaron's head through his beard on to his breast. Similarly, and with an abundance that is scandalous for those who have no understanding, three hundred pence's worth of the best spikenard is poured on Christ's head. The holy oil may not anoint any man. Therefore it was with common oil, kept in poor vases and perhaps not even perfumed, that Samuel anointed Saul and David kings. Aaron and his sons, on the day of their anointment, will present unleavened bread tempered with oil, and eat it. Miraculous bread is tempered with oil. The taste of manna was like wafers made with honey, or with oil; oil and honey shall feed Jerusalem in the triumph of her glory. The land is said to be flowing with milk and honey but also with oil and honey. The people are made to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. Oil, which exalts and consecrates, binds together the concrete universal of consumption and the food of the innocent man, and unifies them in the same way in which, on becoming holy, it unifies the scents and perfumes. Pure and fresh, just out of the press, oil is its own sacrifice, *ut ardeat lucerna semper in tabernaculo testimonii*<sup>120</sup>. It is not to be denied, however, that the pleasant mellowness of oil and honey may at times be deceitful and seductive<sup>121</sup>.

## **Pious and impious artificers**

For all this exciting labour credit ought to be given to the artificer, the weaver, the embroiderer, or the apothecary. The seal maker is busy at his work day and night, trying to vary the pattern of his seals. The blacksmith at his furnace, scorched by the flames, deafened by the hammers beating heavily away, struggles to make a perfect artifact. The ceramist turns a wheel with his feet, and the whirling wheel shapes the clay according to his plan. When the vases are finished, he goes on to glaze them: during the night he prepares the oven. He is the craftsman of an important art: the

**120** *Ex. 27:20-21.*

**121** *Favus enim distillans labia meretricis et nitidius oleo guttur eius. Prov. 5:3.*

material he uses is the obedient clay, which has not yet been turned into any product, metallic, agricultural, pastoral, textile or aromatic. The ceramist metamorphoses the earth he turns on the plate of his lathe, making it into vases for the keeping of oil, wine, honey, milk, water, and dry foodstuffs; unlike the mason and the blacksmith, he follows no model, except for the model he has in his own mind: a constant reminder of the Work that made great the humble dust of the ground.

By shaping clay, the ceramist shapes himself as clay. This is a temptation: after he has made his vases, he shapes idols. Here is a burning reproach: from the matter of clay, from the possible, he shapes the divine, the Necessary! Of course he knows nothing about God. Indeed, when he shapes the empty ghosts of his idols, he very well knows what he is about. In his greed for lucre he denies God, and makes a game and a market of his life. He has a heart of ash<sup>122</sup>.

His empiety is not the only one. Some embellish their own statues obscenely<sup>123</sup>; some others depict on walls huge Chaldeans with girdles and mitres, which seduce silly Oolla and Ooliba. Others make their beautiful images of human idols of wood, of bronze, or iron. They plate wooden statues with gold and silver. Nebuchadnezzar orders a huge image of gold to be set up. Certain kings want to be worshipped in their statues, which they have commanded to be spread around their dominions. Artists have help spread the abomination of idolatry. To please their masters, they do their best to improve on their images; the masses in their vast empires, who have never seen their kings, are deceived and seduced by the beauty of the statues, and worship them. Skilled carpenters fell the best cedar trees, oak trees, ilexes or pine trees in the forests, select the most suitable trunks, bark them, and make them into implements and tools. Unfortunately they too make images of animals and men, that is idols: which is a tragical error, an instance of foolishness and evil will. Still, the images they make are dangerously beautiful; their craft, being unfortunately too artistic, is evil and corrupt.

122 Sap. 15:7-12.

123 Sap. 15:4.

Let's leave aside the sarcasm of a constant, passionate argument against idolatry; it is enough for us to have met, amidst the streams of doing, with central aesthetic questions, like the artist's responsibility, his power to seduce, the quality of his products and their appreciation. There is an intense awareness in the making of an artifact; that is why a pot of clay is an example. It is wrong that such a craft should make human images in the shape of idols; it's wrong that clay should not rebel against the potter, thereby forgetting that it covers him with its very misery. If however they are employed in the service of God, we may have cherubim of gold, of olive wood plated with gold, of golden wood, or oxen and lions of bronze. The artificer who does that deserves no reproach.

Very presumptuous people may wonder that artisans should know about things divine: *Nonne hic est fabri filius?*<sup>124</sup>. Maybe it is inconvenient that blacksmiths, engravers, ceramists, artificers should hold no public offices. Their wisdom may not be like that of the scribe, who is free from absorbing practical tasks; it may not be the same as is learned from the thinkers of the past or from the prophets. It is of a manual, practical kind. Still, it is a kind of wisdom, a good patrimony of knowledge for mankind: *Sine his omnibus non aedificatur civitas*<sup>125</sup>. Some wise artificers are well known. When the sanctuary is about to be made, Moses calls Bezaleel and Aholiab. The Lord has put in them wisdom and understanding to know how to work all manner of work for the service of the sanctuary. They made works of gold, silver, and bronze; they engraved precious stones; they cut wood and ebony; they embroidered cloths and dyed them purple and crimson; they made works of byssum, they made wooden work. Further, they know how to invent new things. Next to the two supreme versatile artificers, Moses calls every wise hearted man, in whose heart the Lord hath put wisdom, every one whose heart stirred him up to come unto the work to do it. During the construction of the Temple that follows we meet with great Hiram of Tyrus.

## **The noble cedar tree**

124 Mt. 13:55.

125 Eccli. 38:36.

Wood makes a strong armour. Cheap sycamore is good enough, if no other wood is available. The palaces of the wealthy however have beams of cedar, ceilings of cypress. A good ship ought to be made of fir, oak, or cedar. David dwells in a house of cedar wood. In Solomon's temple, next to the foundation stones and the walls, there are colonnades: and Solomon covered both the floor and the walls with boards of cedar. No less noble wood might be used. Its cost however was not too high, since in Solomon's reign silver could be found in abundance and cedar trees were as common as sycamores.

All vegetable species contain in themselves their own growth. In the present day trees we can find all their essential qualities; we have received them from the Lord: "I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together"<sup>126</sup>. The patrimony of trees is to be kept as carefully as the species in Eden, and defended, especially against the flames setting the mountains on fire<sup>127</sup>. It is to be spread: from the excellent cedar tree<sup>128</sup>, in its extreme tallness<sup>129</sup>, cut a scion, bury it: you will see it send out a bud, bear fruit and grow into a superb tree. See how much life throbs in the rationes seminales! This vegetable world is wisdom made visible in the cedar of Lebanon, in the cypress upon the hill of Zion, in the palm tree in Cades and in the rosebush in Jericho, in the olive tree, and in the plane tree shading the water and the market place. A priest is an olive tree putting forth its buds; he is a cypress standing out; his brethren are as many Lebanon cedar trees. The righteous man will flourish like a Lebanon cedar, like a palm tree.

His growth may be impious, though: this was the crime of Assur in the allegory of a cedar as a high statue<sup>130</sup>.

126 Is. 41:19.

127 Ignis qui comburit silvam... flamma comburens montes. Ps. 82:15.

128 Species eius ut Libani, electus ut cedri. Cant. 5:15.

129 Extremely small is the hyssop, as is well-known to Solomon the naturalist. III Reg. 4:33.

130 Ez. 31:3-16.

Look at it! See how its height is exalted above all the trees of the field, and its boughs are multiplied, how far it is in its greatness, in the length of its branches. The trees of Eden envy it. So great an ambition must be punished. The cedar is to be delivered to the axe of the mighty one of the heathen, of the terrible of the nations. Let it be cut off, let the fowls of the heaven and the beasts of the field desert it, which it harboured and protected. Its extraordinary growth is due to deep waters running round about its roots. The water sends out its little rivers unto all the trees of the field. As soon as the source of water is dried up by the wrath of God, all the trees are delivered unto death, just like the cedar. The water is the water of Eden flowing back; maybe the cedar is the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

## **The Ark back to the Ark**

When it is intended to be a show of mere opulence, every shining object annihilates, smothered by the dun misery of dust. Abundance punishes itself. Inflation made gold in Tyrus no more valuable than the dust in the streets. This diminution in value helps us understand how little precious metals count, when they are compared to certain values; they count even less, if the values are the greatest of all. The Law and the Word are more desirable than thousands of topaz, gold, and silver artifacts. The acquisition of Wisdom is far better than a successful bargain in precious metals; for Wisdom is more valuable than whatever we think excellent and eminent, gold, sardonyx, sapphire, topaz from Ethiopia, rock crystal, dyed stuffs from India. Set against Wisdom, silver turns out to be mere dust. Whoever values gold more than Wisdom and the Law (and is therefore inclined to get too much of it) makes an error that will ruin him.

Thus rulers are warned not to mass immense heaps of gold and silver. David remembers the warning and, setting a good example for the optimates of Israel, sees to it that his own gold and silver are used in the building of the Temple.

The Temple was Isreal's greatest achievement in architecture and the outstanding landmark in its history. Its precedent is a ship of finely-carved wood and carefully caulked, both inside and outside.

The thin wooden wall of the ark prevents man from returning to dust. It is a floating house: a cellular structure, rational and functional, with right angles and flat surfaces, provided with a door and a window. It needs no sails, no oars, no rudder: the hand of Wisdom itself will steer it<sup>131</sup>. A very simple task; still the job, which requires a great deal of carpentry and caulking, is a hard one for Noah, who can only count on himself and his family. The woman who later on took an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, put her child Moses in it and laid it in the flags by the river Nilus' brink, could not but call back to mind, I believe, the rescuing ark of long ago.

When he starts the building of the Temple, Moses is not alone; nor does he - who is rather a stonemason - carve the wood. Beseleel, Aholiab, and other artificers are ready and eager to help. Having repented of the recent crime, the people came, both men and women, as many as were willing hearted, and brought bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold; they all brought a willing offering for all manner of work, which the Lord had commanded to be made by the hand of Moses. The people gave so much and with such enthusiasm that the wise men had to stop them and proclaim throughout the camp that neither man nor woman make any more work for the offering of the sanctuary.

Moses' project, no less than that of divinely-inspired Noah - is to make a movable house for the Lord. The holy ark is to be his tent: a simple wooden parallelepipedon, with staves of shittim wood, which may be carried through the desert and through history in the same way as the ark was floated on the waters of the abyss. It is not smeared, however, with black pitch; it is covered, both inside and outside, with the purest gold. The holy ark is not to be out in the open or in bad weather; it is protected by the Tabernacle. Which is a large rectangular hut with movable boards of shittim wood and sockets of silver. The first covering is to be of strong goats' hair, the second of rams' skins dyed red and purple. A veil inside isolates and protects the ark of the testimony; another hanging hides the door of the tent; more hangings are to encircle the court in front of the Tabernacle. The curtains and hangings are all of fine twined linen dyed red and purple.

131 Sap. 14:6.

Wood is not alien to the sacred. The Temple's altar is made of wood. Solomon employs precious wood in his great work. He receives much from his father David: a task, a detailed project, as well as a rich store of jewels, partly offered by generous donators, partly collected from the wealthy. However, he still lacks material resources, technological know-how, and connoisseurs like Beseleel and Aholiab. In exchange for food for Hiram's household and pieces of land, Solomon obtains from the crown of Tyrus, ever friendly to David, gold and the precious wood of Lebanon: cedar trees, pine trees, and juniper trees. More importantly, Tyrus sent him Hiram, a man filled with wisdom and understanding, and cunning to work all works in brass, copper, marble, wood, iron, and various dyestuffs. Hiram was a widow's son of the tribe of Nephtali, a Jew on his mother's side. Although he was not filled with the spirit of God, he was, as the good craftsman and artificer that he was, ready for the sacred task. Hiram coordinates and guides the artificers David has obtained, and sets to work the mass of people that the king, very much in the style of a Pharaoh, has forcibly put together. The building of the House-Temple is not due to a direct command of God or to his instructions; nor is it due to the spontaneous offerings and cooperation of the people. Rather it is part of a vast project, involving the architectural and commercial planning of the city.

But as soon as we examine its realisation closely, we cannot but recognise the ark and the Tabernacle in its simple far-from-huge<sup>132</sup> chamber, whose quoins were squared in the quarries before they were brought together, since neither hammer nor axe nor any other iron tool was to be heard in the house, while it was in building. The chambers of the ark of the flood reappear here in the chambers of a three-storey wooden building. In his cunning to work all works of brass, Hiram cast two pillars of brass, which had on their tops chapiters of lily work with network and chains and pomegranates in rows.

I need not say more about the other furnishings of brass and jewels, or about the coverings of fine twined linen, the great cherubim of gold on the two ends of the mercy seat, which spread out their wings on high, and covered with their wings over the

132 60x20x30 cubits (height). III Reg. 6:2.

mercy seat. I will only dwell on the graven cedar overlaid with gold on the inside of the wall. When David, in the comforting luxury of his palace, compares his own house of cedar wood with the goats' hair that covers the holy ark, he decides in his heart that the goats' hair shall be replaced with stones, gold and wood in a solid Temple that is to come and crown the volumetric poetics of the ark. With its flat surface anchored on the stone and its carved face overlaid with gold, the cedar is kept between the hard and lasting stone, ready to receive the Word, and the gold made pure by the grief that refines. The one conciliates with the other: it is the cedar, the noblest tree of ascending life.

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For this paper I have referred to the Vulgate as edited in *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam, nova editio... ornata a Alberto Colunga et Laurentio Turrado*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos de la Editorial Catolica, 1985. Also I have consulted *Biblia Sacra juxta Vulgatae exemplaria... edidit... ornavit Aloisius Claudius Fillion*, Paris, Letouzey, 1925.

After long consideration I have decided to refer to the Vulgate, which is on principle to be preferred as a venerable, stabilized and enormously influential text. I have of course compared various editions in modern languages, including the King James Version, with the Septuagint. Here and there I have made use of what Hebrew I know. My decision seems to me, as far as concerns this paper, to be sound enough.

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