

CzasKultury/English

Vegetal Philosophy
(or Vegetable
Thinking)

Andrzej Marzec

5/2008

Vegetal Philosophy (or Vegetable Thinking)

Andrzej Marzec

“Things have their roots”

Confucius

Thought was vegetal from its very beginnings. On the pages of his treatise *On the Soul*, Aristotle writes about the vegetable soul, which is responsible for the body's growth and development. Plants were forgotten for many centuries afterwards: it is easy to overlook what merely “vegetates,” in other words, that leads a dull existence. Plants, however, appeared and still appear in metaphors found in the (extra)ordinary life of philosophy. For example, the philosophical concept of “substance” may simply be referred to as “ground”, and philosophical statements are “grounded in” something or “take root”, thinkers should not be “full of beans”, though they often are, so even this expression can be classified as canonical. Finally, philosophy itself, with its numerous branches (ontolo-

gy, epistemology, or ethics) is “cultivated” until it bears the expected “fruit”. Even the concept of culture, which in our day has become extremely popular, originally meant the cultivation of plants or morals. We should restore the rightful place of plants in philosophy. Indeed, it is worth discussing and writing about thinking as vegetating: starting from the dictatorship of the taproot, through classical systematic classifications, to finally turn towards damp, creeping, rhizomatic neoplasms of thoughts.

The root of the problem

The notion of thought structured like a taproot has been cultivated for many centuries, and is well-grounded in philosophy.¹ The taproot consists of a primary root, growing directly downward, and smaller, shorter, and thinner rootlets which grow laterally. This type of thought is always symmetrical and polar. It thrives on opposites: existence/non-existence, rational/irrational, male/female, spiritual/physical *et cetera*. The root also has its mirror image: the tree. A tall and mighty tree is only ostensibly the opposite of an earthbound root because they both share a metaphysical core (hardcore). This metaphysical core is the basis, the foundation, the centre around which new tissues of vegetal thought may build up and grow. The core that unites them is a rule that makes the inseparable despotic inner unity between binary oppositions – the root and the tree – possible. An experienced taproot philosopher acknowledges this phenomenon. Indeed, his

1 I refer here to the taxonomy of plants developed by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari [in:] *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, London and New York 2004, pp. 3–28. See also: G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Capitalisme e Schizofrenie II. Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980.

favorite pastime is reduction: he eliminates multiplicity, and arrives at the fundamentals, simple and clear elements which give one absolute certainty (of the world and oneself). He looks at a tree as if he were a lumberjack who takes the greatest pleasure in cutting it down. Armed with the axe of logic, in order to achieve an erection, he resects all incorrect and unnecessary branches. A proud thinker thus creates a logical tree: a thick, stiff, woody, protruding trunk (a phallus full of meaning) that cannot be brought down. If we were to look for counterparts of such trees in nature, they would be baobabs.

The wind in the trees

When we observe the crowns of trees waving and rustling in the wind, this profusion of branches and leaves which gives shelter to various species of animals, we are easily fascinated with their beauty and variety. Impressed with the play of shimmering green forms, we forget about the core, which is the foundation making this multiplicity possible. A philosopher who hews excessive branches from tree-thought does not kill it; on the contrary, he brings out its essence and highlights the hidden unity of the phallogocentric trunk.² Thus, a tangle of branches which carry in their juices the memory of the root, their wooden genealogy, is reduced to the trunk. Indeed, each branch is an extension and reflection of the trunk: everything in a tree can be reduced to the trunk.

2 Jacques Derrida coined the term "phallogocentrism" to criticize the metaphysical assumptions of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

That is why it is so difficult to destroy the tree and bring it down. It is like a hydra: two new heads grow in the place of a single severed head. Pluralism in the tree is achieved by the slow, continuous reproduction of the same hard woody sense. Reliance on only one legitimate interpretation, explanation or concept implies an essentially anti-conceptual (infertile) creation. Only the hardness of wood, the ideal, is copied. And it cannot be reconciled with the multiplicity of fresh, soft and bold concepts, whose growth is prevented by the trunk. All subversive heretical branches wither, rejected by the tree as dangerous, or are removed by the lumberjack as incompatible with orthodoxy. When these branches are severed from the trunk, knots are formed. They are the hardest points in the trunk. These are the so-called *aporias*, philosophical disputes, contradictions that have never been resolved and incorporated into the coherence of the trunk. Leaves are the only Dionysian element in the Apollonian structure of the tree. They are located at the very end of branches and thus have the least contact with wood. Therefore, they are the most prone to be tossed to and fro, and thus degenerated. Leaves are filled with motion and ambiguity, especially when the wind plays with them. But when leaves fall, flake and completely lose contact with the tree, after some time they start to ferment and rot. Then they become a part of completely different restless thought. Blooming flowers, falling leaves and animals living in trees are cyclical and impermanent. They go with the wind. The tree on the other hand remains unchanged – it IS. One cannot be indifferent to it because its obscene duration requires one

to use the verb “to be,” thereby laying the foundations for all metaphysics.

Settled thought

Tree-thought is a dignified, languid, and, above all, settled formation. It is firmly rooted, anchored in the ground (substance) which supports it. It is similar to the state apparatus, inasmuch as it is hostile to riots, unrest and change. Weighed down by its fruit, tree-thought emanates the atmosphere of a heavy sweltering existence. Indeed, settled thought has to bear fruit; it is never selfless and unproductive. It is, however, by all means teleological: it is subjected to the objective it pursues. Therefore, it is not possible to speak here of a complete standstill, because this category of thought is characterized by two types of very slow, minimal and symmetrical movements. The first one is phototropism: this is movement towards sunlight, excellence and the life-giving source of thought congealed in ideas. It is movement determined by the sun, one of the poles of thought and the absolute value of plants. Sunlight, associated with rationality, divinity or the superego, attracts plants and extends the taproot structure of the tree. This type of thought, immersed in guilt, is filled with the desire for freedom, salvation and liberation from what is material, corporal, impure and imperfect.

The second symmetrical type of movement of tree-thought is geotropism. It is the constant growth of the root downwards in response to the force of gravity. Although its direction is opposite to phototropic movement, it consti-

tutes in fact a mirror image of the same desire. A constant movement downwards reflects a desire for depth, and stems from a dissatisfaction with shallow or impoverished soil. The root pursues something wholesome, perfect and true. This quest is dictated by a wish to escape mediocrity and a desire to achieve uniqueness. The only problem is that trees never want to stay just trees. As if the possibility of moving up and down gave them a chance to become something better, bigger and more beautiful. On the day of its death, however, a tree is never anything other than just a tree. Phototropism and geotropism are the essence of the existence of such a plant: upward movement gives it a sense of perfection and downward movement gives it a sense of meaning. Thus, thought becomes limited. Demarcation lines are delineated: poles beyond which one cannot venture. The force of gravity and the sun chart the territory, set the framework, mark the map with points of departure and arrival. Thinking at this point becomes a routine, an outdated ritual, because one needs only to follow a well-travelled route – all deviations imply leaving the clearly marked territory.

Hier-archy³

The phrase “the crown of a tree” or “the kingdom of plants” suggests that taproot thought is all about power, authority and rule. Tree-thought is a strong structure based on the domination and subordination of other minor concepts–rootlets, concepts–twigs. Hence, plants grow in stories: the caste system and hierarchy are founded on

3 Hierarchy (gr. ιερός [hieros] – holy / αρχή [arkho] – rule).

access to the sun and deep strong roots. Indeed, the competition between plant systems is based on violence and force. Only trees have managed to generate such a grand narrative, such a consistent and powerful taproot system, that they are able to permanently dominate other plants. Their imposing height stigmatized the downtrodden shade-loving plants that are deprived of sunlight. And the desire for depth marginalized plants with weak root systems that were not able to overcome the dictatorship of trees. As a result, an unquestionable division into higher (wholesome) plants and lower plants, degraded due to their small size, was established. This in turn meant that the subject was strengthened, a strong identity was built. The world of plants was divided into species that have a hard core (phallus) and those which suffer from its absence and desire one greatly. The tree-root type of thinking oscillates around a central principle (*arche*) and establishes the existing hierarchy. Such actions are inherently associated with the generation of violence, exclusion and dogmatism.

Botany

Botany was founded on the grounds of tree-thought. It is mainly interested in the separation, segregation, determination and isolation of strong subjects. Claiming to be a “total” discipline, one that embraces all plants, botany began to systematize and classify flora. But as long as organisms lived in their natural habitat, they eluded concepts by means of which science wanted to define them. To get its own, botany had to petrify the uncombed thoughts of plants, deepen the previously delineated demarcation

lines, and divide plants into model species and deviations from the norm. The history of vegetal philosophy, which confined plants to herbaria, became the crowning achievement of taproot thought. Locked, dead, stuck between the pages, plants are unable to move anyone today and only gather dust in display cabinets. Vegetal thought, born out of “the tree of knowledge,” is at its end. Big rotten branches fall with a snap. We should follow them to the ground and examine the lower parts of flora.

Alternative rhizome

The rhizome is a completely alternative and bizarre thought structure. The rhizome usually grows horizontally, just below or above the ground, creating stolons. It is impossible to cultivate it, classify it or guide its growth. The rhizome does not have a beginning or end; it lacks any indexing or symmetry axis. It is characterized by a non-significant break. The rhizome may be broken at any point and reconnected completely without losing its meaning because it does not so much as have a meaning but rather produces it. The rhizome has a short memory. It has come to terms with its amnesia because there is no one to complain to about it. It is characterized by anti-genealogy; it usually creates multiple versions of events, often contradictory ones, and favours freedom and randomness. This thought reproduces nothing because it does not have a matrix, patterns, authorities, directive interpretations or a core. Still, it remains the most creative and conceptual – it grows at an alarming rate through variation, expansion, capture, injection and neoplasm. In contrast

to the metanarrative⁴ of tree-roots, it does not want to reach a climax. The rhizome is an orgiastic tangle; it is a constant region of intensity that continuously vibrates on itself in the throes of transgression. It is a mundane, superficial, sticky and humid discourse that is aware of its own position and does not want to change it. The majority of philosophers-fruit growers regard it as something unclean, undesirable, something one should get rid of in an orchard (*abject*).⁵

A pack of rats, swarming and squeaking, fills one with similar disgust. Other examples of rhizomes are animal burrows with multiple entrances and exits, ubiquitous ants, almost unremovable couch grass, and grass and weed thickets which are impossible to get through. The rhizome, however, cannot exist within a single homogeneous species. Plants form them with the wind, animals with human beings, and human beings build them with viruses (through lateral transfer of genes),⁶ which in turn allow us to connect with other species.

Hetero- or homogeneity?

The structure of the rhizome lacks a core, a centre which would be responsible for the organization of the whole. It is a multiplicity, a multiplicity that cannot be reduced to the one. It is also a discourse that rapidly mutates and proliferates. That is why it is so difficult to develop a standard

4 See J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis 1984.

5 See J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1980.

6 The transfer of genes from one organism to another when the first organism is not the progenitor of the other.

system that would not become immediately outdated. The grand narrative of trees was based on the separation and purity of species (although cross-breeding of fruit trees was allowed). The essence of this type of pluralism was that multiplicity had to be organized around the same core: the trunk. Hence, the great variety of such trees as oak, forsythia, mulberry, poplar, elm, and the like. Rhizome-thought is characterized by complete arbitrariness due to the lack of an organizing (grounding) principle that would monitor which species may exist and which are doomed to oblivion. All parts of the rhizome can be combined with each other at any point. This means we cannot talk about such categories as identity, subjectivity, or representation. It is difficult to single out an individual thing that could break through the thicket and declare about itself: "I." Everything is ungrounded, formless, random, arbitrary and extremely temporary, because nothing can find, and is not even looking for, an excuse for its duration. A mutating tangle, a pack of rats, teeming with wet mouths and pale wriggling tails: there is no individual here. The rhizome is always surrounded by something; it is in-between, and it should be treated as such. Pluralism takes here the form of interspecific crossing where one is not able to distinguish between the maple tree and the grass. There is only the maple-grass, the oak-rat and the beech-ant. A certain type of organic intimacy we can observe in nature is a perfect exemplification of relations in the rhizome. It is mutualism: both species are so dependent on each other that in case of their separation they cannot survive on their own. An example of mutualism is

the mysterious inseparable pact (adhesion) between the fungi and the algae. Plant systematics, unable to cope with queer organisms, called them fungi-algae lichens – a third gender (a hermaphrodite).⁷ No one knows the rules, boundaries or key according to which individual parts of the rhizome combine. Instead of a system, there is a will and determination to unrestricted creativity. Because, contrary to the root, the rootlet will never say “I am” but rather “I want.”

Nomadism

In contrast to settled thought, the rhizome is a very busy plant. As such, it is deprived of languidness, often called seriousness. Its movements resemble the light treads of a carefree child who does not worry about fences, does not respect other people’s property, and does not use the map but leaves behind numerous traces. As a result, rhizomatic neoplasms, without their established, stable and mature identity, undermine, dismantle and move monumental structures. Their movements are untrained. They creep, sway, romp and jump like cornfields dancing in the wind. Tree trunks could never move like this. The rhizome is in a continuous intellectual confusion, rumpus, uproar, and its efforts do not have an explicit goal or cause. Rhizome-thought is nomadic. It begins nowhere. It is located in the *intermezzo*, constantly in transition between two points. We cannot predict its development, and the traces it leaves behind disappear after some time. A nomad is not a settler. He stops for a while only to set out again.

⁷ See J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London 1990.

Thus, he does not build a comprehensive picture of the world but only creates temporary orders. Similar to a mirage that lasts a moment, only to burst like a soap bubble. There are no points of reference on his route; everything he finds along the way is accidental, occasional and unplanned. Therefore, a nomad has no claim to any territory – he has no desire to trace out points, borders or routes. Consequently, he does not build settlements or systems. He confirms and strengthens nothing. He has nothing to come back to, and therefore is determined to go forward. He creates for himself a liquid space of becoming and delights in the aesthetics of disappearing. Similarly, guerrilla forces disperse in a territory and do not divide it between themselves; they flow only to disappear behind the horizon. This movement of deterritorialization involves leaving the territory. The land is left unsettled, while a nomad moves on, fighting for independence of a purpose, rule or *logos*. The constantly moving rhizome has no fixed territory, and if we decide to be still, we can be certain that it will soon leave us.

Weak thought⁸

Thought that has become decentralized, devoid of its centre of gravity, its Archimedes point, its hard core, is fundamentally doomed to weakness and even instability. However, the rhizome can permit it, as it does not have anything to protect itself from danger. Since this type of thought is not consistent, it is not threatened by inconsistency. Since it is shallow and superficial, it does not

⁸ See G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Baltimore 1991.

fear oversimplification. It does not carry meanings, but releases and throws them out of itself, and thus does not have to be afraid that someone will take them away from it. The rhizome should be weak because then no one is able to take away its identity, balance or dignity. Elevated tree-thought cannot humiliate the rhizome because the latter is in itself mediocre. Thanks to its weakness, it repeals great and marvelous senses which thought, claiming to be hard and strong, must face. Rhizome-thought gets out of the ring in which only the power and consistency of logical propositions matter. One cannot refute it, disprove it or knock it out for one more simple reason. Rhizome-thought does not have a subject, essence, idea or assertion that could lose in a fight. A question about the “who” of the rhizome is inherently fallacious and has no answer. The rhizome is a mixed lot, a mass of outcasts with liquid identities – so soft and flexible that they perfectly adapt to any type of substrate. The rhizome slides over the surface to plait, to creep, to entwine the existing canonical orders and absorb them into its complicated network. It is like couch grass that grows everywhere and enters every woody structure. Cereal ears sway in the wind: they do not resist its power, but together with the wind form a horizontal, spectacular and beautiful wave. The rhizome is impermanent but it shows that it is unbeatable. Classified as weak, it is beyond any classifications. In contrast, power, hegemony, dictatorship and orthodoxy are founded on unwanted oppositions they wish they could beat. The rhizome in its weakness is closer to the verb “not to be” than “to be;” it oscillates between

continuous creation and nihilism. A classic philosopher, looking at the problem through the prism of binary oppositions, would ask an ultimate question: what would the rhizome be without the trees it can entwine? Is it possible for the rhizome to exist without trees? Symmetrical questions cannot be answered definitively, and one can think about the answer without end. These questions thrive on the tensions which arise when the right answer is suspended between two poles. Rhizomes are not interested in trees; they entwine and penetrate them just because trees stand in their way. When the trunk disappears under the greenness of a rhizomatic tangle, we no longer know whether we are dealing with the tree or the rhizome. Soon it turns out that it is the rhizome or an illusion of the tree. Blending, growing into one, has such an amazing power to revoke meanings: an original, a source, no longer exists and all we are left with are copies.⁹ Thus, not only does the rhizome cover trees, as in the story by Borges in which a map covers an entire empire, but the tree also becomes the rhizome. That is why we no longer look for it under a tangle of rootlets. We grew exhausted with the tree because our culture was founded on it. If we are searching for a goal, some kind of support, some warm and comfortable place, a beaten and well-travelled track, we must turn to settled thinking. Where are we going? Where do we come from? Where has the tree gone? Such questions are completely useless.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁹ See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Minneapolis 1981.