

# The Writing of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein

Elena Nájera, Alicante, Spain

## 1. Fragmentary philosophical writing

There is no doubt that we are faced with two writers who are interested in making their thoughts take on a certain form. Nietzsche is sure that “better writing means better thinking” (Nietzsche 1999 2-592). In a similar sense, Wittgenstein insists that the value of his thoughts will be all the greater, the better expressed they are, although he feels obliged to grant them a margin of imperfection: “of all of the sentences that I write here”, he points out, “only one or the other will make any kind of progress” (Wittgenstein 1980 §384). And in this respect, precisely with regard to our other writer, he explains:

“Nietzsche wrote somewhere that even the best poets and thinkers have written things that are mediocre or bad, yet they have separated them from what is good. But it's not exactly like that. Of course, in his garden a gardener keeps roses alongside manure, rubbish and straw; but it is not only their goodness which makes them stand out, but, above all, their function in the garden” (Wittgenstein 1980 §338)<sup>1</sup>.

Thus relinquishing an entirely elaborate way of writing, Wittgenstein also compares his philosophical observations with “raisins”, which may be the best part of a cake, although adding them does not ensure a perfect, complete form of expression (Wittgenstein 1980 §386). This is why, although he acknowledges that he is captivated by his way of guiding his thoughts towards philosophy, he says that he is not captivated by his own style (Wittgenstein 1997 100). In the prologue of *Philosophical Investigations*, he confesses in that respect his inability to make his thoughts progress in a natural seamless sequence: “After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed”. His reflections tend, on the contrary, to “jump all around the subject”, finding themselves spread around on “loose notes” and breaking themselves up into “countless pieces” which are impossible to piece back together, like “excerpts from an enormous landscape” in which it is difficult to find one's way (Wittgenstein 1980, §§ 156, 317 & 452). In short, the Wittgensteinian essay submits to the juxtaposition and incompleteness typical of an “album” (Wittgenstein, 1958).

Nietzsche also shares this tendency towards fragmentation and criticises philosophical systems. He introduces himself as “master” of the aphorism and the sentence that guides thought along an unhindered path which only a particularly conscientious reader could follow (Nietzsche 1999 6-153). He acknowledges that the aphoristic form creates difficulties and insists on the great hermeneutic effort which it requires. He in fact claims, “not to write more than that which could plunge «hurried» men into despair”, therefore transforming good reading into an art by which nothing is achieved unless it is done “slowly” (Nietzsche 1999 5-256). Wittgenstein appreciates calm in intellectual work too and urges the reader to take their time:

“I really want my copious punctuation marks to slow down the speed of reading. Because I should like to be read slowly (As I myself read.)” (Wittgenstein 1980 §393).

And this is, indeed, the pace set by his writing in spite of its brevity. In this sense, Wittgenstein is aware of the difficulty and obscurity of the extremely short observations which make up his work and, therefore, of the fact that only few readers will be able to understand it, this perhaps being the desired effect as it is possible that, for our two writers, style may be best justified as a discriminatory measure. To this respect, Nietzsche wrote that “all the nobler spirits select their audience when they wish to communicate; and choosing that, one at the same time erects barriers against *the others*” (Nietzsche 1999 3-633). And, with regard to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes along the same lines that:

“The book must automatically separate those who understand it from those who do not. [...] If you have a room which you do not want certain people to get into, put a lock on it for which they do not have the key” (Wittgenstein 1980 §34).

But, who has the key to style? In a rough draft of the prologue to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein dedicates the book to those who are closest to him in a cultural sense: “my fellow citizens as it were, in contrast to the rest who are *foreign* to me” (Wittgenstein 1980 §495). However, he regrets that:

“It will fall into hands which are not for the most part those in which I would like to imagine it. May it soon – this is what I wish for it – be completely forgotten by the philosophical journalists, and so be preserved perhaps for a better sort of reader.” (Wittgenstein 1980 §384).

The text is aimed, without a doubt, at a close circle of people and requires an interpreter who knows how to handle the language of philosophy in such a way that is *neither journalistic* nor academic, who, perhaps, instead is sensitive to literature and poetry.

## 2. The limits of writing

Nietzsche and Wittgenstein's styles make an effort to express their thoughts which seems to bring them close to the imaginative or suggestive register typical of poetry. And it may well be said that the former wrote all of his works in the same hand as the creative *poetic reasoning*, as well as composing actual poems. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, confesses to an inability in that respect, which is, however, very significant when determining what is to be expected from his writing: “Just as I cannot write verse”, he points out, “so too my ability to write prose extends only so far, and no farther.” (Wittgenstein 1980 §336). So his style seems to admit a limit which nonetheless manages to highlight his firm poetic vocation. He writes:

“I think I summed up my position on philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry [...] For with this assertion I have also revealed myself as someone who cannot

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein refers to *Human, All Too Human I*, § 155.

quite do what he would like to do” (Wittgenstein 1980 §129).

The fact that it is impossible to give philosophical writing a completely poetic form perhaps justifies its inadequacy. Wittgenstein in fact acknowledges that he perhaps expresses only a tenth of what he wants to express, which make his texts seem like “mumbling” (Wittgenstein 1980 §§100 & 145). In this sense he ends up admitting that not all that one thinks should be written on paper:

“Really all that can be written—that is, without doing something stupid and inappropriate—is that which emerges in the form of writing. All the rest is comical and comparable to rubbish, so to speak” (Wittgenstein 1997 27).

Nietzsche also seems to number his words and reserves them to tell of some experiences, warning that “one should only speak where one cannot remain silent, and only speak of what one has *conquered*”. The rest is all “chatter”, “literature”, bad breeding” (Nietzsche 1999 2-369).

In the same way, the proposals of *Tractatus* rule that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”, drawing a precise line between the sphere of the *speakeable*, the scientific description of the world, and that which can only be *shown*, the mystic (Wittgenstein 1961 §7). Decades later, Wittgenstein continues to insist that “the indescribable (that which seems mysterious to me and which I don’t dare to express)” is the background upon which the thoughts that he wants to express acquire their meaning (Wittgenstein 1980 §83). In any case, the question which we are interested in raising is that his literary style favours the unspeakable. The laconic proposals of *Tractatus* create the effect of a certain dogmatism—not in vain did their author intend to convey an untouchable and definitive truth through them—, indicating a road to the mystic which suggests, precisely through the obscurity of his writing, an indisputable clarity.

Turning to the very terminology of *Philosophical Investigations*, it can be affirmed that the aphoristic form which Wittgenstein’s writing tends to take on facilitates the *synoptic vision* which provokes understanding, an understanding that consists of “seeing connections” and depends on “finding and inventing intermediate cases” (Wittgenstein 1958 §122). The hermeneutic key to aphorism is, in fact, the capacity to provide examples which forsake an explanation in favour of a merely *descriptive* illustration<sup>2</sup>. And this, without a doubt, forces philosophy to adapt its writing not to a chain of inferences, but to a collection of images which intends to appeal to the personal point of view.

In this sense, Wittgenstein warns his reader that he merely intends to be the “mirror” where he can see his own thoughts with all of their errors, so helping him to correct them (Wittgenstein 1980 §93). In the same way, he seems to abandon discursive reasoning when he affirms that philosophy purely and simply places everything in front of us and does not conclude anything. For this reason, he emphasises that:

“Writing in the right style is setting the carriage straight on the rails. [...] All we want to do is straighten you up on the track if your carriage is crooked on the rails. But then we’ll let you travel alone” (Wittgenstein 1980 §§212-213).

So, the literary way of thinking is in itself significant from a philosophical point of view and reveals something which words cannot say. “Style” is the “expression of a general human necessity [...] seen *sub specie aeterni*” (Wittgenstein 1997 28). With this it is acknowledged that an author’s way of writing allows for the understanding of their own particular circumstances and their aspirations to be placed in perspective, seen from outside the ordinary logic of words, reaching a compromise with the undecidable: with the sphere of values, with the mystic.

In accordance with this idea, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein’s works may well be an attempt to *show* a cultural situation from a critical point of view, their styles suggesting something more than that which the language of the time—an egalitarian and scientific era— allows, because that which has been said up to now leads us to suspect that our two thinkers did not have too much faith in their present nor in what their present had to offer, in short, good readers.

### 3. Where are the good readers?

In the case of Nietzsche, he would actually be contradicting himself if he was to expect to find “ears and hands” for his truths in life: “that today one doesn’t hear me and doesn’t accept my ideas is not only understandable, it even seems right to me” (Nietzsche 1999 6-298). In the same sense, Wittgenstein, in the correspondence surrounding the publication of *Tractatus*, proves to be equally resigned to the idea that “nobody will understand it”<sup>3</sup>. And with regard to the “spirit” of *Philosophical Investigations* he regrets the same lack of understanding during that era:

“This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written. This is not, I believe, the spirit of the main current of European and American civilization” (Wittgenstein 1980 §§29 & 34).

As we insinuated a few lines ago, the philosophies of our two writers contain, more or less explicitly, a criticism of civilisation which brings them together and in which they collaborate and converge their styles. In a text from 1930, Wittgenstein points out that there are “problems in the western intellectual world” which he has not come up against and which no philosopher has ever confronted, although he specifies in brackets that “perhaps Nietzsche passed them by”. To have done so would mean having known how to predict and describe the “odyssey” of the west before its end, something reserved for certain poets, for which reason it should not seem strange that it is written “in the obscure knowledge of premonition and it may only be understandable to a few” (Wittgenstein 1980 §41). That same year, confirming the wisdom of the Nietzschean cultural diagnosis, Wittgenstein wrote about the decadence of the contemporary world:

“Our age is really an age of the transvaluation of all values. (The procession of humankind turns a corner & what used to be the way up is now the way down, etc.) Did Nietzsche have in mind what now is happening & does his achievement consist in anticipating it & finding a word for it?” (Wittgenstein 1997 53).

According to these passages, Wittgenstein seems certainly to have read Nietzsche and to have made use of some of

2 Cfr. Cavell, Stanley 2004 “The *Investigations*’ everyday aesthetics of itself”, in: *The Literary Wittgenstein*, New York-London: Routledge.

3 Letter to Russell, 13.03.1919.

his teachings. He coincides with him in the moral censorship of a world which is united around science, industry and progress and which, because of this, suffers acute nihilism. We are speaking about a world which is impervious to value and to feeling, in which the light has gone out: "it is as if the shine were erased from everything, everything is dead" and "one suddenly realizes that one's mere existence is still completely empty, deserted" (Wittgenstein 1997 198-199). For this reason, in these dark and desolate coordinates, authenticity, the value of the individual, becomes an arduous task: "For in times like these, genuine strong characters simply leave the arts aside and turn to other things and somehow the worth of the individual man finds expression" (Wittgenstein 1980 §29).

For Wittgenstein, cultural disappointment prevails, but he believes that the individual may still have the chance to express himself. It is a question of raising oneself to the higher and undescrivable perspective of the mystic, touching upon aesthetic and religious hope. The price to be paid, however, is the creation of something from this feeling which cannot be communicated, cannot be said in the everyday common language, which is the language of argumentation and criticism. So a victory, which could almost be described a Pyrrhic victory, is celebrated of authenticity over the nihilism of the western civilisation.

## Literature

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