

## FROM PRAYER TO LITERATURE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT OF VILÉM FLUSSER

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I intend to study the philosophical thought of Vilém Flusser starting from the relationships that he found between literature and prayer. His life and his work were built between two continents. He was born Czech, but lived and worked in Brazil. Brazilian, he radicated in Europe. His comments on literature concentrate on the works of the Czech Franz Kafka and the Brazilian João Guimarães Rosa. These authors will be our references.

The whole work of Vilém Flusser is an invitation to decision-making. And every decision involves an absurd gesture, because it is not possible to judge the decision *a priori*. When it is possible to judge the decision, it is impossible to come back. As an attempt to explain this absurd character of decision, one must enter Franz Kafka's labyrinth. Kafka's characters open doors, cross hallways, use middlemen, but never arrive anywhere. No matter how often they start anew, they come back to the starting point and never cross the threshold. What is beyond the threshold is something that one only knows from hearing about. One does not know the law, but only its keeper. The fate of the characters seems to represent in advance whatever happens to the reader. The meaning of the narrative is not found outside the text, but once inside the narrative, it escapes us. The meaning of life is not found outside our life, but once inside life itself, it escapes us.

The wanderings of the characters reinforce Flusser's conception that every decision transcends meaning, being, by definition, absurd. The animal-narrator in *Der Bau* ("The burrow") knew about that, while searching in his labyrinth the exit that he knew would not save him after all. I dare define literature itself as a labyrinth: a senseless and irrational construction for sure — but, at the same time, vital: *conditio sine qua non*. To understand this condition, Coleridge recognizes the need of the willing suspension of disbelief. Every poetry and fiction reader needs to suspend his disbelief, in order to allow himself to dive into on the text he reads, in such a way that he can, in fact, endure the whole process. As theoreticians and teachers, we develop a type of "suspension of the suspension of disbelief", to understand the process that allows and provokes that "suspension of disbelief". What Vilém Flusser proposes is something similar, but a step ahead. Perhaps I can call it "suspension of belief" — suspension of belief in maps, that is, in theory, in philosophy and in science. This exercise of "suspension of belief" would be indispensable to learn to decide.

In the philosophical jargon, the suspension of belief is better known by the Greek term *εποχή* — or *épokhé*. For the Greeks, it was a state of mental rest, through which we neither assert

nor deny. This state very often leads us to stillness, as well as leaves us open to all the perspectives of the phenomena. Husserl revives the concept, turning it into the axis of his "phenomenological reduction". *Épokhé*, then, corresponds to the momentary suspension of judgement, so that one can try to "see" the phenomenon from a new perspective. Of course this is, however, a trick of thought. In absolute terms, it is an impossible artifice. Thought, which necessarily confuses itself with judgement, and thus with belief, has no condition of suspending itself, just as a serpent cannot devour its own body. As a consequence, thought needs "to be deceived" to open a new access to another truth. Thought needs "to suspend itself", or to try to do it, although the task seems impossible. Thought needs to blend the myths of Sisifo and Uroborus.

The whole life of Flusser resides in this experience, announced in one of his first articles, called "Waiting for Kafka". In this article, he already recognizes two basic possibilities for the appreciation of a literary work: either as an answer, or as a question. In the first case, as an answer, the literary work is regarded either as an answer to the historical context where it appeared, or as an answer to a text that preceded it. In the second case, as a question, the literary work is regarded as a question to a particular reader at a given moment. If we try to understand the literary work as an answer, we need to analyze its relationships either with the context from which it emerged, or with the text that preceded it. The realm of that attempt is criticism. If we try to face the literary work as a question — as a provocation —, we are obliged to talk with it. The realm of the second attempt is that of speculation. The realm of criticism corresponds to the attitude of curiosity, while the realm of speculation corresponds to the attitude of sympathy. Without undermining criticism, Flusser opts for speculation, that is to say, he opts for taking his place in the general conversation, of which the literary work is a noble part. As a consequence, he invites his reader, and the reader of Kafka, to try to take on the attitude of sympathy.

Kafka's work, though, does not appear to be nice, but rather repulsive. However, our sympathy should make an effort to cross that peculiar repulsive atmosphere. Flusser observes with great care that similar atmosphere derives from the language Kafka writes in, the official and bureaucratic German of Prague (the same German he learned how to read, write and think in), impregnated by the continuous impact of Czech (with a very diversified grammar). The translators of Kafka to Portuguese, and I imagine that also to other languages, disturbed with his construction type, end up "correcting it", lending fluency to what Kafka had deliberately overloaded and truncated. But precisely because of this kind of language and difficulty that Kafka's text acquires its absurd atmosphere, an atmosphere that had already been present in the language of Prague. From the transcendence of the difficulty results that sardonic irony that we call, as a rule, *kafkian*. Either through the arid tone of the bureaucratic language in *The Castle* and in *The Trial*, or by means of the tone of the bourgeois family talk in *Metamorphosis*, there opens an aesthetically insurmountable abyss between the form and the meaning of his sentences. If the meaning is of an almost unbearable tragic nature, the form

seems ridiculous and grotesque. From the incongruity between form and meaning, between code and message, there appears the existence of the absurd that Kafka provides us with. The story of *Metamorphosis*, for example, starts with the tragedy of the character and his family, in the context of bourgeois exploitation and alienation but, as it is told from the point of view of the "insect-like" salesman, it becomes comic, ridiculous, grotesque. However, the reader does not laugh. He can't laugh.

The existence of the absurd is enlarged, according to Flusser, because the message that Kafka cast in our direction would not have fully reached us yet. His message is premature. His basic narrative situations assemble around a key situation: that of a man forgotten by the omnipotent administrative apparatus, but relaxed and incompetent. This man makes an effort without success, and without the slightest feeling of revolt, in making himself remembered. Kafka teaches that human life is a frustrating search for knowledge, without pride. Human life would have nothing of heroic about it. Man would not be rebellious. The search to which we are devoted is nothing but a docile and humble fumbling. The knowledge we seek corresponds to our own ruin and futility. Naturally, this order of ideas does not agree with the image of man that we are used to projecting, but it agrees with the intimate existence that we experience in the moments of withdrawal. In his works, Flusser deepens the visceral contradiction between the grandiloquent public image that the human being projects of himself in his philosophies, and the intimate existence, actually stingy in nature, that each man has of himself when reality falls on him. Kafka would also teach that the superior forces, solely divine, constitute a hierarchically super-organized administrative machine, despite being pedantic, corrupt, badly maintained and disgusting. This idea of the Divinity, as something corrupted, sounds repulsive, but it agrees with the intimate awareness that we have of the forces that govern us. Or else, "why do we pray, if not to corrupt an inferior instance of the hierarchy of the divine"; why do we kneel down, if not to deceive a celestial employee, vaguely entrusted of "our" case? Why do we fight for "good causes", except to obtain "credit in our celestial checking account, fearing, at the same time, that some incompetent accountant miscalculates the transactions?" While faith postulates the existence of a God, the *kafkian* existence discovers the abyss of nothing. The thought goes through a kind of hopeless vertigo, because it notices that God is nothing but a reflection of thought itself on the calm and abysmal surface of nothing. Disgust and tedium would be the opposite of anguish, while God would be the opposite of thought. He would in fact have the face of Minotaurus, showing us one of the faces of Dionisus.

Vilém Flusser and Franz Kafka did not live exactly in the same period of time. Flusser was born in 1920 and Kafka died in 1924. But, for the rest, the resemblance is very uncomfortable. Both of them are Czech. Both of them are Jewish. Both of them are intellectual. Both of them wrote most of their work in German — in the bureaucratic German of Prague. They were both born in Prague. And died in Prague. According to Flusser, Prague would be a city placed near the border (*O Estado de São Paulo*, 28/10/1961). On the border between the Gothic and the Baroque. On the border between Germans, Czechs and Jews. On the border between faith and

the demon. To the current accusation that the people of Prague corroborate any government system, the philosopher answers: it is "an opportunistic, ironic, cynic corroboration, given with a kind of mental reservation which went unnoticed by the potentate". The same kind of cooperation, or relationship, can be found in both the guard and the peasant in Kafka's short story *Before the law*. The same type of cooperation is displayed by Gregor Samsa, in relation to the exploitation of his boss and his father, in *Metamorphosis*; such cooperation is cooperative to the extent of reversing all the exploitation. Gregor could be treated as an insect and should adjust to that, but was not allowed to lose his human appearance and become, concretely, a gigantic and disgusting insect, dripping mucus upon receiving on his back the apple of the family "paradise". However, he turned into what people saw him like, turned into the discourse that surrounded him, and because of that he made himself unbearable. Gregor Samsa's disobedience is shaped into the contradictory form of an insane adhesion. The character disobeys out of excess of obedience. As he totally submits to the forces that alienate him, he renders them victorious in such a radical way that they become exposed, and annihilated. The interests of the capitalist regime (or, in Flusser's words, of the "apparatus") demand insects which are "only" symbolic. The alienation of the apparatus destroys the person, keeping the mechanics of the human condition intact. When, in an act of naïve terrorism, Gregor truly becomes an insect, he destroys the rules of the social game, because he takes them to the last consequences.

However, Kafka's literature was not a denunciatory literature. The denouement we may possibly perceive is a consequence. Similarly, Flusser's philosophy is not denunciatory. As a philosopher, he prefers not to judge. To judge is repulsive not because everything is equivalent, but, on the contrary, because everything that is worthwhile can only be distinguished by challenging judgement, which reinforces our willing suspension of judgement. To suspend judgement implies resisting to the reification of the phenomena — of the Other and of the whole reality — to think "ahead". This resistance brings prayer near to literature. Religion and art, in past times, were so well blended that one would regard them as forming a whole — but, even today, the distance between them can still be perceived as being way too small. In an article published in 1965, Flusser recalls EXODUS (20, 4): "you shall not make any sculptures or any images imitating anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below". This was one of the ten commandments, synthesized in four words: "you shall not imagine". We can explain the prohibition as a result of the horror of the Bible toward paganism and the adoration of images. Images would be horrible because they are not the "thing", that is, because they are fake. The western form of monotheism relies on the fight against the falsehood of images. The monotheistic God is unimaginable, because He cannot and should not be imagined. If we understand God as the foundation of reality, and the visual images as the models of reality, what our monotheism says is that all models of reality cannot exhaust reality, therefore, they are false. Paganism, as a consequence, is the belief that all models represent reality; idolatry would then be the explanation of reality through models.

Models are false gods "against whom we address the hatred and nausea of the prophets". Therefore, the construction of models is considered, by the decalogue, a sin.

The context suggests that the prohibition of images should be regarded as an ethical commandment. Out of context, the prohibition can present itself as an aesthetic norm — it could be prohibiting the figurative art, allowing just the abstract art. Under more careful consideration, a theory of knowledge is also revealed, when we say that images bring us fake knowledge. To Vilém Flusser, however, the three aspects of the verse are inseparable. "Theory" is nothing but the imagination of reality, by means of the construction of models, models which take the place of reality, which replace it. Newton handed down to us a model that makes the movement of bodies imaginable, Darwin a model that makes the development of life imaginable, Freud a model that makes the operation of the *psyche* imaginable, Marx a model that makes the behavior of society imaginable. But, if the models take the place of reality, other models can take the place of previous models. The theory of relativity prevails over Newton's model, but it did so in a problematic way: the theory of relativity does not make the movement of bodies imaginable; on the contrary, it makes the terms "movement" and "body" themselves unimaginable. Does that mean that, in the field of Advanced Physics, the commandment "you shall not imagine" begins to reveal its force? Will monotheism finally take effect, in spite of being restricted to the theory of relativity? Maybe not. Our difficulty to imagine the world according to Einstein leaves us deeply disturbed. How can we admit that an unimaginable theory can be a valid type of knowledge? In Physics, we would find ourselves in a situation similar to the one of the Israelites before the Golden Calf. Reality appears from behind Newton's model as a good demonstration — that of how inadequate the human imagination is.

Immersed with Flusser in the atmosphere of the Old Testament, we are trying to understand why the prophets feel disgust and horror before false gods, while people are attracted to them. We are trying to understand why the commandment "you shall not imagine" is far from being followed, since images and models of the surrounding reality and of God Himself do not cease to multiply, in people's homes as well as in churches. Idolatry can be readily understood: the models (the model of fertility represented by Ichtar, the model of the clash of social classes evoked by Marxism) make reality imaginable, and life in it becomes significant. In some way, "man builds models to protect himself against reality and to prevent its rays from reaching him". Reality — the deity — blinds man. The models are our sunglasses. If we use the term in the feminine, remembering the models of fashion magazines, half naked, on billboards and centerfolds of the male publications, we will see that these models, usually depicted on two-dimensional photographs, represent beauty and allow us to imagine desire and a woman; at the same time these models protect us from the real, three-dimensional woman.

The prophets feel horror and disgust toward models. As a consequence, the attempts to imagine reality, in order to understand and manipulate it better, can only be seen as sinful. They put Science, Technology and Arts in the same boat: the boat of sinful instances. We do

not agree with this, however, no matter how orthodox our religiosity might be. Even if we still perceive the magic element of these areas of knowledge, our daily, professional and political life no longer permits that we discard them *in limine*. That is the reason why the biblical exegetists try, unlike what they do with most of the other passages, to contextualize the commandment historically so that it becomes innocuous and inoperative, presupposing that its object was simply and solely the cult of Ichtar and not the cult of Freud. Flusser, however, distances himself from biblical exegeses, and acknowledges, on both the existential and the aesthetic levels, the present validity of the commandment "you shall not imagine". Yes, Flusser echoes the words from EXODUS. The sight of a model, in fact, can cause disgust and horror, once it hides from us what we intimately conceive as being the reality, or the beauty, of life. Due to the omnipresence of the *media*, we try to deny this intimate sensation even to ourselves, but the truth is that models and female models are dangerously close to disgust and despair. This means that Flusser doesn't make a liberating and glorious defense of imagination. He doesn't sing, as John Lennon does: *imagine all the people...* The defense of the imagination *per se* does not combine with phenomenology.

Intimately, we feel that any model — Darwinism, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Constructivism, Deconstructivism — is a self-enclosed model which explains too well everything that it approaches. And this proves, without any doubt, its intrinsic falsehood — in other words, its condition as a model that pretends that it is not a model, but rather reality itself. Noticing this does not imply denying the need of models, but it forces us to face the reification of the models. We now return to the starting point of this essay: the philosophical need not only of the suspension of disbelief, but, mainly, of the suspension of belief and judgement. Because phenomenology is, according to Flusser, the attempt to adopt a certain attitude in accordance with the commandment before any phenomenon. Phenomenology avoids the models in order to allow that the situation is revealed itself existentially.

The artistic movement that tries to capture this attitude is Surrealism. And the image that paradoxically best represents the commandment "you shall not imagine" is the painting that the artist René Magritte entitled, very appropriately, *Forbidden Reproduction*. A man looks at himself in the mirror and sees nothing but his back, flouting all the models of Physics and Optics — but probably in agreement with our deeper intuition: the notion that we will never be able to see ourselves while looking at our mirror image. Beyond Surrealism, non-figurative art takes the suspension of the judgement (and the suspension of the representation) to its last frontier. The work of art would no longer aim at the imitation of reality, but rather at the articulation of unimaginable experiences — and, in this sense, the work of art would share with the prophets the horror and the disgust toward idols and images.

Flusser, in a panoramic flight over the valley of History, tries to demonstrate that our civilization is the synthesis of two great inheritances: the Greek and the Jewish. In the field of Morals and Ethics, of Politics and of Economics, the Jewish inheritance prevails, in its Christian variant. In the field of Aesthetics and Knowledge, the Greek inheritance prevails. Our Art,

Science and Philosophy owe much more to the Greeks than to the Jews. In these fields, in agreement with the meaning of the Commandment, we would still be pagans, devoted to the construction of models. However, at present, the Jewish inheritance seems to be felt in these areas as well, forcing us to experience our models as expressions of false gods. The so-called post-modern theories, on the one hand, and Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty, on the other, steer to the fear of belief. As a consequence, we would be starting to exist inside an unimaginable world, which brings about a sense of disorientation and the loss of what we thought we possessed: the sense of reality. The world would gradually become more and more absurd. Quantum Mechanics puts us in contact with an unimaginable reality. With difficulty, we even accept this reality, but we cannot simply stick to it. Abstract art puts us in contact with another unimaginable reality. With the same difficulty, we accept this other reality, but we cannot understand it. This means that, for the first time in the history of the western civilization, the Jewish experience of the world is articulated, in Science, in Art — and, in Philosophy, through Phenomenology and Existentialism. The Jewish philosopher Vilém Flusser, however, does not celebrate. He understands that this would be a dangerous moment for the development of our thought, because it can result in anti-intellectualism, as well as in the articulation of a new religiosity. Probably, the two results are compatible, in spite of the contradiction.

The resurgence of the commandment "you shall not imagine" brings to surface an inheritance which had been submerged. We should view the event not only from an aesthetic angle, but also from ethical and epistemological perspectives: "we are the first generation, after an entirely different history, capable of experiencing the commandment in its original essence, that is, as words that come from the inarticulated foundation." What cannot be articulated? That which is not human. The commandment "you shall not imagine" forbids to imagine God in our own image and likeness. The commandment can thus be updated in the following way: "the world rhymes with itself". It implies that we cannot imagine ourselves as the measure of the world, which represents a certainly more demanding imperative than the categorical imperative. We understand the extension of this demand when we admit, with Flusser, that language in fact creates reality, which does not mean that language controls it, but rather the opposite. Just like Sisyphus, language articulates the foundation of the world, in other words, that which cannot be articulated. Language follows a direction which is opposite to the one the commandment establishes. "You shall not imagine" means: "you shall not mirror yourself", or: "you shall not multiply yourself". The verb, on the other hand, serves another order, in truth a curse, at the exit of Eden: "grow and multiply yourself". Due to that existential contradiction, language becomes less than a means of communication, plethoric and inexhaustible source of misunderstandings.

Language is ambiguous. From this brilliant ambiguity there emerges, for example, Guimarães Rosa. The universe in the work of Guimarães Rosa relies on the universal structure of myths: "a non-historical space, inside of which time runs incongruously with the temporal linearity of

historicism" (magazine Comentário, 1969). The reader accepts this idea, which is surprising. The geographical determination should demand historical determination, but that does not happen. The first explanation that occurs to Flusser, to explain the surprise, is the following: the Brazilian Plateau would be the habitat of a society that, *per se*, lives non-historically, and the writer from Minas Gerais would represent the mythologist of this society. The universe of Rosa would be non-historical in a post-historical sense (and not prehistoric, and even less likely, post-modern); its coincidence with the back-country universe is more of an excuse rather than reality. Flusser considers that the work of Guimarães Rosa overcomes historicism by the way of syntax, since it breaks up with the linearity of discourse, and by the way of semantics, since it founds a mythology. The work of Rosa would be, to a great extent, a phenomenology of the Brazilian back-country, which enlightens it from many angles. Flusser says:

The Brazilian Plateau (Chapadão) is indescribable, because it lordly despises all human dimension. And "to describe" is to register in human dimensions. The experience of chapadão is that of man's annihilation as a measure to all things. A more violent annihilation than that suffered while contemplating the starry sky. Because the experience of chapadão is not the experience of emptiness, but of some incommensurable thing. Its vastness (in the sense of "lack of measure") results in disorientation and vertigo, therefore, in terror and uprooting exaltation. *Masslosigkeit* (vastness) results in *Bodenlosigkeit* (lack of foundation). One cannot inhabit the back-country, in the sense of getting used to it. The back-country man, like a sailor, lives in an exposed situation, without foundation, he does not live anywhere. Living like this is very dangerous. But the sailor sees the port as the purpose for the crossing, and the back-country man crosses the Plateau without a purpose or goal. The waves of the sea rock the sailor with their articulated rhythm, and the motionless waves of the back-country, its inarticulate hills, involve the back-country man in immobile monotony.

The experience of the Brazilian back-country, in its demand to express itself, in direct confront with its inexpressibility, would annihilate the philosopher more violently than the contemplation of the starry sky, or the contemplation of the abyss. From the notion of "lack of foundation" — *Bodenlosigkeit* —, emerges the title of Flusser's philosophical autobiography, *Bodenlos*, reinforcing the need of conversation and of literature, in place of futile attempts to establish, *a priori*, a foundation for the world. The need of conversation and of literature, on the other hand, forces the question about the origin of language. He asks:

What is the origin of language? This is a fundamental question, a question that demands foundation. To formulate it with seriousness, with total passion, constitutes a task for life. Actually, it is a task for a religious life. Nowadays, this is perhaps the only form of a religious life after the death of God. (*O Estado de São Paulo*, 29/04/1967)

In the origin of language, in the source of symbols, the roots of thought are anchored. When posing this question, Flusser is not interested in the distant profundities of history, of the



nervous system or of the unconscious, but in the immediate proximity of the *I*. It is from the concrete nucleus of his *I* that he notices language to rise, as a geyser, in spouts: "if I could capture the moment of the explosion, that fleeting moment in which I am still not language, but no longer inarticulate, if I could capture that critical moment between the chaotic *Other* and the *I* organized by symbols, I would have captured the origin of language". The artist seldom has the paradoxical possibility to articulate the inarticulate. He should not act too early, for that which is still not articulated cannot be captured; he should not act too late, for that which is already articulated does not deserve to be captured. It seems to be impossible to define this precise moment (this almost-symbolic moment) in a philosophical or scientific essay. This, however, does not prevent Flusser from courting this impossibility, leaning on the writer who, among us, Brazilians, seems to have arrived closer to the inarticulate. The dimension of Rosa's "Brazilianess" would be the least important dimension, but it tends to be noticed by readers as Rosa's message proper — and this generates two disastrous consequences. The first is that the universal quality of the work tends to be hidden, either because of the enormous difficulty in translating Rosa to other languages, or because of the transformation of Rosa into a "regional" author, which implies a change in meaning. The other is that the "developmentalistic" tendency of Brazilian events is guided in a direction opposed to that of Guimarães Rosa's vision, making him an author "of the past", which is absurd. This would promote the castration of Guimarães Rosa: inserted in the "history of literature" and in didactic books, he becomes part of the system, when, in reality, his work subverts not only language, but thought as well — and therefore, its virtual untranslatability.

Since Rosa incarnates the Portuguese language in conflict with itself, Guimarães Rosa would be untranslatable — or translatable only in the semantic sense, which resulted in anecdotal reproductions, forging a type of exotic and tropical regionalism which gave the non-Brazilian reader an entirely wrong view of the work. The American translation of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, for example, with the title *The devil to pay in the backlands*, turned him into a storyteller of cowboy tales. But Guimarães Rosa had some responsibility in the *kitschization* of his work, either to applaud all the translations that were made of it, or to privilege the technical aspect of his writing. This technique threatened the authenticity of the synthesis from within, resulting in a kind of schizophrenia that could be called, like Benjamin, "aestheticization of the aesthetic". Flusser considered Rosa's neologisms the weak point of his work, forming empty word games. Although he saw his friend as the incorporated essence of the Portuguese language, he distrusted Rosa's vast knowledge of other languages — it was vast without being deep. Rosa's neologisms, for the philosopher, only touched upon the surface of words which, in reality, vibrate a deep mystery from within. And Flusser comments the title of one of Rosa's books.

A single word serves as an example: "Sagarana". Doubtlessly, the word sounds Portuguese, and fits easily in the Portuguese syntax. Besides, it has the melody of the "a" so fervently loved, and for the same reason it evokes Sanskrit with all its mysterious connotations. But the

word "saga", in substandard German (vaguely, "myth"), has an inexhaustible richness that is lost in Rosa, and the tupi suffix "rana" suggests an agglutinative plural equally lost. What remains is only a way to say "several myths". And we feel, from behind this, an intellectual deliberation that leaves a bitter taste in the mouth, in spite of so much sweetness.

Guimarães Rosa's invention did not reside in the use of neologisms, but rather in the rupture of syntax and in the way he led discourse to absurd. For this reason, Rosa still appeared to Flusser to be the starting point of a new universe. Both agreed that language is not merely a means of communication, but the real foundation of Being. *Logos* is the same as *mythos*. Writing, for both, would be the only way to fulfill their own essence — which both understood as "the silent language inside us". The *praxis* of writing, according to Vilém Flusser, came as the project of *existentially* unifying Wittgenstein and Husserl. The *praxis* of writing, according to Guimarães Rosa, came as the project of existentially unifying the *logos* and the *mythos*. When Flusser discusses the torments of his friend-writer, he tries to speak of his own torments as a philosopher. This is not a vulgar projection, but sympathy, that is, a kind of internal understanding. He goes back to the question posed by Albert Camus, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*: why don't I kill myself? To answer, he praises amazement (*O Estado de São Paulo*, 25/04/1964). He wants to recover a kind of primordial religiosity, recovering the links with literature. For the philosopher, the gradual transformation of things and of their mystery into instruments explains the progressive degradation of the religious feeling. The only thing that is possible to adore in instruments is the human labor behind them. Therefore, the only religiosity we are capable of having is self-adoration, that is, narcissism. But self-erotic adoration confuses itself with the essence of disgust; by definition, it is disgusting. It does not lend any meaning to human existence. Among the attempts to re-conquer amazement, to which one should pay attention, Flusser insists on Husserl's phenomenology, understanding it as a method of "letting the thing be a thing". Through *épokhé*, he tried to rediscover *eidos*, the amazement of the thing.

Ever since the Renaissance, the western thought has intensified its attention toward nature, which has been progressively promoting nature's annihilation. When instrumentalized, nature loses its amazing character, and that is irreversible. But nature is not the world. Our environment is not made up only of things that can be transformed in tools. Nature was transformed into an industrial estate and into tedium — but there is something beyond nature that has not been named yet, only hinted at, which is subject to provoking amazement, and therefore, subject to provoking invention and fiction. One should then formulate the enigma without, however, undoing it.

To undo the enigma is a sin. To search for the truth, to make it tool, is a sin. The last chapter of Vilém Flusser's last book, *Gesten*, deals precisely with the gesture of searching. It maintains that our present crisis is in reality a crisis of science: a crisis of our gesture of searching. The gesture of searching, or of researching, would be the paradigm of all our present gestures, just as the religious gesture informed all the other gestures in the Middle Ages. However, Flusser

contends that the gesture of searching *should not* be a model for other gestures, because it does not search for anything that has been lost. It searches with indifference; does not set goals, does not ascribe values. The place taken by scientific investigation in our society would be, therefore, in contradiction with the investigation proper. The scientific investigation escapes from the problems that interest men and is devoted to unimportant objects. Because those objects stay at a distance, they are "simply" objects, and man can become their subject, can get to know them in an "objective" way. In relation to such things as rocks and stars, man puts himself in the place of a god, tracing the coordinates and the formulas. In relation to such things as illnesses and wars, man puts himself in the place of a victim, defending himself with vaccines and short term agreements. When his interest is vital, scientific interest is paradoxically hidden. When there is no vital interest, then science is interested. However, the gesture of searching for objective and exact knowledge is about to be converted into something impossible. Contemporary physicists search for, with extreme seriousness, the last theory, the one that can integrate the infinitely small into the infinitely large. They search for, in this way and through this *hybris*, God, or rather, they want to make God their object. We find ourselves, therefore, on the edge of the abyss.

Despair, however, pairs up with literature, because it forces the emergence of new perspectives. The limit of the crisis would allow us to observe, from the underground, the emergence of a new type of the same gesture of searching. One discovers the search with desire and suffer, that is, with values. Knowledge is, among other things, passion, and passion is in its turn a type of knowledge. All this happens in the fullness of the human life, in its "being in the world". The gesture of a "pure" attitude, ethically neutral, is a concealed gesture. It is an inhuman gesture, alienation, madness. When it comes to know inanimate objects, this alienation is exclusively epistemological, and in this case it is simply a mistake. But when other things come into play, such as illnesses, wars, injustices, alienation turns into a criminal gesture. The investigator, who approaches society as if it were an anthill, and the technocrat, who manipulates the economy as if it were a chess game, these two characters are criminals.

The investigator, a criminal? Our post-modern and post-historical post-doctors, criminals? So criminal as, for example, the brilliant engineer mentioned in *Territorio comanche*, a novel by Arturo Pérez-Reverte. He invents a bullet that zigzags inside the enemy's body, names it *Bala Louise* and goes with his family to Disneyland to celebrate. Doctor Frankenstein and Oppenheimer shake hands. The investigator transforms phenomena into objects: from the song of a bird he makes an acoustic vibration, from the human pain, a dysfunction of the organism. He disconnects from his conscience the fact that he is paid by someone to search, he does not consider if the invention or the paper are good or bad for society, solely concerned with publishing (or perishing).

Vilém Flusser formulates a proposal to confront the apparatus, technicism and "developmentism" — to confront sin. Flusser's proposal, as usual, lies in the text and in the philosopher's style. It should be read right there. His proposal consists of attributing values, by

recovering the ethic question (why?) and the ontological question (who?), together with the methodological question (how?). Only in this way does the gesture of searching, as well as the other gestures, turn into a gesture that searches for the other — for the one whom we simply cannot and should not turn into an object. The other is the friend, the other is Guimarães Rosa. He saw, in his relationship with Rosa, the road that begins in religious revelation and ends in moral imperative, which helps us to understand the road travelled by Flusser from prayer to literature.

Just like art was made from religion, literature can be made from prayer. Literature, then, can be seen as privileged realization of Ethics, since it allows the perspectivization of truth. Questions make sense only when they have no answers. Questions lull a sweet, heavy and mysterious fruit, commonly well-known as "fiction". This fruit is a prayer in the direction of authenticity.

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<sup>1</sup> **Versão para o inglês de Gisele de Carvalho e Beatriz Gama e Silva.**

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