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How to Face the Terror of Reason:
From Philosophy to Literature¹

Good morning, I hope. Yesterday, in Brazil, an icon of honesty and kindness, even naïvety, the ex-Senator Eduardo Suplicy, was arrested, literally dragged away, that is, “arrastado”, by the Military Police of São Paulo. He is almost 80 years old. I think I am not overstating if I say that this is the beginning of terror.

Well, terror is my subject. I ask, in the title of my paper, how to face the terror of reason. My paper is a small part of a book I am writing together with the Swiss Professor Rainer Guldin, who is now among us. This book will be the biography of the Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser, who was born on 1920, in Prague, and died on 1991, also in Prague – but, in the meantime, he lived in Brazil for 30 years. We wish to publish our Flusser’s biography simultaneously in German and Portuguese.

My paper discusses the influence of literature in philosophy. It assumes that the work of two Czech writers, Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek, is essential for Flusser’s thinking. Two novels of Kafka and Hašek, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Adventures of Brave Soldier Švejk*, respectively, prefigure the terror caused by reason itself. Vilém Flusser is victim of such terror. In 1939, he flees from Prague to Brazil, leaving all his family behind. His parents and his sister are murdered in concentration camps. His philosophy faces this terror, assuming he is inspired by the symbolic strategies of Kafka and Hašek.

As we read at the end of Hasek’s novel, the character says: “I declare with obedience, my Lieutenant, that I’m overly happy. It will be something glorious when we die together on the battlefield in the name of His Majesty the Emperor and His August Imperial and Royal Family”.

This is the final speech of the hero in the novel *The Adventures of Brave Soldier Švejk*, written by Jaroslav Hašek in 1921. The novel soon became a huge success, which, unfortunately, the author did not enjoy, because he died of tuberculosis in 1923. The novel narrates the adventures or, better saying, the misadventures of a veteran soldier named Josef Švejk, during the First World War.

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The misadventures of Švejk seem to expand, in a tragicomic way, the misadventures of another famous Czech character, known as Gregor Samsa. Gregor is the unfortunate protagonist of the novel *The Metamorphosis*, written by Franz Kafka in 1912 and published in 1915. Just one year after Hašek, therefore in 1924, Kafka died, and also as a result of tuberculosis.

Well, what is the relation among Hašek, Švejk, Kafka, Samsa and Flusser?

First of all, Flusser's childhood and adolescence are marked by these novels, two of the most famous in Czech literature.

Second, the way they are mentioned by Flusser suggests that he brings together their authors and himself.

Third, the philosopher clearly claims at the foundations of literary fiction to build the internal constitution of his own philosophy.

Besides, the life and work of Flusser are so impressive that it is somewhat difficult to speak about him as an ordinary person. Rather, we see (or read) him as more-than-a-person, that is, as a character, at the same emblematic level of Samsa and Švejk. In his conversations, classes, lectures, letters and also in his books, Flusser, the philosopher, works hard, and with a lot of irony, to value Flusser, the character.

We'll try to understand why the misadventures of Josef Švejk expand the misadventures of Gregor Samsa. These begin right on the very first sentence of Kafka's novel, as we can read in German: "*Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt*". A literal translation into English of the sentence would be: "when one morning Gregor Samsa from uneasy dreams woke up, metamorphosed in his bed into a monstrous insect he found himself". Translators usually translate the German term *Ungeziefer* as "insect" or "monstrous insect". Many people deducted the species from its subsequent description and then translated *Ungeziefer* as "giant cockroach".

Nevertheless, in colloquial German used in Bohemia region, *Ungeziefer* means "animal badly cleaned for sacrifice", whereas in modern German the word might mean "worm" or "insect". Therefore, the usual translation makes us lose two important senses: first, Gregor Samsa's story is the story of a ritual sacrifice; second, Gregor is still dirty even to be sacrificed.

Gregor is sacrificed on the altar of exploitation of man by man, but he is not good enough for that, if he cannot show himself sufficiently clean for the sacrificial ritual. In this case, Gregor's dirt lies in the metaphor into which he transforms himself. He embodies his own alienation, dehumanization, and, finally, his own objectification – or insectization, for that.

Gregor always sacrificed his life and his will for his family, working as a traveling salesman for an exploitative boss in order to provide for his mother's, his sister's and his inert father's needs.

Seen by family and by his boss almost like a filthy and despicable insect, he, instead of becoming outraged, ends up becoming a real despicable and filthy insect.

His father and boss' justifiable angry reaction, however, shows that Gregor Samsa's revolt could not be more effective. The game of exploitation and humiliation relies on contradictory words and actions, the words claiming they just want the good of the subject, the actions crushing him until he turns into an amorphous substance.

Nevertheless, when the victim fully plays his role and becomes what the others had made an effort to transform, or even deform, him into, the perverse role of the father and boss reveals itself. Gregor Samsa's story is often read as a surrealist fable, but in fact it is rather a realistic narrative. Gregor neither surrenders into becoming an amorphous substance, nor revolts in order to confirm the power of those who crush him.

Gregor becomes the "animal badly cleaned for sacrifice", thus reversing the logic of exploitation and the logic of the scapegoat. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, then, is a fable about the tragedy of a sacrifice so poorly conducted that it ends up revealing the horror of the ritual itself and of the entire system.

The tragic tale of Kafka is originally written in German. Shortly after, Jaroslav Hašek writes in Czech a comic fable which exposes in the same way the perversity of any power agents. The characters have no way of beating those who dominate and crush them; they take on the role of the court jester, who laughs at what no one should or could laugh, and lay bare the power agent's perversity.

According to Peter Demetz, Švejk "is the master of 'the say-yes', forcing his winning opponents to reveal all their foolishness". Early on, in Hašek's novel, the narrator says that "at that time a light still shone in Europe, a light which revealed that tomorrow would annihilate the most audacious certainties". The metaphor of light is traditionally positive, but here the light reveals the fear that the future will not be as bright as the Europeans expect.

Nevertheless, we read this reference not only after the First World War, when the novel was written, but mainly after the Second World War, that is, after Auschwitz. In this case, the metaphor of the inside-out-light becomes as prophetic as terrible. In this context, the soldier Švejk submits joyfully to the absurdity of the war and to the absurd orders of his superiors.

The joy of this subservience is funny, because it breaks the readers' expectations: they should be either terrified at the possibility of death or euphoric at the possibility of glory in battle. The joy of this subservience, however, is also tragic, because it exposes the absurdity that surrounds the character, the Czech people and the readers in any latitude.

That's why Hašek closes the novel when Švejk' states that he is "overly happy", relying on the ironic excess to better characterize the opposite feeling. For the character, the possibility of dying on the battlefield along with his superior, Lieutenant Lucas, in the name of the Emperor and His family, is something "glorious", not to say the contrary.

Well, what is lovely about dying on the battlefield in the name of the Emperor, the Fuhrer, God, Allah or what the hell? That is the question the novel opens for the reader.

That is the question that resonates throughout Flusser's life and work. He is the man who had been doomed to lose ground since 1939, when the Nazis invaded Prague and forced him to flee to England and then to Brazil. He is the man who left behind his parents and sister, who were arrested and murdered along with other six million Jews.

How did the groundless man, the *Bodenlos* man, deal with this atrocious loss and his own survival, first in Brazil and then back in Europe, in the last years of his life? Why did he return to die and be buried just in Prague's ground, from where he was expelled 52 years before? And how is the philosophy of the groundless man determined both by that atrocious loss and by the best Czech fiction?

There are several answers to such questions. Vilém discusses them in several articles, such as the one published in *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper on 26 July 1969. In this article, he explores Hannah Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil".

Arendt demonstrates the falsity of the current idea: that the greatest evils are committed by the biggest monsters. In fact, the greatest evils are committed by ordinary employees, rather than by gigantic apparatuses.

Flusser agrees with her. However, he tries to look at the other side of the problem, that is: how educated people, when employed by ordinary apparatus, commit evils that should never have been committed.

In other words: while Hannah studies the apparatus as transforming ordinary people into powerful and destructive employees, Vilém studies the apparatus as transforming educated people into troublesome and annoying employees. In any case, both types of employees maintain and promote apparatuses like Nazism.

Let's read Flusser's own words: "We all have experienced the boring apparatus, but not all of us, fortunately, have experienced the destructive apparatus. Whoever is caught in the gear wheel of the destructive apparatus (for instance, Nazism) is filled with terror and feels crushed. And whoever is caught off guard in the gear wheels of the boring apparatus (for instance, a commercial firm or an educational institute) experiences comedy and futility. But the distinction is temporary, fortuitous and dangerous. I remember the rise of Nazism, when its comic and futile appearance was

clearly visible. Later, the terror erased this aspect. And the comedy of the boring small apparatus hides its tendency to crush us little by little. Had it been taken seriously when the comical apparatus was still unimportant, and maybe Eichmann would not have taken place.”

We must fight “against the apparatus in its infra-human stupidity”, argues Flusser. Yet, because the apparatus is inevitable, we can only overcome it if we assume an ironic attitude towards it. That irony is not passive, but rather subversive. That irony undermines the apparatus because it is part of its mediocre game, yes, but never to win the game: what one tries is to change the game to better take down the apparatus.

The irony that Flusser refers to, is, for example, that of the professor, who evaluates his students warning, at the same time, that every evaluation is unfair. That irony is the one of the authors like Kafka and Hašek, who create pathetic characters to better picture both the ordinary and historical tragedies.

The irony that Flusser refers to, is, in short, that which lies at the heart of his style of thinking, speaking and writing. His irony is the equivalent to the biblical exegesis of Talmud, also known as *pilpul*, which writes infinite and often conflicting comments around the sacred text. His irony produces a philosophy close to science fiction, which strives to reduce science to the point of absurdity, so as to shed light on obscure aspects of truth.

In an article published in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, on 26 February 1972, entitled precisely “Irony”, Flusser defines the term as “the weapon applied in that battle named agony”. Thus, irony takes place when “the weak man, to defend himself against the strong one, ironically cuts himself into pieces” – or becomes the most despised insect by the strong man.

The irony is “not only the weapon of the weak people, but also the weapon of those who will die, be it in gas chamber or in the circus”. Irony, then, tragically recovers dignity just when one has already lost all dignity and is about to lose life itself.

Irony is often disturbing. When Vilém uses his ironic method, which can also be labelled “twisted dialectics” or “unthink”, he creates a discursive style that is both very clear and very disturbing. Some people, though, consider it rather annoying, perhaps because they do not recognize their own anguish.

That anguish can be enriching. Who shows it is a novelist born in Vienna, named Gustav Meyrink. Mirjam, a character of his best novel, *The Golem*, says: “my father once told me that the world exists only to be demolished by our thinking - and only then does life begin”. Vilém Flusser always asks difficult questions and then he gives categorical answers in a prophetic tone. Nevertheless, he demolishes those answers to better pose new questions, even more difficult ones.

Another Brazilian philosopher, Sergio Paulo Rouanet, in a letter written to Flusser on 28 January 1981, considers that his friend is himself a new Švejk, an ironic cybernetic Švejk who, after much simulating the world of apparatus, ends up destroying it from within. Rouanet points out: “meta-Švejk, you are more subtle than Švejk. However, but this one knew he was Švejk, and you do not know that you are the meta-Švejk. But calm down: your criticism is more efficient”.

Flusser enjoys the comparison with the most famous Czech character. He answers Rouanet: “you call me meta-Švejk, which proves your ability to empathize. It would be better to say: post-Kafka. In any case: Prague-born”.

Thus we can close the circle that brings reality into fiction. Now, we can understand fiction as a *sine qua non* condition for the comprehension of that reality. Vilém Flusser is both the post-Samsa and the meta-Švejk. He survives to think about our history, that is, to think the intellectual and moral history of the twentieth century.

Thank you. Vielen Dank. Muito obrigado.