

VILÉM FLUSSER      Bibliophagus.

I am writing this paper under extreme conditions. I must concentrate upon each single word, so that it articulate my own thought and wish, and not the thought and wish of some alien power. However I feel I must attempt such almost superhuman effort. He who reads this, (and it is my fervent hope that somebody will read this), will come to share my desperate urgency to relate the experience I am having. To relate this experience is, I believe, the only hope left for our survival as human beings.

The best way to begin this report is to write down, in very simple terms and without reference to scientific zoological methods, how it all happened. Ever since a child I was fascinated by ants. It was an ambivalent fascination. They attracted me by their individually chaotic and collectively orderly behavior and by the immense activity and vitality they display. And they repulsed me by their anatomy which I always projected into the size of the human body. I never tired in observing the columns they form, the way they organize traffic, their distribution of labor, and the complex architecture of their hills in which they keep those repulsive creatures which are their young ones. But what absorbed my attention most was their method of communicating with each other: the rapid and nervous rhythmical touching of antennae. This was truly mysterious to me: not what they communicate to each other, but how they do it. I must have decided very early to dedicate my life to their study.

My childish intuition of the mystery of ants was more than confirmed by what I learned later about them. It seems that they represent a branch of evolution which points to a direction totally different from the one pointed at by the primates. As if life had had a choice between two methods of conquering matter by spirit. One through the development of an internal skeleton, the other through the development of an external armour. The advantage of the first method is that it can result in very big organisms, with very big brains and therefore a great choice of decisions, (spirit). The advantage of the second method is that it can result in organisms with brains that are absolutely much smaller, but very much bigger in relation to the size of their bodies. Relatively speaking therefore insects are more spiritual than vertebrata, but they cannot take full advantage of this fact in their struggle with vertebrates for the dominion of the Earth, because of their relative smallness. Therefore, upto the moment of my writing this, the struggle was undecided, although, of course, mankind always assumed, rather naively, to be governing the world.

But this is not the end of the matter. In several genera of insects, and especially in Hymenoptera, life seems to have succeeded in making a jump of quantity into quality through which the smallness of the insect body was overcome dialectically. Through this jump the individual organism

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becomes an organ of a super-body: the ant-hill or the bee-hive. This is not the first time life performed such a jump; it did the same when it jumped from protozoa to multicellular organisms and thus changed individual cells into synchronized parts of a greater order. The ant is to its ant-hill what a cell is to its body. If we want to compare ourselves to ants as far as size is concerned, we must not compare ourselves with an individual ant, but with an ant-hill. Which means that communication between ants is not like communication between men, and more like the metabolism within the human body. But, of course, such a comparison is not valid. The ant-hill is an order of a higher level than is the organisation of a body. Therefore the processes that go on within it are more spiritual than are the processes going on within a body. (But in saying this I am not quite sure whether it is really me who is speaking).

When I began studying ant behavior at the Zoological Department of my University, I concentrated, as a matter of course, on inter-ant communication. And the following phenomenon impressed me more than others: ants make balls of specific food-stuff, chew them, put them in the mouth of other ants who again chew them and hand them on to the next ant, until the ball has passed from mouth to mouth through the entire ant-hill. It seems that the ball and the saliva transmits specific information which thus becomes available to the ant-hill. The ant-hill thus becomes a collective memory that stores such information. But there is even more to it. From the experience I am going to relate I became convinced that in the species "Bibliophagus" such chemically transmitted information penetrates genetic information. That means that a Bibliophagus tribe is a collective memory which stores and accumulates such information from generation to generation.

I must now say a few words about Bibliophagus. It is a rare species of Hymenoptera, and its position within Hymenoptera is quite uncertain. It also poses a philogenetical problem. It is found exclusively in libraries, and feeds on the pages of old books. No specimen has so far been found in nature. It must therefore be supposed that the species originated after the invention of writing, possibly as a mutation of the common red ant. It is however anatomically very different from ants in that it possesses enormous antennae, twenty times the length of its body. It uses its antennae in ant-like fashion, but also for scanning the page it is feeding on in a way that must be called "reading", and it sometimes rolls itself within its antennae so that they form a sort of cocoon around it. Although it is known that Bibliophagi live in tribes not unsimilar to ant-hills, no such tribe has been found so far. Stories that these tribes are located in top secret archives of various Foreign Ministeries must be discounted as fantastic.

I came to concentrate my studies on Bibliophagus for the follow-

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ing reason: one day, while consulting some text books on ancient zoology in the University library, I happened to notice a beautiful 18th century Bible. I reached for it, opened it haphazard on the page of Genesis where the creation of Man is related. There I found a Bibliophagus scanning the page with his antennae. As this is a rather rare event I stopped to observe it. But so did the Bibliophagus. He stopped scanning the page and stretched his antennae in the direction of my finger. Very carefully I extended my finger to allow him to feel it. The tips of the antennae began exploring my finger tip, but, all of a sudden, they changed their motion. They began, very slowly at first, but in a rapidly accelerating rhythm, a very curious sort of drumming. I must now try to describe, as coolly as I can, the tremendous and uncanny effect this had on me.

It was as if, all of a sudden, my whole being were concentrated on the tip of my finger. My whole body was paralyzed as if in a trance, but I did notice sweat running down my forehead. What I clearly felt, however, was that something was penetrating my body through my finger tip, something which, for the lack of a better term, I shall call a "message". The "message" was a rhythm and my whole body began to vibrate with it. I had never before experienced such rhythm, although it reminded me, when I tried to analyze it later, of the rhythm of some of Sophocles' plays, and, simultaneously, of an Evening Raga. However, although my whole body vibrated in sympathy with the rhythm, I clearly felt that it was my brain that echoed centrally the vibration emitted by Bibliophagus. I became a sort of drum with my brain in the drum's center. It was a highly pleasurable, even orgasmic experience of an intensity I had never before suspected, but at the same time I had a feeling of unmistakable depravity and degradation.

I succeeded somehow to break the charm and withdrew my finger. Bibliophagus immediately stopped his beating, and stretched his antennae in a vertical position. I took the small microscope I always carry with me for field studies, and placed it in a way to scrutinize Bibliophagus. While I was focussing the microscope I could not escape the feeling that the Bibliophagus was collaborating in my effort to observe him. He put himself in the best possible position, moved to a place on the page where the lighting was better, and displayed one after another of his anatomical features for me to study them in detail. I took out my writing pad, made some sketches and annotations, and thus, without having become conscious of it, had assumed the attitude of scientific observation. At one point, when, after having written down some details of the Bibliophagus' thorax, I returned my glance to the microscope, I found the Bible page empty. Bibliophagus had disappeared, and I could not find him either within the Bible nor on the table.

This experience had left me exhausted, but with a fervent wish to renew it. Although I told myself that I wanted to do it again out of science,

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tific curiosity, and that I had decided to do my paper for PhD on Bibliophagus, I knew that there was much more to my desire. But all my efforts to find "my" Bibliophagus again, ("mine" is a façon de parler, because Bibliophagi, like all Hymenoptera, lack individuality and every individual can stand for any other), all these efforts proved to be in vain, as much as I went through the library book shelves. But one night at my home, while reading Bergson's "Creative Evolution", (I have always been interested in philosophy and I feel every zoologist should be), there was "my" Bibliophagus as if waiting for me. I shall not describe the experience that followed, nor the many subsequent ones, because they all fall within the same pattern. But what I must relate is the unmistakable fact that I could never deliberately find Bibliophagus. When I did find him, it was by what I first considered to be chance, but later found out to be the result of the subject of the books I was reading. Bibliophagus could be found, in the first stage of my experience, only in books of vitalistic philosophy, in the second stage, in books on cybernetics, in the third on theory of communication, and in the last and present one in books on theology. Thus, after having discovered the pattern, I followed Bibliophagus' choice of subjects for my reading. But this is all changed now and does no longer matter.

My "dialogues" with Bibliophagus changed slowly, but perceptibly, as far as their impact on me was concerned. Without ever losing their initial libidinous and aesthetic dimensions, (they remained always a sort of love making and a sort of tactile concert), they gained a new dimension, which I might best call the intellectual "understanding" of the message Bibliophagus was emitting. Not as if I were learning to "read" his signs like some code his drumming had nothing to do with Morse. But as if my intellect were connected with his intellect, and as if I were learning to "read" his thoughts in some sort of para-psychological, (although neurologically perfectly explainable), fashion. I "grasped" his thoughts so to speak immediately and directly. But their meaning was so strange to me, and I had such difficulty to absorb them, that I came to suspect that the drumming of his antennae on my finger tip was a too primitive method to relay the message. Therefore I decided to try and improve on it. Although I do not know, of course whether it was I or he or us who decided to do so.

Under some pretext which is of no interest to be reported I convinced a colleague of mine from the Anatomy Department to perform a secret skull trepanation on me. Through a small opening in my skull he implanted a capsule in my brain which contains Bibliophagus. He now lives within my brain and we are in the closest of intellectual contacts. He can now beat his thoughts directly into my gray matter. The aesthetic and libidinous experience I am now having has become almost unbearably strong, but we have found

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a method to ration their frequency, so that I can enjoy long moments of relaxation. It is in one such pause that I am writing this paper. But what has radically improved through the operation is the clearness of my reception of his message. I shall now try to relate it.

The species "Bibliophagus" is the most recent and most advanced in life evolution. And it lives in close symbiosis with the species "Homo Sapiens". It feeds on human books, reads them, (all of them), and stores the information contained in them within its genetic information. Therefore Homo Sapiens is for Bibliophagus its organ for food providing and for collection of information, and Bibliophagus is for Homo Sapiens its collective memory. But this is merely a first primitive stage of symbiotic collaboration. Evolution is about to make a new "big leap forward", and I was chosen to be the instrument of it. It has now become both necessary and possible to synchronize the two species better. This has become necessary, because there is a growing and dangerous discrepancy between the way men and bibliophagus organize information into models for practical application. And it has become possible, because we now dispose of the technical means to connect individuals of the two species to form one single system. Again, while writing this, I do not know which of the two of us is speaking. Because I know, somewhere deep down, that what I just said amounts to the transformation of men into tools of Bibliophagus.

The discrepancy between human and Bibliophagus mentality is due to a defect in the human brain, which is, after all, a relatively primitive organ, if compared to the brain of Bibliophagus. This defect leads humans to make judgements of value. Although, of course, humans do have a formal capacity and therefore know that judgements of value are grammatical errors they are physiologically unable to free themselves from them. It is their "original sin", (this constant distinguishing between good and evil), and they know it. But it does not help them. They remain desperately committed to some "causes". But the Bibliophagus brain is free of that primitive defect, and therefore operates more smoothly. On the other hand, the Bibliophagus body is too small to effectively translate this operation into practice. If Bibliophagus brain and human body are connected, entirely new possibilities for the conquering of matter by spirit are open.

The specific human malformation toward ethics will lead, if unchecked by Bibliophagus, to the extinction of the human species, because it is responsible for wars which have now become destructive. Because it is committed to good and evil mankind is about to destroy itself, and consequently also Bibliophagus. But this catastrophe will be avoided through intimate symbiosis of the two species, and in its stead an undreamed of era of happiness both for men and Bibliophagus is dawning. Every man will have his Bi-

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bliophagus in his brain, and every Bibliophagus his man to live in. Every man will have the beautiful and enriching aesthetic and libidinous experience I am having, and he will have also moments for the gathering of scientific information. And every Bibliophagus will have the possibility to organize this information into models, according to which mankind will be able to change the world into place fit for men and Bibliophagi to live in. An era of peace, beauty, pleasure, knowledge and creative work without parallel will have been inaugurated. The evolution of life will have achieved a new level.

No doubt; this is Bibliophagus speaking through me. And the most terrible thing is that I cannot deny that he is right in what he is saying. Can I not deny it, because he has taken so violent a possession of me? Or is it my human ethical defect that revolts against the truth of his message? And why does he allow me to utter these doubts, why does he not stop me writing this paper? Can the reader of this paper, (which I am hoping for), help me? Or can he at least help himself? O God help me