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The Labyrinthine History of the Devil
The First Reception of Flusser in Mexico

"It may be that what we call sin is nothing but
the mythical expression of the consciousness
of ourselves, of our solitude."

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

On 26 July 1966 a letter was written to Vilém Flusser whose sender was none other than the ambassador of Mexico to India between 1962 and 1968, the writer Octavio Paz, for whom his stay in that country was fundamental to his work and thought[1]. In this letter he reports having come to know Flusser's work through gifts from Celso Lafer —a distinguished Brazilian jurist, diplomat and academic— first *Language and Reality* and then, more attentively, *The History of the Devil*. Octavio Paz's confession regarding his reading of the latter is a curious one, a confession that has to do with laughter, since it is very hard for those who did not know him personally to imagine a smiling Octavio Paz, because the personality of the poet always imposed on him a serious and reflective air. In that same letter Paz expressed his wish that Flusser's work be published in Mexico.

It is common knowledge that *The History of the Devil* is not the first work published by Vilém Flusser; his debut work was *Language and Reality* [2]. Nevertheless, *The History of the Devil* is the first of his manuscripts to be published, in 1965, and thanks to a Portuguese translation made by Flusser himself. The German original, written in Brazil in 1957/58, remained unpublished until 1993. During this period Flusser consolidated his thought while striving to find a sense of belonging in life. It is important to note that this stage was characterized by the assimilation of the experience of the Holocaust, which left a deep mark on his personal life and manifested itself in a constant struggle against an

[1] In this text we refer to the letter reproduced in the appendix, held in physical form at the Arquivo Vilém Flusser São Paulo. It should be noted that there are, in addition, two further letters related to this epistolary exchange: Vilém Flusser's reply to Octavio Paz, dated 1 October 1967, and three letters between Flusser and Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, editor-in-chief of the publishing house Siglo XXI, dated 23 January 1967. To see the letters and their transcription, see the Appendix.

[2] It should be clarified that *Língua e realidade* (1963) is not his first completed manuscript. It is preceded by *Das zwanzigste Jahrhundert* (1957), which remains unpublished as a book. The typescript held at the Vilém Flusser Archiv (doc. 1423) only became publicly accessible in 2015, when it was published in digital facsimile in *Flusser Studies* 20. Guldin (2015)

overwhelming sense of solitude and the meaninglessness of life. This struggle unfolded in the context of a developing country (Brazil), as Flusser himself argues: "I was thrown into Brazil at a plastic and assimilable age; for this reason I have spent the last thirty years of my life looking for myself in Brazil and looking for Brazil within myself" (Flusser, 2014, p. 12).

During the 1940s Octavio Paz wrote the essay that would establish him as a literary figure of international standing, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. This essay, divided into two parts, as he himself arguments in the letter to Flusser, sets out first to describe the apparent of Mexicans; the second part of the book becomes a genealogy of Mexican beliefs from the conquest of Mexico to modern Mexico. Paz conceived the work while carrying out diplomatic duties at the Mexican embassy in Paris at the end of the 1940s. The origin of the book, however, goes back some years earlier, during his stay in the United States (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1943-1945), a period in which he held a Guggenheim fellowship. In this context Paz experienced in some measure racism and the sense of strangeness that comes from being perceived as "other", which prompted him to reflect on the superficial of "being Mexican".

The peculiarity inherent in what is foreign and different seems to have been a creative catalyst for these two figures in their work. Although they do not influence one another in their creative process, we consider that their works explore, in some way, a notion of dynamic equilibrium, a life drive in the context of death and of the eternal solitude to which we are condemned. Flusser writes about sin and its creator, the Devil, and about how, through sin, we are led to and into life. Paz, for his part, points out that through our solitude we are able to suspend our apparent being and observe the appearances that constitute it. Taking this epistolary exchange as our starting point, we therefore propose a comparative reading of Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and Flusser's *The History of the Devil*, with the aim of analyzing the conceptual and biographical convergences that emerge in both works.

Flusser opens *The History of the Devil* with the dedication *Uxori omnia mea*, which translates as "all to my wife"[3]. This dedication runs through the whole of Vilém Flusser's work and life. It was Edith Flusser who, in some way, saved Vilém's life during his escape from Prague when he was barely nineteen years old. Unfortunately, Flusser's immediate family did not share the same fate and fell victim to German totalitarianism. Edith's presence becomes a crucial lifeline for a young Flusser drifting in a sea of solitude while his entire world vanished into ashes. In his haste he took with him only a small book of Jewish prayers, handed to him by his mother at the last moment, and a copy of Goethe's *Faust*. It

[3] We prefer this translation, considering that the meaning of this phrase, originally in Latin, admits variants such as: "To my wife, all that is mine". We consider that Flusser, in citing this phrase, is not referring to material aspects but, as he states in *La Consumidora Consumida*, to the fact that "man belongs to woman in the same sense in which one says <*mi vida*>", thus charging the phrase with a profound meaning. (Flusser, 2016, p. 62)

is likely that his interest in the Devil as a character arises here, as does the recurring theme of love in his later work. Flusser perceives death and love as the only forces capable of challenging discursive and tyrannical life, which is perhaps why his tone towards the Devil is one of indulgence.

The childhood and youth of Octavio Paz were marked by exile, persecution and the sense of strangeness. This was due to his father's activism as adviser and lawyer to the Zapatista movement during and after the Mexican Revolution. His childhood stay of almost two years in the United States represented a significant challenge for Paz, since he came up against the language barrier. As Paz recalls, his parents took him to a school in Los Angeles, California, but as he did not speak a word of English he found it very difficult to communicate with his schoolmates. On the first day he was mocked and, inevitably, got into a fight. He came home with his suit torn, one eye half closed and his mouth cut. Two years later, on returning to Mexico, he experienced a similar situation among his own compatriots: mockery and punches once again. A stranger everywhere, foreign and singled out, Paz sought refuge from that solitude in the writing of poetry; the young man withdrawn into himself confronts himself. "At some point our existence has been revealed to all of us as something particular, untransferable and precious. Almost always this revelation occurs in adolescence. The discovery of ourselves manifests itself as the knowledge that we are alone; but children and adults can transcend their solitude and forget themselves through play or work. The adolescent, by contrast, wavering between childhood and youth, remains suspended for an instant before the infinite richness of the world." (Paz 2019: 13)[4]

These two authors seemed to be united by the shared experience of adolescence, which served as a source of creativity and as a vital anchor. Their youths were marked by tragedy and vitality, by the proximity of death and solitude, by horror or emptiness. This singular question of what to be or what not to be becomes a deep problem, a transcendental mission within a labyrinth, a diabolical labyrinth. In both authors, through these works, e see an effort of healing and affirmation, an effort to make a path, to orient oneself, and on the other hand an effort to move freely, that is, to be oriented by committing oneself to *the other*, to life.

The choice of epigraphs by which both authors inaugurate their respective works is particularly significant. In Flusser's instance, he chooses for an epigram by the seventeenth-century mystical poet Angelus Silesius, taken from his work *The Cherubinic Pilgrim*: "God is pure nothingness, touched neither

[4] All quotations from Paz and Ruescas Juárez are drawn from texts originally published in Spanish (see corresponding references). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are the author's own, and this applies to all subsequent quotations from these works throughout the text.

by the now nor by the here. The more you try to grasp him, the more he flees from you". (Flusser, 2014)[5]

We find the choice of Silesius extremely interesting. A convert from Protestantism to Catholicism, his mystical nature seems to have exercised a considerable influence on the young Flusser. The singular mystical pantheism present in his poetry might be said to anticipate Taoist philosophy and Zen Buddhism, doctrines unknown to Silesius. Flusser, who studied these cosmologies during his first years in Brazil, makes numerous references to them in his work *The History of the Devil*. Flusser describes his relationship with God by stating: "My life has been a life without religion, but in search of religion", as we read in his biographical book *Em busca de Significado*. Silesius held that God, whose essence is love, must transcend his own nature in order to affirm himself, thus taking on a finite form and becoming man. Consequently, God and man are inherently one. Silesius interpreted Christianity in an individualised manner, seeking in God the eradication of the appetites and the attainment of a state of perfect quietude in which desire, knowledge and time cease to exist. His reflection proposes a practice of religiosity open to the sensation of abstraction; that is, prayer does not consist solely or necessarily in verbalisations. "Silesius relativised the importance of verbal prayer by suggesting a mysticism that «gives God neither praise nor glory»… one rather little-known instance may be of interest: the prayer «without discourse» practised by certain Spanish «illuminati» or *alumbrados* of the sixteenth century […] Those spiritual figures who nourished themselves on «a mystical theology, which means a hidden one» were called «recogidos»; they attached great importance to mental prayer, for which reading and the word do not suffice; and they pursued, as the supreme reward, a state of quietude, of «thinking about nothing». Now, this «thinking about nothing» was for them «thinking everything»." (Ruescas Juárez, 2022: 113-114)

It is striking that this position of Silesius with respect to prayer is the one Flusser relates in the chapter on how sloth and sadness lead to a definitive calm in which all knowledge and desire dissolve into silence and nothingness. God and Devil, everything and nothing, absolute solitude. Illumination. It strikes us as a stroke of genius on Flusser's part that the epigraph opening his book should evoke its ending, a kind of literary ouroboros.

Octavio Paz begins his work *The Labyrinth of Solitude* with an epigraph by Antonio Machado, the Spanish Republican poet who died in 1939 at the French border while escaping the fascist regime that had risen in Spain during the Civil War: "*The other* does not exist: such is rational faith, the incurable

[5] Originally in the German version as: *Gott ist ein lauter Nichts, ihn rührt kein Nun noch Hier: Je mehr du nach ihm greifts, je mehr entwird er dir*. Flusser, V. (1993). *Die Geschichte des Teufels* (Edition Flusser, Bd. 2, A. Müller-Pohle, Hrsg.). Göttingen: European Photography.

belief of human reason. Identity = reality, as if, in the end, everything had to be, absolutely and necessarily, *one* and *the same*. But the other does not allow itself to be eliminated; it subsists, it persists; it is the hard bone on which reason breaks its teeth. Abel Martín, with a poetic faith no less human than rational faith, believed in *the other*, in "the essential Heterogeneity of being", or, as we might say, in the incurable *otherness* that *the one* suffers."

Machado was a figure of great personal importance for Paz, who had been in Spain during the Civil War as a member of the delegation of intellectuals at the Congress of Antifascist Writers of 1937.

It is particularly significant that Machado does not speak in his own voice but through Abel Martín, his fictional philosopher-character. Paz, in his profound interest in masks and in the concept of otherness, chooses to inaugurate his book on Mexican masks with a quotation that is itself a literary mask. It is also worth remarking that in a work whose primary aim is to describe the appearance of Mexicans, the introduction is presented through the voice of a Spanish poet, who offers Paz a perspective on the undeniable Spanish heritage in Mexican culture. That heritage, often repudiated and at other times exalted from different quarters, has been the object of various interpretations, some of which are not without reason in their claims. This heritage made it possible to put to the Mexican the question: what are we? —a question Machado answers in a few lines and Paz develops throughout the work— the Mexican affirms himself in his wanting to be, in nothingness; as he reaffirms his being it vanishes, before the appearance of *the other* that lies buried, always denying it and beginning the cycle anew. Rational reason, the absolute inheritance of the West, seeks absolute identity, but *the other*, otherness, persists as an inescapable reality. Another literary ouroboros.

Both epigraphs establish an implicit dialogue: Machado emphasizes the non-existence of otherness and its emptiness, while Silesius alludes to the emptiness that God represents. This originates in the transfiguration of the dialogue with nothingness in Flusser's work and culminates in the withdrawal into solitude in Paz's. Both authors set out, in their respective works, to trace paths leading to the healing of the soul and to reconciliation with life. Although their motivations differ, their aims seem to converge on a common point. The interest both shared in Hinduism at that time is also is remarkable: Paz influenced by his experience in India, and Flusser from Brazil. Although Paz does not explicitly mention Hinduism in "The Labyrinth", this is because he had not yet acquired his Indian experience when he wrote it. On reading Flusser's text, Paz understands the references to that religion that Flusser includes in *The History of the Devil* since, as we mentioned earlier, Paz was immersed in Hindu culture at the time he contacted Flusser.

As for the introductions to their texts, the two authors adopt different approaches. Flusser, for instance, offers an extensive introduction that presents a novel perspective on the understanding of the Devil. This introduction allows us to observe one of his recurrent writing gestures, which we shall follow throughout his work: the philological aspect of the words. He first chooses to show that the word "History" (*Geschichte*) contains the concept of "layer" (*Schicht*). It is suggestive to encounter the idea of history as a gesture of assembling layers, which is ideally suited to finding Flusser in Paz and vice versa.

Octavio refers to Mexico as something that is asleep, buried; that is, it may be said that Paz understands Mexico in a way similar to the etymology of history that Flusser proposes: "The term «history» is related to layers that follow one upon another, and the German language links the term «history» (*Geschichte*) with the term «layer» (*Schicht*)" (Flusser, 2014, p.1). It is worth noting that the architectural construction of pre-Hispanic Mexico presents itself in the manner of a layer: one building erected upon another, stone upon stone, layer upon layer, hidden gods and lives. This claim aligns with Flusser's observation in *The History of the Devil*, which illustrates its evolution through distinct layers, from antiquity to modernity. Paz finds in the historian the Flusserian diabolical character: "The historian describes like a man of science and has the visions of a poet" (2019: 349). By virtue of his position, the historian has this terrible task of describing what holds the world in time (the Devil) and at the same time observes the irresolvable destiny of the dissolution of all layers into nothingness (the Divine). That is, the historian witnesses the very work of creation, the eternal flow of which we are part.

Continuing with Flusser's introduction, the deadly sins represent different facets of diabolical influence on reality, arranged in concatenated order from lust to sloth. Each sin operates across multiple ontological layers, creating a cycle that leads humanity towards hell. The journey Paz undertakes is not that of showing sin in relation to creation; he opts instead for the search for the beliefs of the Mexican that live in the deep layers of his soul. In both, however, the gesture is the same: that of finding strata, methodological coincidences in different problems and with diverse aims. And we should not forget that, geologically speaking, layers are never homogeneous, a novel approach that observes both writings as literary topologies and not under their more common classification as essays.

Octavio Paz, for his part, presents the Mexican not as an entity but as a set of relations or layers of being that have consolidated over the years. These relations simultaneously cover and construct the appearance and constitution of the Mexican; like a pre-Hispanic temple, the Mexican shows and conceals himself in the interactions of these strata. Paz presents the Mexican as a force hidden within its own relations.

Paz's text appears to lack an introduction properly speaking, because his style is different. As a poet and prose writer he does not describe an object situated in its circumstances; his procedure is not scientific. He is that object; he is the very circumstance he describes, points to and studies. Paz is immersed in his writing, which contrasts with Flusser's extensive introduction, which reads more like a chapter, and with the way Paz dissolves his introductions and himself into the text. He shows and conceals himself in these layers of literature that make up the book.

Mexican lust

Having reviewed the authors' backgrounds and the openings of their books, we shall now attempt to identify coincidences between the two texts. As we mentioned, these texts are anachronistic, and the authors make no explicit or direct reference to one another. Despite this, it is notable that, although the subjects appear different, we have found significant thematic and conceptual coincidences in both authors.

We shall begin by noting that both Flusser and Paz regard water as the primordial element, the substance from which life flows and is transformed. In Flusser: "The heavens and the Earth condensed out of spirit to produce the river of life, which flows in search of the ocean of spirit. For poetic reasons, we deliberately resort to the allegory of the circulation of water in describing the phenomenon of life." (Flusser, 2014, p.1) And in Paz: "If the solitude of the Mexican is that of motionless waters, that of the North American is that of the mirror. We have ceased to be fountains" (Paz, 2019, p.33)

With important nuances, Paz describes a state of immobility, a metaphor of still water that represents the solitude of the Mexican. This state of immobility, a motionless fluidity, is a consequence of the Mexican's loss of connection with his source, the fall of our consciousness into solitude, the loss of the spirit in its attempt to secure the validity of an order in which consciousness and innocence, man and nature, coincide. In other words, that they converge once more in that flow or river running towards the ocean of spirit, symbolizing its origin and spiritual destiny, as Flusser indicates. This primordial broth also contains the final destiny of everything. Origin and destiny, loss and stagnation: everything is intertwined in this flow, and the circularity of life, deepened in the Eastern tradition, reveals hidden aspects that have not yet been exhausted in the West.

This convergence between Paz and Flusser is manifested in the premise of a rupture—chaos/wound in Paz; the fall of the Devil/separation from heaven in Flusser—, which sets off the

entire subsequent dynamic of the text: the search for redemption in Paz's case, and the search for improvement in Flusser's. Here Flusser's argument about sin takes on a singular currency, for in his account the wound has its origin in life itself; that is, sin has a non-human character and origin. With his innovative perspective, he presents the Devil not as an anthropomorphic figure but as a force that arises from creation itself, divine creation of course. Material time and immaterial time: we conceive time from our materiality, which leads us to an apocalyptic impulse, the idea that everything will come to an end. This is because we perceive our life on our own temporal scale, since we do not witness our own death. And it is from this last perspective that the wound arises in Paz, who finds the problem not in the living but in the anthropocentric attitude that tears it apart. For one perspective, Paz's, life is conceived as a state that the human being must redeem; while for the other, Flusser's, it possesses an inherently diabolical connotation from its origin, reflecting their respective religious visions: one Catholic, the other Jewish. At the same time, these attitudes point in opposite directions: sin points towards life, while solitude is oriented towards death. Both philosophies are manifested in these contexts of development, with Flusser emphasizing the need to hold fast to life, and Paz exploring the vitality of the Mexican, which manifests itself in his constant confrontation with death.

Wrath and intelligence

Before continuing to address the similarities between the two writers, it is essential to highlight Flusser's innovative perspective on the structure of the sins. In his analysis, lust and wrath appear as points of support, both centered on the *Self* and on a world perceived as "for me". These sins reflect a profound ontological uncertainty and a relativist ethics in which reality "in itself" lacks intrinsic value. Lust generates a phenomenal reality that expands and perpetuates itself, it is the world as it is, while wrath transforms and reorganizes it, dismantling its foundations and revealing other sins, projecting a world as it ought to be. Both sins are manifested throughout Flusser's later work, constituting a seminal element of his thought, even though he no longer identifies them as sins. For Flusser, the Devil's "workshop" is not idleness, as the popular saying would have it; it is the lust and wrath intrinsic to all creation.

The remaining sins are residues or products of these two forces, which is why in the structure Flusser presents they are relatively secondary, though not for that reason unimportant. Rather, they fulfil other diabolical functions, to complicate our standing in the world. Faced with the action of lust and wrath, gluttony becomes necessary to avoid the despair of the frustration that wrath provokes.

Gluttony devours everything. Envy and greed organize everything that has been devoured, and pride and sloth fulfil the function of rendering all of it useless; that is, as Paz rightly diagnoses in his letter, these last are the material from which the poet, the philosopher and the contemplative create. In general, they are the sins of art.

Convergent points around wrath can be identified in the works of both Octavio Paz and Vilém Flusser. There is a crucial point in the application of the law where this coincidence becomes particularly evident. In both authors the law is presented as paradoxical. Flusser conceives freedom as human dignity and as the rejection of limitations, which take the form of laws that must be transformed, not destroyed. This process of transformation is precisely the role that wrath plays. Science and technology, in their interaction with natural laws, turn them into instruments that enhance freedom.

In the case of Octavio Paz, particularly in the section entitled "The Mexican 'intelligentsia'", the law is presented as a legal instrument designed to liberate and emancipate the people. This intention is frustrated, however, since the law ends up becoming "a trap into which only its inventors fell" (Paz 1998: 180). This legal instrument was created by the governments that emerged after the Mexican Revolution. Ironically, the very search for freedom or emancipation that motivated its creation was betrayed by the rejection implicit in the nature of the laws themselves. At its core lies a diabolically ingenious mechanism that turns the law into a mere suggestion rather than an imperative command. And in the case of Mexico the law tends to destroy itself, unlike Flusser's European Devil, who seeks to transform himself; thus, Mexican history reflects a conflict between tradition, universality and political and economic forms. Apparently, Mexicans are more diabolical than the Devil.

Another point of convergence, as we have already noted above, is to be found in the representation of the mind or nation divided between two irreconcilable worlds. Wrath is manifested as in the work "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde", which according to Flusser would be expressed in the fact that "we live in a dual world; in the wrathful world of the school and in the lustful world of life" (2014: 120). Solitude and communion, Mexicanness and universality, continue to be the extremes that consume the Mexican, whose existence is characterized by a constant tearing between these two poles, according to Octavio Paz. Both texts structure their argument around a schizoid split between two poles that cannot be reconciled: desire as the product of lust and reason as the daughter of wrath in Flusser; and the struggle between the particular and the universal in Paz. Both authors employ the verb of tearing, "*dilacerated*" —"desgarrarse"—, which is notable in the metaphor of rupture on which they coincide: "The tearing provokes a great sinister laughter. In its way it is just: it restores balance, puts things in their place, that is, it reduces them to dust, misery, nothingness. The funniness of the "macho" is an

act of revenge." (Paz, 2016: 96) Wrath has a "machista" character from Paz's perspective, and Flusser, for his part, makes its violent character plain.

Gluttony

In Mexico Tlaltecuhtli is venerated, a deity of androgynous character represented in various ways, as a clawed monster or a great caiman, with multiple hungry mouths at its joints. According to tradition, Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca descended from the sky to draw Tlaltecuhtli out and divide it, thus separating the earth from the sky. From Tlaltecuhtli all foods emerged: its hair was transformed into trees, flowers and grasses; its eyes into wells, springs and caves; its mouth into rivers and caverns; and its nose into valleys and mountains. This deity represents a living being, generative and devouring at once. Octavio Paz describes solitude as this deity, which consumes itself and devours whatever it touches. In Flusser's work, gluttony takes on a more "ecological" character. Perhaps it is here that the distinction between Flusser's and Paz's perspectives begins to dissolve in their texts: in one, the world is something perfectible; in the other, redeemable. Both visions can be reconciled through diabolical action: in one, infernal fire purifies and transforms; in the other, that same fire reforms, rescues and integrates.

Gluttony manifests itself as a violent process of appropriation-incorporation that transforms the living and mysterious into a transparent, instrumental object. This process inverts the traditional relation between creator and creation, culminating in an ontological solitude that separates the subject from his origin. It is significant that both authors employ similar language —the "transparency" of the instrument, the inversion of means and ends, and the construction of walls or protective enclosures against chaos— to describe processes that they frame differently: one as the metaphysics of technological capitalism, the other as the workings of the Mexican. For Flusser, humanity, in its eagerness to devour and transform, becomes obsolete and destined to disappear. Automation accelerates self-destruction and the loss of any sense of reality. The macho's conduct in Paz is very close to that of gluttony, as the singular anecdote contained in his book shows: "Arbitrariness adds an unforeseen element to the figure of the "macho". He is a humorist. His jokes are enormous, outsized, and always end in absurdity. The anecdote is well known of the man who, to "cure" the headache of a drinking companion, emptied his pistol into his skull. True or not, the incident reveals with what inexorable rigor the logic of the absurd introduces itself into life." (Paz, 2019:95-96)

In Flusser, life seen as hunger is brutal and without divine purpose, exalted only by human admiration. Mental and technological gluttony reflects a diabolical struggle to transform and dominate reality, carrying humanity towards its end.

Envy and greed

In a manner analogous to the intrinsic connection between lust and wrath, envy and greed operate alternately. Unlike lust and wrath, which are considered primary impulses, envy and greed constitute the fundamental pillars of the human social fabric. Envy fosters the creation of myths and social progress, while greed seeks the consolidation and ritualization of those creations. The interaction between the two drives both change and stability within society, each representing a facet of the same vice.

The Fiesta, as a mechanism of collective fusion that dissolves the individual, coincides with Flusser's description. He describes *small talk* (degraded conversation) as the social paradise in which "we lose our individuality; we become 'We'… The loving embrace of the mud shelters the remains of what were once our Selves" (Flusser, 2014: 171). Paz describes the Fiesta with an almost identical logic: "society communes with itself in the Fiesta… each one abandons himself… all dissolve in its whirlwind" (2019: 61). In both texts we observe a return to an undifferentiated primordial mass —Flusser calls it "primordial mud", Paz "primordial dough"— in which the individual is lost in the collective as a way of escaping an unbearable tension. Death for Flusser, solitude for Paz.

Ritual is conceived as the consolidation and petrification of a prior, more vital impulse. According to Flusser, envy generates myth (the irruption, the new, recalling that this comes from what has been swallowed), while greed crystallizes it into a "ritual" which consolidates and arrests that impulse: "Greed seeks immediately to consolidate, to contract and to avoid that which the produced phenomenon evaporates. This is called 'ritual'" (Flusser 2014: 155). Paz, though with an opposite connotation, also conceptualizes ritual as a structure that channels and limits an explosive force: the Fiesta "is governed by special, exclusive rules that isolate it and turn it into a day of exception" (2019: 59), and those rules contain —temporarily— the disorder that the Fiesta releases. In both cases ritual is presented as the institutional form that provides a channel for, and simultaneously limits, a disruptive energy. We consider that in some way Flusser, in referring to envy and greed, points to the process of the diabolical digestion of culture. Through gluttony we swallow everything that lustful life and wrath in its "ordering" action provoke, and it is through these sins that we turn the devoured nutrients into

fecal matter; the paradise of the antisocial (of the solitary) has found in Flusser a powerful argument for thinking of society as a producer of pure shit. From this diabolical interpretation, of course.

Pride and sloth

Although Flusser distinguishes these last two sins in his indexing, we consider it pertinent to group them together because of their joint action. Pride, whose manifestation constitutes the primordial source of all existence, generating and destroying worlds and art, is opposed to sloth, whose manifestation, philosophy, must be approached with serenity, resignation and without faith, as an act of annihilation of the ego. Paz approaches the Mexican from his inability to transcend his solitude; in this sense pride is probably his principal sin, for after the victory of destruction, and in accordance with Flusser, "We are now locked […] in our solitary cell" (2014: 182). There is a strong coincidence between the two texts: solitude or enclosure is presented as the point of arrival (not of departure) of a process; in Paz, the original rupture that the Mexican fails to transcend; in Flusser, the paradoxical result of the triumph of the "creative will". A person full of pride is a destructive person, for the will expresses itself through language, creating illusions and connections in the mind by means of poetry, painting and music. Poetry and art reflect the creative activity of the will, which seeks to project and expand itself in different forms. It is the sin of the conquerors. And the conqueror is a being in eternal solitude.

For Paz, the mystical festive climax of the will does not definitively liberate, but leads instead to a subsequent withdrawal or enclosure, the hangover of the fiesta; in Flusser, the "solitary cell" that follows creative pride, and by means of the sloth that points us to the death of God and of the Devil, reveals the death of the creative will, leaving a tower of wisdom and resignation. It is through the solitude provoked by pride and its creations that the figures fall, the masks of Paz, of God and of the Devil. The world is presented to us as a creation of the will; the phenomenal world is a surface created by the will, in which apparent causes and connections are illusory. The self-consciousness of the will reveals that both God and the Devil are projections of that same bloated and deceptive will. Despite the richness of his cultural practices, the Mexican might be considered the most atheist individual within Christendom. It is essential to recall that his deities and cosmogonies were torn apart and reinterpreted within a dichotomous European framework. Nihilism, the child Europe engenders with science, is manifested in Mexico through the loss and dissolution of its world, which, according to Paz, lies buried.

In some, the Europeans, history fades away before the impossibility of building layers in the void left by pride. In others, in Mexican culture, history is torn to pieces and reinserted into a declining Christian historicity, resulting in the absence of layers and the presence only of the ruins of solar structures, successively rebuilt and destroyed in a pattern of square fortresses whose characteristic is solitude. The argumentative turn in the work of Paz and Flusser is of remarkable brilliance. Both authors conceive death not as an end but as an origin, thus inverting conventional teleology. In this way the "end" (death, silence, music) is identified with the "origin". The rhetorical construction "origin and end/destiny" is present in the work of both. Both imagine a deliberate sacrifice of the individual in favor of something greater, the cosmic in Paz, the logico-mystical in Flusser, although Paz describes it as an ancient cultural institution and Flusser as a personal philosophical program. Everything points to Nirvana, one in the manner of the primordial broth and the other in the renunciation of the self in favor of the collective. In both, the effort to hold fast to life.

Redemption and exorcism

On 1 October 1967 Vilem Flusser replied with embarrassment to Octavio Paz's letter, an embarrassment arising from the time that had passed since he received the letter Paz had sent more than a year earlier. This delay was unusual for Flusser, given that his archive shows a strong commitment to replying promptly to any correspondence, whether from friends or from people who contacted him for any reason. We do not know whether Octavio Paz received that reply, nor what impact Flusser's work might have had in the 1970s in a Spanish-speaking country such as Mexico through his contact with Octavio Paz, who was already an institutional figure in the country and whose support in the distribution and reading of works he considered important was no small matter. We know that on 23 November 1967 Flusser sent a copy of *The History of the Devil* to Siglo XXI Editores, at that time under the direction of Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, a distinguished Mexican publisher. It is impossible to know what became of that contact. It may be that this text, written sixty years after the epistolary exchange between our authors, attempts in some way to bring about the supposed encounter of these two seminal works by Vilem Flusser and Octavio Paz. Perhaps events never converge at the opportune moment, diabolically and unhappily. It may be that chance constitutes a component of the Devil that our friend Flusser did not develop at greater length in this work at the time. It may be that in Paz's busy life there was no propitious moment to open a door to Mexico for Flusser and his thought. Everything is pure project, the project of life.

We have finally reached a state of serenity and peaceful acceptance. The emptying out of everything, for the sake of committing oneself to life itself, constitutes the commitment to existence that our authors uphold. Flusser brings his work to a close with a peaceful conclusion. After an introspective journey marked by intensity and sin, he attains peace through a final confession. We shall not reveal the ending of *The History of the Devil* to inexperienced readers, but we can affirm that its ending reveals the true intention of the work. Flusser has led us on an entertaining and vertiginous journey whose end brings us to calm, to solitude and to a clear mind. Paz, for his part, is implacable, concluding that life is a process of rupture and of the search for reunion, in which solitude becomes a trial and a purification. To live is a constant process of construction, layer by layer, which would explain why nothing arrives on time, but rather why life is configured in time. The labyrinth is not traversed; it is built by traversing it, as a poem by Antonio Machado reminds us. It is fitting to quote Paz: on leaving the labyrinth, "perhaps we shall discover that we had been dreaming with our eyes open, and that the dreams of reason are atrocious. Perhaps then we shall begin to dream again with our eyes closed" (2019: 246). Farewell insomnia, farewell dear Devil, welcome solitude, thanks be to life.

As a conclusion

The comparison between Octavio Paz and Vilém Flusser, based on their works *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and *The History of the Devil*, reveals a profound convergence around solitude, sin and the search for meaning, despite their biographical and cultural differences. Both authors lived through experiences of exile, loss and strangeness that marked their thought. Flusser, marked by the Holocaust and his migration to Brazil, and Paz by exile and the sense of otherness from his childhood onwards. These experiences led them to reflect on identity, *the other* and the human condition, using metaphors such as the labyrinth and the layers to describe the complexity of existence and the construction of identity. In both works, Paz and Flusser explore the dynamic between rupture and reconstruction, between chaos and the search for redemption or improvement. Flusser approaches sin and the Devil as forces inherent in creation, while Paz analyses solitude as an existential wound that defines the Mexican and, by extension, the human being. Both agree that Western life is a process of confrontation with emptiness and uncertainty, in which solitude is a condemnation and at the same time a path towards reconciliation and serenity. Their texts invite us to accept uncertainty and constant change as an essential part of the meaning of life, proposing that true redemption or exorcism lies in the acceptance of solitude and in the construction of meaning through commitment to existence and openness to *the other*. In this way

the work of both authors becomes an introspective journey that, far from offering definitive answers, proposes an attitude of openness, acceptance and transformation in the face of the complexity of life and the human condition.

The epistolary exchange between Octavio Paz and Vilém Flusser, carried out in 1966 and 1967, did not continue. We do not know whether Paz received Flusser's reply, nor what became of the copy sent to Siglo XXI Editores. This work sets out, sixty years later, to carry out the joint reading that this exchange left unfinished. We therefore conclude with the epigraph that opens this article, in which sin is conceived as the manifestation of the consciousness of our solitude, inviting us to glimpse something of Paz's work through Flusser's work, and vice versa.

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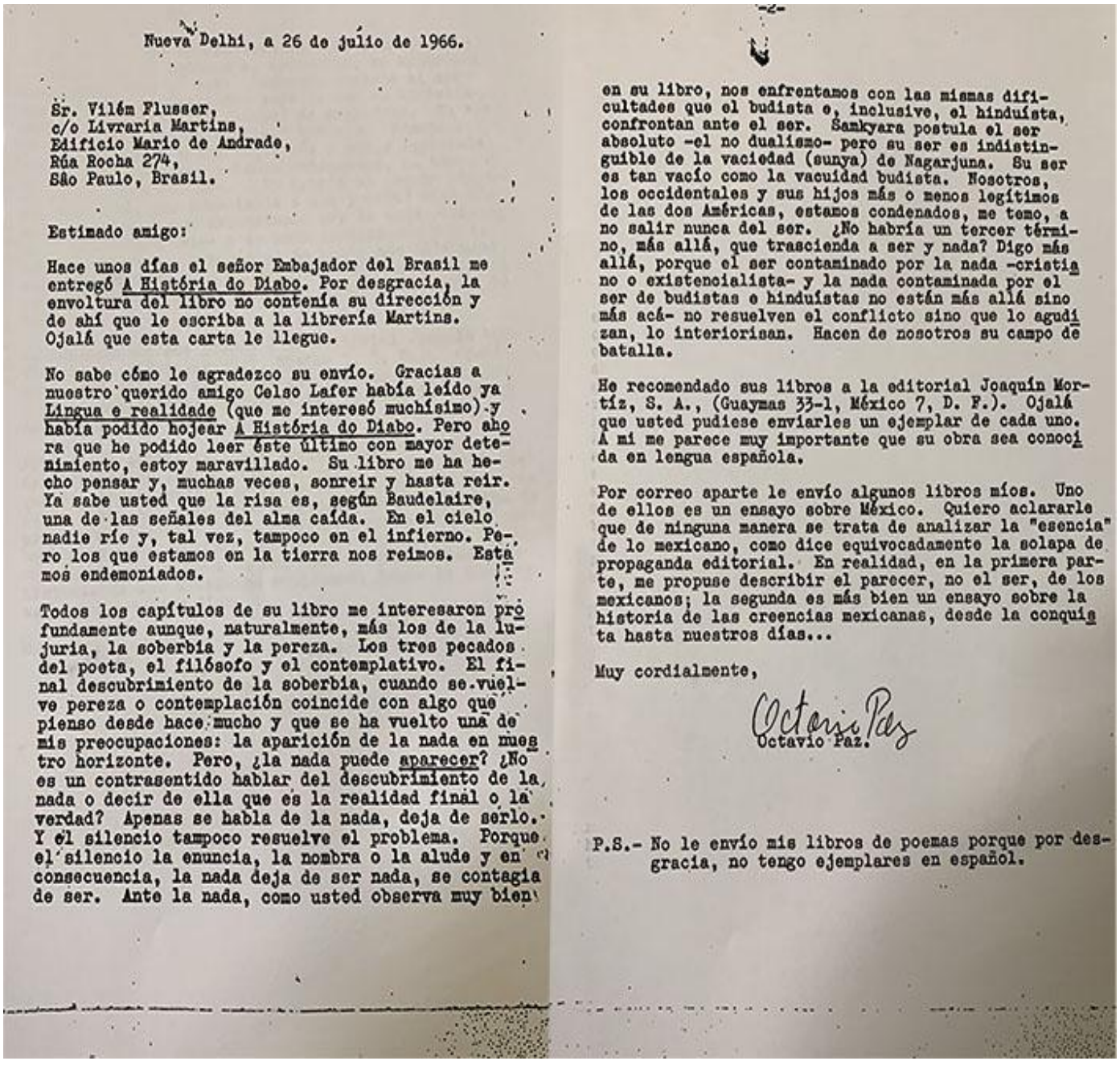
Appendix

Octavio Paz's letter (New Delhi, 26 July 1966) begins as an expression of gratitude for the gift from Celso Lafer, who sent him a copy of *The History of the Devil*, and moves towards a concern of Paz's own that the ending of the book comes to confirm for him: the appearance of nothingness, which, once named, or even passed over in silence, is contaminated by being. Drawing on his reading of Samkara and Nagarjuna, Paz suggests that the West seems condemned never to emerge from being and asks whether there might exist a third term that transcends being and nothingness. He adds that the Christian, existentialist, Buddhist and Hindu solutions remain on this side *(más acá)* that interiorizes the conflict.

Flusser, for his part, replies more than a year later (São Paulo, 1 October 1967) and attributes his delay to an intellectual modesty. He reformulates the question as a problem of translation, and asks whether to translate is to transcend, or whether every meta-term ends up being encompassed once again by being or by nothingness. He then extends the question to the pair ser/deber ser and to the pair ser/estar, the latter accessible to those who think in Spanish and Portuguese and concludes that to translate is synonymous with vertigo.

There is no record that Paz and Flusser wrote to one another again, so their correspondence is limited to these two letters. The same is not true of Flusser's contact with Mexico, which continued through Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, director of Siglo XXI Editores.

Letter from Octavio Paz to Vilém Flusser



Nueva Delhi, a 26 de julio de 1966.

Sr. Vilém Flusser,
c/o Livraria Martins,
Edificio Mario de Andrade,
Rúa Rocha 274,
São Paulo, Brasil.

Estimado amigo:

Hace unos días el señor Embajador del Brasil me entregó A História do Diabo. Por desgracia, la envoltura del libro no contenía su dirección y de ahí que le escriba a la librería Martins. Ojalá que esta carta le llegue.

No sabe cómo le agradezco su envío. Gracias a nuestro querido amigo Celso Lafer había leído ya Lingua e realidade (que me interesó muchísimo) y había podido hojear A História do Diabo. Pero ahora que he podido leer éste último con mayor detenimiento, estoy maravillado. Su libro me ha hecho pensar y, muchas veces, sonreir y hasta reir. Ya sabe usted que la risa es, según Baudelaire, una de las señales del alma caída. En el cielo nadie ríe y, tal vez, tampoco en el infierno. Pero los que estamos en la tierra nos reimos. Estamos endemoniados.

Todos los capítulos de su libro me interesaron profundamente aunque, naturalmente, más los de la lujuria, la soberbia y la pereza. Los tres pecados del poeta, el filósofo y el contemplativo. El final descubrimiento de la soberbia, cuando se vuelve pereza o contemplación coincide con algo que pienso desde hace mucho y que se ha vuelto una de mis preocupaciones: la aparición de la nada en nuestro horizonte. Pero, ¿la nada puede aparecer? ¿No es un contrasentido hablar del descubrimiento de la nada o decir de ella que es la realidad final o la verdad? Apenas se habla de la nada, deja de serlo. Y el silencio tampoco resuelve el problema. Porque el silencio la enuncia, la nombra o la alude y en consecuencia, la nada deja de ser nada, se contagia de ser. Ante la nada, como usted observa muy bien

-2-

en su libro, nos enfrentamos con las mismas dificultades que el budista o, inclusive, el hinduísta, confrontan ante el ser. Samkyara postula el ser absoluto -el no dualismo- pero su ser es indistinguible de la vaciedad (sunya) de Nagarjuna. Su ser es tan vacío como la vacuidad budista. Nosotros, los occidentales y sus hijos más o menos legítimos de las dos Américas, estamos condenados, me temo, a no salir nunca del ser. ¿No habría un tercer término, más allá, que trascienda a ser y nada? Digo más allá, porque el ser contaminado por la nada -cristiano o existencialista- y la nada contaminada por el ser de budistas e hinduístas no están más allá sino más acá- no resuelven el conflicto sino que lo agudizan, lo interiorisan. Hacen de nosotros su campo de batalla.

He recomendado sus libros a la editorial Joaquín Mortíz, S. A., (Guaymas 33-1, México 7, D. F.). Ojalá que usted pudiese enviarles un ejemplar de cada uno. A mi me parece muy importante que su obra sea conocida en lengua española.

Por correo aparte le envío algunos libros míos. Uno de ellos es un ensayo sobre México. Quiero aclararle que de ninguna manera se trata de analizar la "esencia" de lo mexicano, como dice equivocadamente la solapa de propaganda editorial. En realidad, en la primera parte, me propuse describir el parecer, no el ser, de los mexicanos; la segunda es más bien un ensayo sobre la historia de las creencias mexicanas, desde la conquista hasta nuestros días...

Muy cordialmente,

Octavio Paz

Octavio Paz.

P.S.- No le envío mis libros de poemas porque por desgracia, no tengo ejemplares en español.

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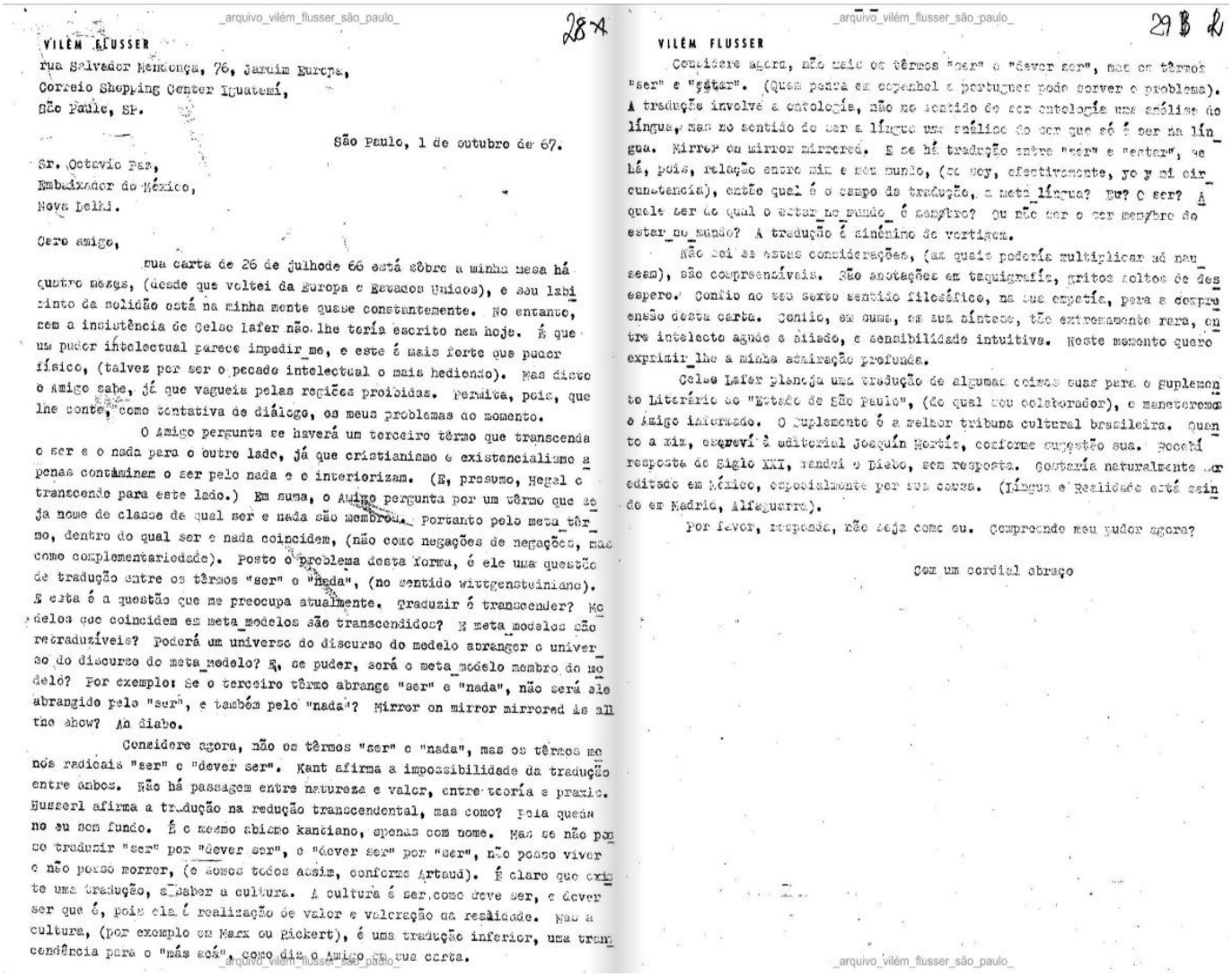
Muy cordialmente,
[firma manuscrita]

Octavio Paz.
P.S.- No le envío mis libros de poemas porque por desgracia, no tengo ejemplares en español.

Letter from Vilém Flusser to Octavio Paz



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VILÉM FLUSSER
rua Salvador Mendonça, 76, Jardim Europa,
Correio Shopping Center Iguatemi,
São Paulo, SP.

São Paulo, 1 de outubro de 67.

Sr. Octavio Paz,
Embaixador do México,
Nova Delhi.

Caro amigo,

sua carta de 26 de julhode 66 está sôbre a minha mesa há quatro mezes, (desde que voltei da Europa e Estados Unidos), e seu labirinto da solidão está na minha mente quase constantemente. No entanto, sem a insistência de Celso Lafer não lhe teria escrito nem hoje. É que um pudor intelectual parece impedir-me, e este é mais forte que pudor físico, (talvez por ser o pecado intelectual o mais hediondo). Mas disto o amigo sabe, já que vagueia pelas regiões proibidas. Permita, pois, que lhe conte, como tentativa de diálogo, os meus problemas do momento.

O Amigo pergunta se haverá um terceiro têrmo que transcenda o ser e o nada para o outro lado, já que cristianismo e existencialismo apenas contaminem o ser pelo nada e o interiorizam. (E, presumo, Hegel o transcende para este lado.) Em suma, o Amigo pergunta por um têrmo que seja nome de classe da qual ser e nada são membros. Portanto pelo meta-têrmo, dentro do qual ser e nada coincidem, (não como negações de negações, mas como complementariedade). Posto o problema desta forma, é ele uma questão de tradução entre os têrmos "ser" e "nada", (no sentido wittgensteiniano). E esta é a questão que me preocupa atualmente. Traduzir é transcender? Mc delos que coincidem em meta-modelos são transcendidos? E meta-modelos são retraduzíveis? Poderá um universo do discurso do modelo abranger o universo do discurso do meta-modelo? E, se puder, será o meta-modelo membro do modelo? Por exemplo: Se o terceiro têrmo abrange "ser" e "nada", não será ele abrangido pelo "ser", e também pelo "nada"? Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show? An diabo.

Considere agora, não os têrmos "ser" e "nada", mas os têrmos nos radicais "ser" e "dever ser". Kant afirma a impossibilidade da tradução entre ambos. Não há passagem entre natureza e valor, entre teoría e praxis. Husserl afirma a tradução na redução transcendental, mas como? Pela queda no eu sem fundo. É o mesmo abismo kantiano, apenas com nome. Mas se não posso traduzir "ser" por "dever ser", e "dever ser" por "ser", não posso viver e não posso morrer, (e somos todos assim, conforme Artaud). É claro que existe uma tradução, a saber a cultura. A cultura é ser como deve ser, e dever ser que é, pois ela é realização de valor e valorização da realidade. Mas a cultura, (por exemplo em Marx ou Rickert), é uma tradução inferior, uma transcendência para o "más acá", como diz o Amigo em sua carta.

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VILÉM FLUSSER

Considere agora, não mais os têrmos "ser" e "dever ser", mas os têrmos "ser" e "estar". (Quem penra em espanhol e portugues pode sorver o problema). A tradução involve a ontología, não no sentido de ser ontología uma análise da língua, mas no sentido de ser a língua uma análise do ser que só é ser na língua. Mirror on mirror mirrored. E se há tradução entre "ser" e "estar", se há, pois, relação entre mim e meu mundo, (se hoy, efectivamente, yo y mi circunstancia), então qual é o campo da tradução, a meta-língua? Eu? O ser? A quele ser do qual o estar no mundo é membro? Ou não ser o ser membro do estar no mundo? A tradução é sinônimo de vertigem.

Não sei se estas considerações, (as quais poderia multiplicar ad nauseam), são compreensíveis. São anotações em taquigrafía, gritos soltos de desespero. Confio no seu sexto sentido filosófico, na sua empatía, para a compreensão desta carta. Confio, em suma, em sua síntese, tão extremamente rara, entre intelecto agudo e aliado, e sensibilidade intuitiva. Neste momento quero exprimir-lhe a minha admiração profunda.

Celso Lafer planeja uma tradução de algumas coisas suas para o suplemento littrário do "Estado de São Paulo", (do qual sou colaborador), e manteremos o Amigo informado. O suplemento é a melhor tribuna cultural brasileira. Quanto a mim, escrevi à editorial Joaquín Mortiz, conforme sugestão sua. Recebi resposta do Siglo XXI, vendei o Diabo, sem resposta. Gostaría naturalmente ser editado em México, especialmente por tua causa. (Língua e Realidade está saindo em Madrid, Alfaguarra).

Por favor, responda, não seja como eu. Compreende meu pudor agora?

Com um cordial abraço

_arquivo_vilém_flusser_são_paulo_

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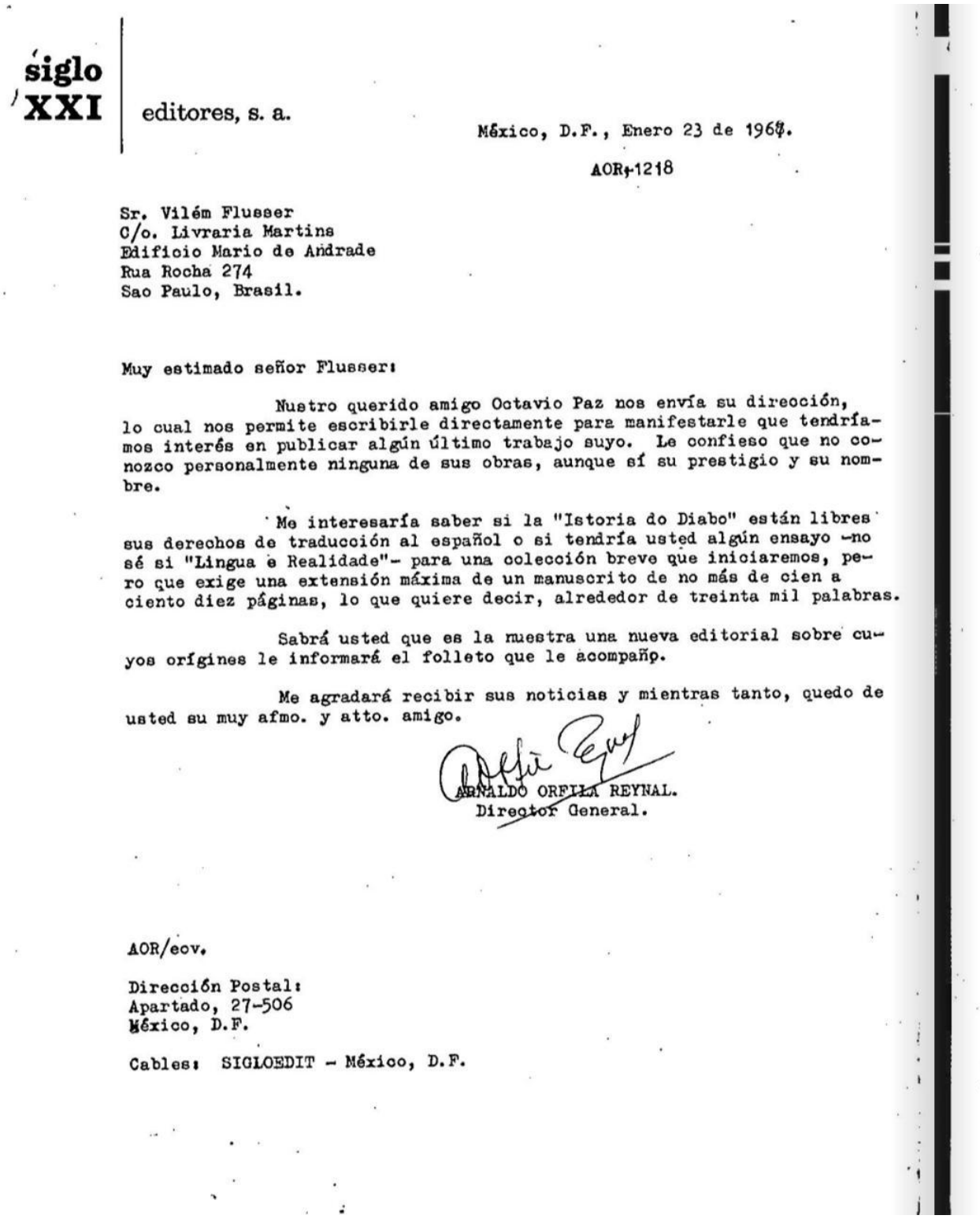
Com um cordial abraço

Correspondence between Flusser and Arnaldo Orfila

Letter 1. From Arnaldo Orfila to Vilém Flusser



siglo XXI editores, s. a.

México, D.F., Enero 23 de 1968.

AOR-1218

Sr. Vilém Flusser
C/o. Livraria Martins
Edificio Mario de Andrade
Rua Rocha 274
Sao Paulo, Brasil.

Muy estimado señor Flusser:

Nustro querido amigo Octavio Paz nos envía su direoción, lo cual nos permite escribirle directamente para manifestarle que tendríamos interés en publicar algún último trabajo suyo. Le confieso que no conozco personalmente ninguna de sus obras, aunque sí su prestigio y su nombre.

Me interesaría saber si la "Istoria do Diabo" están libres sus derechos de traducción al español o si tendría usted algún ensayo -no sé si "Lingua e Realidade"- para una colección breve que iniciaremos, pero que exige una extensión máxima de un manuscrito de no más de cien a ciento diez páginas, lo que quiere decir, alrededor de treinta mil palabras.

Sabrá usted que es la nuestra una nueva editorial sobre cuyos orígines le informará el folleto que le acompañp.

Me agradará recibir sus noticias y mientras tanto, quedo de usted su muy afmo. y atto. amigo.

ARNALDO ORFILA REYNAL.
Director General.

AOR/eov.

Dirección Postal:
Apartado, 27-506
México, D.F.

Cables: SIGLOEDIT - México, D.F.

México, D.F., Enero 23 de 1967.
AOR-1218

Sr. Vilém Flusser
C/o. Livraria Martins
Edificio Mario de Andrade
Rua Rocha 274
Sao Paulo, Brasil.

Muy estimado señor Flusser:

Nuestro querido amigo Octavio Paz nos envía su dirección, lo cual nos permite escribirle directamente para manifestarle que tendríamos interés en publicar algún último trabajo suyo. Le confieso que no conozco personalmente ninguna de sus obras, aunque sí su prestigio y su nombre.

Me interesaría saber si la "Istoria do Diabo" están libres sus derechos de traducción al español o si tendría usted algún ensayo —no sé si "Lingua e Realidade"— para una colección breve que iniciaremos, pero que exige una extensión máxima de un manuscrito de no más de cien a ciento diez páginas, lo que quiere decir, alrededor de treinta mil palabras.

Sabrá usted que es la nuestra una nueva editorial sobre cuyos orígenes le informará el folleto que le acompaño.

Me agradará recibir sus noticias y mientras tanto, quedo de usted su muy afmo. y atto. amigo.

[firma manuscrita]
ARNALDO ORFILA REYNAL.
Director General.

AOR/eov.

Dirección Postal:
Apartado, 27-506
México, D.F.

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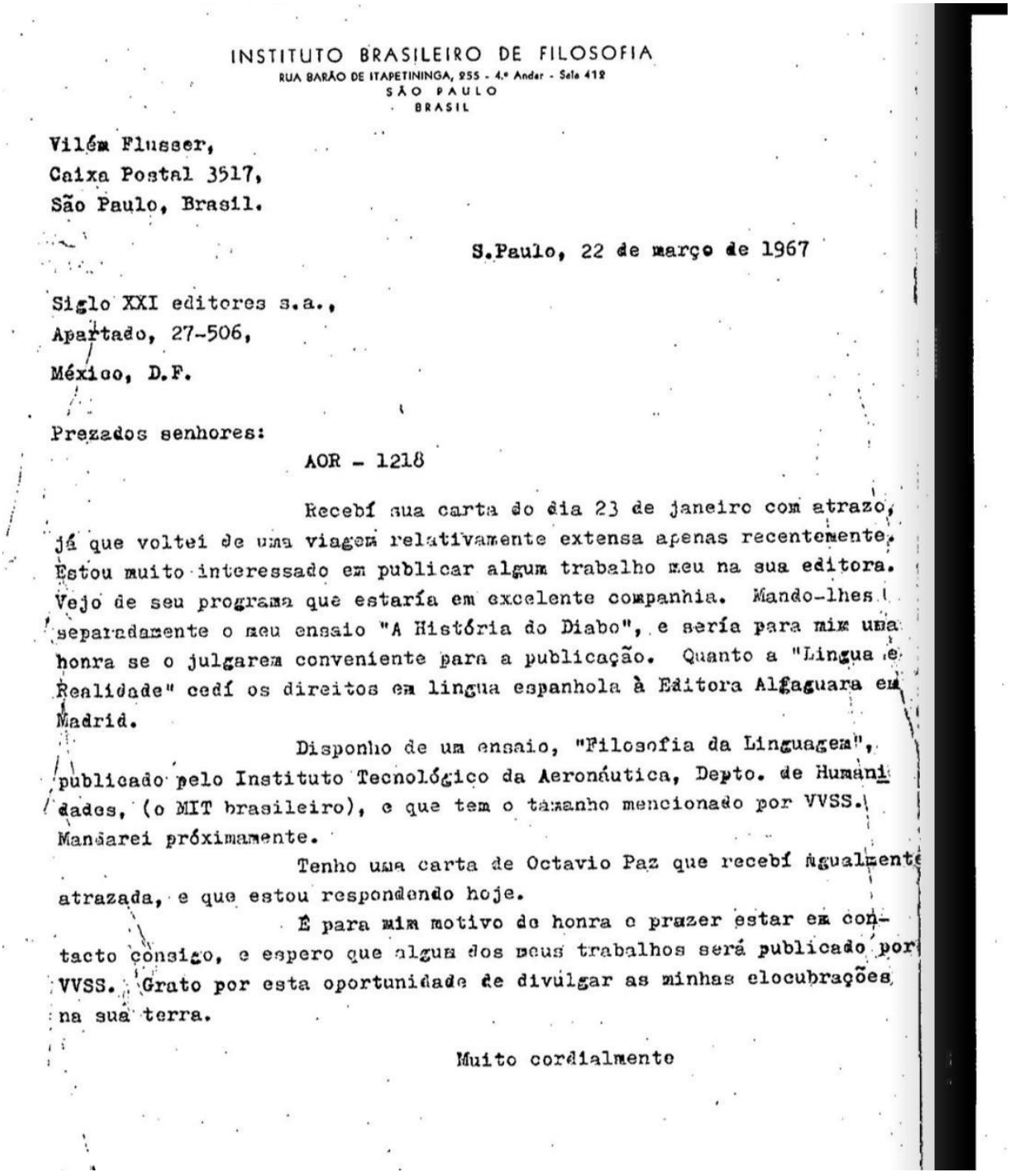
Letter 2. From Vilém Flusser to Arnaldo Orfila



INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE FILOSOFIA
RUA BARÃO DE ITAPETININGA, 255 - 4.º Andar - Sala 412
SÃO PAULO
BRASIL

Vilém Flusser,
Caixa Postal 3517,
São Paulo, Brasil.

S.Paulo, 22 de março de 1967

Siglo XXI editores s.a.,
Apartado, 27-506,
México, D.F.

Prezados senhores:

AOR - 1218

Recebí sua carta do dia 23 de janeiro com atrazo, já que voltei de uma viagem relativamente extensa apenas recentemente. Estou muito interessado em publicar algum trabalho meu na sua editora. Vejo de seu programa que estaría em excelente companhia. Mando-lhes separadamente o meu ensaio "A História do Diabo", e sería para mim uma honra se o julgarem conveniente para a publicação. Quanto a "Lingua e Realidade" cedí os direitos em lingua espanhola à Editora Alfaguara em Madrid.

Disponho de um ensaio, "Filosofia da Linguagem", publicado pelo Instituto Tecnológico da Aeronáutica, Depto. de Humanidades, (o MIT brasileiro), e que tem o tamanho mencionado por VVSS. Mandarei próximamente.

Tenho uma carta de Octavio Paz que recebí igualmente atrazada, e que estou respondendo hoje.

É para mim motivo de honra e prazer estar em contacto consigo, e espero que algum dos meus trabalhos será publicado por VVSS. Grato por esta oportunidade de divulgar as minhas elocubrações na sua terra.

Muito cordialmente

INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE FILOSOFIA / RUA BARÃO DE ITAPETININGA, 255 - 4.º Andar - Sala 412 / SÃO PAULO / BRASIL

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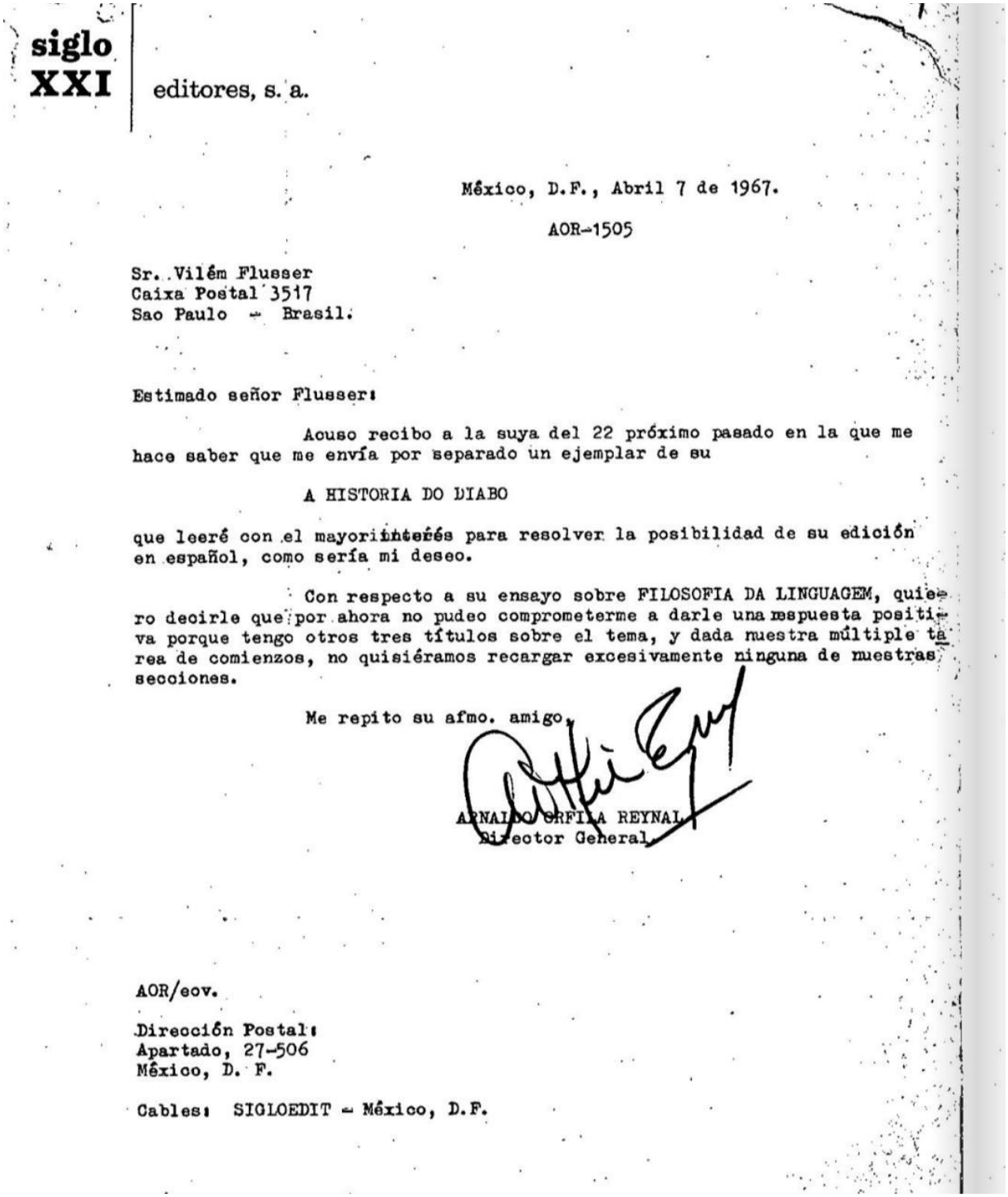

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México, D.F., Abril 7 de 1967.

AOR-1505

Sr. Vilêm Flusser
Caixa Postal 3517
Sao Paulo - Brasil.

Estimado señor Flusser:

Acuso recibo a la suya del 22 próximo pasado en la que me hace saber que me envía por separado un ejemplar de su

A HISTORIA DO DIABO

que leeré con el mayor interés para resolver la posibilidad de su edición en español, como sería mi deseo.

Con respecto a su ensayo sobre FILOSOFIA DA LINGUAGEM, quiero decirle que por ahora no pudeo comprometerme a darle una respuesta positiva porque tengo otros tres títulos sobre el tema, y dada nuestra múltiple tarea de comienzos, no quisiéramos recargar excesivamente ninguna de nuestras secciones.

Me repito su afmo. amigo,

ARNALDO ORFILA REYNAL
Director General

AOR/eov.

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