



## A FABULOUS WORLD

VILÉM FLUSSER<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** “Um mundo fabuloso” (“A Fabulous World”) is one of Flusser’s earliest articles, published on November 28, 1964, in the literary annex of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. In it, with *exact fantasy*, an octopus, a tapeworm, and a human fetus address the reader on their superiority over the others, exploring the friction between Darwinian and Freudian theories. If Flusser resorts to the tradition of the fable, it is only to point to the fact that we cannot go back to the times of La Fontaine or those even more primitive times of cavemen and their hunt stories around the bonfires, for the fables of our times are scientific. The essay can be considered seminal because in it Flusser already plays with the characteristic perspectivism of his philosophical fiction, and because later the philosopher will dedicate individual texts to each of the three animals. The octopus will be the main subject of *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (FLUSSER; BEC, 2011), in which Flusser claimed to have done “fictional science”, and the others turn into protagonists of two of the “scenarios for the future” from *Angenommen*, or *What If?* (FLUSSER, 2022).

**KEYWORDS:** Vilém Flusser; Fable; Exact fantasy; Charles Darwin; Evolution.

**RESUMO:** “Um mundo fabuloso” é um dos primeiros artigos de Flusser, publicado em 28 de novembro de 1964 no Suplemento Literário do jornal *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Nele, com *fantasia exata*, um polvo, uma solitária e um feto discursam ao leitor sobre sua superioridade sobre os demais, explorando o atrito entre as teorias darwiniana e freudiana. Se Flusser recorre à tradição da fábula, é apenas para apontar que não podemos voltar aos tempos de La Fontaine ou àqueles ainda mais primitivos dos homens das cavernas e suas histórias de caçadas ao redor das fogueiras, pois as fábulas de nossos tempos são científicas. O ensaio pode ser considerado seminal porque nele Flusser já brinca com o perspectivismo característico de sua ficção filosófica, e porque posteriormente o filósofo dedicará textos individuais a cada um dos três animais. O octópode será o tema principal de *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (FLUSSER; BEC, 2011), em que Flusser afirma ter feito “ciência fictícia”, e os demais se tornam protagonistas de dois dos “cenários para o futuro” de *Angenommen*, ou *What If?* (FLUSSER, 2022).

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Vilém Flusser; Fábula; Fantasia exata; Charles Darwin; Evolução.

Animals talk. Usually in rhyming verses. Students from courses dedicated to the teaching of French listen. At the end of the dialogue between the animals the story’s lesson shows up, with the purpose of illustrating irregular verbs. Here is one of the ways in which the

---

<sup>1</sup> Traduzido por Jessé Antunes Torres, doutorando em Ciências da Linguagem pela Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina (Unisul), com bolsa de estudos Capes para dedicação exclusiva e período sanduíche na Universität der Künste Berlin (Alemanha), onde pesquisa no Vilém Flusser Archive. E-mail: jessesthorres@gmail.com.

fabulous world, currently, presents itself. We are, where fables are concerned, a bit of a late generation. In more “primitive” times, the impact of the fabulous world must have been more immediate. When the horde would gather up around the bonfire after the mammoth’s hunt, the fables told by the elder hunter must have had a more profound effect. In the semi-darkness of the cave, the voice of the animals that spoke must have resounded mysteriously. The flames illuminated enigmatically the figures of the reindeer, the wild horses, and the bulls on the cave walls. These figures would become alive with the vacillating and deceitful flare of the bonfire. And through the toothless mouth of the horde’s chief and priest, these animals would mumble and babble, revealing the secrets of the astonishing world that surrounds man. The rhythmic and conjuring singing of the old man was followed by the howling of the wolves outside. A sacred space would involve the men, the wolves, and the bonfire and would merge all into a union of deep meaning. Here is the “primitive” form of the fabulous world. The progressive transformation of the chief into La Fontaine is an aspect of the history of mankind as valid as other more sophisticated ones.

The purpose of the present article is to tell a fable, a story in which animals talk. It will not be a Lafontainian fable, mainly because the lesson of the story will not be obvious either to the author or to those who listen to it. The clarity of moral beliefs belongs, unfortunately, to the past. Neither will my fable be a mysterious mumbling. The bonfire from the cave was replaced, hopelessly, by the functional light bulbs; and the figures on the walls by reproductions of Picasso. It will be a contemporary fable. The animals speaking therefore will not be mammoths or foxes. These animal species are existentially extinct. They do not interest us. I chose, for my dialogue, more interesting species. The octopod that dwells in the abysses of the oceans, the tapeworm that dwells in the abysses of the intestines, and the curious worm called “embryo” that dwells in the abysses of the uterus—these will be my characters. The theme of the dialogue will be Mr. Darwin, even though a bit more of an anachronic Darwin, granted that he will be Freudian.

The octopod raises one of its eight limbs and asks for the floor: As the most evolved representative of the mollusks, therefore as the crown of evolution, the final appreciation of Darwinian theory is up to me. It is curious that such a fruitful theory has been formulated by a mere vertebrate. Vertebrates are apart from the main current of life’s evolution. The latter develops, obviously, in the oceans, both from a quantitative or qualitative point of view. The most numerous species, and the most evolved ones, occur in the oceans. Life’s main direction is its advancement from the shores to the depths. A subordinate and negligible branch (from a

Darwinian point of view) stretches its tentacles in the direction of dry land, but it is obvious that this direction represents a *cul-de-sac*<sup>2</sup> in life's endeavors. Solely in an aqueous environment, in an adequate environment, may life's potentialities take place. The wonderful perfection of my structure proves it. Compare, for example, my radial symmetry<sup>3</sup> with the primitivism of the vertebrates' axial symmetry. See how I am beautiful, if compared to the grotesque and repulsive shape of man. Observe the richness of the sensory organs I have. How rich it is, as a consequence, the world in which I exist. A multitude of chemical, thermic, and electromagnetic impressions precipitate over me, to be apprehended by my tentacles and comprehended by my powerful central brain. They are impressions from a reality of which vertebrates do not have the slightest idea. Encapsulated in their skeletons, these primitive beings vegetate, expelled from the vitalizing environment of the sea, mere pathetic shadows of the vital *élan*. I accept Darwinian theory because it proves, though in a primitive and typically vertebrate fashion, my superiority.

The tapeworm, with a slightly ironic smile (since in fables tapeworms smile), responds to it: It is evident that, despite your eight arms, you cannot authentically embrace Darwinian theory. In your abyssal darkness, you do not realize its message. Knowing the intimacy of man, I can judge the merit of the problem. The force that propels life's evolution is the libidinous power of procreation, the power of fertility. It is the will to power, as said Nietzsche (one of those organisms that serve to feed me). Life's evolution is a libidinous process. It is due to libido and in search of a more perfected and glorious libido that species evolve. And I am the most perfect accomplishment of this process. Notice my proglottids, the links that make up my chain. Each one of the links carries an enormously complex sexual apparatus that gathers the masculine and the feminine principles in a perfect synthesis. The eggs produced by each link reach the figure of 50,000, which is a notable achievement by itself. But I consist of 1,500 links. Therefore, I produce 75 million eggs. I reached this vertiginous height of accomplishment because I overcame the slavery of feeding and moving. I turned the vertebrates into my slaves. They supply my food already digested and they are the vehicles that transport me. Thanks to them I became free to perform the nobler task that is the powerful accomplishment of libidinous potentialities. I am uninhibited. My existence is a single grandiose and uninterrupted sexual act. I am love itself incarnated. I am the spearhead of life's evolution. Darwin was a bit right when he said man is the goal of this evolution, even though not in the sense he intended. Man is the

---

<sup>2</sup> Dead end. (T.N.)

<sup>3</sup> Flusser made a mistake here since octopuses actually have bilateral symmetry. (T.N.)

owner of nature, and I am the owner of man. Man exists in order to free me from the necessities of feeding and to make possible the maximum accomplishment of the libidinous power that I represent. I am therefore decidedly Darwinian, though I must add to Darwin a Freudian dimension.

The embryo, indignant, shakes its head (a projected head, of course, because it's still not fully developed): You, tapeworm, in your solitude are incapable of understanding the love that propels life. You are incapable because you are not inhibited, as you confess. It is in the separation of the sexes, and in the barriers that introduce themselves between them, that the power of love resides. Love is inhibited libido. Inhibition is a principle inimical to life. Inhibition is from your point of view, oh tapeworm, an illness. The frustrated sexual act, which you do not know, is the source of love, of this power that is a synthesis between the vital *élan* and the inhibition opposed to life. Love is the fruit of a struggle between life in its libidinous advancement and a principle that opposes itself to this advancement. In that regard, love is the horizon and goal of life. Notice how I twist myself libidinally inside the uterus to make myself a man. How I go through, in a sort of shorthand, the whole evolution of life,<sup>4</sup> as if to recapitulate the lessons learned by the current of life. I am solitary<sup>5</sup> like you, but I am biologically imperfect, biologically frustrated. Nine months from now I will be released into a hostile environment, and the octopod has a point in stressing this fact.

Countless barriers will be lifted around me, to frustrate my path. My vital force, weak and ill (as the octopod says with reason), will have to shock against these barriers. I will be a biologically maladaptive being. But in this battle I will have to fight, and the libidinous power that operates within me will be transformed. Being inhibited, it will be sublimated. In me and for me will be born love, which wins all, including life itself. It is in this dialectical sense that I will be the goal of life's evolution. Life is a process that tends to overcome itself. Man, which is the most inhibited and ill being, is, precisely because of that, the point at which life overcomes itself. It is called "spirit" this inhibition and this illness that characterizes man. Spirit is the human form of love, the only form I know of. Therefore I am not Darwinian. I consider man the goal of evolution for reasons opposed to Darwinism. It is for being the less well-adapted species that man is the goal of life. If the octopod is Darwinian, it is a cosmivision that is up to it. And for the same reason, I am not Freudian. It is a point of view that is up to you, oh

---

<sup>4</sup> Flusser alludes here to the recapitulation theory, according to which embryogenesis would recapitulate the steps of phylogenesis, a hypothesis refuted nowadays. (T.N.)

<sup>5</sup> Wordplay. The tapeworm is called in Brazilian Portuguese "solitary" because taeniasis is a parasitosis usually caused by only one single worm. (T.N.)

tapeworm, once you are, like you say, the most perfectly accomplished libido. Concerning me, I am not conditioned only biologically, and that is why I must not, strictly speaking, take part in this discussion on equal terms. I submit, therefore, these arguments of mine to a mental reserve, which, for being mental, must look derisory both for the octopod or for you, oh tapeworm, who are so close to me in my current stage of development.

Here ends the fable I intended to tell my readers. Our Lafontainian tradition demands that I add a lesson to the story, to make it pedagogically serviceable. But I confessed my incapacity of a moral belief (and, *a fortiori*, of a pedagogical activity) at the beginning of this article. The fabulous world of life, which my fable is about, seems impermeable to morals, because it is impermeable to all values. It is a diabolic world, the world of life, because it is a world beyond Good and Evil, to speak in a Nietzschean way. To me, the octopod and the tapeworm seem to be its most worthy representatives. In this diabolic world, spirit and love, these fragile principles that seek to overcome life, seem abandoned. This abandonment characterizes the human situation. Instead of a lesson for the story, I add therefore a poem by Omar Khayyam that expresses what the fable intends:

Ah, Love! could you and I with Fate conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!<sup>6</sup>

## REFERENCES

FLUSSER, V. Um mundo fabuloso. In: FLUSSER, Vilém. *Ficções filosóficas*. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1998. p. 23-27.

FLUSSER, V. *What if?: twenty-two scenarios in search of images*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

FLUSSER, V.; BEC, L. *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2011.

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Flusser in English. Verse CVIII from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, translated by Edward Fitzgerald. (T.N.)