

Tunnel vision

“Are these still human beings, one asks oneself,
or only machines that think, write and talk?”
(Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life*)

When Wittgenstein was young, he wrote a small book intended to solve all of philosophy's problems with language, called *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). A self-taught philosopher with an academic background in engineering, Wittgenstein had studied logic and philosophy under the supervision of Bertrand Russell, but the *Tractatus* was not written inside university walls. Wittgenstein wrote this small book on the front-line, during the First World War, in intellectual solitude, without any peers and without any feedback from his supervisor. After the war, Wittgenstein showed the book to Russell who immediately recognized its brilliance. The book was very well received by the Cambridge community of analytic philosophers and by the Vienna Circle. Later, Russell persuaded Wittgenstein to present it as a PhD thesis at Cambridge. The PhD defence, held in 1929, seven years later after the publication of the *Tractatus*, was a mere formality held among close friends – G. E. Moore and Russell were in the commission. Although Wittgenstein was granted the doctoral degree by his friends, this book was never something one would call “academic writing”. His committee knew that the degree was an exception, granted to an exceptionally gifted philosopher. But as an academic writer, Wittgenstein had failed.

As an intellectual piece, the *Tractatus* is a strange beast, written by a student with the voice of a professor. Its process of creation resembles that of a fictional piece: the author is struck by inspiration, labours in solitude, and then translates the vision onto paper. Yet the *Tractatus* was not meant to be a work of fiction, rather to have the final say in a conceptual debate about the relation between language and world. This little book was meant to be the end of all philosophical conversation, the final nail in its coffin. Written outside the university, the *Tractatus* had the ambition of ending the academic conversation in philosophy, while it refused to engage with that conversation. This was not fair-play on any account. The *Tractatus* was never intended to be an academic text; it had no footnotes, no references to other authors. It was a vision of language that Wittgenstein had shared with the world.

What followed the book's publication was a kind of pay-back: everybody tried to draw Wittgenstein into the conversation he had fled from. But Wittgenstein could not endure involving the *Tractatus* in any battle of ideas. Initially, he claimed he had been misunderstood by everybody, even by Russell. Later, during the 1930s, after already embarking on other projects and writings, Wittgenstein admitted that he had been wrong in the *Tractatus*. But it was too late. The philosophers of the day kept asking him to comment on those ideas that he had come to see as mistakes. Sometimes Wittgenstein would just whistle a tune from Schubert, or turn his back and recite Indian poems, in response to their annoying demands. The book had gained a life of its own, against its creator. People wanted to talk about it then, and still today, conferences and books are written on Wittgenstein's youthful mistake.

One can only wonder if Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* would have resulted in such a strange piece had it been written inside the university, after debates with peers. As soon as an academic text is published or just shared with others, it gets placed in another context. Academic writers lose all authority over their own text and are forced to approach it as readers, with unfamiliar eyes.

This is when the work starts to rise against its author: even if the author made no mistake, just by being cited, read and discussed, the work gets a whole new meaning decided by others. Academic writing is conversational in a way that other kinds of writing are not. Wittgenstein did not know this, he insisted on shushing the wave of words stirred by his text.

A piece of academic writing does not stand on its own, it stands on other pieces of writing that came before it. This is what the footnotes and references signify. Nobody writes alone in academia: we start from others, we embed quotes and paraphrases in our own texts, then we discuss these texts with others, revising and rewriting. Academic writing is about weaving never-ending threads of texts-as-conversation, both in speech and in writing. The academic conversation can be overwhelming: it went on before we entered the discipline and will go on without us. The world created through this conversation cannot be grasped by one mind. It is not the world of one author, one vision, but a universe created by thousands of writers, each adding a minuscule layer to the existing textual corpus. In this vast universe of pre-existing writings, we are pulled and pushed in different directions by texts which seduce us. Sometimes we manage to find a moment of equilibrium, in which our ideas, facts and words align perfectly into a vision. Every writer knows these moments when words just flow out of the keyboard or pen, when everything seems to match perfectly, because we have found an a balance between what we say and the world of texts resisting us. These moments of equilibrium close us off to other possibilities of seeing and thinking. We get tunnel vision. There is something hypnotic when ideas are constructed in a harmonious way such that the parts fit the whole: because it is so well formulated, it seems true.

In academia, we need to have conversations about our texts because the danger of getting tunnel vision is present all the time. Any researcher labouring long enough in one's own field undergoes a phase when certain facts, concepts, and words fit so well into a model that any alternative perspective seems impossible. Once we manage to crystallize our theories into some kind of model, we want to settle down in that moment of peace and give up looking for other solutions. Once we finish the text and confront it with other's perspectives, only then does the construction fall apart. If we do not find others to discuss our own writings with, we become the people of one idea, one picture, one perspective. Finding a nice match between theories and facts is always accompanied by a feeling of accomplishment and finitude. We feel that we deserve a rest from all that writing. We found something, is that not enough? This is when a static vision becomes rigidity and intellectual death.

Academic writing always entails a discussion with others, either before, during, or after the writing. In the university, our writing is exposed to others systematically. The writing of a dissertation or a thesis is exemplary in that way: it is a process of writing a first draft, then getting comments from the supervisors, then rewriting, discussing, repeat for N times. Each interaction makes us see our own writing anew, from the perspective of others who keep adding points of reference into our universe, expanding our vision. When others read our work, comment on it, or even cite it, we are forced to dissociate ourselves from our own creation, to look at it again as if for the first time.

Something very personal is involved in writing one's thoughts to have them read by others. Many writers refer to their own works as their "babies". Once others enter the conversation with us after reading our text, the baby becomes emancipated. We relate to our writing differently, as strangers, and thus, we relate to ourselves in another way. The concern for ego-

boosting and recognition through publication must give way to something else, the concern for the truth. The issue at stake is no longer ourselves and our talent as writers or truth-tellers, but the text itself: the truth it expresses must be given a voice. To let go of one's preconceptions is usually termed "critical thinking"; but to let go of new ideas discovered while writing has no name. Perhaps we could call it educational detachment from oneself. It is not just a new world that is made possible in the process of writing-discussion, but a new self, which can stand beside itself and not be trapped in any vision, no matter how enticing.

Writing as a solitary activity has been described as a technology of the self, most famously by Foucault's interpretation of the Stoic's daily journaling (Foucault 1997). In the academic context, however, the change of self through writing gets a different meaning. It is still a technology of the self, but it becomes collective. Academic writing works only if inscribed in a larger process of reading, writing, commenting, discussing, rewriting, revisiting, defending one's work. Academic writing is fundamentally writing with others in view of expressing a common truth. The truth does not rest in the text itself, but rather in the interaction it creates with the others, the readers. It lies in the middle. Paul Valery once said: "*A poem is never finished; it is only abandoned*"; *academic writing faces the same abandonment. But it is not only the text that is abandoned, but also the writerly self, with all the ego and pride of the author. When academic writing functions as a technology of the self, it works because it opens up a possibility for the writer to become someone else, to think differently, to leave the comfortable spot of equilibrium for something unknown. Only in those moments, when the writer writes just for the sake of truth itself, the text speaks by itself, instead of the author. The self has disappeared and something else is left to emerge in the empty space.*

When writing, we find ourselves following a path in which everything makes sense. Then we are exposed to the gaze of others as they read our texts. In this exposure, we are disconnected a second time from our own ideas. The writing stands detached from us as an object, ready to be scrutinized. Once we understand how others see our writing, only then do we see it for the first time. In this estrangement from our own creation lies the main educational point of academic writing: we model ideas, we believe in our own constructions, we bring them to the light of another's gaze, and then we give up on these visions. At the same time, a different move emerges: we get new ideas through conversation with others, and these ideas belong even less to us than the first batch. Ideas emerge in the middle ground of the conversation, and nobody can lay claim on their conception. To be able to see these new ideas, we must learn to detach from our initial intuitions, which we poured into the very first draft. Faulkner's famous adage "kill your darlings" can be recast here as "kill your first text". Then let something new emerge, less personal, more intersubjective. And then, after the first revision is done and one thinks harmony is achieved, the writer must be ready for yet another round of conversation, for yet another killing of the darlings. If time were not an issue, the rounds of academic writing would go on forever.

Many years after the *Tractatus* was published, Wittgenstein wrote other things, less polished pieces that he did not find good enough to publish. At that time he was already a university lecturer. His writing style had changed. Looking at *On Certainty*, we already notice how Wittgenstein keeps referencing a lecture by Moore and several private conversations about that lecture. He is no longer the solipsistic genius trapped in a universe the size of a bottle. He acknowledges others' ideas, he responds to them, he engages in a conversation. Wittgenstein's later writings were composed after many discussions with his colleagues and his students, as an answer to these. He urged the students to abandon philosophy because he thought that it

cannot be done, not in academia anyway. But he himself could not think if it weren't for the seminars he conducted. Wittgenstein needed the university to confront his ideas and to never be trapped again in that bottle.

References

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