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Encountering Bibliophagus:
An Aesthetics of Reading

“...it is not about what the philosophers say, but how they say it...the essence of philosophy does not reside in its enunciations, but in its climate...”

Vilém Flusser, *The History of the Devil*

We are strangers to ourselves, the strangeness never leaves us, but we become adept at covering it over, experts in the avoidance of our own uncanniness. The world is unfathomable, ungraspable in all its transitional “thisness”, yet standing out in such openness is hard to bear we become great constructionalists, scaffolding buttresses and layer upon layer of ground; taking up home in the thick skin of an unquestionable “I”; inhabiting the blanket of comfort Vilém Flusser describes and decries: “Habit is like a cotton blanket. It covers up all the sharp edges, and it dampens all noises. It is unaesthetic (from *aisthēsthai* = perception), because it prevents bits of information from being perceived, as edges or noises. Because habit screens perceptions, because it anaesthetizes, it is considered comfortable [...] Habit makes everything nice and quiet. (Flusser 2002a: 105)

And even so, the strangeness still pervades our being, awakening in moments of doubt, wonder, perplexity; the death of a loved one; the shock of the sea; the dark heart of the night and its echoing question, ‘*who am I?*’; the flicker of otherness across a known face; the immensity of a child’s astonishment; moments of unearthed groundlessness where a tear forms in the fabric of the snared weave through which I glimpse the fleeting phenomenality of the world and the ephemeral haecceity of my own being – this all too brief dash of a passage between birth and death; moments where the thick skin of this “I” is disturbed, unsettled, in the ec-stasis of a here and now; moments of exile from the soft blankets of habit, the comfort of the known, where the “everyday” ordinarily blundered through is perceived anew in the shock of the *aesthetic* eventness of the strange.

Yet, what is strangest and uncanniest of all, as Martin Heidegger proffered, is not the sudden “thisness” of the world, but that this suchness has been dialled down through habit. The strange,

the *unheimlich*, is not the weird or extraordinary, but the very ordinary itself *awoken to* itself in its questionability: “This possibility of the intensification of the character of the there of something which comes down on us like a storm or is already there as an inconvenience lies right within the *inexplicit* self-evidence of the familiarity of the there of the everyday world. The strange is only this inexplicit familiarity insofar as it has been shaken up and awakened and is now being encountered in the character of unfamiliarity. This lack of familiarity is not merely something occasional, but rather belongs to the very temporality of the world’s being-encountered. (Heidegger 1999: 77)

As Heidegger would have it, the strangeness of the world belongs to the very experience of living, which is constantly turning, unfolding, moment from moment *differently*, otherwise than expected. Questionability, rather than an anomaly to our existence in the world, *belongs* to the very structure of our experience, where our encounters, however familiar, are always accompanied by the shadow of the unforeseeable and unknown. The uncanny, in this sense, lies not in this *alterity* of the world being encountered, but that such strangeness gets covered over – we become benumbed to the very questionability of the everyday and the “world being encountered appears as simply there in a straightforward manner.” (Heidegger 1999: 80)

The task of the thinker, in this light, might be considered as the attempt to return us to a questionable existence in the world, to peel back this blanket of habit which screens our everyday perception, and to make *aesthetic* once again the ordinary. In the field of writing it may mean, not a wielding of language as an instrumental transparency, but a letting it be an organ of perceiving once more, exiling it from its *unaesthetic* sclerosis in habitual articulation; unsettling it from its *anesthetising* blankets of comfort.

Bibliophagus

“One day, while consulting some text books on ancient Zoology in the University library, I happened to notice a beautiful 18th Century Bible. I reached for it, opened it haphazardly on the page of Genesis where the creation of Man is related. There I found a Bibliophagus scanning the page with his antennae. As this is a rather rare event, I stopped to observe it. But so did the Bibliophagus. He stopped scanning the page and stretched his antennae in the direction of my finger. Very carefully, I extended my finger to allow him to feel it. The tips of the antennae began exploring my fingertip, but, all of a sudden, they changed their motion. They began, very slowly at first, but in a rapidly accelerating rhythm, a very curious sort of drumming. I must now describe, as coolly as I can, the tremendous and uncanny effect this had on me. It was as if, all of a sudden,

my whole being were concentrated on the tip of my finger. My whole body was paralysed as if in a trance [...]. What I clearly felt, however, was that something was penetrating my body through my finger tip, something which, for the lack of a better term, I shall call a 'message'. The 'message' was a rhythm and my whole body began to vibrate with it. I had never before experienced such rhythm, although it reminded me, when I tried to analyse it later, of the rhythm of some of Sophocles' plays, and, simultaneously, of an Evening Raga." (Flusser Bibliophagus: 3)

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As an auto-didact, it is unquestionable that reading was a practice of huge significance for Flusser. Self-directed, his was a course beaten out by the idiosyncrasy of his own searching, rather than following a programmed way pre-configured in advance. Such a path is one mapped out for us in his philosophical self-portrait "In Search of Meaning (Philosophical Self-Portrait)", which is, by all accounts, a recollection of his trajectory of *reading*, one that crosses back over itself several times. For Flusser, as we learn in this essay, this search was his calling as a *writer*, whose field of inquiry is *language* itself. Yet it is a search which has failed to find its meaning, and a calling which knows it cannot be found, for to find it would be the end of the game. "Taken thus", he says, "my failure has a religious taste to it. Mine was a life without religion and in search of religion, and is this not, after all, a definition of philosophy? At least of one type of philosophy? I am a failure, because I live philosophy. Which is to say that philosophy is my life." (Flusser 2002b: 198) If such reading, and its extension as writing, could not reach a meaning, just what was this reading for? For Flusser, it seems, it was simply to *live*.

An unpublished essay entitled "Proposal for a model to be used in the criticism of written texts, (Aesthetic Approach)", sits idly in the selection of essays copied during one of my reading sessions at Flusser's archive in Berlin, which I have hauled out to help me write this essay. It is a text that I am reminded of for its strange resonance with the excerpt from Bibliophagus I have just read. In it, Flusser describes a way of reading, which, as he distinguishes, differs from either a semantic approach directed at analysing the text's *meaning*, or a syntactic approach directed at analysing the text's *structure*. What he comes to call the *aesthetic* approach is a concern not with the denotative or connotative significance of the text, but with its *affect*. As he describes, this affect "accords well with the etymology of the word 'aesthetics' which implies 'living experience', or 'feeling'. The effect of a text upon the receiver is a sort of vibration, ('sympathy and antipathy'). (Flusser, Proposal: 3)

In lieu of a view which treats texts as discourses communicating a message to a reader, the

aesthetic takes texts as *dialogical* attempts, where the effort is not to communicate “what is or what ought to be” (ibid: 4), but to make a *demand* on the reader, to *call* them, *provoke* them into their own creative response. This provocation occurs, as Flusser sketches it, to the extent the text is a renewal of the *aesthetics* of language, on the visual and aural levels of its use. The more divergent the text is from the predictable, habitual presentation of language on these levels the more provocative tension it holds within it to call another text into being. As Flusser puts it:

This is what Rilke had in mind when he said that the message of the torso of the Apollo of Belvedere is: “Du musst dein Leben ändern” (you must change your life). Now this aesthetic aspect of messages of texts is not imperative [...] it is 'open'. It does not impose, it proposes. This is what is dialogical about them: they demand response, and they put the responsibility for the response upon the receivers of their message. The answer to Mozart's symphonies are Beethoven's symphonies[...].“ (ibid: 4)

The provocation of the text lies, in this sense, less in *what* is said than *how* – in the perceivable *aesthetic* of a way of saying. It is a sentiment Flusser re-articulates throughout his writing. In his essay “Waiting for Kafka”, for example, he draws a distinction between a *critical reading* which approaches the text as an *answer* putting an “end to a previous conversation”, and a *speculative reading* which approaches the text as a *provocation* that *calls* the next conversation into existence through *sympathy*, in, as Flusser puts it, “the Greek sense of the word, 'vibration-with'. The word *sympathy* sprouts from the humus of music. Consider, for a moment, the viola d'amore: in the viola, particular strings vibrate in sympathy with the strings being played by the bow.” (Flusser 2002c: 151) It is re-iterated again differently in *Does Writing Have a Future*, where the crucial aspect of the text lies in its success at creating a unified rhythm at all levels of language. “Texts must flow”, he says, “[...] Compressed letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs must follow one on the other [...] Particle of text must be built into a wave structure. It is about rhythm, about layered levels of rhythm. Each single level of letters, words, sentences and paragraphs must resonate on the musical, lexical, semantic, and logical levels of the text. Only if a text is in harmony can a reader agree or disagree with it, can a reader resonate in sympathy or antipathy.” (Flusser 2011: 44)

Through the aesthetics of a configured rhythm the text becomes an *aesthesis*, a *living experience*; the singularity of the text's rhythm is the resonant provocation calling another to respond. In this sense, the more the text manifests its own aesthetic attunement from within its singular use of language, the more it sloughs off the comfortable unaesthetic, anesthesising habit of the expected. It is this *aesthesis*, which Flusser indicates, is the true quest of reading when he says “in the living experience of reading a text, we discover [...] some texts provoke our response much more

strongly than others. They are more truly dialogical, more 'authentically' aesthetic than others. In fact, this discovery of the degree of provocation to dialogue in a text is our purpose in reading. We read, in order to have an experience, which means in order to be changed by the text, in order to dialogue with it." (ibid: 6)

What is read, in this sense, matters less than the occasion it offers to be provoked into dialogue, where I am forced to, as Heidegger put it, *undergo an experience* – be depropriated, changed: "To undergo an experience with something – be it a thing, a person, or a god – it means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of 'undergoing' an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens. To experience something means to attain it along the way, by going along the way. To undergo an experience with something means that this something, which we reach along the way in order to attain it, itself pertains to us, meets and makes its appeal to us, in that it transforms us into itself." (Heidegger 1977: 57)

The aesthetic presentation of the text, its idiosyncratic rhythm, *disturbs* me from the habitual abode of an unquestionable "I" – in undergoing an experience with it, a provocative encounter, I am altered, changed. In the shock of the aesthetic eventness of the strange, the text ruptures the veil of habit, cutting through, as Flusser puts it in *Post-History*, alienated symbolisation, and returning us to "the concrete experience of our own death in the Other". (Flusser 2013: 167) A truth which has to be *experienced* is one in which *living* itself is at stake, it is a *pro-vocation*, a form of human vocation that is *for* the *vocation* of the other. In provoking another to respond, the text is a call to the reader to make an attempt at their own project of existence – it is *for* their freedom. In allowing themselves to *resonate* with the text, the reader is *for* the writer, recognising themselves in their project.

The two-fold action of reading as that of being *struck* and attempting to respond corresponds too to the creative nature of the intellect Flusser sketches in one of his earlier books, *On Doubt*, where the two-fold action is here depicted as the manner in which the intellect confronts the unconstruable *suchness* of the world through the *poetic intuition* of *calling*, and the critical act of *conversing*. The poetic is understood here not as a genre of literature but as the chiasmic encountering of self and world, self and other – it is the shock, the ancient *thaumazein*, of being confronted with the sheer inarticulability of facticity. "Verse", as Flusser opines, is the language which reverberates with this shock, holds within it some taste of this sensation of standing outside oneself, giving to language its "religious climate": "Holiness is the experience of the limitation of the intellect and its absurd ability to overcome this limitation by calling and proclaiming proper names.

Poetry, being the borderline situation of language, brutally reveals the absurdity of the effort of thinking. The inarticulable, as it is penetrated by poetry, demonstrates what it is: inarticulable. The proper name reveals the insurmountable abyss that separates the intellect from the inarticulable precisely because it is a conquest of the intellect. Language grows, but the inarticulable remains untouched.” (Flusser 2014: 62)

Language comes close to the suchness of the world to the extent that it allows for this inarticulable alterity to shock it. The call of the poetic intuition is marked, in this way, by its *incapacity* to signify the “thing”, where language “succeeds” only insofar as it “fails”. What the call signifies is, as Flusser notes, “nothing but itself”, (ibid. 76) what could otherwise be said with Walter Benjamin as the *communicability* of language. “Our exile from the 'thing' and our longing for the 'thing' is precisely the bedazzlement by the light that we are; this impenetrable light blinds us”. (ibid: 77) The most provocative texts, in this sense, are those, which contain within their articulation a trace of the *inarticulable*, not as what must be passed over in silence, what cannot be said, but as the very saying of language itself; the vibrational *shock* of language against the inarticulable; the *calling* of language. It is this vibrational singularity of language, which allows for the resonance with another. In this sense, the ethical responsibility of the writer to the reader pertains less to the *content* of what is articulated, and more to their renewing the *communicability* of language – what signifies nothing but itself and our incapacity to articulate the unarticulable. Such is the originary *doubt* of the intellect, the ordinary strangeness of exile language casts us into disconnecting us from the world while at the same time connecting us to it.

As Flusser saw the dilemma of his age, thought ceases to be thinking to the extent it has turned its back on this poetic intuition – the *limit* of language and the intellect, where it is recognised that “the intellect is not an instrument for the domination of chaos, but an ode in praise of the indomitable”. (ibid: 69) To converse authentically in this sense, is to allow the inarticulable to remain at the center of conversation, as the “meaning” of the “conversation's dance”; the unfolding of the vibration of shock; an ode to the inarticulable. “Authentic conversation is the ritual prayer that explains the adoration that is the proper name”. (ibid: 81) Without this “center” of the inarticulable as conversation's meaning, we dive headlong into the spinning circle of small talk where “the exuberant and terrifying experience has evaporated”; where the shock of encounter with facticity can no longer be felt. Such small talk is *meaningless* not in the sense of not “signifying” but in the sense of being alienated from the intellect's purpose of articulating the inarticulable – what cannot be “said” *in* language, but what the saying of language itself says. As Flusser puts it quite harshly, “we are always conversing more rigorously about less. And we are conversing not in order to converse, but to polemicize. We are not critics but propagandists”. (ibid: 90)

The “poetic” is the *aesthesis*, *which* protects the indominable expansion of the intellect – to shock against the unforeseeable, the unpredictable, to be *grasped*. An aesthetic approach to reading, in this ilk, is an ever on-going *intensification* of one's existence in the world; a deepening of the enigma of being, rather than its explanation. Reading gives me no answers, it gives me occasions for encounters where I am exiled from the comfort of the abode of an “I” and cast into attending to the shock of the aesthetic eventness of the strange. I read to be undone, to fall into the groundlessness of my existence and thus my potentiality for being otherwise. Reading is an assaying and transformation of my life, where I leave the petty grievances of my *du jour* concerns, and attend, through the call of an other, to a more expansive sense of being. *What* I read, in this sense, is only the pretext for this journey towards myself, in search of myself. The crux of philosophy, what makes readable those texts, which have been read to death it seems, is the crossing of their path with poetry – those instances which shock us into ponderment and wonder, into the *thaumazein* of thinking's arche encountering the inarticulable. Such texts are indeed akin to Rilke's aphoristic statement: “you must change your life”.

Reading, in this sense, has a future to the extent that we ourselves have a future, that is, as beings who have their own being as a question – thinking, meditative beings – those who attempt to project an existence against the thrownness of their condition; seekers whose responsibility is one of response to the call of the inarticulable.

Ending his book *On Doubt*, Flusser proposes that it has been an attempt to obstruct the so-called progress of Western thought, it has been a waiting for a different conversation to occur, another thinking that is not a conquering claim, but an adoration, a thinking “currently unimaginable”. (ibid: 99) A thinking whose aim is not the explication of reality, nor the “self-sufficient discipline in search of a perfect internal consistency”, but is a fundamentally “aesthetic intellectual effort, an attempt to compose a perfect prayer, a prayer in praise of the unarticulated”. (ibid: 86) Such an *aesthetic* intellectual effort would once again be an adventure and a celebratory feast – a thinking that would alter us not into something different, but into simply being human again, where we remain in contact with the invisible underlining of that which is manifested, takes form, is shown – at its core, the *strangeness* of being-here, the enigmatic facticity of living. Not *what* the world is, but *that* it is at all. I end, thus, with Flusser's words as the heart of the provocation of this essay: “Let us continue the great adventure that thought is, but let us sacrifice the proud madness of wishing to dominate the all-different with our thought. Let us face the all-different, by adoring it, that is, by being doubtful and submissive. In other words, let us once again be thinking beings; let us once again be humans.” (ibid: 100)

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