

Vilém Flusser

Letter to Octavio Paz (October 1, 1966)

VILÉM FLUSSER

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São Paulo, SP.

São Paulo, October 1, 1967.

Mr. Octavio Paz,
Ambassador of Mexico,
New Delhi.

Dear friend,

Your letter of July 26, 1966¹, has been on my desk for four months now (since I have come back from Europe and the USA), and your labyrinth of solitude has been almost constantly in my mind. However, were it not for Celso Lafer's insistence, I would not have written to you even today. A certain intellectual reticence seems to hold me back – a reticence stronger than physical modesty (perhaps because the intellectual sin is the most heinous). But you know about this, given that you wander through forbidden realms. Allow me, then, as an attempt at dialogue, to tell you about my current troubles.

The Friend² asks if there might be a third term that transcends being and nothingness toward the other side, given that Christianity and existentialism merely contaminate being with nothingness and internalize it. (And I presume, Hegel transcends it toward "this" side.) In short, the Friend asks for a term that serves as the class name for which being and nothingness are members – thus, a meta-term within which being and nothingness coincide (not as negations of negations, but as complementarity). Framed this way, the problem becomes a matter of translation between the terms "being" and "nothingness" (in Wittgenstein's sense). And this is the question that currently occupies me. Is translating the same as transcending? Are models that coincide within meta-models transcended? And can meta-models be re-translated? Can a model's universe of discourse encompass the meta-model's universe of discourse? And if so, does the meta-model become a member of the model? For instance: If the third term encompasses "being" and "nothingness," is it not itself encompassed by "being" and by "nothingness" as well? Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show³? Ah, the devil.

¹ Translation from Portuguese into English by Rainer Guldin.

² In the Portuguese original Flusser addresses Octavio Paz as *O Amigo*.

³ This is a quotation from the third stanza of William Butler Yeats poem "The Statues".

Consider now not the terms “being” and “nothingness,” but the less radical terms “being” and “ought-to-be”. Kant asserts the impossibility of translation between the two. There is no passage between nature and value, between theory and praxis. Husserl affirms this translation within the transcendental reduction, but how? Through a descent into the bottomless self. It is the same Kantian abyss, merely under a different name. Yet if I cannot translate “being” into “ought-to-be” nor “ought-to-be” into “being,” I can neither live nor die (and such is the condition of us all, according to Artaud). Of course, a translation does exist namely, culture. Culture is being as it ought to be, and the ought-to-be that is, for it constitutes the realization of value and the loading of with reality with value. Yet culture (in Marx or Rickert, for instance) is an inferior translation—a transcendence toward the “this-side,” as the Friend puts it in his letter.

Consider now, no longer the terms “ser” and “dever ser,” but the terms “ser” and “estar.” (Those who think in Spanish and Portuguese can fully grasp the problem.) Translation involves ontology – not in the sense of ontology being an analysis of language, but in the sense of language being an analysis of being, which is being only within language. Mirror on mirror mirrored. And if there is translation between “ser” and “estar” – if there is, then, a relationship between myself and my world (if I am, effectively, myself and my circumstance – then what is the field of translation, the metalanguage? Me? Being? That being of which being-in-the-world is a member? Or is being not a member of being-in-the-world? Translation is synonymous with vertigo.

I do not know if these reflections, (which I could multiply ad nauseam),⁴ are comprehensible. They are shorthand notes, scattered cries of despair. I rely on your philosophical sixth sense, on your empathy, for the understanding of this letter. I rely, in short on that extremely rare synthesis in you of a keen, incisive intellect and intuitive sensitivity. At this moment, I wish to express my profound admiration for you.

Celso Lafer is planning a translation of some of your work for the “Estado de São Paulo Literary Supplement” (to which I contribute), and we will keep you posted. The Supplement is the premier cultural forum in Brazil. As for me, I wrote to the Joaquín Mortiz publishing house, following your suggestion. I received a reply from Siglo XXI – I told them to go to hell – but got no response. Naturally, I would like to be published in Mexico, especially because of you. (*Língua e Realidade*) is being released in Madrid by Alfaguara).

Please reply; don’t imitate me. Do you understand my reticence now?

With a warm embrace

⁴ For this idiosyncratic use of punctuation see Rainer Guldin “ , () , On Vilém Flusser’s Idiosyncratic Use of Commas and Round Brackets” in *Flusser Studies* 40, November 2025, <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-and-punctuation.pdf>.

Post-scriptum

“Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show ...
Translation is synonymous with vertigo.”

Vilém Flusser

In his dense philosophical letter to Octavio Paz⁵ – unearthed by Miguel Ángel Vilchis and Miriam Colín from the Vilém Flusser Archive in São Paulo⁶ – discussing the work of Kant, Husserl and Wittgenstein with a short reference to Artaud, Marx and Rickert, Flusser reflects on the nature of translation and its relationship to transcendence. He discusses three different opposition pairs: the relationship between “being” and “nothingness”, “being” and “ought-to-be” and the two Portuguese verbs *ser* and *estar*. The question of their relationship is linked to the existence of a third term, a meta-model that would comprehend the other two models and ensure a translation between them. “Framed this way, the problem becomes a matter of translation between the terms ‘being’ and ‘nothingness’ ... this is the question that currently occupies me. Is translating the same as transcending? Are models that coincide within meta-models transcended? And can meta-models be re-translated? Can a model’s universe of discourse encompass the meta-model’s universe of discourse? And if so, does the meta-model become a member of the model?”

These reflections resurface in later publications showing how Flusser keeps coming back to earlier ideas that he translates and retranslates into new contexts. In the essay “Para uma teoria da tradução” (For a Theory of Translation), published three years later in 1969⁷, Flusser differentiates between object-language and meta-language, a distinction that is dependent on the practice of translation itself. If one translates Portuguese into German then German is the meta-language, and Portuguese the object language. However, this relationship can always be reversed: a meta-language can become an object-language. This happens when German is translated into Portuguese. This reversibility prevents the formation of linguistic hierarchies. In Flusser’s view, the focus is on the target-language: it is not the original that plays the decisive role in translation but the language into which it is translated.

⁵ For the Portuguese original of Flusser’s letter, Octavio Paz’ letter, other related letters and the relationship between Paz and Flusser see Miguel Ángel Luna Vilchis’ and Miriam Sanabria Colín’ “La laberíntica historia del Diablo. Primera recepción de Flusser en México” / “The Labyrinthine History of the Devil. The First Reception of Flusser in Mexico” in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

⁶ This shows that there are still treasures hidden in the Archives, especially among the letters to which *Flusser Studies* is going to dedicate a future special issue.

⁷ Vilém Flusser, Vilém (1969) Para uma teoria da tradução. In *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* 19/73: 16–22.

In the 1970s and 1908s, Flusser picked up this question again⁸ in connection with the translation between languages and between images and texts. Instead of model and meta-model and object-language and meta-language, he now uses the terms object-code and meta-code. The original (the source) is the object-code and the translation (the target) the meta-code. In translation processes the two codes switch their roles.

The second question is that of retranslation, which plays a central role in Flusser's understanding of translation. What happens to a text if I translate it from the English original to Portuguese, from Portuguese to German, and then translate the German text back into the English original? In his view, each new translation carries with it the changes that occurred in the previous translations. The final retranslation, then, cumulates all the changes and feeds them back into the first text. This conception is developed in the essay "Retradução enquanto método de trabalho" (Retranslation as a working method)⁹ most probably written in the early 1970s.

Rainer Guldin, Lugano October 2026

⁸ Vilem Flusser (1996) *Kommunikologie*. Mannheim: Bollman: 341-342.

⁹ Published in *Flusser Studies* 15 – May 2013 (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.netS/files/media/attachments/flusser-retraducao.pdf>).