TITLE: I know why the philosopher sings: exploring the work of Fabrice Hadjadj

ABSTRACT

Fabrice Hadjadj (1971-) is a prolific contemporary French Catholic author whose work is largely unacknowledged by the international academy. This article proposes ways of classifying his creative work, analyzing his distinctive literary gestures and relating these to his religious vision. Hadjadj can be situated as a writer of *fullness* in the Taylorian sense. Nevertheless, he moderates the transcendent dimensions of fullness by a celebration of the *clownesque*. At a textual level, Hadjadj's literary art is one of disruptive hybridization and experimentalism. At a linguistic level, however, we observe an integrative exploration of what he terms the *ineffable* and the *indicible*. Hadjadj's work is only growing in complexity and importance and deserves more scholarly attention. (114 words)

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In French Catholic circles, Fabrice Hadjadj (1971-) is one of the most extraordinarily versatile thinkers, writers and artists since Gabriel Marcel, himself a philosopher, essayist, dramatist and composer. On top of his journalistic output in a diverse range of publications (notably in *Le Figaro* and *Avvenire*), Hadjadj's extensive oeuvre which is now approaching thirty works – including essays, plays, art criticism, works of exegesis and original songs – has earned him a series of critical accolades: the Grand prix catholique de littérature (2006) for *Réussir sa mort. Anti-méthode pour vivre* (2005), the Prix du cercle Montherlant-Académie des Beaux Art (2008) for *L'Agneau mystique* (2008), the Prix de littérature religieuse (2010) for *La Foi des démons ou l'athéisme dépassé* (2009), and the Prix des Libraires Siloë-Pèlerin (2017) for *Résurrection: mode d'emploi* (2016). Hadjadj is as highly fluent and prolific a speaker as he is a writer. Many of his speeches on national and international platforms can be found on *Youtube*, his invitations including those of the Scouts de l'Europe and international meetings of the Communion and Liberation Movement.

These diverse invitations result from the increasing esteem in which Hadjadj is held. Currently Director of Studies at the Philanthropos Institute in Fribourg, Switzerland, from 2014-16 he served a two-year term as a consultant of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Laity. The widely-read French leftist newspaper *Libération* has identified Hadjadj as the '*maître à penser*-the leading thinker' of the French "cathosphère,"[1] and Archbishop Charles Chaput describes him as "one of the finest Catholic minds for decades."[2] The profound impression Hadjadj frequently makes outside literary and theological circles was captured most eloquently in a talk given by Laurent Lafforgue, the French educational reformer and Fields-Medal winning mathematician: "[Hadjadj's] pages often leave me dumbfounded and catch me off balance, but in reading them I recognise their accuracy and truth. No contemporary writer of French interests me more."[3]

One other striking fact about Hadjadj is that he had devoted much of his intellectual power and undoubted verve to crossing the divide between serious philosophy–he is often introduced as a holder of the *agrégation de philosophie*, one of France's most distinguished academic titles–and popular culture. As his growing bibliography demonstrates, Hadjadj is a creative and disciplinary chameleon, or perhaps a subversive of literary invention, who blends, transforms or undermines standard text types in multiple ways, constantly swapping philosophy for theology, essay for theatre, and art commentary for song writing (*Nos vies quotidiennes*, his first album, was released in 2017). At the same time, his pushing of interdisciplinarity to the extreme–his imbrication of theological investigation with philosophical discourse, or social criticism with lyric creativity–may explain why he remains one of contemporary French culture's most provocative yet least studied religious thinkers and literary artists.

There are no monographs dedicated to his voluminous and otherwise sympathetically received output and hardly a trace of discussion about him in learned journals. Arguably, biographical factors play a part in what ostensibly appears as his decided marginality. He describes himself as "*un juif de nom arabe et de confession catholique*–a Jew with an Arab name and a practicing Catholic", any part of which profile is guaranteed to offend some constituency of French opinion.[4] With Hadjadj, however, the paradoxes seem endless: this Jewish Catholic family man with eight children and counting, acknowledges today his debt to Nietzsche, the author of the death of God, happily celebrates the language of the notorious anti-Semite novelist Louis-Ferdinand Celine and, in his 2018 Lenten Conferences at Notre Dame, cited controversial French novelist Michel Houellebecq more than any other contemporary author.[5] For all that, Hadjadj expresses no resentment about his own relative obscurity, dismissing the hypothesis that he is akin to one of Paul Verlaine's accursed poets, living in some unhappy ghetto of cultural and social infamy. On the contrary, he evinces

sincere gratitude and enduring surprise that any reader would stop to pick up his books and read them.[6]

In the light of all these factors, this article aims to offer an exploratory analysis of Hadjadj as a religious writer and creative artist by way of bringing to wider attention a body of writing full of promise for scholars of theology and philosophy and of their intersections with culture. In Hadjadj's case, we must interpret the term literature in a broad sense; his philosophical and theological essays draw on a literary imagination which reaches out to, and freely manipulates, artistic resources and forms as a constant feature of self-expression; Hadjadj even describes himself firstly as a poet, rather than a philosopher.[7] That said, it would be invidious to approach his work purely on the basis of its thematic preoccupations, not least because, as we will argue below, Hadjadj sees his writings primordially as artefacts of the authorial craft, rather than as the vehicle of some self-conscious message or as a simple instrument of communication.[8] Instead, the article will first aim to situate Hadjadj as a Christian author, using Charles Taylor's concept of *fullness* that circumscribes believers in a secular context.[9] To do so, and in pursuit of a model of Hadjadjian *fullness*, it will analyze the conditions Hadjadj himself lays down for authentic speech in his *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui? Anti-manuel d'évangélisation*.[10] Thereby, we must address the first of many Hadjadjian paradoxes: that while he rejects writing as a purely instrumental form of communication, his work is often constructed through intellectual and creative tactics of disruption that assume the existence of a communicative dialogue between author and reader.

The second section of the article will problematize these tactics of disruption at macro- and micro-textual levels: first, by analyzing examples of Hadjadj's frequent experimentation with forms and the sometimes vertiginous levels of textual hybridization in his published works, and second, by exploring examples of his use of language, sampled in distinct text types. In this last regard we will evaluate the integrative power of Hadjadj's

rhetoric that runs so counter to the disruptive nature of his textual forms. Both the first and second parts of the article will draw on samples taken from his published output from 1999 onwards (a small number of earlier works having proven impossible to locate, even at the Bibliothèque nationale de France), as well as on a long interview which the author conducted with Hadjadj in July 2018.

Ultimately, the article will argue that while these tactics of disruption have produced a dauntingly diverse body of work that shuttles adeptly between the textual gestures of popular culture and the ambitions of high culture, they depend on a remarkably stable and homogenous creative and literary thrust that belies the prima facie complexity of Hadjadj's oeuvre. Hadjadj is a trained philosopher with a theological mind but at heart he is a literary craftsman for whom the poetic possibilities of language stand as a constant creative reference point. Hadjadj is the philosopher who sings.

Hadjadj, fullness and disruption

As a religious author, Hadjadj might best be classified as a writer of fullness, taken in the sense used by Charles Taylor in his monumental study *A Secular Age*. Taylor's treatment of fullness has aroused controversy, not least because it implies for some that secularity has eroded human sensibilities.[11] Such arguments, however, are tangential to the usefulness of the concept of fullness as a tool to situate an avowedly Christian and Catholic writer such as Hadjadj. The problem here is not to understand whether Hadjadj's sense of fullness is available to a secular reader, but the extent to which the concept of fullness helps account for the kind of writer Hadjadj is or indeed aspires to be.

That said, classifying Hadjadj as a writer of fullness is not meant to attribute any conscious strategic shape to his literary production, although it does presuppose how Hadjadj understands the act of writing. In this regard, the truism that authors write in order to communicate breaks down. Hadjadj feels he must write firstly to understand, and sometimes does not even know what he is going to write until he has written it; his writing, therefore, is a kind of mental workshop, yet it is also an act of craft or production.[12] For Hadjadj, as author and thinker, writing leads the intellect reflexively to a consciousness of how the common cosmos has brought it into act. It is on these two footings - writing as mental workshop and as access to a shared cosmos - that Hadjadj's understanding of fullness can be correlated with Taylor's.

Taylorian fullness is a rich notion comprising several phenomena that overlap the domains of religious and irreligious experience. First, Taylor describes fullness as a "moral/spiritual shape" that characterizes life as "richer, deeper, more worthwhile."[13] For the believer Taylorian fullness blossoms into a sense of surpassing quotidian reality. Second, fullness may at times enjoin a certain negativity "where we experience above all a distance, an absence, an exile";[14] this disorientation is not only a loss of the sense of fullness but sometimes the desperate feeling that it cannot be recovered. Lastly, between these two conditions lies a stable middle, a place that protects us from the extremes of fullness and its loss.[15] Taylor notes that this middle ground is, in the eyes of some non-believers, all we can hope for in life. Paradoxically, this *tertium quid* is for the unbeliever not the moderation of transcendence but its unspectacular and disenchanted denial.

Now, in his essay *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui. Anti-manuel d'évangélisation*, Fabrice Hadjadj sets out a similar schema for experience and desire, adopting, nevertheless, a very different middle tactic for the management of balance.[16] Experience of some concrete thing can lead the mind to an intuition of something or someone

immense and transcendent - the *ineffable* - that promises an unlimited filling of the mind and will through the immeasurable hinterland of being.[17] In contrast, experience of the same entity can also lead the mind to the realization of its finitude and insufficiency ('an aftertaste of bitterness', Hadjadj calls it); it can even evoke a feeling of powerlessness before our mortality. This, says Hadjadj, is the domain of the *indicible*, a term denoting the unspeakable or inexpressible. Seemingly these terms echo the language of Vladimir Jankélévitch, although Hadjadj's conceptualization of the *ineffable* differs from that of Bergson's disciple, not least because it is in no way connected to *le charme*.[18] It is more likely in fact that Hadjadj sourced the vocabulary of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* directly in the writings of the neo-Platonist Damascius, although for Hadjadj the *ineffable* and the *indicible* are qualities of finite being, rather than properties of the divinity.[19] Nevertheless, to understand Hadjadjian fullness, it is not the intellectual filiation of these concepts that counts so much as the real-world linguistic and cultural consequences of their contrasting manifestations in song and prayer.

Hadjadjian song and prayer, verbal responses respectively to the *ineffable* and the *indicible*, cannot be understood as mere text types or communicative genres; rather, they appear as modes or moods in language, evoking a *joie de vivre* or else the presentiment of death. For Hadjadj, writing is not a dialogical sonar or, worse still, one link in a chain of informational production and consumption that connects us to others amicably or parasitically. Rather, the relation of writer and text enters a process of triangulation with the reader, through which all can participate in "*la verité de l'existence humaine*- the truth of human existence".[20] In this sense the co-presence of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* denotes the plenitude of a life bounded not by abstract concepts or irreducible matter, but by intangible ontological depths that appeal and repel at different moments.

Where Taylorian and Hadjadjian fullness differ most significantly is in the middle ground between the extremes of fullness. While the third term of Taylorian fullness denotes a

protective flatness of fatigue or vertigo, the middle term for Hadjadj between the *ineffable* and the *indicible* appears to be the *clownesque*.[21] The clown as a structural and thematic metaphor appears several times in Hadjadj's oeuvre, notably in his play *Solo pour un clown* and his parodic self-help guide *Etre clown en 99.* For Hadjadj, humans and primordially Christians are frequently undone not through an act of avoidance or self-preservation, so much as through a disruption of the individual's perception of their own autonomy or competence. This is a process of catharsis, the purging not of pity and fear but of the hubris that familiarity with existential extremes can engender: the *clownesque* suggests that our *assent* to the *ineffable* - and perhaps the *indicible* - does not depend on our *ascent* but our *descent*. Thereby, the Hadjadjian *clownesque* is not primarily a linguistic response to transcendence and its absence, but a description of the condition in which familiarity with the divine leaves us; if the dynamic is that of disruption, the ethos is that of humility. Accordingly, the clown is a contemplative par excellence whose voluminous and impractical humiliation hides his penetrating intuition.

Furthermore, the *clownesque* with all its subtly disturbing connotations may also contain in it a clue as to why Hadjadj's writings can seem so disruptive or even confrontational. One startling example of his boldness in this regard came in his first Notre Dame Lenten Lecture in 2018, when he addressed the following words to the assembled grandees of Parisian Catholicism and the national and international audience listening via radio or watching on *Youtube*:

> A man of our age would not have come here with his poor body of flesh and blood, breath and bone. He would already have stolen your navigation histories and a powerful algorithm would have told him what was likely to interest you. As for me, I hesitate and I stammer ... *I'm not even sure I want to engage the interest of my listeners*. It may be that in these days of noisy entertainment and *fun* [he uses the English word], the

> greatest favor I could do for you would be to offer you a long period of silence and boredom. To lead you into the desert.[22]

Such rhetorical disruptiveness, challenging his listeners' assumptions about his duties as a speaker, only lends spice to what a progressive or liberal audience or readership might find ideologically disruptive, intellectually clownish or even radically offensive in Hadjadj. On the topics of technology and gender theory, for example, Hadjadj would be classed as reactionary, even though such categories are insufficient to cope with his tangible sophistication.[23] The same is true of his essay collection *Puisque tout est en voie de destruction* (2013) which rehearses the virtues of catastrophism, even if he later published *L'aubaine d'être né en ce temps* (2015), a work that confronts the views of believers whose dismay at a fast secularizing world trumps their belief in the providential oversight of time. Every potential reader, it appears, is sooner or later wrong-footed by Hadjadj, as his writing moves with virtuosity from attacks on Cartesianism (*La terre, chemin du ciel*, 2002) and the sexual revolution (*La Profondeur des sexes*, 2008), to reflection on the most supernatural dimensions of Catholicism (*La Foi des demons ou l'athéisme dépassé*, 2009 and *Résurrection: mode d'emploi*, 2016).

Seen from the view of literary filiation, these many instances of Hadjadj's disruptiveness might appear unproblematic or at least unsurprising. His early literary interests included Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Michel Houellebecq, all of whom could easily be inscribed in a French literary canon of disruption. His own biographical path has also known many disruptions. Born to Maoist parents and identifying as an anarchist in his student days, Hadjadj found his convictions overturned by a sudden but profound conversion in 1998 that was catalyzed by a visit to the Parisian church of Saint Séverin (the favored haunt of decadent novelist and Catholic convert J. K. Huysmans) while his father was dangerously ill; having visited the church to mock its worshippers shortly beforehand, he now found the apparently imminent death of his father

calling him to prayer. Nevertheless, if Hadjadj does not write to communicate–if, as indeed he claims, he writes to produce[24]–it makes no sense to relate the disruptiveness of his writing to a desire to communicate the urgency of the same path to others.

Still, the parallel with Huysmans could be illustrative. Like the decadent writer who became an oblate of the monastery of Ligugé, Hadjadj after his conversion found instruction, support and spiritual guidance in a Benedictine monastery (Solemnes to which he remains attached as an oblate) the monastic life of which centers on the *conversatio morum*, usually translated as the *conversion of life*. Seen in its Benedictine light, therefore, Hadjadj's entire literary project might be framed not so much a conversation in search of a conversion (that would be to see his writing as purely communicative and instrumental), but rather an auto-conversion (of the clownish self before the transcendent) whose implications engage him in a creative conversation (a song or indeed a prayer) that his readers may or may not share as they please. Thereby, Hadjadj's disruptiveness is not so much a contrary and antithetical method of communication–as if it were a kind of attention-craving punk Catholicism–but emerges rather from his belief in the universal validity and openness of the divine to the human agent or, as we have noted above, "la vérité de l'existence humaine".[25] Above all perhaps, Hadjadj is disruptive because he does not respect the codes or pieties of what Taylor has labelled the *buffered self* for which autonomy or self-determination–the very antitheses of conversion–is the speculative and ethical criterion par excellence.[26] Thereafter, it is simply a case of *caveat lector*. To engage with Hadjadj's writings is to embrace the risk of disruptive self-divestment, the danger of a contagious *clownesque*. While Hadjadj appears confrontational, it is only because he believes we are all existentially vulnerable to the truth of a divinely ordained cosmos in which we live in common and which invites all to a mutual self-divestment.

If one work casts a synthetic light on these disruptive and confrontational dynamics of Hadjadj's work, it is unquestionably *Les violents s'en emparent*.[27] Composed of papers originally read as a series of Lenten lectures, this work evokes the tradition of the writers of holy violence–Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, Ernest Hello, Léon Bloy, Feodor Dostoyevsky and Georges Bernanos–who target those that seek too many accommodations with the world (in its Johannine sense). Audaciously written for a fresh convert, it argues that Catholics cannot rest on their confessional laurels as an excuse not to become the violent ones of the gospel who bear away the Kingdom of God. Its publication so early in Hadjadj's canon suggests he was quickly aware not of the implications of the *clownesque* (a theme that only emerges explicitly from 2012 onwards) but rather of the burdens that might be placed on a dissonant voice, even in the church he had just entered. In the gutter, after all, not everyone is looking at the stars.

Such then seem to be the contours of fullness and disruption as they might be construed from Hadjadj's writings. Hadjadjian fullness rejects the locked-in syndromes of idealism or materialism, while embracing the plenitude made available by the *ineffable* and *indicible* and accessed by the disruptive clownish humility of the converted self. Nevertheless, many questions remain concerning how such perspectives take shape in the concrete. Understanding and evaluating this dimension of Hadjadj's writing is the aim of the second part of this article.

Disruptive creativity: macro- and micro-analysis

Hadjadj's view of writing as artefact rather than communication raises the question of Hadjadj's own craft. If he does not seek to be polemical–because his agenda is not communicatively instrumental–he is undoubtedly aware of the dissonance that his religious voice evokes, especially in a context of secular hegemony; opening his first Lenten Lecture at

Notre Dame, he declared with finely-tuned Gallic irony, "Everything here seems retrograde and dust-ridden. Really, it is only good now for the museum or for a postcard."[28] In this respect, we must ask how the features of Hadjadjian fullness and their potential for disruption are worked out at a macro-textual and micro-expressive level. By way of elaborating an answer, this article posits two hypotheses.

The first is that Hadjadj's text-type experiments aim not to articulate a message so much as to subvert the assumptions from which his work appears dissonant; these assumptions include the philosophical, ethical, cultural and civilizational norms explicitly or implicitly authorized by secularity. The second hypothesis concerns the linguistic woof and weft of his writing and holds them to be far more integrative than Hadjadj's disrupted text types appear: here Hadjadj is committed to the burdens of language, frequently giving expression to the *ineffable* and the *indicible* and their relation to the "la vérité de l'existence humaine".[29] At the micro-analytical level, Hadjadj's search for literary expression appears less like disruption and more like a unifying thread representing the common cosmos and its shared meanings. Taking examples from a variety of genres and texts, this article will now evaluate evidence for both these hypotheses.

Macro-textual experimentation

The text types Hadjadj deploys superficially seem standardized and recognizable: essays, plays, songs and art commentary. Beneath the surface, however, things are not as they may at first appear. For example, Hadjadj has experimented several times with the order of the parts of texts. While Beaugrande and Dressler identify coherence and acceptability among the standards of textuality (both of which rely on normative dispositions of order),[30] readers of both *Réussir sa mort* (2005) and *Paradis à la porte* (2011) are invited to read the chapters

(called ‘movements’ in the latter book) in any order that they so desire. Cynically, one might dismiss this as a writer’s excuse not to refine a longer essay’s internal coherence. Fundamentally, however, the inspiration for such anarchy of order – ‘extra-order’ rather than disorder - is the same: for Hadjadj, to disrupt rectilinearity is to throw into question the expectations of rationalist logic. Questioning the predictive power of rationalism becomes in Hadjadj’s hands a device to make space for other ways of ordering knowledge.

The most challenging kind of textual experimentalism practiced by Hadjadj comes from his imbrication of different text types. *Passion-Résurrection* (2004), another work that discards the norms of narrative order, pushes such experimentalism to the limits, offering us the passion play *Gabbatha* as a frame in which to contemplate a polyptych created by French artist Arcabas. Hadjadj’s understanding of the gospel text type is itself quasi-experimental. While the gospel narrative tells the story of the death of Christ, it is, Hadjadj argues in a short opening essay, unique in the annals of murder stories for its readers learn that ultimately they are Christ’s murderers; indeed, to have read the gospel without realizing the identity of the murderer (oneself) is never to have read it at all.[31] In the same introductory essay, Hadjadj further brings down the walls that separate text type from text users, arguing that our own human matter blends with the pictorial matter of the paintings; the spectators are thus necessarily actors in the sense that all individual human destinies are implicit, not to say complicit, in the death of Christ.

Perhaps the most experimental dimension of *Passion-Resurrection*–the point at which formal textual requirements seem to go haywire–arises from the fact that Hadjadj uses a board game based on the rolling of dice (*le jeu de l’Oie*) as a means of controlling the order in which the pictures are visited and the scenes played. Players chosen from among the audience role a dice to determine which painting is illuminated and which corresponding scene of the play is acted. Hadjadj calls *Gabbatha* “le spectacle ou l’anti-spectacle”, and even

envisages that the play will differ and endure varying states of incompleteness each time it is performed.[32] This literary conceit was inspired by research on the paving stones of the historical Gabbatha in Jerusalem where archaeologists discovered graffiti scratched on the flagstones resembling some form of board game. Far from Hadjadj the bland and vain intention of writing a fourth-wall drama with an orderly plot that develops towards some eventual denouement, as if that text type could even begin to represent the events of Christ's passion and resurrection. In *Gabbatha* the ludic intersects the tragic, and through a board game–a typical field of quotidian activity–the apparent amusement of random action imposes on all a fresh experience of the conflicting trajectories of human intention and an irruption of the divine. In *Passion-Resurrection* taken as a whole, the drama, the paintings, the game and the gospel converge in a nexus of disconcerting but creative invention, a blending of board game, murder mystery and theatre, dissolving the conventions that separate text users from the texts and resituating the former right at the heart of the latter. Thereby, Hadjadj's textual experimentation transgresses the quarantining of the gospel's events usually required by the discourses of the social, historical or physical sciences.

A third illustrative example of Hadjadj's textual experimentation is found in a more recent work *Etre clown en 99 leçons*.[33] If *Passion-Résurrection* is a form of complex counterpoint, the challenge of *Etre clown* lies in the accelerated evolution of the text type as the work ends in a climax of entropic comedy: as the title puts it, this work is a *guide (pas très pratique), essai (raté), récit (peu romanesque)*–an (impractical) guidebook, an essay or attempt (that has failed) and a story (that is not very story like). The parody of the self-help book is one that Hadjadj returns to frequently–see *Réussir sa mort* and *Comment parler de Dieu* aujourd'hui as prime examples of this tendency–offering him a creative option that correlates with the aversion to auto-determination expressed by the *clownesque*: after all, theologically speaking, whatever humans are, they are not simply self-made individuals.

From its title *Etre clown* appears to be a how-to book on being a clown, but everything from its central thesis to its textual format is disruptive in nature or even perversely paradoxical. One of the defining characteristics of being a clown is hardly to be aware of the fact[34]–a condition that might cast doubt on the plausibility of purchasing a how-to guide on the matter!

If the use of the clown as an image of the believer is not itself unique, still Hadjadj's intention in using the *clownesque* differs distinctly from that of others.[35] In Hadjadj, as we noted above, the *clownesque* seems to mark the dissolving of the subject's self-sufficiency. Being a Hadjadjian clown is not to be an accomplished comic like Charlie Chaplin, or a poetic one like Pierrot, but a believer conscious of one's ridiculousness and awake to the "mystery of one's lost royalty".[36] More positively–and here perhaps is where the *essai* of the title begins–the clown is gifted with a capacity for wonder and surprise that elevates the mind above the purely bestial preoccupations of other primates.[37] Thus, Hadjadj's how-to guide for clowns (who do not know they are clowns) evolves into an essay on the virtues of contemplation and wonder, and yet from Lesson 52 onwards, Hadjadj again changes tack. Maintaining the loose guidebook format that has bewilderingly endured unto this point, Hadjadj begins to tell the story of the clown from his courtship and marriage onwards, dramatizing the mystery of clownish sexuality and his hilarious and humiliating journey to Christianity where he recognizes the truth of the letters IHS, meaning, as the clown supposes, "*Je suis hors service* – I have broken down."[38] At this point, the text-type of the self-help guide collapses in bathetic brokenness, like the clown and indeed like the Savior he has turned to.

In the Epilogue to this quasi-picaresque work, Hadjadj again tests the barriers and distinctions that lie between textual forms and their creators/users. Hadjadj imagines the clown going from door to door as an evangelist, aided by his wife and daughter who has

Down Syndrome, encountering only rejection and indifference. Yet, switching to the second person singular, Hadjadj finishes the work with this highly rhetorical and ultimately whimsical conclusion:

> Here you are now, clown, before my door with your wife and daughter. You have been ringing the bell for some time. You are even addressing me through the keyhole, calling out the name on the plaque.
>
> Am I only the Ringmaster or the White Clown of this story?
>
> I will have to stop writing in order to answer the door, to look at you while I conceal my surprise at recognizing you – and will doubtless drive you away.[39]

This self-questioning, however, evokes a feeling of uncertainty and blunder, the sense of comic failure that Hadjadj had predicted for the apostle in his earlier essay *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui*:

> [The Christian] is a clown because of the disproportion between what he speaks of and what is: his mouth is too small for the infinite and his heart too narrow for a measureless love. He has put on Christ but, like a clown in his oversized costume, he gets lost in it, all tangled up, finds his foot caught in the trouser leg and then–crash!– he is on the ground at the very moment he was just about to start talking of heaven.[40]

If this is a comic prospect rather than a tragic one, it bespeaks not a mood of frustration so much as a resignation to the inevitability of comic disaster: in a secular context, how can one speak of God without looking like a clown? The *clownesque* in this light is not only a counterweight to the burdens of the *ineffable* and *indicible* but also the dilemma in which the ambient assumptions of contemporary secularity seem to cast the believer. Hadjadj's manipulations and subversions of standard text types seem to inscribe in literary format his

commitment to craft a text that evokes this *vérité de l'existence humaine*. These *clownesque* contours of Hadjadj's self-help book for clowns–an avowedly failed guidebook, mistaken essay and even worse story–thus become not only a hymn to the clown's humility before the divine but also a dangerous lampooning of the hubristic assumption that regards the human subject as self-sufficient and believers as no more than fools.

The multiple textual manipulations of Hadjadj's writings–subverting order, hybridizing or parodying forms or dissolving the boundaries of text users and producers–are so many reasons to see in Hadjadj's own craft a kind of *clownesque* performance. The art lies undoubtedly in how the coordinates of such writings project Hadjadj's authorial craft into a cosmos the map for which cannot be found among secular assumptions and norms. Like a clown, Hadjadj is frequently amusing and endearing; yet, like a clown, he is also indubitably disturbing. It is not that he is trying to tell us something. It is more like he is hoping to disrupt us enough that we might see what he sees for ourselves

Micro-analysis

The textual experimentation that was explored above might lead us to expect that, at a propositional level, Hadjadj will deploy forms of equally disruptive potential or experimentalism. Nevertheless, even though Hadjadj is witty and frequently bemused, his dialectical and rhetorical resources bespeak a much greater seriousness denoting a unifying thrust to his writing. To evaluate this unifying thrust, moreover, we can apply the test that Hadjadj himself develops in *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui?* and consider how his writing attempts to evoke the *ineffable* and the *indicible* both as a condition of true speech and as a representation of fullness.

Since the *ineffable* and the *indicible* are accessed for Hadjadj especially through the representation of the *quotidian* realities around us, particularly in nature, one of the challenges that bedevils Hadjadj's writing is the progressive artificialization of our daily experience, or its sublimation into an anti-culture of technology. Hadjadj, a long-time reader of Gunther Anders, has often expressed his concerns about such technologization and foregrounded these anxieties in his Notre Dame Lenten Lectures in 2018. Moreover, the consequences of technology for a quotidian-oriented authorial craft is clear: what becomes of the *ineffable* and the *indicible*, or of their rehearsal in song and prayer–and by corollary what becomes of fullness–in a context of technologization and its attendant reorganization of the scope of our experiences? This problematic received some comedic treatment in his first album of original songs *Nos vies quotidiennes* (2017), notably in *Fils de pub* (pub for *publicité* or advertisement; the song title is an allusion to the French expression *fils de put'* or 'son of a whore') and *Marche* [Walk] which lampoons contemporary sedentariness. Still, a richer sampling of Hadjadj's evocation of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* can be had through the prize-winning essay *Réussir sa mort* (2005) and his futuristic play *Jeanne et les posthumains ou le sexe de l'ange* (2013). While the former text still relies on the availability of the natural quotidian, the latter problematizes the technologically-induced disappearance of the quotidian and the lonely search to recover it, its connotations and the language that might give expression to them.

At a purely textual level, there are many instances of such language in Hadjadj's *Réussir sa mort* (2005) but two examples will suffice to exemplify the *ineffable* and the *indicible* in this work. The first of these is a passage that Hadjadj dwells on from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* where Thomas considers how the death of Jesus Christ was willed in different ways by God and by his executioners; God's will for Christ's death, Thomas argues, is a permissive action akin to someone who leaves a window open and then

finds it has rained inside the house. Setting aside the theology, Hadjadj is captivated by the Angelic Doctor's comparison. Leaving a window open can be counted as a normal or quotidian event, but in a cosmos that resonates the transcendence or the finitude of existence such an ordinary gesture evokes the action of Christ as savior of sinful humanity, "presenting [his] infinite vulnerability for us to attack." Hadjadj concludes thus:

> Nowadays, when it rains, my wife and I do not close the windows immediately. We let the wind slam the open door shut. We watch the raindrops battering down sideways, spattering all over the pillow and soaking the quilt. And it sometimes happens that we are even moved even to tears.[41]

Such an extract is typical of Hadjadj's writing. After a passage of extended and careful dialectic, weighing the subtleties of some philosophical or theological point, his prose often concludes by becoming terse, basking in the immediate but firmly orientated towards another horizon. The *ineffable* remains but a step away, rehearsed in language that goes in search of lyrical economy and the poetry of the moment.

Contrast such a passage with the story Hadjadj relates of his friend and former colleague Jean-Marc Leblanc, a special-needs teacher in the *lycée* where Hadjadj once taught philosophy. Leblanc, Hadjadj relates, had a major heart attack that left him on the point of death, the ultimate experience of finitude. What was harder for him as a believer, however, was that in that apparently final moment, he could not abandon himself to God. Leblanc, in other words, encountered not only the finitude of the human condition during his brush with death, but also the finitude of his own resources when negotiating perhaps life's greatest challenge:

> 'I learned,' Jean-Marc told me, 'or rather I unlearned. I unlearned all the pious rhetoric. Abandon oneself to God. What does that mean? One is abandoned and that's

> that. Anyway, isn't it arrogant to think that one can abandon *oneself*, with everything that pronoun implies, if one thinks one can undertake that ultimate act by one's own power? I couldn't do it anyway. I was scared. But that was a grace perhaps, God's help, because I then felt I had no human help. I had become a beggar, even begging my beggar's voice, at the feet of the Almighty...'.[42]

Of course, the experience of the *indicible* is crucial to the agenda of *Réussir sa mort* (whose subtitle is *anti-méthode pour vivre* [an anti-guidebook for living]. It is not incidental, therefore, that this passage ends with Hadjadj reflecting on how the experience of limitation and privation turns the human subject towards prayer:

> Three times, Paul's prayer was not heard. Three times he who was ravished even to the third heaven, was refused by heaven. But this refusal is the gift of God. Our poverty opens us to a treasure greater than allows human treasures, for the Spirit is the father of the poor.[43]

Here again then, the *indicible* is represented and its linguistic response–*prayer*–is evoked. In such a context, it is only natural for Hadjadj to redirect this moment towards the transcendent.

It is worth noting in this case of prayer as a response to finitude that Hadjadj, a Jew, is sensitive to what the *indicible* could signify for the Jewish people. His finest rehearsal of this problem occurs arguably not in this essay but in his play *Massacre des innocents* (2006), published a year after *Réussir sa mort*. In only the third scene, a shepherd, whose son has been slaughtered in the massacre of Jewish infants by Herod's soldiers, rants his pain and fury before God, only to realize, as his exhausted voice turns to bleating, that he is like the shorn and shivering lamb awaiting its immolation in the Temple of Solomon.[44] Nevertheless, in *Réussir sa mort* Hadjadj had argued that the liberation of the camps in 1945 must not mean that the camps are now free as it were to roam abroad, reproducing themselves in the hearts

of their survivors through enduring despair.[45] The last century, he reflects, has been one of repeated genocides in which all have "interiorized the law of Auschwitz." Tragically, all have become the *Héautontimorouménos* of Baudelaire: "*Je suis la plaie et le couteau*–I am the wound and the knife."[46] In his conclusion, we find what might be an echo of that prayer Hadjadj once offered prior to his conversion in Saint Séverin in Paris, the wounded unbeliever reaching for something beyond the finitude of his own convictions:

> The darkening of the horizon turns our faces to look upwards. The ghost can go in search of the one who is resurrected. But first he must leave behind this greatest distress: to fail to recognize that he is in distress. He must recognize his complete failure, his shit-smeared shame, [his role as] a fetus aborted by both life and death. He must admit that he is beaten, sold, prostituted to his very depths, to such an extent that only the blood of a God can redeem him.[47]

Auschwitz is not of course a quotidian reality, but at least from Hadjadj's point of view it is so deeply imprinted on the Jewish and the European memory that its immediacy remains tangible even now. Nevertheless, to see it only as an insuperable obstacle, the proof positive of the death of the divine, rather than as an instantiation of the *indicible*, is to hand the victory to finitude and thereby render incomprehensible all revulsion to the source of its scandal. An *indicible* that could not be countered and ultimately overcome by the *ineffable* would no longer belong to the world of fullness in which Hadjadj believes.

In writing the futuristic play *Jeanne et les posthumains* (2013) Hadjadj took on a unique challenge as an author seeking ways to speak or write the *ineffable* and the *indicible*. The events of this play are based in a future dystopian world called *DéMo*, the *Démocratie mondiale*, a collectivist, neo-liberal, irreligious and soft-authoritarian society marked by advanced technology, bio-chemical reductionism regarding the human being, collectivist

control of individual destinies through commercial eugenic farming and neuro-psychological oversight, and, most tellingly, the digitalization of all physical sexuality through the latest sex software platform Playbox IV. In this play human procreation has become entirely a technological procedure and thanks to Playbox IV there is no need for outdated and dangerous copulation until a certain Joan d'Ark Market hears a voice telling her to sleep with her co-worker Valentin. If this is a daring, not to say blasphemous, intertextual reference to the story of Joan of Arc, Hadjadj argues that Joan's fornication is a step back from the brink of an existence lost to the natural order in the hyper-technologized world of *DéMo*.[48] The play is then structured around three interviews of Joan with two psycho-engineering counsellors who eventually force her to undergo the so-called *Grand pardon*, a process of memory suppression that robs any rebels of their wayward ideas. As this brief summation shows, *DéMo* not only subjects its citizens to an astringent abstraction from concrete and quotidian realities, but also menaces offenders with the closure of the mind's own gateway to the past through the short-circuiting of retrospection.

The play echoes a wide range of historical, cultural and literary reference points, not only the arrest, trial and execution of Joan of Arc but also Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) whose inhabitants are largely happy with their atrocious lot, and even Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1924 novel *We* which was a seminal text for Hadjadj and other young French writers who published with the French literary and political journal *Immédiatement* (1996-2004).[49] For our purposes, however, what is most striking about Hadjadj's play is that it serves to dramatize a world in which quotidian realities are being continually overcome and replaced by artificial, fabricated and unnatural substitutes. In such a world, we observe the almost complete suppression of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* and of their expression in song and prayer, at least until Jeanne's revolt against the established, artificial order. As we have argued, the poles of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* suggest that Hadjadj sees daily realities in

themselves as a mystery, or as part of a bigger mystery in a world not defined by appearances. In sharp contrast, the world of *DéMo* is a field not of the mysterious but of the problematic; a numinous sense of mystery would be taken only as a failure of methodology. Here, everything is subject to rationalized calculation, and from those calculations nothing can escape.

Joan's revolt in this context is not simply one of asserting the mystery of sex in a society where copulation has been stripped back technologically to its discrete procreative and orgasmic functions. It lies also in rehearsing before her interrogators the *ineffable* and the *indicible*. Several times in the course of her interviews, for example, she returns to her recollections of the city's hanging gardens. For Hadjadj, this is a passing *hommage* to Bernard Charbonneau's *Le Jardin de Babylone* (1969) with its devastating indictment of an industrial civilization that only co-opts nature the better to exploit it. For Joan, however, the hanging gardens are a place of solace, a site where she escapes from her life as a checkout girl. "What do you go there for?" says one of her interrogators:

> Nothing. Precisely nothing. I lie on the grass [...] I listen to the wind that makes the leaves dance. It's beautiful to see. Every leaf is different. Have you noticed? First, how green they are [...] Then the unique design of their veins, like hands raised up to heaven [...] I watch them dance, I listen to their murmur and I give in to the scent of the earth but which is not of earth, which recalls something else. Heaven perhaps. The sap remembers heaven and continuously rises up towards it.[50]

Almost every proposition in this speech is offensive to the world of *DéMo*; the deliberate aimlessness of her visit to the gardens, her appreciation of the individuality of the leaves (opposed to the possibility of their manufactured reproduction), her poetic imagination that anthropomorphizes nature, and finally her experience of the *ineffable*, the transcendence that

lurks beyond the calculations of science and technology and which she hardly knows. These words are Jeanne's song to nature in the deformed prison of calculated artificiality that DéMo has manufactured for humanity.

A world of mystery, however, is also a world of finitude. As the play continues we find Joan is pregnant and that she is carrying a child with an undetermined congenital condition. Predictably, in *DéMo* where technological norms underpin quality standards, Joan's interrogators insist that she agree to an abortion and sign a consent form to that effect (for *DéMo* still observes the pities of individual choice in a world of neo-liberal collectivism). In her response, Joan speaks again of the hanging gardens, but this time her memory evokes not only the *indicible* but its cohabitation with the *ineffable* in a world whose meaning she is grasping for. "All you need do is sign at the bottom," she is told:

> And if I sign, will I be able to go back to the hanging gardens? [...] One afternoon I saw a blackbird, a round, black shape in the branches, its beak like a flame. And from its pointed, open mouth, this rounded darkness sang a melody brighter than the day. It sang as if there were still such a thing as a springtime. It sang like birds sing – it seems to me – even when there is a war on. Even when men fall to the ground face down. And then, in spite of its dark heaviness, it took off, and I followed the flight of its black shape tearing a hole in the sky that had been all too blue.[51]

Joan's interrogators want her to see her pregnancy as a medical problem that can be solved by the technologies of surgical intervention. Joan, in contrast, intuits immediately the *indicible* implications of the abortion–the fact that it cannot be performed without a loss of life, a deliberate procurement of human finitude–and her memory evokes the dark blackbird. What is so extraordinary here, however, is that this same blackbird offers its own canticle before taking flight, like Joan herself, enslaved to the death-dealing *DéMo* but lifted up by a *joie de*

vivre from the darkness that inhabits even herself. If Joan's reflection in this moment is not yet a prayer towards which rehearsal of the *indicible* tends, it is still an evocation of the mortality of the human and, most importantly, of the meaningful character of that mortality.

Time and again across Hadjadj's oeuvre instances of the *indicible* and the *ineffable* seem rarely far apart. The small sample of their usage we have garnered for our purposes here suggest that while they are propositional, dialectical or rhetorical in nature, they do not appear to have any particular stylistic feature. They are all experientially grounded but quickly become metaphorical in import. Arguably, what is perhaps most surprising about them is that they do not appear to participate in the disruptive creativity that marks Hadjadj's treatment of text types. Hadjadj has not attempted at a propositional level to subvert the expectations of his readers or bamboozle them with any kind of Joycean complexity or even the linguistic playfulness of a Perec or a Queneau. This is why it seems more logical to see in his treatment of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* a unifying thrust that functions in favor of the fullness towards which his whole oeuvre tends. If his innovative textual experimentation is the sign of a craft that disconcerts, the clarity of his thought and the consistency of his romancing of the *ineffable* and the *indicible* are signs of a creative unity that yearns for loving song or prayerful monody.

Conclusion

The vast and varied body of work already produced by Fabrice Hadjadj offers an extraordinarily fruitful field that awaits scholarly exploration. The aim in this article has been to tease out ways of problematizing some of the profound tendencies in his writings, his textual virtuosity and the coherence of his artistic vision. The works listed in this article's footnotes concern only the works alluded to or quoted in this article; several others have been

omitted only due to space. For now, only two works–*Résurrection: mode d'emploi* published unfortunately under the title *The Resurrection: Experience Life in the Risen Christ* (unfortunately because it misses the intertextuality of the original title) and *L'Agneau mystique* published as *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (a commentary on the famous Ghent altarpiece)–are available to scholars who do not read French. It should be noted, nevertheless, that for a French philosopher with a predominant interest in religion, Hadjadj is remarkably accessible even in his original tongue.

Several themes and preoccupations, however, merit urgent attention, including matters that have only been touched on in passing in this article. His contribution to French theatre is deserving of study; there are seven plays already and an eighth about Dom Juan, has been announced. His development as a lyricist, not only in his own songs but also for French singer Marguérite Laissy, deserves also to be watched. It is striking that Hadjadj refers to himself often as a poet and a literary artisan, while others seem to prefer his oft touted title of *philosophe agrégé*. Hadjadj's critique of technology and his contribution to Christian ecologism in France is growing in importance, a cause he sees through the lens of Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Sí* (2015) with its anxieties about techno-economic paradigms. Hadjadj's writings on sexuality, notably *La Profondeur des sexes* (2008), also deserve to be revisited. Surprisingly, Hadjadj is read and appreciated by erotic memorialist Catherine Millet and counts her husband Jacques Henric among his friends.[52]

The present article was originally spurred by this author's puzzlement that a writer such as Hadjadj could be so productive and appreciated by readers but so completely neglected by scholars in France and elsewhere. It is to be hoped that such neglect will not last much longer.

(8,991 words)

[1] Sylvain Mouillard and Bernadette Sauvaget. "Les saints patrons de la cathosphère," *Libération*, November 23 2016. http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/11/23/les-saints-patrons-de-la-cathosphere_1530515 [accessed February 1 2018].

[2] Preface of Fabrice Hadjadj, *The Resurrection: Experience Life in the Risen Christ*, trans. Michael J Miller (New York: Magnificat, 2016), Kindle edition.

[3] Laurent Lafforgue, "Que peut une politique de la langue?", speech in Geneva, March 2009. https://www.laurentlafforgue.org/textes/PolitiqueLangue.pdf [accessed July 23 2018].

[4] See his profile for Editions de Corlevour, one of his publishers. https://editions-corlevour.com/project/hadjadj-fabrice/ [accessed June 25 2019].

[5] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Culture et évangélisation. La culture, un défi pour l'évangélisation* (Paris : Editions Parole et Silence, 2018).

[6] AUTHOR, Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj via Skype, July 23 2018.

[7] See the documentary *Des écrivains à Solemnes* (KTO, 2018) http://www.ktotv.com/articles/2017/3/27/des-ecrivains-a-solesmes [accessed July 4 2019].

[8] AUTHOR, Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj via Skype, July 23 2018.

[9] Charles. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2007).

[10] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui. Anti-manuel d'évangélisation* (Paris : Salvator, 2012).

[11] Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, eds. *Aspiring to fullness in a secular age: essays on religion and theology in the work of Charles Taylor* (Notre Dame, Indiana : University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

[12] AUTHOR, Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj via Skype, July 23 2018. Hadjadj is in good company here. His remark echoes that of novelist Yann Moix, speaking of Charles Péguy: "Tant que Péguy n'écrit pas, il ne sait pas ce qu'il pense – Péguy did not know what he

thought until he wrote about it." Matthieu Giroux, Interview with Yann Moix in *Philitt*: https://philitt.fr/2014/09/22/entretien-avec-yann-moix-tant-que-peguy-necrit-pas-il-ne-sait-pas-ce-quil-pense/ [accessed July 1 2019].

[13] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

[14] Ibid., 6.

[15] Ibid., 6-7.

[16] Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui*, 105-8.

[17] Ibid., 102.

[18] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable* (Paris : Points, 2015 [1961]). Françoise Schwab, Sofia Eliza Bouratsis and Jean-Marie Brohm (eds), *Présence de Vladimir Jankélévitch : Le charme et l'occasion* (Paris: Broché, 2010).

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[19] Damascius, *Problems and Solutions Regarding First Principles*, trans. by Sara Ahbel-Rappe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[20] Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui*, 104.

[21] Ibid., 126-31.

[22] Hadjadj, *Culture et évangélisation*, 13.

[23] See, Fabrice Hadjadj's play *Jeanne et les posthumains ou le sexe de l'ange* (Clichy : Courlevour et Compagnie de Bas en Haut, 2013) where he picks apart the personal drama of transgenderism in one of the play's main protagonists.

[24] AUTHOR, Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj via Skype, July 23 2018

[25] Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui*, 104.

[26] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37-42.

[27] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Les violents s'en emparent* (Saint-Victor-de-Morestel : Les Provinciales, 1999). The allusion to Flannery O'Connor is not incidental. Hadjadj is in fact a passionate

reader of American literature and is undertaking a doctoral thesis on the writings of Walker Percy.

[28] Hadjadj, *Culture et évangélisation*, 11.

[29] Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui*, 104

[30] Robert de Beaugrande, and Wolfgang U. Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1981).

[31] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Passion-Résurrection* (Paris : Cerf, 2004), 9-10.

[32] Ibid., 10.

[33] *Etre clown en 99 leçons : guide (pas très pratique), essai (raté), récit (peu romanesque)* (Paris : Editions La Bibliothèque, 2017).

[34] Ibid., 7.

[35] See, for example, Roly Bain and Patrick Forbes. *Clowning Glory* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995); Philippe Rousseaux, 'L'expérience du clown: des voies nouvelles pour une spritualité au quotidien', *Spiritualités et théologie: questions, enjeux, défis*, ed. Christine Aulenbacher (Munster : Lit Verlag, 2013), 135-42 ; Wolfgang Zucker, 'The Clown as the Lord of Disorder', *Theology Today* 24: 3, 1967, 306-317.

[36] Hadjadj, *Etre clown*, 34.

[37] Ibid., 33

[38] Ibid., 143.

[39] Ibid., 153.

[40] Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui*, 128.

[41] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Réussir sa mort: Anti-méthode pour vivre* (Paris : Presses de la Renaissance, 2005), 290.

[42] Ibid., 123.

[43] Ibid., 124.

[44] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Massacre des innocents: Scènes de ménage et de tragédie* (Saint-Victor-de-Morestel : Les Provinciales, 2006), 42.

[45] Hadjadj, *Réussir sa mort*, 222.

[46] Ibid., 224.

[47] Ibid., 225.

[48] AUTHOR, Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj via Skype, July 23 2018.

[49] Contributors also included novelist Michel Houellebecq, philosopher Philippe Muray, Christian anarchist Falk van Gaver and socialist libertarian Jean-Claude Michéa. Some of these writers have become important for the contemporary movement of *écologie intégrale*, inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Sí* (2015) the best-known forum for which is the monthly review *Limite, revue d'écologie intégraleI* (2015-).

[50] Fabrice Hadjadj, *Jeanne et les posthumains ou le sexe de l'ange*, 48.

[51] Ibid., 85.

[52] AUTHOR, Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj via Skype, July 23 2018.