

III. ON NAME

The purpose of this book is to discuss the intellect and its limitations, with the aim of contributing toward the overcoming of the current situation of our civilization. This situation was characterized, in the introduction, as a nascent nihilism, the fruit of an excessive valorization of the intellect accompanied by despair in relation to the intellect's ability to put us in touch with "reality." At the current stage of our cultural development, we are reaching the intellectualization of every layer of mental activity, including the layer of the intellect. This intellectualization of the intellect has been called, in the introduction, the "doubt of doubt." The intellect is our only avenue of access toward reality, and this avenue is blocked by the intellectualization of the intellect. Hence, our nihilism.

In order to overcome this super-valorization of the intellect and this despair in relation to the intellect, we have resolved to attempt to analyze it; instead of abandoning it, as so many do nowadays. This analysis, as rough as it may have been, has revealed the frontiers of the intellect. These frontiers are not mysterious, mystical, or sacred (at least *prima facie*), as those who aim to overcome the intellect through a leap suggest. The frontiers that bar

the intellect's advance toward "reality," toward "God," are not archangels with flaming swords to be defeated in a fight, or infernal furies to be orphically enchanted. These frontiers are something much more prosaic: **names**. The last frontiers of the intellect, the point at which the intellect stops and no longer functions, are names of a certain type called proper names. The whole process called thought invests, in vain, from and against the proper names. The investigation of this type of word is therefore equivalent to the investigation of the limits of the intellect, and is equivalent to **the investigation of the human condition**, if we consider man as an intelligent being.

Traditional grammar, generally unconscious of its fundamental ontological function, classifies the words of a given language according to a supposed correspondence between words and "reality" (*adaequatio intellectus ad rem*). It distinguishes, for example, substantives, which correspond to "substances," adjectives, which correspond to "qualities," prepositions and conjunctions, which correspond to the "relations between substances," and verbs, which correspond to the "processes between substances." Traditional grammar is naive. It precedes the doubt of doubt and is illuminated by the grace of faith in the intellect and language. Its classification of words, the fruit of this naivety, needs to be abandoned. The best is to forget all of these devoted efforts as we come closer to the problem of the classification of words. However, it is evident that words need to be classified in some way. Words are the intellect's data. They are intellectual reality. The classification of words is the cosmic vision of

reality. Classified words are a *Weltanschauung*, in the strict sense of the term.

If we look attentively at words, we may distinguish two types. The vast majority of words act as if they are implanted within the compost of language, organically thought and articulated within the mechanism of language. There are, however, words that seem unwilling to fit so organically; they demand an almost extra linguistic effort in order to be thought and articulated. When we think them, we feel a barrier, and when we articulate them, we are tempted to grunt, shout, or make a gesture. "This here," or "that there" are words of this type. Let us call this type "primary words," or "proper names." And let us call all the other words "secondary words." In order to distinguish the intellectual activity that involves thinking and articulating proper names from the activity that involves thinking and articulating secondary words, let us make a distinction between "to call" and "to converse." Proper names are "called" and secondary words are "conversed."

To call and to converse are, therefore, the two main intellectual activities. Proper names are called in order to be conversed, that is, to be transformed into secondary words. This transformation is gradual. As the proper names are conversed, they are transformed into secondary words that are always farther from their primary origin. The first stage of this transformation vaguely corresponds to the type of word that traditional grammar calls "substantive." These secondary words that are close to the proper names, and which serve as subjects and objects of phrases, are

undergoing a transformation. It is worth observing this process a little closer.

Let us first consider the calling of a proper name. The field, which the intellect is, expands in the process in order to occupy a territory that was previously extra-intellectual. The result of this expansion is the emergence of a new word, which is the proper name that has been called. The process can be compared to the feeding process of amoebae. An amoeba emits a pseudopod toward something extra-amoebic and occupies it. Then, already within the amoebic reality, a vacuole is formed around this conquered something. This something is now part of the amoeba without having been incorporated into its metabolism. The vacuole closes and this something is gradually transformed into an amoeba, that is, into protoplasm, which is to say, it becomes amoebic reality. In this image, the emission of the pseudopod corresponds to the activity of calling, the vacuole corresponds to the proper name, the something inside the vacuole corresponds to the extra linguistic meaning of the proper name, and the digestion corresponds to the conversation. The amoeba as a whole corresponds to language as a whole. The amoeba's anatomy, which consists of vacuoles and protoplasm, corresponds to our classification of words into proper names and secondary words.

Insisting a little longer upon the image of the amoeba, we may say that the extra-amoebic territory, within which the amoeba emits its pseudopods, is the amoeba's becoming. The amoeba is the realization of this territory through protoplasmation. The amoeba expands into its potentialities, which are, from the amoeba's perspective,

vacuoles *in statu nascendi*. However, a curious thing happens. Although the amoeba may occupy all possibilities with its pseudopods, and may form a vacuole around every occupied possibility, it cannot digest all of the possibilities. For example, a quartz crystal may be occupied and encapsulated within a vacuole, but it cannot be digested. All of the vacuole's contractions are in vain; the crystal shall always continue to be a foreign body within the amoeba's protoplasm. The best thing would be to expel it, unless the crystal may serve, precisely for being a foreign body, as a stimulant or catalyzer for the amoeba's metabolic processes.

Let us translate this image to the field of the intellect. Language may emit its callings into its becoming, which are the proper names in *statu nascendi*, in all possible directions. Everything that is possible may be called. These appeals shall always result in proper names. We may say that everything can be apprehended by the intellect. However, not everything may be transformed into secondary words. Not everything can be utilized as a subject or an object of a meaningful phrase. Not everything can be assimilated to the mechanism of language. Not everything can be comprehended. Inassimilable proper names shall always continue to be foreign bodies within the structure of language; they shall always continue to be bywords. A typical example of these bywords, these inassimilable proper names that are apprehended without ever being comprehended, is the word "God." Just as the chemical structure of the amoeba's protoplasm refuses to assimilate a quartz crystal, the structure of our languages refuses to assimilate the word "God." Nevertheless,

precisely for being inassimilable, it may, perhaps, serve as a catalyzer for authentic linguistic processes. It may stimulate the conversation without ever being able to authentically participate in it.

Another emergent limitation of the intellect is that even though everything can be called a proper name, even though everything may be apprehended (at least in theory), not everything can be comprehended by the intellect; *not everything can be conversed*. We have arrived at this conclusion not because of some mystical speculation, but through an inter-intellectual observation of foreign bodies, which are proper names inapplicable to meaningful phrases. Being unable to serve as subjects or objects of meaningful phrases, these names do not transform into secondary words and remain bywords, that is, meaningless symbols, empty symbols. Nevertheless, they may still be, sometimes, of decisive importance for the intellectual process.

The act of calling is the intellect's only productive activity. Proper names are the products of this activity. The Scholastic quarrel between Nominalists and Realists, although extremely naive (since it is anterior to Cartesian doubt), proves that the distinctions between proper name and secondary word, and the productive power of the act of calling, have always been recognized by thinkers, even though confusedly, as being fundamental. Before proceeding with our investigation, let us clear our path from the detritus of this Scholastic quarrel. The Nominalists (the winners) affirm that proper names are "real," while secondary words are "aura." The Realists (the temporarily defeated) affirm that certain types of

secondary words (the *universalia*) are equally “real.” Let us disconsider the Platonic and Aristotelian background that hides behind these naive affirmatives, and let us consider only their formal aspect. Nominalists and their successors, the Empiricists, feel the experiential quality of the proper name, although they cannot grasp it intellectually, and feel the lack of this quality in the case of secondary words. That is why they deny “reality” to secondary words. Nominalists and Empiricists are Existentialists in an embryonic stage. Realists feel that proper names are not ontologically different from the other words and cannot be rigorously differentiated from them since the intellectual process resides precisely in the transformation of proper names into secondary words. However, they do not resolve to concede the dignity of “reality” to all words, since they are committed, due to their naive faith, to an extra-linguistic reality. In a tacit agreement with traditional grammar, they consider words that this grammar calls “substantives” to be “real.” Despite the naivety of the Scholastics, this excursion into the Middle Ages serves to illustrate the curious manner in which our thought, in its effort to overcome Descartes, returns to its pre-Cartesian origins.

The experiential quality that accompanies the productive activity of calling is known as “intuition.” When the intellect calls something, it intuits this something. For the intellectual comprehension of intuition, it is necessary to liberate this concept from the extra-intellectual impurities that stick to it. Intuition is a synonym of the intellect’s expansion into its potentialities. As I intuit something, I transform this something into a proper name, I realize this

something within the intellect. However, since intuition is a borderline situation (*Grenzsituation*) for the intellect, the experience of the intellect's limits adheres to it: hence the origin of the extra-intellectual impurities that stick to it. In this sense we may say that the intellect expands intuitively. We may, however, define the intuition that results in the production of proper names better, since it is a productive intuition. We may call it "poetic intuition." The proper names are taken, through this intuitive activity, from the chaos of becoming in order to be put here (*hergestellt*), that is, in order to be brought into the intellect. To take in order to put is called, in Greek, *poiein*. Whoever takes in order to propose, therefore, whoever "produces," is the *poiétés*. The activity of calling, the activity that results in proper names is therefore the activity of poetic intuition. Poetry is the intellect's expansion. Poetry is a borderline situation of the intellect. Proper names are products of poetry. The almost extra-linguistic effort demanded by the effort to think and articulate proper names is the poetic effort. It is an effort because something is produced. It is poetic because new words are this something that is produced.

We may widen our concept of the intellect in the following manner: *it is the field in which two types of words occur: proper names and secondary words*. This field expands through poetic intuition, creating proper names to be converted into secondary words through conversation. We may distinguish two tendencies within the intellect's field, one centripetal and the other centrifugal. "Poetic intuition" is the centrifugal force, while "critical conversation" is the centripetal one. Proper names are the result of "poetic

intuition,” and the transformation of these names into secondary words, or their elimination from the intellect’s field, is the result of “critical conversation.” If the intellect is the field of doubt, we must say that doubt has two tendencies: the “intuitive,” which expands the field of doubt, and the “critical,” which consolidates it. Intuitive doubt creates the raw material for thought (proper names), and critical doubt converts this raw material into articulated organizations (meaningful phrases). Intuitive doubt is poetry and critical doubt is conversation. Poetry and conversation, two forms of doubt, are therefore, two forms of language. Two types of thoughts (linguistic organizations) occur within the intellect’s field: poetic thoughts and conversational thoughts. Two types of thoughts occur within the intellect’s field: “verses” and “converses.”

Let us detain ourselves a little longer upon poetic thought, upon the type of thought that creates proper names, upon intuitive thought. Let us detain ourselves a little upon “verses.” The “verse” is how the intellect precipitates itself upon the unarticulated chaos that circles it; it is the intellect’s effort to break the fence of the chaos that limits the intellect. The “verse” is, therefore, language’s borderline situation. Language attempts to overcome itself through the “verse.” In the “verse,” language attempts to articulate the inarticulable by turning the unthinkable thinkable, and by realizing nothingness. If this effort succeeds, the “verse” results in a proper name. The successful “verse” is the proclamation of a proper name. The “verse” wrenches a proper name from the chaos and

verts¹ it toward the intellect. The “verse” is the act of verting a proper name. Therefore, it is not accurate to say that poetry represents an exclusively centrifugal force. The “verse” calls a proper name, and in this particular phrase it is centrifugal. However, if the “verse” is successful, it proclaims the proper name and becomes centripetal in that particular phrase. The “verse” calls and proclaims; within it there is a conversion of 180 degrees. The poet, when he calls, has his back turned to the intellect, but as he proclaims, the poet turns toward the intellect. Poetic intuition, as it shocks against the inarticulable, wrenches the proper name from it and returns with this conquest to the field of articulation. This inverted and controverted situation of the “verse” forms a continuously recurring theme of humanity’s myths. It is Moses that returns from Mount Sinai having wrenched the tablets from the unarticulated. It is Prometheus that returns from Mount Olympus to the valley of conversation, having wrenched fire from the unarticulated. It is the Rishis that return from on high, having wrenched the Veda from the unarticulated. These are three typical myths of the poetic activity. We can glimpse, in these myths, the experience of the “verse”: it is a creative shock between the intellect and the unarticulated, a shock that is both an advance and a

1. In Portuguese, Flusser uses the verb *verter* from the Latin *vertere*, which means to turn or flip something. According to the OED, the verb “to vert” has the same meaning and etymology and is the root for invert, convert, pervert etc. Therefore, although it is no longer commonly used, I chose “to vert” in order to maintain Flusser’s play on the words verse, version, conversion, inverted, and controverted, which all share this root. [TN]

retrocession. The result of this shock is the enrichment of the intellect by a proper name. Language has gained, thanks to this shock, a new word.


The “verse” conserves, in its *Gestalt*, the stamp of this shock. The verb vibrates. The proper name scintillates, encrusted within the “verse” like a diamond in a mineral. Let us consider the “verse” with which Moses returned: “I am Yahweh, your God.” There is an aura of vibration and light around the proper name “Yahweh.” The proper name is “holy.” Although the chosen example is an extreme one, since a large part of “Western civilization” spins around this “verse,” we must say that every successful “verse” participates in this vibration and light. Every proper name is “holy.” “Holiness” is the stamp of the shock that the intellect suffers when it faces the inarticulable, and every proper name conserves this stamp. “Holiness” is the experience of the limitation of the intellect and its absurd ability to overcome this limitation by calling and proclaiming proper names. Proper names are witnesses of the limitation and expandability of the intellect, and are, therefore, “holy.”

The proper name, as the limitation and expansion of the intellect, is absurd. After all, what does “a successful verse” mean? It means the enrichment of language, but in no way does it mean the impoverishment of the inarticulable. Language expands but the chaos does not diminish. Poetry expands the territory of what is thinkable, but it does not diminish the territory of what is unthinkable. Poetry, being the borderline situation of language, brutally reveals the absurdity of the effort of thinking. The inarticulable, as it is penetrated by

poetry, demonstrates what it is: inarticulable. The proper name reveals the insurmountable abyss that separates the intellect from the inarticulable precisely because it is a conquest of the intellect. Language grows, but the inarticulable remains untouched. The intellect is absurd. The proper name is palpable proof of the absurdity of the intellect. The proper name is palpable doubt. The proper name, being the *alpha* and the *omega* of the intellect, is the absurd cage within which we spin in small circles, like Rilke's panther. These small circles are the conversation. Let us consider the conversation.

Poetic intuition verts the "verse" toward language so that it can be conversed. The centripetal process of conversation submits the "verse" to a critical analysis, it integrates the "verse" into the fabric of language through a critical explication, and thus it intellectualizes the "verse." It converts the "verse" into prose; it desecrates and profanes the "verse." Conversation is the process of critical explication, intellectualization, and profanation of the "verse." Conversation is the progressive realization of the project started by the "verse," toward language. The "verse" is the conversation's theme, its "topic." Conversation has the complete explication of the "verse" as an aim and progresses until it completely exhausts the "verse." Conversation progressively destroys the mystery of the "verse;" it destroys the stamp of the shock against the unarticulated. The "verse" is converted into prose through conversation. The prosaic manner of thought is the conversation's style. With the progress of conversation (if it is successful), the poetic mystery disappears and the prosaic climate prevails. Conversation, as the centripetal

tendency of thought, is a distancing of thought from the inarticulable, and the concentration of thought upon itself. Conversation is the consolidation of thought. Thanks to conversation, thought becomes solid. As a critical analysis of the “verse,” the conversation unfolds the “verse” into multiple layers of meaning, explicating the meaning that is hidden, contained, and implicit in the “verse.” Conversation multiplies, ramifies, unfolds, and specializes thought. Thanks to conversation, thought becomes enriched. The intellectual possibilities hidden in the “verse” are revealed by conversation. Conversation realizes these possibilities. Conversation is the development of the possibilities involved in the “verse.” Conversation is a historical process. *Sensu stricto*, conversation is identical to the concept “history,” in its intellectually accessible meaning. The history of the world, the history of humanity, the history of a people, the history of an institution and an idea, the history of a person or of an event are, *sensu stricto*, histories of phrases of conversation, or the history of conversation as a whole. The “verse” happens *in illo tempore*, but as it is verted it originates an intellectually accessible time. Conversation is the intellectual aspect of time. The progress of conversation, “our” intellectual progress, is for us, identical to the progress of time. The past has been “conversed,” the present “converses,” and the future is “to be conversed.” The meaning of progress is therefore the explication and the desecration, the intellectualization and the realization of the “verse.” From this angle, “progress” and “decadence,” “development” and “exhaustion” become synonyms.

From an intellectual point of view conversation is progress and development, and from poetry's borderline point of view, it is decadence and exhaustion. Formally speaking, conversation is a conversion of proper names into secondary words that are always farther from the proper name and always more abstract. Conversation is a process of abstraction.  This abstraction is processed according to rules imposed by language, within which the conversation evolves. In the case of fusional languages, these rules may be identified, generally speaking, as "logic." In the conversation called "Western civilization," the rules of progress are logical (generally speaking). Logic, *sensu stricto*, applies to the last stage of conversation, to the last stage of abstraction, to the stage of mathematical language. The progress of the conversation called "Western Civilization" may be approached as the progress toward mathematics. It is the transformation of proper names into mathematical signs. Western conversation would exhaust itself if all the "verses" proposed to it were converted into mathematical equations. However, since poetic intuition never ceases to propose "verses" to the conversation, this exhaustion is unimaginable. Other types of languages obey other types of rules. Therefore, the history of these other conversations (for example the Chinese language, which is of the isolating type) has a different character than ours.

The transformation of proper names into more abstract words, which has, in our Western case, their transformation into mathematical signs as an aim, is a process that results in phrases of different levels of abstraction. The proper name proposed by the "verse"

goes through these different levels of abstraction, through these different layers of language, in the course of their transformation. The conversation of the proper name is processed at different levels of abstraction, at different levels of intellectualization. The phrases formulated at these different levels are further “knowledge.” Conversation produces knowledge. The sum of our knowledge is the sum of the phrases conversed at the different levels of abstraction. As they are transformed into secondary words, the proper names are progressively known. The progress of the conversation is the progress of knowledge. The transformation of a “verse” into a mathematical equation would be the perfect knowledge of this “verse.”

The fragmentation of knowledge into different levels of abstraction represents an epistemological problem of the first order. The proper name is simultaneously being conversed at different levels of abstraction, therefore, at different levels of meaning. Each level of meaning corresponds to a mental (intellectual) discipline, with a slightly, or more than slightly, different methodology. In our Western case, each level of meaning corresponds to a different science, art, or ethics. The global vision of the different levels of meaning, which is the aim of epistemology, is opposed by the difficulties of translating from one level to another. The problem of knowledge is, essentially, a problem of translation. Specialized knowledge is the result of the translation of a proper name onto a given level of abstraction. Global knowledge would be the result of the translation of all levels of abstraction onto a neutral level, for example to the

level of philosophical language. Formal Logic with its ad hoc invented language is the sign that epistemology is awakening to its function of translation in the current phase of Western conversation. This fact alone may be interpreted as an important symptom of the emptying of the meaning of “reality,” of the intellectualization of the intellect, of the doubt of doubt, which characterizes the current stage of our conversation, and of which I spoke in the introduction to this book.

Poetic intuition never ceases to propose proper names to the conversation. The intuition of Western conversation shows no signs of weakening. From this angle there is no fear of an exhaustion of Western civilization. On the contrary, this intuition irrupts into the conversation at every level of meaning, which is intrinsically disquieting and difficult to evaluate. Poetic intuition exists within the layers of the different sciences, and even in the layer of mathematics. Proper names are proposed in these layers disguised as abstractions.

For example, in the layer of physics it is difficult to distinguish which are the secondary words as the result of conversation, and which are the proper names (such as, without a doubt, the word “field”) as the result of poetic intuition. Western conversation shall not exhaust itself for the lack of intuition. The danger of stagnation comes from another direction. Our conversation has reached a stage where that which has been conversed is once again considered as that which is to be conversed. Conversation starts to double back on itself. Already articulated knowledge forms topics of conversation, and once again they become raw material to be known. Critical doubt

turns against itself. This critique of critique (or “doubt of doubt,” as I called it in the introduction), exemplified in this paragraph by symbolic logic, represents a vortex within Western conversation that threatens to submerge it into small talk. If this vortex, which is a self-intellectualization of the intellect, manages to attract all of the layers of meaning of our conversation to itself, as it has already done with a large part of the so-called “exact” sciences, our conversation shall spin on a fixed point. At such an advanced stage, poetic intuition shall serve for nothing, since the proper names shall no longer be converted into secondary words, and shall spin intact in a vicious circle. The doubt of doubt shall not allow for a naive doubt, a primary doubt, the doubt, therefore, which transforms proper names. The doubt of doubt, since it doubts doubt, is incapable of doubting the dubitable. Western conversation shall fall into a tedious repetition, into the Nietzschean “eternal return of the same.” At this point the history of the West will have ended.

This doubling back of the conversation upon itself, which is a second-degree reflection, a secondary speculation, is essentially an abandonment of poetic intuition. Although it may result in an anti-intellectualism that is so characteristic of several current tendencies, this is not an anti-intellectualism that searches for the origins (poetic intuition) of the intellect, but which seeks to leap out of the vicious circle, which for these thinkers is the intellect. It is within this abandonment of poetic intuition that the fundamental danger of the doubt of doubt resides. It rejects the intellect *in toto*, including the centrifugal phase, the poetic phase of the intellect, in order to

suicidally dive into “experience,” into the unarticulated. The doubt of doubt is anti-poetry. It does not precipitate itself *over* but *into* the unarticulated. It becomes mute. This mutism is the abyss that has opened up before us.



The proper name, this mysterious source of language, this memento of the limitation of the intellect, is at the same time a memento of the function of the intellect. The doubt of doubt, bedazzled by the limitation of the intellect, which is the proper name, forgets the function of the intellect, which is the same as that of the proper name. The doubt of doubt is the result of the loss of faith in doubt, of the loss of faith in the possibility to critique the proper name: not believing in the possibility to critique the proper name, it paradoxically abandons the proper name. The way out of this situation, in my view, is not to regain faith in doubt, but the transformation of the doubt of doubt into faith in the proper name as the source of doubt. In other words: it is to accept the limitations of the intellect, simultaneously accepting the intellect as the method, *par excellence*, through which we shock against the inarticulable. This acceptance would not only be the overcoming of intellectualism, but also of anti-intellectualism, which would allow the continuation of Western conversation, although in a more humble climate. It would allow us to continue weaving the wonderful web that is Western conversation, although without the hope of capturing the rock of the inarticulable in this web. It would be the recognition of this web's function: not to capture the rock, but to envelop it. It would be the recognition that the intellect is not an instrument for the domination of chaos, but an ode in praise of the

indomitable. The proper name is not the result of an intellectual effort, but of a shock between the intellect and the indomitable. The proper name is the synthesis of the intellect and the all-different. The proper name, and by “power of attorney” every word, is the holy Name. The recognition of this mysterious source of every word may be the beginning of a new sense of “reality;” a rebirth of a sense of proximity to the all-different within the intellect; a rebirth of a sense of the intellect’s function, and in this sense, of the function of our existence.