

## Vilém Flusser

### Valleys

(translated from the Portuguese by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes<sup>1</sup>)

We have several ways of relating to nature, some of which may be called “supernatural,” “theoretical,” or “perspectival” (according to our many tastes). One of these ways is to see nature as a map. In this view, we have inverted the epistemological relation between landscape and map. The map no longer represents the landscape, but now it is the landscape that represents the map. The map no longer serves as an instrument so that we may orient ourselves in the landscape, but now it is the landscape that serves as an instrument so that we may orient ourselves in the map. The truth stops being a function of the map’s adjustment to the landscape, and becomes a function of the landscape’s adjustment to the map. Such a furious idealism, drummed into our heads during high school, expresses itself in the sentence “the sea is blue, and the English dominions are red.” Under this view, valleys become the paths through which the water runs toward the ocean. Is this the “scientific” view?

We have, in this case, a particular model: that of water circulation. Here, the origin of the model does not matter. The model foresees (in the sense of “telling” or “prophesizing”) that one of the phases of the water cycle is the running of the water down the mountains through the valleys. The observation of the landscape confirms the model. Or in other words: the landscape adapts itself to the model (the “map”). It answered “yes.” Valleys are affirmative answers to the “spiritual” investigation (formal) of the map. Madness? Yes, in the sense of “spirit” as madness, of man as a mad animal. And not in the sense of “spirit” as negation, of man as an animal that can change valleys by building dams. For an engineer, this vision of the valley is “adequate.” For those who live in the valley, it is madness. But is it possible that engineers cannot live in valleys? They cannot. As engineers, they live in the maps.

I am not an engineer and I live in a valley. Or do I? Even though I am not an engineer, I am also man: a mad animal. I, too, was expelled from paradise, not just the engineers. I cannot live in the valley, or at least, not completely. I also live, partially, in the realm of engines, even though my engines are not the ones of the engineer. I do not practice “natural science,” as the engineer does. I am,

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poor me, a humanist. My madness is of another kind. Valleys for me are also paths. Certainly not for water, but paths for men. Here is why I cannot live so completely in the valley as the deer do. Deer roam in the valley and I walk through it. I cross the valley (be it the valley of tears or of smiles). *Homo viator*. Errant knight, errant Jew. Stranger. But not completely. If I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me. How green therefore is my valley! However, the valley is mine, and I am not its, because I also have a map, to which my valley must answer “yes or no” to adjust itself. My map, my engine, is this:

Humanity is a horde of invaders, of immigrants. It has invaded the landscape for approximately eight million years, in several waves: searching for reindeer, mammoths, grasses, cattle, salt, coal, and electricity; in sum, in search of happiness. Where the horde comes from is unknown. This is probably a false question; there is no method to answer it. However, it does not seem to be “false,” since eight million years is not such a long time after all. But where the horde goes is known. It climbs. It climbs along the rivers and streams in the opposite direction that the water runs. It climbs the valleys. The valleys are the arteries through which the blood of humanity’s river climbs. And the narrow mountain valleys are the capillaries. In them the invasion stagnates. They are dams, in the opposite sense from that of the engineer’s. In my map, the first are the last: the most courageous standard bearers, who form the tip of the invading spear, and who penetrate the narrowest valleys, remain dammed there in order to form the last vestiges of the horde. I live (in the problematic sense of the term) in a narrow mountain valley. Now my valley, answer me, “yes or no?” Answer my “perspectivist,” historicist, humanist question.

During the last interglacial period, this valley was probably inhabited by men of the Heidelberg species, when at the same time the lower plains were inhabited by *Homines sapientes*. When the plains were already Neolithic and grass was planted, here the Alpine goats were still Paleolithically hunted. When Rhaetian was being spoken in the plains and bronze was already used, here there were still Neolithic villages without division of labor. Here, Rhaetian was spoken when Latin and Greek were already spoken in the plains (and elsewhere).

When middle German dominated the Holy Empire, here Ladin was spoken. Today German is spoken here, when it is Italian that is spoken in the plains. Yet in the small side valleys Ladin is still spoken. And Rhaetian still has not died in small agglomerations above three thousand meters. And there are still houses built in the Neolithic way. And there are small isolated ponds at the foot of the glaciers, where people still fish in the Paleolithic way. And are there not Neanderthal and Heidelbergian traces on the faces of the mountain people? My valley has answered: “yes, I am structured ac-

ording to your map.” I live in a dam of human history, in which “anterior” becomes “the higher valley,” and “posterior” the “lower valley.” This type of stratification is contrary to that of geology. Unsurprisingly: the “humanities” have a different map than that of the “natural sciences.” Time runs in opposite directions according to both disciplines. In the natural sciences, it runs toward entropy; in the humanities, toward increasing information. The water runs in the opposite direction from that of the river of humanity. The historical stratification of my valley is in opposition to its geological stratification, just like the “spirit” is in opposition to the world, because the world is a passage, and “spirit” is adventure.

My valley is not interesting only for the fact that I live in it. It may be generalized. Is this not how the “spirit” functions: generalizing, classifying, and projecting “high?” That is: emptying? My concrete valley could here be generalized into an empty form: “a class of valleys.” That is why it is interesting. It may serve as a concrete example of the abstract class “valleys,” therefore, as an epistemological inversion. My valley is interesting because once this inversion is done, it allows for this type of question: tradition or progress? On my map, valleys are the places toward which progress advances and where it stagnates. But there, it stagnates in a particular structure: as the structure of “memory,” in the Platonic, biological, psychological and cybernetic sense (and maybe also in other senses). On my map, valleys are storage for information, they are conserves, therefore, traditional conservatives. On my map, progress runs uphill in order to be stored in the narrow valleys. On my map, the aim of progress is to be conserved. This is because my map is a humanist’s map, not an engineer’s. That is why the valley’s “*nunc stans*” appears to be an aim of the “*panta rhei*,” or in sum, as Shangri-La. All of humanism is utopian: it aims at the narrow plenitude of the valley, and sees in the wide vacuity of the plains as only one stage of the course.

First attempt at an answer: valleys are articulated. They are narrow and surrounded by obstacles that allow only a few difficult passages. This articulation turns them “organic,” that is, difficult to mechanize. They cannot be easily filled with “masses” that move mechanically. It is not possible to easily build in them pharaonic pyramids, *circuses maxima*, or fifty-story banks. Such things do not fit well in valleys, and not because they are “small.” The experience of the valley is grandiose, the mountains that surround them are much higher than the tallest pyramids, circuses, and banks. They are not good for “mass” culture, not because valleys are “small,” but because they are articulated. The massifying progress of the plains is, therefore, destined to become articulated (“humanized”) in the valleys.

Second attempt at an answer: valleys shelter. Every valley forms a universe, with its own fauna

and flora, slightly different from that of the next valley, with its own economy, social structure, architecture, music, and legends. And these universes that are the valleys do not communicate with each other, except with the plains, which are common to all. It is in this sense that valleys shelter: not in the sense of isolation from the rest of the world, but in the sense of indirect communication via large roundabouts. This is perhaps what distinguishes the cultures that spring from a network of narrow valleys, from the cultures of the plains: they are “confederative,” not “federal,” as are the ones from the plains. For example: Greek, Jewish, Tibetan, Toltec and Incan cultures compared to Roman, Mesopotamian, Hindu, Mayan and Chibchan cultures. The “civilizations” of the plains are therefore destined to become cultured in the valleys.

Other similar answers are possible and easy to formulate. All of them will say that history is a process that has the valley as an aim. Or that a happening is a process that has memory as an aim. Or that progress is a process that has tradition as an aim. In sum, they will all say that to store information (negentropy) is humanity’s aim. And they will all say that valleys (memories, tradition, negentropy) are not static places, where nothing ever happens. They are, on the contrary, places where information is constantly regrouped and restructured. To speak communicologically: valleys are places where discourses from the plains are dialogued. That is why valleys are the places for thinkers and poets, from Heraclitus to Nietzsche, David to Rilke. But not for prophets. Prophets do not inhabit valleys. My map does not encompass prophets. I must widen it.

Prophets pass through the valleys and climb all the way to the mountain’s summit. They go one step beyond the valley’s inhabitants, and then they return. On the way back they do not even rest in the valley that they cross. They go directly to the plains in order to tell their “news.” They tell of the view they had on the summit. For them, the valley is a channel between the plain and the summit, and the summit and the plain: an ambivalent channel. On the way up, it is a channel between redundancy and noise. On the way back, it is a channel between noise and new information. On the way up, it is a channel between mass alienation and solitude. On the way back, it is a channel between solitude and engagement. Here is what the valley is, in a map projected from the mountain’s summit: no longer a dam, but the place in between. In this map, whoever is in the valley is in the middle of their life. And the question that emerges in such a map is this: is the one who is in the valley still climbing or already going down? Is he still a thinker (the re-formulator of the plain’s discourse, of “prose”), or is he already a poet (the preparer of a new discourse)?

Therefore, in this second map (which is no longer historicist, but just as formal as the engineer’s map), humanity no longer appears in the form of a river over the valleys, but in the form of a circula-

tion that gyrates in the opposite direction to that of the water. They go up through the capillaries of narrow valleys, some drops project all the way up to the summits and then return laden with “news” in order to vivify the plains. This circulation of humanity climbs up as great rivers (the great “tendencies”), ramifies into deltas at the mountains (the several “heresies”), reaches the summits as individual drops (the great “heretics”), which then evaporate and re-condense into vivifying rain (“prophecy”). Consequently, in this second map, valleys are different paths than the ones in the first map. They are no longer paths that lead toward an aim. They are initiation paths for a return. “Decisive” paths.

He who has never climbed through a valley has never lived. He vegetates in the plains. For him, the third-dimension, that of the sublime, is missing. But he who has climbed through the valley and stayed there also did not live. It is true that he uprooted and de-alienated himself, but he remained hovering in the air, in availability. He must decide to climb higher, to isolate himself ever further on those summits that Rilke called “those of the heart,” those that not even eagles inhabit, and to risk himself in the solitude in which Unamuno says he “lost his truth.” But in such a decision he cannot wait for a Virgil, or a Godot, or any alpine guide. Or, he must decide to go back to the plains, without having had the risk of the climb, certainly not to be re-integrated, but to engage, because integration has become impossible for those who were in the valley, because for him, integration has now become a synonym of promiscuity. For having climbed the valley he is apocalyptic, and will never go back to being integrated. The “return” can never cancel the “going.” Whoever comes back is no longer the same; he is altered. He is informed even if he did not climb to the summit. Here is the decision that whoever has climbed through the valley must make: solitude without the guarantee of a return, or a return without having seen the summit.

Those who were born in the valleys do not see the summits. They look at the soil they cultivate, and rarely at the plains at their feet, where they exchange the products of their labor. They rarely look at the plains, because it is generally covered in mist. That is why those who were born in the valleys believe that they were born above the clouds. They are mistaken. They were born in the middle of the path. Those who were born in the plains and have never left are likewise mistaken. They believe that they were born under the sky, when in reality they were born under the mist that does not allow them to see the valleys or the summits. But those who were born in the plains and climbed up through the valleys see the steep and inaccessible summits first. Then they see the bright green grass of the valley. However, as they are travellers, they see the landscape as if it were a confirmation of the maps they carry in their pockets. Two maps: the first shows the valley as a path that leads to an

objective; the second shows the valley as an epicycle that leads to a return. The first map was projected in the heavy climate of the plains and seeks to free the traveller. The second map was projected in the valley itself, and seeks to change the plains and their climate. Both maps are equally adequate. The landscape, if consulted, answers “yes” to both. The decision: “which of the two maps should I use?” cannot be made having the maps as a basis, not even on the basis of a comparison between the maps, on the basis of a “meta-map.” It would not be more appropriate for being “meta.” Both are equally appropriate. The decision to be made must be “absurd” (without basis).

And this represents the limit of the madness that is the human spirit. It is perfectly possible to project maps. It is perfectly possible to invert the relation between map and landscape, and to consult, not the map in order to orient oneself in the landscape, but the landscape in order to orient oneself in the map. Such madness is perfectly possible. But in terms of making decisions, maps are no good. Authentic decisions are absurd. And the absurd is the concrete (the unclassifiable, non-generalizable, non-formalizable). Once the decision is made, the madness disappears. The decision occurs in the concrete. Valleys are the paths of decisions, concrete places in which it becomes necessary, at a given moment, to throw away all the maps, under the pain of hovering in the “supernatural,” the “theoretical,” and the “perspectival.” Precisely because valleys are almost supernatural, almost theoretical, almost perspectival, they are borderline situations. The decision in them, according to Jaspers, is of deciphering and not of resolving. In sum, valleys are places where availability can, if so decided, become engagement.