

Vilém Flusser

Ontogenesis repeats Phylogenesis

When one reaches a certain age, which can be euphemistically called maturity, one makes the decision to write a good, beautiful, correct, in short, a definitive text, a *summa*. Just as one might stumble over one's own feet, one will, with a probability, which approaches certainty, stumble over one's own decision when writing the text. Nevertheless, one will defiantly attempt it, as the question of *what* one writes about takes a back seat to the question of *how* one is to write it. For what one is to write about is obvious: ontogenesis repeats phylogenesis.¹

The beauty of this repetition is that it is so uncertain. Examples from three different levels of being will shed light on the beauty of this uncertainty. When sperm has fertilized an egg, an amoeba-like being is produced. By observing an amoeba, one learns about the fertilized egg, and by observing a fertilized egg, one learns about the amoeba. However, fortunately, there is no single amoeba, nor has there ever been an amoeba that can correspond exactly to a fertilized human egg. Fortunately, because, if such amoebas existed, people who are against abortion would also have to forbid all water purification plants. So the text to be written, good, beautiful and correct, must deal with something like the uncertain parallel between amoebas and human eggs.

Second example: the newborn baby has a behavior closely related to that of the first species of the human genus. If we observe the baby's kicking, we can associate it to how the so-called primitive humans acted. Since we unfortunately do not have any way of observing the behavior of primitive humans, in order to understand the baby's behavior we have to constrain ourselves, like some Gestalt psychologists and behaviorists, to observing chimpanzees. However, there has never been a baby like primitive man, and no baby is a primitive kind of homo. The good, beautiful and correct book to be written will be about something like the blurry parallel between *Homo erectus* and our babies.

Third example: During puberty, each of us has written romantic poems, either in praise of a beloved, or in defense of political or religious aims. In doing so, each of us rhymed, chanted and stylized as if we were living in the 18th century. However, there has never been a romantic poet who wrote like a 20th century teenager, and there has never been a teenager who wrote like Byron or Goethe, even in the unlikely event that they had read them. Nevertheless, reading Romantic literature contributes to the understanding of puberty in the 20th century, and looking at our own literary production at the time of our puberty (as far as we overcome the shame) helps

¹ Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt / Menschwerdung*, Bensheim and Düsseldorf, Bollmann, 1994: 165-168.

to understand Romanticism. The good, beautiful and correct text to be written must deal with this uncertain parallel between our own puberty and occidental romanticism.

Is that then the content of this book to be written? Amoebas as human eggs, homines erecti as babies, romantic poets as teenagers, between the two wars? If it is to be a summa, the content can only be this and nothing else, and this also prescribes the name for this text, namely “Becoming Human”. “Becoming Human” in the sense of ontogenesis, where the writer tries to get from an amoeba to an erectus to a romantic, and then tries to grasp even higher, only to become dust. And “Becoming Human” in the sense of phylogenesis, where our species attempts to swing out of the biological, the animal, the inherited, just as the attempt fails in Auschwitz, Hiroshima and other ashes.

But the title “Becoming Human”, this title with two tracks referring both to the development of the individual and to that of the species, and meaning the development of the individual precisely because it means the species, demands a subtitle. It must be a triptych. The first part must be called “At hand”, because it is all about somehow grasping everything, which is passing before our hands.

The first part must be about actions. The second part must be called “In the Blink of an Eye”, because it is a matter of somehow catching what is passing before the eyes. The second part must gain insights into prospects. The third part must be called “Without a Trace”, because it is about catching the passing of all that we leave behind. The third part must swipe up what is being wiped out.

This all becomes urgent as soon as one decides, as a mature person, to write a summa. And this is the real beauty of the whole thing: The text is written in maturity, at the end of the second millennium after Christ. It goes without saying that after the second millennium the third millennium will come, but what does that matter to us who draw all our force from this millennium? For us, the millennium is the end of everything. This text is being written in maturity, at the end of Western civilization. Of course, after the Western civilization comes another civilization, for example the immaterial or the postmodern. But how does that matter to us, who take all our values from the West? For us, everything comes to an end with the West. This text is written in maturity, that is, between 70 and 80 years old. Of course, the world does not end with the death of the writer, but what does “of course” mean in this case? The beauty of this uncertainty is that in maturity ontogenesis and phylogenesis get mixed up. With the being ends the species and with the species, the being. The last Mohican, when he writes his history, is also writing the history of the Mohican tribe.

This is a kind of preface to Mohican history. Who could be interested in something like that? Post-Mohicans? Maybe someone will actually be found to read it, but first someone must be

found who is willing to print it. And that explains the motives behind the limping, stumbling intentions to write a good, beautiful and correct book. *Verba volant*. They are at hand, in the blink of an eye and without a trace. But *scripta manent*. They pause before they blow away.

Translation from German, by Baruch Gottlieb