

VILÉM FLUSSER

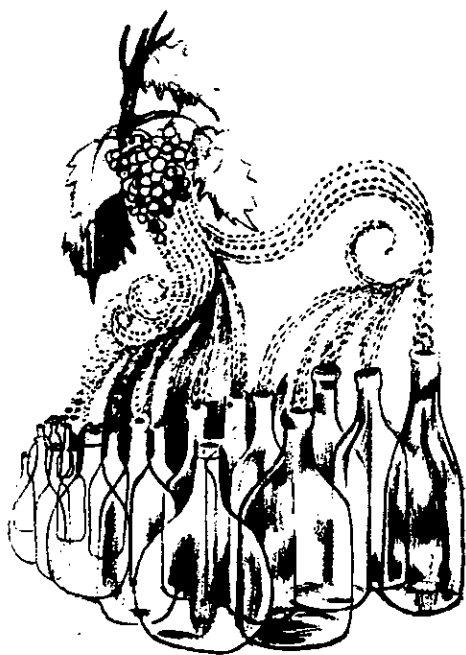
Bottles

THE CONSIDERATION OF ANY THING
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WILL REVEAL ASPECTS
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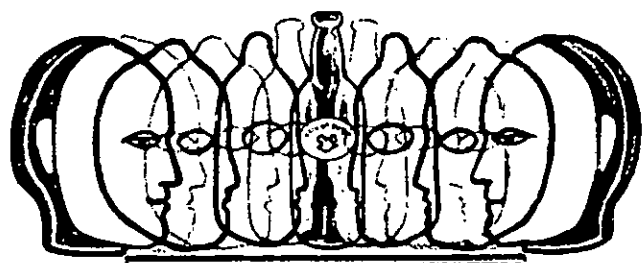
ANY THING THAT STANDS ABOUT in my surroundings can, if properly considered, reveal some aspects of my condition. For instance: bottles. Why bottles, of all things? Why, because they are containers, and may therefore reveal something about content and form, the what and the how, matter and method.

Let us interview a champagne drinker concerning bottles. He will probably, at first, not consider them to be important. It is the wine that is of importance, not the bottle. But if we insist, he may grant us that as a rule champagne bottles are well suited for their purpose (for instance as far as their form, their thickness of glass, their cork, and so on, are concerned). If we ask why, he will possibly explain the fitness of the bottle in a somewhat Darwinistic way: unfit bottles have been eliminated in the course of the history of champagne, and only the fittest survived. This he may call the theory of the growing experience of champagne manufacturers with bottles. But he will grant, if pressed, that the growing experience is, in fact, a progressive discovery of how champagne "wants" to be bottled, and that present bottles therefore show better than discarded ones "the spirit of the wine" they bottle. This may be called the theory of the progressive articulation of champagne in bottles. If we point out to the drinker that the "spirit of the wine" does not seem to be very clever in its present stage of development (consider, for instance, the well-known difficulty with champagne corks), then he may, after a moment of hesitation, offer the following apology of the bottle: what seems to be a defect, is, in reality, the expression of the true spirit of the champagne in the bottle. The spirit is festive, and the way the cork is removed from the bottle articulates that festive spirit.

Notice what has happened in the course of this interview. At first the drinker did not seem interested in the "form" of his drinking. When his attention was drawn to it, he tried to justify the form with rational, parascientific arguments. These arguments, when challenged, acquired an idealistic flavor, although they continued to be rational. And when in real difficulty, the rational attitude was abandoned in favor of an emotional defense of the bottle. If, instead of "bottle" we read "ritual," and instead of "champagne" we read "myth," this interview becomes typical. But we can substitute "bottle" for any equivalent of "container," and "champagne" for any equivalent of "content," and still the interview will have meaning.



Consider the drinker after the interview. He has become aware of the problem of the bottle. He can no longer use the bottle spontaneously; he now takes one step back from it when he uses it. He sees it, and he sees himself using it. This "formalization" of the drinker's attitude enables him to criticize the bottle and his use of it, and to improve upon such use. But it may take an important pleasure out of the act of drinking. The drinker is no longer merely drinker, but also watcher of his own drinking. He sees himself as the interviewer saw him. And he sees himself



in the bottle. This is what every step back, every formalization, comes to. Therefore every detached contemplation not only influences the contemplated, but may even destroy it. Detachment is a way of commitment, and every philosophy of religion (or any other ideology) is anti-religious (or anti-ideological), especially if it is apologetic.

But, of course, if we are interested in bottles as forms, we want to know about empty bottles. What happens to them after the drinking? The drinker is unable to answer: he despises bottles while drinking; he despises them still more after drinking. But "empty" forms are "pure" forms, are they not? Well, it is obvious what happens to the bottles: they are either kept or thrown away, and if thrown away, they may be broken. If kept, they are monuments to past drinking, the historical past. If thrown away, they are past drinking forgotten and repressed, the unhistorical past (perhaps the return to nature?).

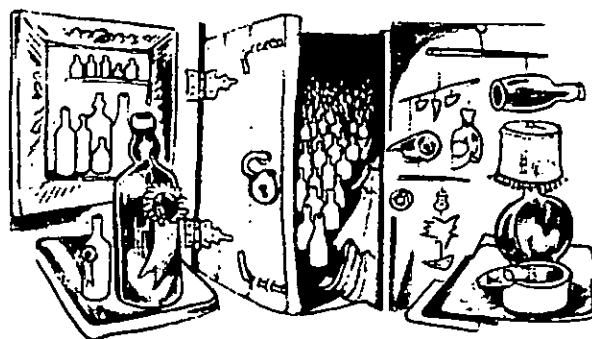
As far as empty bottles are concerned, we stand on double ground. Future archaeologists will discover our kept bottles on the same level on which they find our physical remains, but they will find the bottles which we have thrown away on the level immediately below the first one. They will have to distinguish between "assumed" and "repressed" bottles, and this will help them to understand our culture. But as for ourselves, we cannot, like future archaeologists, treat both kinds of bottles the same way. We can observe those which have been kept, but we must try to rediscover the ones that were thrown away and possibly broken.

Kept bottles may have three destinies: they may be exhibited, they may be hidden away, and they may be changed to fulfill new purposes. If exhibited, they serve two aims: they decorate and they testify publicly. The decorative, aesthetic quality of empty bottles was rediscovered for us by Morandi: Empty form as beauty. Empty bottles may be bought for the express purpose of exhibition,

serving as "pure art." Miniature bottles of famous brands of wines and liqueurs may be bought empty. If "form" were to be called *eidos*, and "little form" *eidolon*, this sort of idolatry could point to an important trait of the "spirit of our time": miniature formalism, (in the sciences, arts, in philosophy — in sum, structuralism). Exhibited empty bottles also testify to our past as drinkers. (Truly, or falsely as if we bought the bottles empty.) We want to be known by the bottles we exhibit. They are part of our mask, our persona. We see ourselves as others see us through empty bottles. They are our assumed past. They are political, public.

If hidden away, bottles are kept for unexpected occasions, so that they may be always available. (Exhibited bottles are unavailable, because to use them would mean damage to the exhibition and thus to our public image.) Being always available, hidden bottles are unpublished, private. They have passed from the public domain (the commerce of wine) to the private domain (the attic). We have acquired the empty hidden bottles, i.e. we have made them private. They belong to us in a radical sense: they are always available — part of our memory, our secret. The more we hide empty bottles away, the more we own, and the more we exhibit them, the more we seem to be. We seem at the expense of owning, and own at the expense of seeming. (This is the dialectic of "public" and "private".)

Empty bottles kept to be changed (into ash trays or chandeliers) are proof of human freedom. Full bottles are delivered into the house provided with both a visible and an invisible label. The visible label indicates the contents; the invisible commands us how to use the bottle. It says: "I am a bottle, empty me and fill me!" The sum total of imperatives of this type which surround me is called my



cultural condition. But I need not inevitably fall victim to this situation. I may approach the bottle in an admittedly difficult attitude (the phenomenological one), and thus free it of the invisible label. I can then see what the bottle *is*, and not how others want me to see it. By thus having freed the bottle of the value put upon it by others, I can put my own value upon it. Knowing what the bottle *is*, I can now make it be what it *ought to be*, for instance, an ash tray. Changed empty bottles are witnesses of human action, of the human capacity to change the world.

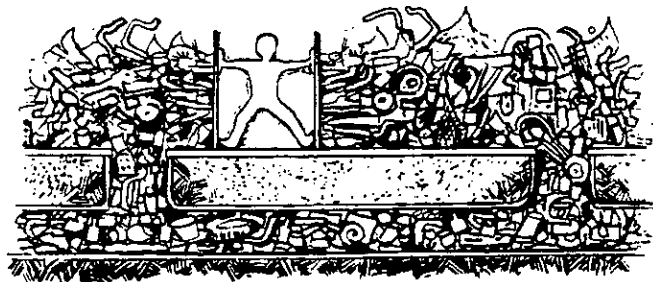
Kept bottles, be they exhibited, hidden or changed, are part of our "culture." They are part of that set of empty forms which are called "values." If exhibited, they are part of the values by which we want to be accepted; if hidden, they are part of the values which we owe to others; if changed, they are part of the values for which we take responsibility. They are *presentable* (that is, available and present with us). They are our recorded past, and as such, they are memorable and remembered, therefore present. The more bottles we keep, the richer is our culture. Culture is storage of things of the type of "empty bottles." It is to things of this type that we commit ourselves if we are committed to culture.

Yes, but what of the bottles we throw away? Obviously, we throw them away because we no longer want them. They are no longer of value to us; we have spent their value. We have overcome them. They are no longer with us. Where are they? In our past, forgotten. Forgotten means not presentable, but does it mean absent? We may say that, by having thrown the bottles away, by having spent their value, we have returned them to nature. That is where they are now, part of nature. This implies the following model of culture:

It is an organism that devours nature by production, eliminates nature by consumption, and grows by saving. To produce means to pluck pieces out of nature and inject value (form) into them. To consume means to spend the value injected into the pieces and return it to nature. To save means to keep the value. To produce is to inform, that is, to oppose the negentropy of human will to the entropic tendency of nature. To consume is to dis-inform, to submit to nature. To save is to build a reservoir of forms, "culture," to conquer the entropy of nature. The aim of culture is to eat up all of nature (what we call the fullness of the times). He who is committed to culture is committed to production and saving, and opposed to nature and spending. He seeks to create form and diminish chaos. His aim is to "humanize the world."

But this noble model of culture can no longer be maintained, because the bottles we throw away prove it wrong. It is an "historical" model, and it shows that history teaches us only that it can teach us nothing. What we observe in fact is this: We are surrounded by products. They form a labyrinth through which we wander. Some of us are producing more and more products. Others are transporting the products from one place in the labyrinth to another. Some of us are trying to dispose of the products by consuming them. Some of us are trying to reach one another in spite of the products. And some of us are trying to escape from the labyrinth into nature (which can be seen vaguely disappearing on the horizon). And there is garbage all over the labyrinth, and within the garbage there are the broken pieces of the bottles we threw away.

The part of this observation which disproves the noble historical model is the garbage aspect. It therefore deserves our closest attention (and is getting it). The rising tide of



garbage is not the fault of some defect in the gutter and sewage system built by our Victorian fore-bears, because it is not a catastrophic eruption (like the Nazi flood, for instance). It is a steady trickle, and no sanitation improvement can stop it, because the fact is that consumption does not return a product to nature. Not, that is, for a very long time. Therefore the more we produce, the more garbage we accumulate (which is the stage between the consumption of a product and nature). It is not better sanitation, only less production which can help this situation.

The model of culture suggested by this observation is as follows: Culture is a process which changes nature into garbage. It does so by producing (informing) and consuming (incompletely dis-informing). It is therefore a negentropic epicycle on the universal entropic tendency. In fact, it builds two reservoirs: One for forms which we save, called "culture proper," and the other for forms which we throw away, called "garbage." But these two reservoirs at best only slow down by a little the tendency toward entropy. He who is committed to culture is committed to information, therefore to an absurd and self-defeating purpose. The observation of thrown-away bottles makes this Manichaeic model inescapable.

Though the model cannot be escaped, it is of a size that may not suit us. We can, however, bring it down to our size, thus: The future of culture is called "nature." This is where everything comes from, is "produced from." The past of culture is called garbage. This is where everything goes to. The present of culture is saved forms. This is where all the present-able and available things are. The age of a culture can be calculated from the rate: nature/garbage. Nature determines us as future, i.e. as a challenge. Garbage determines us as past, i.e. as what we did not digest, and therefore as what continues to be present, though forgotten. We can free ourselves from natural determination in part through the Sciences of Nature. Let us hope that we can free ourselves from garbage determination in part through the Sciences of Garbage.

These sciences (like classical archaeology, ecology, depth psychology, etymology, mythology, and so forth) have a basic problem: They are concerned with the past, with what is forgotten. They are unhistorical, for history is concerned with what is remembered, therefore with what is present. They must uncover. And this is the reason why so

very often the ontological dignity of garbage is not recognized as such: because it goes on under cover. There are in fact three ontological realms: nature, culture and garbage. (To wit: pebbles, kept empty bottles, and broken pieces of thrown-away bottles.) They comprise the realm of the value-free, of the valuable, and of the devalued — of what is not as it ought to be, of what is as it ought to be, and of what is as it ought not to be. But very often, since the third realm is under cover (ambiguous), it is either mistaken for nature or for culture. (Broken pieces of thrown-away bottles are sometimes taken for a sort of pebble, sometimes for a sort of empty bottle.) But if culture is anti-nature (because it is negentropic), garbage is anti-culture (because it is entropic) but also anti-nature (because it is passed through a negentropic domain). It is a case of negative dialectics. And this ontological dignity of garbage must be brought to light by the sciences of garbage, if they are to liberate us from garbage determination.

Such ontological mistakes may be fateful. Red tides are not properly natural phenomena; although they consist of microscopic plants, they are diseases caused by culture. The brutality of some freaks is not a natural or cultural phenomenon, it is a garbage phenomenon. Nationalism is a spent and empty form which determines us; it is neither culture nor nature, but garbage. Broken pieces of thrown-away bottles are neither natural enclaves in culture, nor cultural enclaves in nature; they are garbage. These ontological mistakes may be fateful, because they can lead to mistaken commitments. Thus the "nostalgie de la boue" of part of the new generation can be taken as a romantic return to nature, or as a cultural revolution. It is important to show that every anti-culture is always also anti-nature,

because it is garbage. It may be a legitimate commitment, but it must be shown for what it is, and this is the duty of the sciences of garbage.

It may be that at present we are more determined by garbage than by nature. We possibly cut ourselves more with broken pieces of thrown-away bottles than with pebbles. If so, this means that we must become more interested in the archaeological than in the natural sciences, if we want freedom. It means that spent forms (which we have thrown away) condition us more than the chaos (which contains possibilities of new forms) — the past more than the future. This may be interpreted as the decline of culture, as senility, but also as ripeness, maturity, and the approaching millenium. Anyhow, if this is correct, it means that Plato revisited is our main concern. Thus, for Plato, theory means the contemplation of eternal forms. For the modern age, theory means the manipulation of plastic forms. It now may mean the elimination of spent forms (garbage disposal). It is often said that Plato is the first thinker of our culture, and Nietzsche the last. This is one way to read this statement.

It is certain that man can impose form. It is not quite so certain that he can also dispose of form, but he is now trying to do so. Ours is not yet a consumer society (if to consume means to dispose of forms), but it is a society which must learn how to consume or perish in garbage — material garbage and, even more, mental garbage. Philosophy has often been said to be garbage disposal. Philosophy must not die, if we are to live. This is not the least of the hints which a consideration of bottles may suggest, that is, if bottles are considered as revelations of the human condition.

Vilém Flusser is on the faculty of Sao Paulo University, and a member of the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy. The preceding paper is one of a number of essays he is presently writing for the Cultural Commission of the State of Sao Paulo, to be called Things That Surround Me (Coisas que me cercam). Although Vilém Flusser's writings appear regularly in Europe (as, for instance, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung), his papers have appeared only sporadically at Harvard, New York University and Cornell, where, in the late sixties, he gave some lectures as a delegate of the cultural department of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry.

