

The Glory that Touches the Stars

Vilem Flusser

"The Glory that Touches the Stars" ("Der Ruhm, der die Sterne berührt") was written in 1975, during the worst period of "Normalization" in Czechoslovakia, when the ruling Communist Party tried to undo the achievements of the Prague Spring of 1968. The essay was, however, not published until 1990. The opening of the text refers to the founding myth of the city of Prague (and the Czech nation). On Vysehrad, a hill in Prague, Krok's daughter Libuse had a vision of a great city

There, where the Vltava, in a mighty loop, flows through the cauldron of the wooded hills, there will rise according to an old legenda great city whose glory will touch the stars. Just as the seer once lifted her spirit a little above the temporal in order to see into the future by looking backwards and to announce the city that is striving for the stars, so have I been a little removed from reality since I have been expelled from that cauldron.

Maybe this is why I and the few like me have the gift of seeing coming things when we look back, things that mysteriously condense, like cooling steam above the boiling stew of that cauldron. Aren't we all, you dear siblings, Wenzel and Hus, Karl and Rudolf, Kafka and Rabbi Loew, Dvorák and Rilke, a product of that stew and at the same time happily hovering above it? The pious duke and the rebel, the wise and the raging emperor, the destroyer of the natural and the creator of the artificial human being, the pseudo-believing singer of the *Stabat Mater* and the pseudo-unbelieving singer of the elegies, these are the pillars of the star-touching glory, around which the martyr Nepomuk, perhaps unnoticed, twines.

So this is the glory I want to proclaim, the glory of the spirit that rises up in pain against the heavens. If ever a city, like Prometheus, stabbed a hundred spires into the heavens and clenched hundreds of cupolas, absurdly, desperately decided to conquer the world for the spirit, it was the dear little mother Prague, the heart of Europe, as it has been called. And if ever, in old Europe, this proud, licking flame should jerk up from the glowing ashes, then it will be there out of the lap of the lost beloved. Homesickness, admiration, and curses to the sunken home country.

It is often said that the Western spirit is a compound of the classic Greek-Jewish tradition and the Germanic in a Latin solution. Out of this gathering of roots, it has been said, sprouts the tree of the Occident that bears the blossoms of Christianity, of science, of music, and of philosophy. If this is true, however, Prague is indeed more Western than the West. The subterranean threads that connect her with the Greek orthodoxy, and thus with the academy and the lyceum, have never been torn. Not only the church but the winding penetrating spirit of its ghetto directly make Prague Jewish. He who dares put into question the Germanic quality of this German emperor city misconstrues Prague's character. As far as latinity is concerned, it is the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Added to this pure culture of Western ingredients, however, is the Slav yeast. How all of these ingredients mix and separate, how they fight and influence each other, and how they ferment and overflow, in order to inseminate and to burn Europe, this is a history of the struggle between spirit and commandment, between heaven and hell. It is the Prague history.

It is therefore my history and the history of those, who, like me, have been flung out of the center of the opposing powers into the light of day. This brew, left alone, flows along muddily and ashily, through the narrow alleys of the Old Town, in order to trickle, petty bourgeois-like, beneath the trellises of the Little Quarter. As long as you don't stir it up,

nothing else is as dirty grey and as shallow, as mendacious and deceptively tender, as this Prague kasch. Whirled in the centrifuge of purification, it begins to glitter green and violet, sometimes golden. An example of this is the highly polished but broken crystal of Kafka. In it, the light of Europe is refracted into its Prague spectrum. That is to say, faith and the creative impulse appear with a rationalist aura and thus acquire a devilish glimmer. Or, put differently, the mystically mysterious becomes clear and banal and the quotidian and the taken-for-granted become opaque. It is the curse of this city that it banalizes what is real and authentic and makes real what is banal. That it reveals the lie but does not accept the truth. That it does not kill its children, like Athens did Socrates, but that it maims and abandons them.

Today a lid has laid itself upon this cauldron. Probably it is under high pressure. We know nothing of the secret processes that develop under the protection and pressure of this envelope. What we occasionally see is only the dirty grey, the flat brew. As long as Prague will still be Prague, however, there will come a moment of purification, and the dark red sparks will spray again, not in order to burn themselves but to ignite. Prague, the ignition of the European motor, will again make white humankind jolt into idling against the heavens and for the spirit. I see a great city whose glory touches the stars. (© 1990 Stefan Bollman Verlag, Düsseldorf)

"Introduction" ("Einleitung") opens up the questions which the book Die Schrift ("Writing") explores in detail: does writing have a future? What will it be like? How are the new codes going to change the meaning of writing? What is specific about writing? How does it shape our minds?

Flusser writes: "The reflections in this text propose that there are really only two escape routes from writing: back to the image or forward to the codes. Back to the imagination or forward into calculation. These reflections put forward that these two directions can merge surprisingly into one another: figures can be computed to images. From textual writing/thinking we can try to escape into imagined calculations. If we succeeded, the calculating and imaginative thinking would be sublated into textual thinking. Writers then would have swallowed and digested mathematicians and image-makers and thus lifted themselves onto a new level of thinking" ("Afterword," Die Schrift).

Flusser's attitude to writing is ambiguous. While skeptical about the future of writing, he identifies with those whose very existence depends on writing: "scribere necesse est, vivere non est."

We present here the "Introduction" and chapter sixteen, "Desks," from Die Schrift.

Introduction

Writing, in the sense of the lining-up of letters and other writing signs, seems to have no future or almost none. In the meantime, there are codes that transmit information better than writing signs. What has been written until now can be better transferred on tapes, records, films, videotapes, picture discs, or diskettes. And much of what could not be written until now can be recorded in these new codes. The information that is coded thus is more convenient to produce, to transport, to receive, and to store than written texts. In the future, with the help of the new codes, we will be better able to correspond, make science, talk about politics, write poetry, and philosophize than we are in the alphabet or in Arab figures. It seems as if the codes of writing, like the Egyptian hieroglyphs, or the Indian knots, would be put aside. In the future, only historians and other specialists will have to learn how to write and read.

Many people don't want to see the truth of this. Mainly because of inertia. They have already learned how to write once, and they are too old to learn the new codes. We surround this inertia of ours with the aura of splendor and nobility. With writing, so we say, we lose all that

we owe to a Homer, an Aristotle, a Goethe. Not to speak about the Holy Scripture. Only, how do we happen to know that these great authors (including the author of the Holy Scripture) would not have preferred to speak on tape or to make a film?

Inertia alone, however, does not explain everything. There are people (and I count myself among them) who believe they cannot live without writing. And this is not because they want to emulate Homer for they know: it is no longer possible to write like him, even if they were a second Homer but they believe they have to write because their existence expresses itself in the gesture of writing and only in that gesture.

In that, however, they can be wrong. But even if it is assumed that they are right and that the production of video clips is not adequate to their existence, their "forma mentis," wouldn't this be the proof that their shape of existence is passé, that such people are dinosaurs? I admit, not everything that is passé is necessarily pernicious. What is called "progress" is not necessarily synonymous with improvement. The dinosaurs were finally quite nice animals in their own way. And yet the will to persist in writing becomes questionable these days.

It is to be asked: what is specific about writing? In what does it differ from comparable past and future gestures from painting, from pushing computer keys? Is there anything specific at all that is common to all kinds of writing gestures the carving of Latin letters into marble, the painting of Chinese ideograms on silk, the scribbling of equations on blackboards, the pressing of typewriter keys? What kind of existence did human beings have before they began to write? And what would their existence look like if writing were given up? All these and numerous other questions should of course not only be directed to writing itself but also to the reading of written texts.

These are simple questions only at first glance. It would be necessary to write a voluminous book in order to get a hold of them. The catch, however, is that such a book would be a book. Instead of what? That is exactly what stands in question.

16. Desks

Before desks are compared with the future apparatuses that will replace them, it is useful to make tabula rasa. An empty table is more than just a mostly wooden bar supported by four legs or a kind of simplified artificial beast of burden. In addition it is an ideal that can never be reached: again and again, you plan to release it from its burden and to finally clear your desk. And filled with envy, you watch

the huge and empty desks on TV behind which the supposedly mighty are sitting. If you imagine yourself in their places, then you gain a new perspective on the mightiness and the desk. The word "Macht" [might] is a noun of the verb "mögen" [to like]. Its equivalent in the Romanic languages is the noun of the verb "können" [to be able to]. What might the mighty possibly like, what may they be able to do when the table they are sitting at is empty? Don't their possibilities and potentialities vanish into nothing? And don't they realize themselves precisely in that organized chaos on the desk that has to be accomplished? A phenomenology of power after centuries of anti-phenomenological discussion would have to assume that the point is a foray into possibilities that realize themselves in resistances, that therefore power is not anything already real that you have to obey or against which you could fight, but that power looks for resistance in order to realize

itself at all. Refusing to resist (for instance in the case of the empty table) obliterates the power, and you don't have to be Gandhi in order to realize this. It is enough to imagine an empty desk. It is the will to power that seduces us to go into the stationery store in order to collect all this writing material there, to replenish it again and again and to fill our desk. The purpose, however, is not a will to power-in-general but to a wholly specific power, that is, to the so-called power of the pen. Even though there whole classes of power, this kind of power usually is put in contrast to that of the sword. The power the pen radiates, the possibilities and potentialities (the field of the pen) that it exudes have a specific structure; nevertheless, a systematic theory of the field of the pen has yet to be developed. If iron shavings are caught in a magnet's field of power, then we see how this power realizes itself. Even though we have plunged at least as deeply into the field of the pen as into the electromagnetic field, we nevertheless lack appropriate Einsteins. Probably because in contrast to the "natural fields" the ideological fields have always been ideologically unified before they have been looked into in detail. The marxist attempt of dialectically tracing back all the fields of power, including that of the pen, to one basic field (that of the economic base) offers an example. It is well-known that Einstein could not manage to reduce all fields like this because the well-known details of the different fields resisted it.

What seduces the writing person to go into the stationery store in order to grab the power of the pen has been partly discussed in this essay, even though a theory of the field of the pen has not been proposed.

The will to straighten circles into lines and to reach others, thanks to these lines, seduces the writing person to go to the stationery store in order to grab the power of the pen. That the will to this specific power has realized itself in the shape of Western culture and that, in this sense, the field of power of the pen can be called the "Unterbau" (base) of our society, is what this essay implies which does not exclude that which from other perspectives, from other fields of power can be regarded as "Unterbau" as well. The will to this specific power has the desk as its starting point.

On the average desk, chaos rules: papers, maps, staples, ash-trays, typewriters, telephones and other things are lying on it and are lit by a desk lamp. There is no average desk and we are only now coming to agree on what chaos is. The average desk is an abstraction from all desks theoretically and every phenomenology of the desk must be conscious of the arrogance of equating this desk here and now with the average start with the concrete desk here and now.

As "chaos," we (provisionally) understand a situation whose structure has not yet been discerned or a situation that comes up after a structure has been discerned. Put differently: "chaos" is where order has not yet been stated or grasped completely.

The chaos on my desk equals that in the universe of the natural sciences. Whosoever approaches it unknowingly sees a disorderly mess. Then he begins to state correlations, a method in his madness. When I am sitting at the desk and writing, I am located in an admirable cosmos: everything is in its place and at my service. In this I am the Aristotle as well as the Newton of my desk: all the writing material is in its proper place and must, should it ever leave it, return there. All the writing material can be exactly located in present, past and future if you know the layout of the desk. If, however, I step back from myself and my desk and look over the difficult relationship between it and me, then I become more and more Heisenbergian: what I regarded as order on my desk turns out to be a raw simplification that I myself project upon the desk. That proves itself, if I happen to look for a needle on it. To that extent, chaos rules on my desk.

Now I reach after power, that is, into chaos, in order to load two white sheets of paper and a carbon paper into the typewriter. My glance is directed neither to the papers nor to the typewriter. It looks above them, beyond them, towards the text that is to be written. The whole desk is only a contemptible means. Temporarily, it is justified by a nebulous end. No coming-into-power whatsoever can escape this justification of means. You can, however, try not to despise the means but to look at them. This, however, produces a strange bewilderment: the more attention I pay to the paper and the typewriter, the more unclear the intended piece of writing becomes. The glance at the desk displaces the text from the field of vision. Therefore the demand placed on the powerful to think about the means before applying them is already a refusal: the powerful are demanded to become impotent. Indeed, the glance directed at the table shows the impotence and not the power of writing. The ancient saying "respice finem" probably means you should always remember death, but it can also be interpreted as advice to look across the table: not to let the means paralyze you.

If I sit at the desk in order to look at it (instead of to write), then it blows cold at me. Mainly because of two reasons: first, there are two anti-writing tools on it, telephone and radiotwo extraterrestrial invaders in the universe of writing; and second, the power of the penwhich wants to be a form of power of the unbound "spirit"turns out to be bound to the trickiness of the writing tools.

If you regard the two ETs on the desk then you get the impression that they represent two opposite intrusions of informatization into writing. The radio must supply the background music and serves the writing. When the telephone shrills in its idiotically insistent way, it interrupts writing. So it would be possible to conclude that the intruding informatization on the one hand idiotically disturbs writing but that the power of the pen can manage to make it submit. This is a faulty conclusion. The background music that the radio supplies is not that white noise which contrasts with the information created during writing (as the theory of communication has it); rather, it is a mockery of writing. It whispers into the ear of the writing person: the information that you create is, in the end, not directed to readers but to my black box in order to become background music there itself. And the insistently shrilling telephone does not interrupt the writing but terminates it in order to say: in me a new power takes the floor against which the pen fights in vain.

The empty desks of the powerful shown on TV bear, visually or not, armies of telephones. In the case of the highly powerful there is a red telephone among them. The powerful sit at the desk in order to operate telephonesand not in order to write. This function is regarded as power. A Wittgensteinian question comes up: what is the sense of the sentence, "this is a desk but it does not serve the writing"? The two ETs on the desk are paralyzing because they annihilate the power of the pen and at the same time the term "power."

If you direct your attention to the remaining material on the desk, then the definition of writing as the manipulation of symbols becomes questionable. Do I indeed struggle against soft material (software), like the letters and the language they signify, while I am writing, or don't I have to cope most of all with the obnoxious stubbornness of torn typewriter ribbons, jammed staplers and hopelessly misplaced papers? He who never ate his bread in tears (for instance, in the tears of rage because of a typewriter that does not obey anymore) does not know you, you heavenly powers of the pen. The criticism of literature only sees the heavenly, not the earthly, in writing, with the exception of extreme cases, as in the case of texts that were written in gulags.

Isn't writing labor and, indeed, less a "spiritual" labor (a questionable use of the term) than a physical one? Doesn't the writer have to put into motion elegant fingertips but also vulgar hands, teeth and licking tongues?

Suddenly, the informational revolution appears as relief. For if you regard the desks as the ones shown in the advertisements of the so-called "bureautik" these white, pure laboratory tables with their paperless apparatuses at which smiling, elegant girls are sitting and if you compare them with your own desk experience, then you realize yourself as a dinosaur that mucks around in triassic mud. It is not yourself but the smiling girls in the advertising posters who are engaged in the "spirit." The writer who is sitting at the desk is that material resistance against which they blow. It is only these girls who actually manipulate software and who are more spiritual than we.

However, as soon as we direct our glance away from the means and towards the text, as soon as we disdain the material that is correctly called "stupid," we are grasped again by that excitement that is meant by the term "will to power of the pen." Now a bitter taste has seeped into the excitement. The material that we hold in contempt now is stupid indeed, but in the advertisement posters we have seen intelligent desks. Maybe we are excited about writing because our desks are so stupid? And to the extent to which they become more clever, are we writing people becoming more stupid? This existential question, which comes up in the stationery stores and which becomes dense on the desk, from now on accompanies all our writing. It can be noticed in our texts and it can never again be silenced. The desk that is standing on the brink on the "Northwest passage," as Serres says cannot be maintained once its questionable position becomes visible. Its four legs wobble in this earthquake. The poor donkey cannot be saved.

The glance that brings together stationery stores and desks makes it possible to perceive the decline of writing as the decline of politics. Stationery stores show like all expositions and shops that the town and along with it the public space (the space of publication) is condemned to vanish. And, in particular, stationery stores show how, with the disappearance of paper, every action is over as well. Desks show how the power of the pen stabs into emptiness and cannot realize itself anymore as the term "power" in general is pushed aside by the new term of automatically-guided function. So, all political thinking (which is a thinking in categories of power) misses the post-writing situation. Through the glance that brings together stationery stores and desks, every political engagement of the writer is recognized as a ridiculous error. This is why it is not advisable to the majority of the writing people of today to risk this glance. A glance that in addition reveals the well-known disproportion between means and end from a new perspective. During the entire culture of writing, the means were small and contemptible, the aims were grand and noble. Isn't it ridiculous to think of Dante's quill-pen while evaluating the end achieved in "The Divine Comedy"? Without a doubt, in this case, the means have been justified by the end. This has now become different. If you regard the extraordinarily complex means which gather on an intelligent desk and if you compare them with the end they pretend to serve, then on the contrary you have to speak of a justification of the end by the means. Just a visit to the stationery store shows that the offered material is grander than the notes to be composed grander even than the writing it pretends to serve. How much more intelligence is in such material than in the scribbling that has been produced thanks to it! The means have become so clever that every end is superfluous to them. They become an end in themselves. All means becoming ends in themselves and the superfluity of all ends is what "media

culture" means. This is especially visible when it comes to thermonuclear armaments: the means are so powerful that wanting to ask about their ends is simply stupid.

Finally the glance has been directed towards the means of writing and, quite in accordance with the "spirit of the age," it neglected the purpose of writing. Does the question "to what end?" still have a sense when the straightened lines make room for the puzzles composed of dots?

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