

## Rodrigo Maltez Novaes

### Translator's Note

“The Devil on the street, in the middle of a whirlwind.”

João Guimarães Rosa, 1956

Vilém Flusser met Edith Barth, his future wife, at the age of fifteen in 1935. The ensuing experiences they shared during the prewar years of escalating fear and uncertainty, including their subsequent flight from the Nazi invasion of Prague in 1939, a few months before the outbreak of war, cemented a strong emotional bond between them that remained unbroken, even after his tragic death in 1991. Flusser escaped Prague in March of 1939 with the Barth family to London, where they spent one year before immigrating to Brazil, fearing that the Nazis would also invade England. His father, Gustav Flusser, had been offered a position at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, but chose to stay in Prague under the belief that the situation would not be as bad as others expected. Unfortunately, all of Flusser's immediate family perished in concentration camps including his father Gustav, his mother Melitta, and his ten-year-old sister Ludvika.

In his haste when leaving Prague, Flusser was only able to take along two of his material possessions: a small Jewish prayer book, given to him by his mother at the last minute, and a copy of Goethe's *Faust*. The four years between meeting his future wife and the escape from Prague was a period of increasing fragmentation and confusion. In his autobiography, *Bodenlos*,<sup>1</sup> Flusser writes about the increasing sense of groundlessness that emerged among the Prague Jewish community during those years prior to the Nazi invasion. The resulting philosophical and cultural absurdity and fragmentation, generated by the impending arrival of the Nazis, marked him so deeply that it became one of the central tenets of his existential project from then on; a sense of groundlessness that manifested itself through an immediate experience of the absurd nature of existence, as well as through a loss of meaning and a subsequent search for a new meaning of life and of the human condition. In a short self-portrait, written in 1969, entitled *Em Busca de Significado*,<sup>2</sup> he describes the preceding thirty years in a succinct but poetic style: “I am the son of well-off, intellectual, bourgeois, Prague-Jews; I spent

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<sup>1</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Bodenlos (Groundless)*, Anna Blume, São Paulo, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Em Busca de Significado (In Search of Meaning)*, in *Rumos da Filosofia Atual no Brasil*, Edições Loyola, São Paulo, 1975.

my childhood and adolescence in the inebriating, spiritual and artistic atmosphere of Prague between the Wars. I survived, stunned, the bestial and stupid Nazi “earthquake” (which devoured my world, that is: not only my others and my things, but also the scales of values that structured my world). The fury of the events spat me out in Brazil – which was a plastic, very amorphous, hungry, and thirsty situation in every sense, including the ontic sense. I was spat out in Brazil at a plastic and assimilable age, therefore I have spent the last thirty years of my life searching for myself in Brazil and for Brazil within myself. If to live is to try to orient oneself, then I have lived intensely, that is, in a philosophical manner. But if to live is to be oriented, then I have not yet started to do it, by engaging myself. I have been available all my life, and I am still available. [...] If I have not found myself in Brazil or Brazil within myself, it is because I have not found the foundation of my being-in-the-world. By formulating it in this way, my failure acquires a religious flavor. My life has been a life without religion but in search of religion; could this not be, perhaps, a definition of philosophy, or at least of a type of philosophy? I am a failure because I live philosophy, which is equivalent to say that philosophy is my life.” This quote illustrates some of the fundamental aspects that the reader will encounter in *The History of the Devil*, although in allegorical form. The first manuscript of the book was written in German in 1958, during the time that Flusser began his engagement with the Brazilian intellectual scene. The years between his arrival in Brazil and the late 1950s, were years of intense autodidactic studies but also of a feeling of intellectual isolation. During these years, he worked in a radio transistor factory during the day as an accountant and spent his evenings reading. It is important to note that Flusser never received an academic degree. Despite initiating a Bachelor’s Degree in Prague before fleeing, and studying for two semesters at the London School of Economics, once in Brazil, he never continued his formal academic studies, preferring to study alone. Throughout this period, continuously encouraged by Edith, now his wife, Flusser never stopped reading and writing. In the early 1950s, he wrote several early essays and in 1957 he concluded his first full monograph, *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert*, which remains unpublished. This text already touched on many of the themes, albeit in a less elaborate form, that he would later include in *The History of the Devil*.

Flusser’s main intellectual contact during this period was with his compatriot Alex Bloch, a free-thinker and a free spirit, who also found himself in Brazil escaping the war. The dialogue between Flusser and Bloch was of an intense philosophical nature, and Flusser names Bloch as one of the main intellectual influences of his early development in addition to his wife Edith and his cousin David Flusser, with whom he corresponded throughout his life. In the 1950s, during one of his many intellectual excursions, while working as a general assistant to a Buddhist monk, Bloch introduced Flusser to Zen Buddhism, which both of them studied and practiced. Flusser eventually con-

vinced Bloch to abandon the practice. However, the study of Zen Buddhism, as well as the Veda, had a profound effect upon Flusser, which eventually led him to write *The History of the Devil* with the intention of contrasting Eastern and Western cultural values. Flusser and Bloch disagreed on many philosophical aspects but agreed strongly upon two: the groundless nature of human existence, and the need to existentialize Neopositivism. Hence, these concepts form some of the matrixes that appear in *The History of the Devil*.

After Flusser completed the first manuscript of the book in 1958, seven years would go by before the second version, written in Portuguese, was published in Brazil. In the late 1950s he started to teach at the Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo, through the help of Milton Vargas, who became his closest friend and correspondent. This was also the period when he began to be published in the literary supplement of the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper. These activities eventually led to him becoming a member of, and giving lectures at, the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy. This inaugurated what would become Flusser's first period of intense literary production in which his intellect burst into action. Between the years of 1961 and 65 alone he produced four books, twelve courses (which were written as series of ten to twenty essays and subsequently structured into books, but never published), fifty-six essays for newspapers, sixteen essays for philosophical magazines, including the magazine of the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy and the magazine of the Institute of Technology and Aeronautics, as well as many uncommissioned, independent essays, which remain unpublished to this day. In fact, his level of production remained intense throughout his life, writing everyday for at least four hours in the morning, and always re-writing, translating and re-translating his texts in four different languages, German, Portuguese, English, and French. However, during the early 1960s his intellectual production was almost exclusively in Portuguese.

In 1966 Flusser embarked upon an extended trip, sponsored by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the USA and Europe, which was to be his first return to the old continent, accompanied by Edith, after almost thirty years. Throughout the trip, he gave lectures at academic institutions and promoted his two most recent books, *Lingua e Realidade*<sup>3</sup> and *A História do Diabo*,<sup>4</sup> to international publishers in addition to introducing them to the broader Brazilian cultural and intellectual scene. During this trip, Flusser was invited to publish with German periodicals and became the Brazilian correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which ultimately resulted in many essays in German, several of which also remain unpublished. Some of the most notable meetings during the trip were with well-known thinkers such as Theodore Adorno, Max Bense, Hannah Arendt, and Max

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<sup>3</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Lingua e Realidade* (Language and Reality), Herder, São Paulo, 1963. First edition.

<sup>4</sup> Vilém Flusser, *A História do Diabo* (The History of the Devil), Martins, São Paulo, 1965. First edition.

Brod, and in his correspondence to friends in Brazil he reports that the meeting with Adorno impressed him and that Adorno attended his lecture in Frankfurt about the emerging Brazilian intellectual scene.

Curt Meyer-Clason, the prominent German translator of Brazilian literature, who had unsuccessfully attempted to secure a publisher for *The History of the Devil* in Germany on Flusser's behalf, wrote him a brief comment regarding both versions of the book in a letter from January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966 prior to Flusser's trip: "The *A História do Diabo* - I have them on the trip and have read two-thirds: In the Portuguese version you have a dry sense of humor, a mischievous irony that is not so present in the German version. That is interesting, I see the fact that the language of your adopted country expresses your intentions more accurately. - The manuscript is with PIPER, and with SUHRKAMP. I hope that one or the other will take it. I'll let you know at the earliest as to what happens."

It was around the early 1960s that Flusser met João Guimarães Rosa, perhaps Brazil's greatest Modernist writer. Guimarães Rosa's most important work *Grande Sertão: Veredas*,<sup>5</sup> earned Flusser's admiration and when Meyer-Clason, translated the book to German in 1964, Guimarães Rosa asked Flusser to assist with some aspects of the text revision. Both Guimarães Rosa and Flusser shared a love for Goethe's *Faust* and declared it to be the main inspiration behind *Grande Sertão: Veredas* and *The History of the Devil* respectively. Indeed, Flusser started to write his book immediately after having read Guimarães Rosa's book, such was the impact it had on him. The principal aspect of Guimarães Rosa's work that impressed Flusser was his syntactic innovations and the poetic possibilities that it afforded to the creation of textual images. Guimarães Rosa's style encouraged Flusser to develop his own syntax in Portuguese, which was widely praised for its unique flavor. Flusser was proud of his command of the Portuguese language, which he developed a deep love for in the 1950s, when he started to open up emotionally and intellectually to Brazil and began to accept the fact that he was not going back to Prague. Flusser never wrote in Czech, his native language, instead he focused on German and Portuguese as his main languages, and English and French as subsidiary ones, especially after his return to Europe in 1972. When asked why he did not write in Czech, he responded that in fact he did, but that he wrote "in Czech" through many different languages. According to him the syntax of the Czech language is too soft to generate the levels of articulation that he sought. In an unpublished essay from the 1960s, titled "O Estilo de Guimarães Rosa" Flusser focuses on the syntax of Guimarães Rosa's work, which hints at the significance punctuation would eventually have in his own work: "The Portuguese language has, as every literary language does, a set of rules for punc-

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<sup>5</sup> Guimarães Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (The Devil to Pay in the Backlands), José Olympio, Rio de Janeiro, 1956. First edition.

tuation, a fluid and not so rigorous set, but even so, relatively fixed, traditionally. The commas, the full stop, the semicolons etc. are visual symbols, ideograms that interrupt the flux of the phrase, which consists of words notated in alphabetical letters, which in turn are musical notations. Therefore, they work in two ways: they open gaps in the structure of the phrase, and they introduce foreign elements into these gaps. However, the ritualization of the use of these interruptions veils their character to the reader's eyes, who passes over them, since he is used to them. He does not notice that the comma, for example, has torn the compactness of the phrase, and opened something like a window toward the unarticulated, within which the phrase articulates itself. Therefore, Guimarães Rosa breaks with tradition, dismisses the rules, and ends the ritual. He puts commas, colons etc. in unexpected places, and takes them out of the usual places. Through this apparently simple trick, these ideograms reacquire their revealing character and force thought into deliberate movements. The effect of this is a kind of awakening from a dogmatic sleep (to speak with Kant), and a new sensibility toward the unarticulated.”

This prolific period and his different modes for publishing — books, newspaper essays, courses etc. — allowed Flusser to experiment with slightly different styles of writing, which later, in the 1970s, would condense into a fluid style of prose, at least for the books. In his texts from the 1960s, it is possible to identify three distinct syntactic approaches in his work. For the shorter forms of media such as magazines and newspapers, he adopted what could be called a “telegraphic” style that featured very short, punchy, compact phrases that appear like a string of one-line aphorisms. The style of the essays from his courses are also compact but have a more conversational style as he addresses the audience directly. These were designed to deliver the maximum amount of concepts as clearly as possible within the time assigned so that discussions could follow. Lastly, there is his “formal” style, which he adopted for the books. *The History of the Devil* is from this formal period and it is also the first book in which he makes full use of irony as a stylistic tool. In *Bodenlos*, he refers to his writing style as follows, “I write in the way I speak, and I speak in the way I write.”

*The History of the Devil* is Flusser's first major attempt at allegorical philosophy, or philosophical fiction, as he would later refer to it. In terms of style, *Lingua e Realidade* stands diametrically opposed to *The History of the Devil*, in that it presents the formal aspects of what is essentially the same argument but in a non-allegorical and analytic style, namely, the power of the creative human Will, but especially its creative action through language. This period of his production was mainly focused on the philosophy of language and its relation to the human intellect. For the development of *Lingua e Realidade* Flusser systematically re-studied the works of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, as well as several contemporary works on linguistics, philology, psychology and biology. But it was Wittgenstein and

Heidegger whom he decided to engage with in a deeper sense. For the catalog text of the 1965 edition of *The History of the Devil*, Flusser wrote: “The argument of the book is silently accompanied by the accords of Existential philosophy and Logicism, both tendencies of current thought that seem to the author to be modern forms of Manichaeism. It also appeals, with polemic intentions, to the nomenclature and terminology of both these philosophies, and the numbering of the paragraphs is a caricature of the Wittgensteinian method. However, the book tries to keep this philosophical backdrop distant from the argument on the surface, so as not to obstruct thought with technicalities.”

A caricature with polemic intentions, this is indeed the essence of *The History of the Devil*, and it should be read as such. This particular approach in his work, which he debuts with this text, was to become more and more present throughout his work in later years. In 1981 he wrote *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*,<sup>6</sup> which he refers to as a reworking of the themes of *The History of the Devil*, namely the arbitrary nature of values and their reversibility. However, in the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, the chiasmic pairs that he explores are between man/vampyroteuthis or man/animal, culture/nature, reason/emotion, rational/irrational, whereas in *The History of the Devil* the project is larger and therefore the chiasmic pairs presented are of a wider scope: God/Devil, Good/Evil, Heaven/Hell, East/West, life/death etc. The important thing to note here is, therefore, the underlying structure of these relations: Flusser was not a dialectician and as he mentions in the quote above, his aim was to overcome a Manichean, binary, approach to values. He sought to overcome dialectics but through a different approach to synthesis.

The classic Western interpretation of “synthesis” considers it as the fusion of two elements into one. In the Eastern interpretation it is more like the structure of the Chinese concept of Yin-Yang, where two distinct elements become entwined and revolve around each other in a double orbit, with equal weight. The structural form of the concept of Yin-Yang is one of a tensile relation, whereas in the Western concept of synthesis it is a compressive relation. In the West two come together to become one, but in the symbol of Yin-Yang, two come together to become three, where two elements spin around a central pivoting point – the union itself is the third, tensile, immaterial element. In the West, this pivoting point is what could be referred to as the “excluded third,” but in the Yin-Yang this is recognized as the essential support point. This structure of circular movement between two elements of equal value, eternally reversing their positions is essentially the overcoming of dialectics that Flusser adopted as a basis for the development of the arguments in his work, and which finds its first expression through his analysis of Western languages and the structure of the phrase in fusional

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<sup>6</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, Atropos Press, New York, 2011. First English edition.

languages. At its core, this structure contains the spiral and the double helix, which are also recurring structures in his work. The theme of circularity is present throughout *The History of the Devil* and may also be seen as a representation of a form of paradoxical reasoning: a rejection of a this-or-that structure of reasoning in favor of a this-and-that approach.

*The History of the Devil* has, therefore, a circular, expansive structure, which in close scrutiny could be said to mirror the structure of Flusser's oeuvre. To approach it from a structural perspective, one could say that his entire body of work has a fractal-like structure, where both the macro and micro levels are self-similar. Most of his essays have this circular flow of arguments, the books from the 1970s onwards also have a pseudo-circular structure, especially in the way that the essays are arranged, often having the last essay as a kind of introduction. The arguments in most of his books expand instead of contracting, and at the expected point of conclusion, they return to the beginning of the argument. In *The History of the Devil* this structure is very evident, therefore, it works better if the book is read continuously, in order to follow the flow of ideas and the gradual expansion of the argument, which is structured as a chain. If read in sections, the expansive nature and flow of ideas is easily lost and the arguments risk being interpreted as outlandish when taken out of context.

The Portuguese version of the book is slightly larger than the first German version of the manuscript from 1958. This is mainly due to the experiences that Flusser underwent during the seven years between 1958 and 1965, plus the staggering amount of work that he produced during the same period. By the time he rewrote the book in Portuguese, his intellect had not only suffered many impressions which altered him as a thinker, but it had also become more confident and mature, which invariably produced a different work. This was the only one of his main books in which the first version and the second, final version, were written so many years apart. His usual approach was to simultaneously rework his texts through self-translation and to have both final versions ready at the same time. However, the final version of *The History of the Devil* in Portuguese was never translated back to German. The current German version of the book was published posthumously from the 1958 manuscript, by European Photography in 1993, supervised by Edith Flusser, who continued to edit, translate and publish his work well into the early 2000s.

In the rewrite of 1965, Flusser expanded some of the chapters by adding sub-chapters to include, in the argument of the book, many of the topics that he had explored through his lectures at the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy. The numbering system of the chapters and paragraphs was also introduced, in order to visually resemble the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, which does not appear in the German version. However, this visual resemblance is, as previously mentioned, more of a caricature rather than a true application of Wittgenstein's structural method. Indeed the numbering system

is not consistent, for example there are many paragraphs that do not have numbers, but that are not outside the flow of the argument.

The manuscript of the Portuguese version is currently missing from the archive, therefore, for this translation I have used the first edition, the second edition, and Flusser's corrections on the proofs of the first edition. There is a slight difference between the numbering system of the first and second editions. In this respect I have chosen to follow the system of the second edition, which is more coherent and consistent, and I have also made minor corrections to obvious misprints. As for the style of the text, I have tried to keep it as close as possible to Flusser's own syntax and turn of phrase, as always. The advantage of translating the text from Portuguese into English is that most of what he does with the language can be reproduced without losing much of its rhythm or chromatic effect. As far as the terminology is concerned, Flusser generally avoids neologisms, often choosing to re-signify a word, or even strip it of its accumulated semantic layers in order to apply it in its strict sense, instead of generating a new lexicon (which is not to say he did not also engage in neologizing). This is particularly exemplified in the manner in which Flusser uses certain terms interchangeably in order to mean the same thing. For example, in this text the expression "the all-different" [*o de todo diferente*], which is a reference to Kierkegaard, is used to mean that which is our absolute Other, a concept which frequently recurs in other works from the same period, but was sometimes rendered in other terms such as "the ineffable," or "the inarticulable," or "the unarticulated," which could also mean "God," "Nature," "the world," or in other words, that which perplexes us and therefore frightens us into thought, into the need to articulate, to philosophize.

Lastly, some say that Flusser allegedly felt this book had magical qualities and for this reason he would not allow it in his house. This myth is difficult to prove or disprove, although it is clear he was aware of how much of himself he had poured into the book. In many ways, this book is an x-ray of his intellect; it is his mind stripped bare. The most telling sign of this is his enigmatic dedication *uxori omnia mea*. This is probably a reference to Cicero, but which gains a different dimension in Flusser's reformulation. In this case, he is not simply dedicating to his wife everything that belongs to him (material or immaterial), he is dedicating himself to her. *In nuce*, Vilém Flusser dedicates to Edith Flusser, through this book, all of what he is, was, and is still to become; powerful evidence of the strength of the mutual love that was born in the shadows of some of the most horrific events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Amor omnia vincit*.

Berlin 2013