

VILÉM FLUSSER How to read symptoms.

There is a curious ontology at the bottom of the Islamic and Renaissance view that "nature is a book". Even more curious than the one which sustains the view that "nature is a dream or a stage". Because it is complex. Books are complex ontological models. They are scrolls which have been cut to form sheets. The historical moment when this cutting happened, (when the Torah or the Organon, for instance, became "biblia", books in our sense), is surely a historical incision. Because to leaf through something is a process unlike the one of developing something. If nature is a book, it must be cut into leaves: its development must be rationed for it to be read. Also: books are kept in libraries with their back side turned toward their reader, and must be turned around to be read. If nature is a book, it must be keepable and returnable to be readable. But chiefly: the leaves of the book are covered with lines composed of distinct elements which mean something, (letters). If nature is a book it must follow a similar structure and must be composed of similar elements to be readable. Now this curious and very important ontology will be the point of departure for the present essay.

Among the premisses of this ontology are these: (a) nature has an author, (b) it has a reader, (c) its message is beyond itself, (metaphysical), (d) it follows a linear, (historical) structure, and (e) there is some previous agreement between the author and reader of nature as to its message. The last point is the most interesting one. The author of a book agrees with his reader as to the signification of the letters he is going to use. If nature is a book, such a previously agreed upon code may be conceived of in various ways: it may be the Koran, or the arithmetics of natural numbers, or Euclidian geometry, and so forth. But it must always precede nature itself. The Koran, arithmetics, geometry and so forth must be "supernatural", "formal", "eternal", (or in what other way we want to express the precedence of code over nature). Now this contradicts somehow the premiss (d), (historicity of nature), and this contradiction has proved itself fertile in the history of Western thinking. It means that the message of nature is complete only on its last page, (day), and that this message is to be read empirically, (in the course of time). But the code which permits the reading is always complete and is accessible outside time, through faith or theory. Thus the Koran is the "logos" of which God-author and Man-reader are partners outside nature and time. Or mathematics is the "logos" of which Newton's God-mathematician and Newton himself are partners outside nature and time. This dialectics between observation and theory which is a characteristic of the reading of books is also characteristic of Western science. In fact: science is far more Islamic and much less Christian than

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is generally realized. Because for Christians "logos" is not the Koran, (a code permitting to read written nature, "makhtub"), but the Christ. Indeed science did not develop from the Greeks through the scholastics toward Renaissance Italians, but rather from the Greeks through the Maurs and kabbalists towards the Italians, and the "sources" prove it. The Plato reborn in the Renaissance was much more cordobese than byzantine.

This essay starts from such considerations in order to show the deep relationship between the present crisis in epistemology and some researches made in the theory of communications. Thus: Few will hold at present that nature can be read like a book. Few believe that natura phenomena mean some thing outside nature, and that nature is a "significant context". But this does not prevent a continued reading of nature. It is now being read as one reads a book, not to learn its message, but to find out what machine printed it. This sort of reading in some way denies books. It denies their author, (or at least "suspends" him). It provides a "knowledge", (episteme), not pretended by the author. It does not allow the author to speak, but it makes the book itself speak. Now this is an aspect of the present epistemological crisis. A new type of "knowledge", (episteme), is provided by science: it no longer "deciphers". Because traditional ontology, (the "book" ontology), is being substituted by phenomenology, (let nature speak). Theory of communication has a word to say about this.

The letters that compose a book have at least two aspects. They are symptoms of what produced them, (the printing machine). And they are symbols of something entirely different, (the sounds of a spoken language). Under the first aspect they may be explained "naturally", under the second one "culturally". This implies a specific concept of nature and culture. "Nature" is conceived of as the context of phenomena linked "symptomatically" with each other, and "culture" as a context of phenomena linked "symbolically" with each other. In fact: it is the type of link, (communication), which provides the criterium for the distinction between nature and culture. The competence of natural science is "symptomatical reading", and the competence of theory of human communications is "symbolical reading". (This second competence has been traditionally assigned to the "humanities", to the science of culture, to the science of "the spirit", (Geisteswissenschaft), and so forth.)

But such a distinction between the realm of nature and culture, and between the two ways of reading our context, remains problematic. Its basic criterium is the praxis of reading. Any phenomenon may be read to be natural, if it is taken to be a symptom of something. And also to be cul-

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tural, if it is taken to be a symbol of something. Now if we take something to be a symptom of something else, we presume the chain of cause and effect, because a symptom is the effect of the thing it symptomizes. And if we take something to be the symbol of something else, we presume a code which makes the symbol mean its signification. Both types of reading are based on presumptions, and there is no "naive" reading. But the two presumptions are different from each other. The first one establishes an uninterrupted chain between the symptom and the symptomized, but the second one breaks the chain by introducing a code. (The chain between the letter and the printing machine is constant, but the chain between the letter and the sound is ruptured by the alphabetical code.) In other words: there is no ontological problem involved in symptomatic reading, because the level of reality is the same for the symptom and for the symptomized. But in symbolic reading there is an ontological rupture, because a new level of reality interferes in the form of the code. This is why theory of communication affirms of the symptom that it "presents" the symptomized, and of the symbol that it "represents" its signification.

Now the ontological rupture of symbolic reading is characteristic of human "being-in-the-world". "Ontological rupture" and "spirit" may be said to be two sides of the same fact. "Ontological rupture" is the way in which spirit manifests itself, and "spirit" is an objectivation of the ontological rupture. Thus symbolic reading has the spirit for its object. In this sense theory of communication is indeed "Geisteswissenschaft", (the science of the spirit). Natural science, on the contrary, reads everything to be a symptom of something else, no ontological rupture seems to be involved, and in this sense its object is indeed nature. This is the reason why these two types of reading supply two types of "knowledge". The reading of natural science reveals the context of the written text, (it shows what stands behind the symptom). The reading of theory of communication reveals the pretext of the written text, (it shows what stands below the symbol). Thus these two knowledges follow different models. The epistemological model of natural science is two-dimensional, (it amplifies knowledge). The model of the theory of communications is three-dimensional, (it provides deeper knowledge). One aspect of the present epistemological crisis is a confusion of epistemological models.

But is this confirmed by the praxis of reading? In symptomatic reading there are always moments in which the symbolic character of the text imposes itself on the reader. In symbolic reading the symptomatic character of the text can never be avoided. This essay will give two examples later.

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But the reason for this practical impossibility to distinguish between the two types of reading can be stated already: every symbol is also a symptom, and every symptom may be codified into a symbol. In other words: culture is part of nature, and nature may be totally transformed into culture. This is the reason why we can never resist the temptation to read culture as if it were natural, (a context of symptoms), and to read nature as if it were a book, (a context of symbols).

This is confusing. Kelsen and his followers tries to avoid the confusion. He historicizes the problem. "History" for him is the process by which symptomatic reading substitutes the symbolic one progressively. "Primitive" man, (namely man when he becomes a reader of his context, which means when he becomes Man), reads everything symbolically. Every phenomenon means something. To know is to decipher that meaning. Something is taken to stand below everything. The world is "full of gods", and man, by reading the world, makes the gods shine through the phenomena, ("epiphainein"). Then, slowly, the symbolic dimension of the phenomena is being eliminated. "The gods" are expelled from the human context. It becomes ever less significant. Which means that "nature" appears in the context, which was primitively exclusively culture. "History" is the progressive substitution of culture by nature. Everything tends, through history, to be read as a symptom. Phenomenology substitutes ontology. Therefore the distinction between culture and nature, and between symbolic and symptomatic reading, is no true problem. It is a provisional distinction.

This is a disagreeable thesis. It turns around the Marxist thesis which affirms history to be a process which transforms nature into culture. It makes the loss of signification the criterium of progress. It tends to "explain" everything, (in the sense of making everything plain), and leaves no room for the enigmatic aspect of our context, (that aspect which must be "deciphered"). But it is no good to say that the thesis is disagreeable. It may be true nonetheless. Fortunately it is not true.

One way to show this is to observe phenomenologically the prax is of reading. let us take two texts for this purpose. (a) "A bird building its nest", and (b) "a surrealist painting". Text (a) tends usually to be read symptomatically, because it is part of the natural context, and biology is competent for it. Text (b) tends usually to be read symbolically, because it is part of a cultural context which seems to deliberately eliminate symptomatic reading, and art criticism, (a branch of theory of communication), is competent for it.

(a) Obviously, "a bird building its nest" can no longer be read as if it were a sentence contained in the book of nature. To say that "the

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bird" is a symbol of the soul, "the nest" a symbol of maternal love, and "building" a symbol of dedicated work, would be a ridiculous way of reading the sentence. It would kitschitize the sentence. But even more refined symbolic readings are impossible at present. Take Aristotle for an example. He reads the text as meaning "justice", (diké), in the sense that the "just place" for birds are nests, that it is "unjust" (adikia), for them not to have nests, and that nature is a context where "unjustice" is always reduced to "justice". No such readings are possible now, because we no longer believe that nature means anything. We read our text for instance as follows: The motions of the bird are symptoms of its glandular functions. The form of the nest is a symptom of the bird's genetic information. The material of the nest is a symptom of its ecological surroundings. And so forth. The disagreeable thesis seems to be confirmed by the praxis of our reading. At least at first sight.

Not on second sight, however. If I read the motions of the bird to be symptoms of its glandular functions, I do so because I accept some specific biological conventions, which again are based on some specific conventions of common language. Without wanting to enter the labyrinth of logical positivism it must be admitted that that cultural conventions, (and basically linguistic conventions), inform everything we read, even if we read phenomena to be symptoms. If I say "bird", and "build", and "nest", I am taking recourse to verbal symbols to get at the phenomenon I want to take as a symptom. And if I say "symptom", I am presuming a causal chain just as symbolic as is the Aristotelian "justice". In fact: I must have a whole set of symbols before I can read symptoms. This is what Husserl means when he says: "Die Dinge zu Worte kommen lassen" = "let the things speak, in the sense of permitting them to take hold of the word". Phenomenology can never substitute ontology, it can only "suspend" it. Man must symbolize always. The ontological rupture is characteristic of everything human. Symbolical reading can never be overcome. The disagreeable thesis is not true.

(b) "A surrealist painting" wants to be read as a text composed of symbols. In fact: this is what distinguishes it from "realist" and "hyper-realist" paintings on the one side, on from "non-figurative" ones on the other. The "realist" painter pretends that he presents phenomena, and the "hyper-realist" one pretends that he shows the essence, (eidos), hidden within the phenomena. The "non-figurative" painting hopes that it will be read as a text composed of symptoms. But the term "surrealist" itself suggests that an ontological rupture manifests itself in the painting. What we see in such a painting wants to be read as a set of symbols. The painting wants to be "deciphered".

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Yes, but we simply cannot see only ^{holes} symptoms in the painting. We are compelled to see also symptoms on various levels. For instance symptoms of brushes. It cannot be denied that this is an important level for the reading of the painting. Or for instance symptoms of the painter's gestures, which are again symptoms of his interiority, (his physiological, psychological, cultural and so forth determination). The reading of the painting as a context of symptoms of gestures may in some cases belie the symbolic message: gestures reveal lies. "Lie" in art is Kitsch, and to read apparently symbolic text symptomatically may de-kitschsize them, just as to read apparently symptomatic texts symbolically may kitschsize them. Or we see for instance symptoms of the painter's attempt to symbolize in the painting. This is important. The painter aims in such paintings at proposing new codes of symbols. This newness is responsible for our difficulty to decipher the message. We must learn the code before reading the message. That means we must take the text to be symptomatic of something, before we can read it to signify something. Symptomatic reading is prior to symbolic reading. Therefore symbolic reading cannot be the "primitive" form of reading. The disagreeable thesis is not true.

Now that the observation of the praxis of reading has eliminated the thesis, the problem of the two ways to read confronts us again in its full brutality. But this argument has by now advanced sufficiently for us to reformulate it: Our surroundings, (including ourselves as objects), presents itself to us as a context, (as various readable texts). If we read it symptomatically, it is "insignificant" and has the ontic dignity of nature. Under such reading we acquire a knowledge, ("episteme"), of our context of the type characteristic of the science of nature. If we read our context symbolically, it is "significant" and has the ontic dignity of culture. Under such reading we acquire a different type of knowledge. Under the first reading our context consists of problems to be solved, under the second of enigmas to be deciphered. The two readings, and therefore the two types of knowledge, are mutually implied, one cannot exist without the other. Symptomatic reading presupposes symbols, (to read nature we have to have culture). And symbolic reading presupposes symptoms, (culture presupposes nature). Still, the two readings result in types of knowledge which cannot be reduced one upon the other. This is what theory of communication can say about the present epistemological crisis.

This is a valuable contribution. It may help us to read symptoms in a different, (and more humble), spirit. Thus: We must admit that man can never overcome symbols. This is so, because our context is our context, it is where we live, ("Lebenswelt"), and therefore must be significant for us.

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The symbolic aspect of our context is given by our "being-in-the-world". But still, we are able to "suspend" this aspect. We can, so to speak, push the symbolic aspect deliberately ever farther toward our horizon. This allows us to read part of our context symptomatically, (as nature). We can thus create a terrain of solvable problems around us, a terrain however which must always have an enigmatic back ground. This "pushing toward the horizon" can follow the method of theory of communication: the progressive uncovering of hidden codes, ("de- ideologisation"). This way to read symptoms is different from the one now prevalent in science of nature. It does not presume, (like the prevalent one does), that symptomatic reading is an "unprejudiced" or "value-free" way of reading. On the contrary: it accepts the fact that symptomatic reading is the result of deliberate, and therefore purposeful suspension of symbolic reading. (To see our context as nature is somehow a violation of the human "being-in-the-world".) By accepting this fact, this way of reading symptoms admits that the knowledge, ("episteme"), provided by natural science is the result of a sort of deliberate sacrifice of "significant knowledge". In other words: we may read our context as a set of solvable problems only if we refrain from trying to decipher the enigmas that surround us. And also: every problem has an enigmatic horizon, and without that horizon it is no problem. This is more or less what Wittgenstein was trying to say by "Es gibt kein Raetsel" = there is no riddle. Is such epistemological humility a way to overcome the present crisis?

Let us return to our point of departure. To be sure: nature is no longer a book for us. But we are essentially readers. We must read everything. Now if nature is not a book, it is no longer "significant" for us. But still, we must, being readers, go on reading it. Which means that the reading itself is "significant" for us. Now what does this mean? That we have pushed the Koran a little bit farther toward our horizon, but that it is still there? That what structures our world is, after all, a "mathesis universalis"? Consider such questions. They pose no problem, because they are enigmatic. It seems to be a good strategy to admit this, and not to try to solve them. Here seems to be a definite limit of reading of symptoms. Such sort of questions can only be deciphered. Or remain undeciphered.