

In search of meaning.

(Philosophical self-portrait).

(1) VILÉM FLUSSER.

Curriculum vitae: I was born on May 12, 1920, in Prague. I studied philosophy at Charles University Prague and the London School of Economics, London. I am visiting professor for the Philosophy of Science at the Polytechnical School of USP and full professor for Theory of Communication and Art Communication at the Communications and Humanities School of FAAP. I am member of the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy, where I am director of lectures. I contribute to a number of Brazilian and foreign periodicals, such as "O Estado de São Paulo", "Revista Brasileira de Filosofia" and "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung". I represented the country in various events abroad and here.

(2) I must confess, as a start, that the challenge of a self-criticism is ambiguous. Its motive is vanity, implied in exhibitionism, (as this paper will be published). And who ignores the seduction of being able to speak about himself in public? But at the same time it is an invitation to take an honest stock of what I am and do. And who ignores the danger of facing oneself? I accept the challenge, both for vanity and honesty.

To live is to accept oneself in order to change oneself. He who does not assume himself, does not live his own life, but the life of people. He who assumes himself and accepts himself without at least trying to change does not live actively, but just functions in function of what determines him. Since the attempt to change oneself implies the attempt to change the surroundings in which I find myself. In short: to live is to discover who I am and to try and start from there in order to be "better", (or "more"), thus changing not merely oneself but also the world. In fact, this task which is life is a task that renews itself at every instant. The question "who am I?" is new whenever I ask it, and the decision to start from its answer is painful and radical whenever taken. Thus I shall ask the question "who am I?" as if it were for the first time, in order to take, (who knows?), a decision.

I come from well to do intellectual Prague Jewish parents, I spent my youth in the spiritually and artistically inebriating atmosphere of the between-wars Prague, I survived, groggily, the bestial and stupid earthquake of nazism), (which devoured my world, i.e.: my others and my things, but also the scales of values that had structured that world), I was vomited by the fury of events upon Brazil, which is a plastic and greatly amorphous situation, greedy in every sense, and also in an ontic one, I was vomited upon Brazil at a plastic and assimilable age, and I spent the last thirty years of my life in search of myself in Brazil and of Brazil within myself. If to live is to ~~find~~ search one's way, I lived intensely, i.e.: philosophically. But if to live is to have found one's way, I did not even begin to live, i.e.: committed myself. I spent my life in disponibility, and I am still available. Is this a confession of failure? Is it a confession in that I failed to find myself in Brazil and Brazil within myself, and that

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therefore I failed to even assume myself? But what does "Brazil" mean in this context? It means the scene into which I was thrown. If I did not find myself in Brazil and did not find Brazil within myself it means I did not find the ground of my being in the world. Taken thus my failure has a religious taste to it. Mine was a life without religion and in search of religion, and is this not, after all, a definition of philosophy? At least of one type of philosophy? I am a failure because I live philosophy. Which is to say that philosophy is my life. And this seems to me to be a first approach to answer the question "who am I?" which is the subject of this tortured argument. No doubt: when I was thrown here, not everything "Prague" was destroyed. It was however radically questioned. My German culture persisted, but gained a new coloring: he who dwelled within the nucleus of myself was my enemy. My Czech culture persisted too, but as if condemned to smothering by amputation of the umbilical chord that had linked me to it. My Jewish tradition, (weak and anaemic to start with), (because of Jewish culture I have almost nothing), acquired a much greater importance than before, and at the same time was put to severe test to which it hardly resisted. I did not recognize myself in Brazilian Jewry, mostly of Eastern Europe origin which is totally foreign to me, and the appeals of Zionism, though reinforced by the sufferings of my people in Europe and by the beauty of social experiment and heroism in Palestine, did not reach me sufficiently to commit me. They were held in check by the appeals of my Brazilian surrounding. As to the appeal of Jewish religion on me I shall speak of it a little later. But the thing that persisted mostly was my philosophical formation, though it too suffered a crisis..

Like most who share with me my cultural and historical background I have a solid Marxist basis. However it must be said that it is not exactly the same Marxism of my Brazilian contemporaries. It is more vital in the sense of being closer to true Marxist movements, (my father was active member of the Socialist party), and in the sense of its anti-fascism. But less vital in the sense of decadently bourgeois. This explains possibly why my Marxism did not survive, as commitment, the Moscow processes, the Communist-Nazi alliance in Germany, and the German-Russian alliance during the first War years, but why, as utopy and anthropological model, it persists stubbornly in the very center of my thought. A true Marxist will be right in saying that I never was truly Marxist. But so will be he who, ignorant of the persuasive power and internal beauty of Marxism, says that I always have been and still am Marxist. An illustration of the difficulty to assume oneself: I agree with both arguments.

But very soon I suffered a second influence, less vital perhaps, but much more solid intellectually: the Prague School, the Viennese Circle, and above all Wittgenstein. I did not know then, but now know clearly: the attraction of formalism, (now called in its maturer development "structuralism"), does not dwell mostly in the beauty of its rigor, nor in its break with histori-

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cism, but in its inherent mysticism. This is most clear in Wittgenstein: intellectual rigor cuts through itself in search of the unutterable. At the time of phony mystical shouting and bleating, of pseudo-romantic, pseudo-Greek and pseudo-Germanic poses, be they uniformed or not, which filled the air between the two Wars, this way opened by (mostly linguistic) analysis toward the unutterable was like a breath of true religiosity, and, without realizing it consciously, I tried to hold on to it. I tried to synthesize within myself transcendental formalism and Marxist dialectic, (the present meta-Marxists seem to succeed in this), but I do not think to have been very successful.

A third influence upon me during the formative period in Prague was Ortega's "Rebellion of the Masses". By the Orteguian way I discovered that vast world vaguely called "existencialism" which marked for so many years my thoughts (and possibly alsho my acts). Because of Ortega I re-read Nietzsche who had taken hold of me before that mostly through the beauty of his language. Now, sensing the approach of the rising tide of brown vulgarity, I believed to have found myself in Nietzsche. I think that my encounter with Nietzsche marked me forever and avoided my dissolving into banality in shipwreck and exile.

Of course I read many other authors in Prague. But to read does not mean to vitally assimilate. The genesis of my thought must be placed within the three incongruous coordinates I mentioned.

(3) Development of my thought: During the war, having the extermination camps for background and a foreign society for surroundings, I fell into the loneliness of mysticism, (pre-figured for me in the Tractatus and in Nietzsche). I ~~first~~ studied Oriental thought, St. John of the Cross, Eckehart, I read and re-read Angelus Silesius, rediscovered German romantics and Dostoiewski. I took up Buber and Protestant theology, and discovered Jaspers. The first writings of Heidegger reached me in full and filled me with enthusiasm and hatred in a hardly sustainable tension. I began to feel the call of Catholicism at that period for the first time, and in despair, as a promise of salvation and comfort. But I always knew within a corner of my being, (perhaps the Marxist corner), that all this was nothing but alienation? a running away. That I was committing treason of the mind, not sacrifice.

By the end of the war and advent of Communism in Prague, (which meant the impossibility to ever return, an impossibility due to egotistic and opportunistic consideration, in part, but in part also due to more noble considerations), I started to open myself up ever more to the Brazilian situation. My first contact with things Brazilian on a more serious level was a shock. The mysticism I found seemed to be a caricature of my own and reinforced my misgivings. The many forms of voodoo, spiritism, irresponsible lofty talk, and attitudes copied third hand were for me like a mirror. A memento morri. And simultaneously the Brazilian scene showed in a caricature way the other side of the medal: formalistic sterility. The positivisms, scholasticisms,

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marxisms, academisms and formalistic preciosities à la brasilienne that were fore me the ~~years~~ forties and early fifties, were not only ridiculous, but a sign of danger. I took as a symptom the interest vested by Brazilian thinkers into things like Portuguese grammar, (unrelated to Viennese analysis), like the history of the Brazilian empire, like minute analyses of texts by Farias Brito. Adoration of flees. Between the Scylla of idle talk and the Charybdis of phony erudition, in which I saw myself as in distorted mirrors, I fell into crisis, this time a more internal than external one. I considered suicide for years and survived only with this ever present possibility. I devoured Kafka, Camus, the art of the absurd. This was when I learned with hard pain that faith cannot be provoked and that if God had died He is dead. I went back again to Nietzsche, to the Pre-socratics, refused with disgust everything un-Occidental, and began to understand the last Husserl, radical phenomenology. I wrote them my first book, "The History of the Devil". I wrote it in German, and translated into Portuguese much later.

My salvation was Kant, my katharsis in every crisis. This is not the place to sing praise to his crystalline dignity. I read Cassirer, Cohen Hartmann in rearch of Marburg. The outlines of my future way began to show: my central problem was going to be language. Firstly, and obviously, because I love language. I love its beauty, richness, its mystery and its charm. I am truly myself only when I speak or write or read or when it murmures within myself to be articulated. But also because it is symbolic form, the dwelling of Being which veils and reveals, the channel that links me to others, the field of immortality "aere perennius", the matter and instrument of art. It is my repertoire and my structure, the game I play, the model of all my models it is open and opens up the unutterable. It is my comitment, in it I become real, and through it I float toward its horizon and its foundation which is the silence of the unspeakable. It is the form of my religiosity. And possibly the form of my perdition.

- (4) First productive phase: I began to read systematically about language. In part to regain contact lost in Prague, (the Viennese, Russell, and Wittgenstein ever again), In part as development of the themes of the thirties, (the Americans based on the Viennese). In part under new aspects resulting from my Heidegger readings, ("Unterwegs zur Sprache"). But I discovered aspects I had ingored, especially French ones. (My lack of contact with French civilisation is one of my most serious shortcomings). Saussure did not impress me.

But my concept of "language" required a more varied reading. My interest began to expand. I read linguists, philologists, psychologists, biologists, I tried to penetrate a little symbolic logic and mathematics, and I struggled not to fall victim to etymology. (I never could explain the attraction of etymology, not only on me, but on many others). This formal reading was of course nothing but the arsenal for the attack on the linguistic problem. The problem itself lies somewhere else, namely: within art. I discovered

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and re-discovered the great masters of language: Joyce, Pound, Elliot, the mauxdits, Morgenstern, (who is an unending pleasure). And I returned to the ancients. Goethe is always with me, perhaps for being everything I cannot be, but at that moment he became my bridge toward Thomas Mann who marked me profoundly. "Joseph and his brethren" and "Doctor Faustus", the two great victories of German language become selfconscious, the two great feasts of the spirit became two inexhaustible wells for my thirst of language. Hermann Hesse had a much less intense effect on me. I am not in sympathy with his language which tends to become Kitsch, and I am not in sympathy with his orientalizing. Obviously I was not indifferent to the "Step Wolf", since I recognized myself in part in him, and I recognized even more a close friend of mine, a partner in my searching. "The Bead Game" had a retarded effect on me. I understand that effect better now than during reading, as I rediscover Hesse at the bottom of my efforts with games and with translation qua "sense giving". But I must dedicate a short paragraph to the two most important influences of that period, to Kafka and Rilke.

In some ways they are opposites, in others they are inseparable brothers. They are opposites on the level of language. Kafka, the ascete, and Rilke the orgiast of language. Kafka, (like Wittgenstein), the relentless tearer of phoniness of language, in order to clear the way toward the sacred purity of the fundamental silence of language. Rilke, (like Heidegger), the prophet revealing the mystery that dwells in language. Two opposed beauties, one purifying, the other inebriating. And nonetheless the same beauty at bottom, namely the beauty of poetry as the mouth of the unspeakable. The two Praguers travel in two different vehicles toward the same aim. Which is also mine. And I bow before the two giant who are, taken as one, my model.

Following that model I dived, as if spontaneously, into the ocean of music, the world of records. For reasons I cannot explain Mozart took hold of me violently. I felt his almost superhuman perfection in the effort to overcome human despair. And this dive of mine into music returned me to Schopenhauer, so anti-Mozart and yet so language become music and music become language. "Was er sagte ist vertan, was er war, das bleibt bestahn. Seht ihn nur an! Niemand war er Untertan". ( Whatever he said is gone, whatever he was remains. Just look at him! He was inferior to nobody). (Nietzsche). I wrote "Lingua e Realidade" trying to say all this.

(5) Second productive phase: The publication of that book by Editora Herder was my true opening up to things Brazilian. And Brazil opened itself to me through two gigantic windows: Guimarães Rosa and Vicente Ferreira da Silva. My two great Brazilian masters and, (dare I say it?), my two freinds died both of them. What does that mean? But I learned with Husserl that to live is not to discover meaning, but to give meaning.

Nonetheless it cannot be mere coincidence that I recognized in Guimarães Rosa all my linguistic commitment on a grandious level. "Sagarana" and "Corps du Ballet", and especially "The Devil to Pay in the Backlands" are like domenstrations "in fiert" of my theses in "Lingua e Realidade". The intermittent dia-

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logue I maintained with Guimarães Rosa until his death occurred as if in a dream I had to pinch myself to know that Guimarães Rosa was no fiction of my fancy and that he existed in a reality different from Riobaldo's. His linguistic religiosity, his phanaticism in speaking and writing, his ludic attitude in handling vocals and words, his irony and his humor, (see "First Stories", on which I hope to have had a more than extraneous influence), together with his iron disciplin, were, taken as one, the picture I had made of the True Poet. Yet Guimarães Rosa existed in flesh and blood. I shall say no more about him except that he became for me no longer revelation, but imperative.

To think that Vicente Ferreira da Silva lived in my next neighbourhood during the terrible war period and during the years of anxiety that followed it without my having met him is a nightmare. Had I known Vicente in '40, my way would have been different. And had he known me, this I believe with all my heart, he and with him Brazilian culture would have changed at least a little. Vicente's big misunderstanding by projecting his own beauty and dignity on the disgusting indignity of the furious fascist petty bourgeois in Europe would have been avoided. But that game called destiny had it so that we met very late, at the last hour. For me it was the discovery of an "alter ego", though certainly in greater proportions. A mirror, though, in which the same ingredients made up an entirely different structure. The same Wittgenstein and the same Heidegger, the same Rilke and the same Kafka, the same thirst and the same search. Yet everything different. I stopped everything. I fought him almost daily. Him and his writings. His vision of Christianity. Fichte and Hegel, whom he provoked in me and whom he gave me. His Nietzsche, my third one. German romanticism, seen now not from within, (which was my vision), but from without, (his vision). I learned, I changed in a way difficult to say, I opened myself up to him. But I always felt a barrier, made of tragic misunderstandings, all, I believe, coming from him. I tried to break it. I started succeeding. Death intervened. But he goes on challenging all I do. Under the impact of his presence and absence I wrote a series of articles and essays, in part collected under the title "Da religiosidade" edited by Comissão Estadual de Cultura, São Paulo.

- (6) Third productive phase: I re-wrote "A História do Diabo" in Portuguese, to reply to Guimarães Rosa and Vicente Ferreira da Silva. It was published by Editora Martins and received without echo. And I began to be attacked by the so-called "left", wrongly so-called, I think. On the other hand my (not entirely negligible) influence on certain segments of Brazilian culture grew, mostly on the Paulista new generation. I gave numerous lectures and courses. I became conscious that my problem, language, was too vast, at the stage of my development, to be attacked "in toto". I had to discipline myself and refrain myself. I returned to logic, to those aspects of the Viennese Circle ~~and~~ I had suppressed, to Quine, Chomski, and to epistemology. For a time philosophy of science occupied a large part of my horizon. Certainly in part due to Vicente with his apocalyptic vision of technology. But in part, too, as kathar

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sis. I returned to Kant, always. Science as language, and how avoid Kant in that context? This type of interest led me to Leônidas Hegenberg, who taught me not only logic, but even more the virtue of refrain. The virtue of an intellect that does not think itself omnipotent but knows how to relegate the trans-intellectual to the horizon, ever present, though, but far off.

I then wrote "A Filosofia da Linguagem" published by ITA, S. José dos Campos, and my essay "Da dúvida" which to me is a decisive stage on my future way. And I met Milton Vargas. Friendship is, I believe, a result of interplay between points of contact and friction. His mobile spirit, his vast culture, his way to defend violently unsustainable positions which he himself does not sustain, his deep veracity, are for me like constant whipping that propels me. If I may make a prophecy: much will be said about him in the history of Brazilian culture. Anyhow: I would not do what I do without him.

For example I doubt I would have taken interest in Theory of communications without him. But I did and it began to absorb me. It opened up an entirely new avenue of access to the problem of language. I relearned everything. Not only the French and Italian literature and not only Bense. I reread the books I had read. And took up contact with concrete poetry. Certainly one reason for this was Guimarães Rosa. But another, equally potent, was that curious marriage between science and religion which is Milton Vargas.

Though absorbed by the new field of interest, I cannot say I was satisfied in it. I felt a stranger in the desert land of formulae, computations and of the excessively reasonable. I felt admiration, but also deep divergence, for engineers in poetry like Haroldo de Campos. I had lost myself. In order to find myself again I wrote "Até a terceira e quarta geração", influenced by Foucault, but still and ever looking for a way out into unlanguage within the loops of the tissue of language. The manuscript is held by Miguel Reale, This is a symptom: by him who knows how to combine, in a way for me incomprehensibly admirable, spiritual disponibility with decided action. I owe him much. A large part of my integration in Brazilian culture. And a new vision of ethics, though I have not yet succeeded to embody it within my thinking. How have values without religiosity? Reale has them, and I cannot understand this. Reale may be part of my future more than of my present.

I went on writing much during that phase. I published and gave lectures and lessons. But, on looking back on it, I do not feel satisfied.

- (7) Present phase: Theory of communication implies theory of decision and theory of games. And theory of games implies art in a new sense. This discovery was like a rupture of dams. Suddenly I saw a whole new field of action extending before me. The field of critique and translation between games. The field of freedom. In fact: critique as transcendence of games, i.e. critique as meta-language. The problem thus stated made the odd pieces of my previous phases fall into a pattern which, with discipline and imagination, might form a whole in the future.

What is the religious motive if not the one that makes me know that I play?

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The motive of critique is religiosity. I went over, fully consciously of what I was doing, to critique as translation and as philosophy. "Critique" as ever in a Kantian sense, but "critique" also in the etymological sense of "kriein", "kriterion", "krisis". I began to understand, and to experience, my surroundings as a set of games. Therefore as conventional and gratuitous, but also as veiling and revealing of what is unconventional and unplayable. As channels that cross, recross, and establish passing and revertible hierarchies. But as systems, too, that point not merely at each other, but outside themselves. In short: as languages that not only talk, but say. They say, what Eco called "the absent structure".

To see the world as a set of games, and to see it as a player who knows he is playing, is to see aesthetically. But it is not Kierkegaardian aesthetics, as it reveals not only the fortuitous and absurd, but also the meaningful. And it is not enough to see, it must be experienced. To experience that art is better than truth. That theory of translation is epistemology. To experience that, as Camus knew, the actor, being translator, is the one that knows. In other words to experience that everything is art, is language, including that utmost game: ars morriendi. And to experience the most, i.e.: translate between games, including the game of death. And this is where, again and surprisingly, rite reappears. Rite as the repertoire of the game of death. The appeal of Judaism as religion and as religiosity. But an appeal too definite to be followed at the hour of the inebriating discovery of games.

I trown myself into games. In the sense of the Magister Ludi of H. Hesse. ~~MAN~~ Homo Ludens became to me synonymous with the New man in Marx, Superman in Nietzsche. The man who plays not to win but to play, fortuitously, and in this absurdity offers himself up to what is no game. Being fortuitous commitment, it therefore remains available. And as a matter of course I trown myself into the game of plastic arts, since they are more clearly ~~extra~~ games than science, ideologies, or the diachronic arts like music and literature. I took up the Brazilian plastic arts in their major and minor manifestations, their tendencies and their inner conflicts. But I took them up as player, i.e.: as one who takes them for pretexts. They are pieces in my translation game, i.e.: of critique that tries to give them meaning. They are open to me. They are my way to play my ars morriendi. Of course: this hierarchy may be inverted. To them I play for them. And in the infinite regression of these invertible hierarchies the great question mark which recedes as translation advances. To it is dedicated the work I am doing now: "Reflexões sobre a traduzibilidade". Is this dedication a new calling, or is it still the old one? Is the New man, after all, still the same agony of the old one? Questions have meaning only if there is no answer to them.

(8) Résumé: I am disoriented. In part because I have been dramatically uprooted at a critical and vulnerable age. In part because I lost faith in the grounding sets of values, which for me were Marxist and which are no less fundamental



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for having been inauthentically Marxist. But at bottom because man is a disoriented being. I tried all my life to find myself in order to commit myself, and I am still trying. I.e.: I philosophized all my life, and still philosophize. The two perils of definite perdition are for me empty oratory on the one hand, (represented by the excesses of easy religiosity and easy mysticism), and scholarly erudition on the other hand, (represented by the sterility of academic philosophy and snobbism). I am a writer by calling, and therefore, by calling, language is my field of search. (Though I cannot say what "calling" means, I know what it means). Language offers itself to me as a game of which I try to find the meaning. I did not find it, and I cannot even imagine or intuit the finding of it. It would be the end of the game.

By the way, and is by accident, I produce. I publish, i.e.: I try to change the world in which I find myself. I do it with many doubts and many reserves. At the same time this publishing is my only justification to the others and to myself. And it is my only hope of not having lived in vain. Of having transmitted to others, as disoriented as myself, my search and the example of my failings. And, perhaps, some vague horizons as well. By this I have perhaps contributed, though certainly in a problematic way, to my Brazilian surroundings. And who knows paradoxically this production of mine may be a way to orient myself in others?

I am not dead yet and this résumé is therefore no conclusion. I still want to live to see what my attempt at translation comes to. And also for a whole set of other curiosities. And I still feel within me much to be articulated. An insistent murmur of language not yet ripened in that sweet, heavy and mysterious fruit called "the word". Who knows I did not even begin to live, therefore to philosophize, and all this that I just wrote is no more than an introduction and preface to the theme: In search of meaning?.

In see  
(Phil)

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