

You know a fact when you see it, Archie, but you
have no feeling for phenomena.
(Nero Wolfe, in *Fer-de-Lance*, by Rex Stout)

Wolfe says that he feels phenomena and I collect
facts. I don't think that means anything, having
looked up the word phenomena in the dictionary.
(Archie, in the same book)

“You don't know much,” said the Duchess;
“and that's a fact”.

Preface

Collected here are four essays written over the last fifteen years. The first had its modest origin as a comment to a talk by James Conant at a conference on Wittgenstein in Bergen, December 2001.¹ The present version is five times larger than the original. The second is a revised version of a talk at a French-Norwegian conference on Wittgenstein in Skjolden, in the Spring of 1992, the original is the only one previously published;² the third I gave at a French-Austrian-Norwegian conference on Wittgenstein in September 2005 in Bergen.³ I have added a postscript. The fourth was delivered in Paris late October 2006, at the French-Austrian-Norwegian conference.⁴ Previously its main idea existed publicly solely on the few occasions throughout the last twenty years when I tried to interest my listener in the issue of what Wittgenstein thought we should mean by ‘interpretation’, and the importance of this for the ‘paradox’ in PU § 201. These three talks all address issues in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. Together the four pieces are the first writings of mine on Wittgenstein, since my degree thesis, that I have given a public outing.

I have two reasons for taking the present step. The first is that as a member of the Wittgenstein Research Group at the Philosophy Department in Bergen,⁵ I

1 See <http://wab.aksis.uib.no/w-konferanse/>.

2 See <http://wab.aksis.uib.no/wp-no5.pdf>.

3 See <http://wab.aksis.uib.no/wfg/konf-no-fr-05.htm>.

4 See <http://wab.aksis.uib.no/wfg/konf-no-fr-06.htm>.

5 See <http://wab.aksis.uib.no/wfg/>.

think it incumbent on me to contribute in visible ways to the activities of the group. The second reason is that I have long felt the wish to partake in a debate on something I believe is overdue: given the difficulty of deciding what Wittgenstein *means*, and the deep disagreements among important Wittgenstein scholars, we need to highlight the difference between being a *reader* of Wittgenstein and being an *interpreter* of him. As I see it, a reader opens up a text, the interpreter, to exaggerate, closes it down. A reader struggles to understand the text, an interpreter unfolds an understanding of what the text supposedly says. As interpreters we naturally see ourselves as digging deep into the text, underpinning the results of our labour to make sense of it. We commit ourselves to a particular understanding of the text and try to justify that understanding as well as we know. It becomes natural to play down features resisting our interpretation, all the time streamlining and exposing the depth of authorial meaning, as we see it. It is a commonplace that interpreters must respect the text, not bend and twist it to their purpose: interpreters must be self-aware. As readers we are puzzled, uncertain of our grasp, seeing conflicts and choices, we are slow and delay making up our mind. Both reader and interpreter need wider knowledge of the fields of enquiry the text belongs to; only the interpreter makes a definite decision as to what is relevant. An interpreter must be a reader, but is perhaps a bad reader, reading into the text stuff best seen as not there. My impression, admittedly based on very limited knowledge of the secondary literature, is that the nature of Wittgenstein's writing (the style is informal, suggestive, slightly confessional, and presents an internal debate telling us how it is with Wittgenstein) invites the reader to partake in the discussion and makes it easy for him to see Wittgenstein as saying what that reader considers to be the truth of the matter. (There is a seminary whiff over parts of the secondary literature, not to mention some conferences.) In the essays presented here, I try to read into the texts no more than what I *see* them as saying: just as every other writer on Wittgenstein no doubt. Wittgenstein too discusses issues and problems, first we struggle to identify those, then we may go on and try to evaluate his contribution. Though Wittgenstein is easily seen as thinking about many different issues, just look at the list he provides in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, an interesting feature of his work is the impression that no matter what the discussion is about, there is a *thematical unity* to his work; it is as if he is thinking about the same issue all the time. This seemingly paradoxical feature stems, I believe from two facts; that he is concentrating on the way one should properly think gives his work a character of being about the nature of methodical thinking, and he seems to have a cast of mind, religious, transcendent, that colours all his thinking by what it picks up as of

interest. He is thus of a philosophical type very different from e.g. C. D. Broad, who wrote his views on one topic, and then moved on to give his views on another. We find many philosophers of a ‘non-Broadian’ cast of mind, and many who seem obsessively occupied with one big issue, but not many who share Wittgenstein’s obsession with how to think properly, who see this as the issue. (I said ‘paradoxical’ above, since Wittgenstein admonishes us to see differences, he trains us, by example, to learn to see how things are and how they turn out to be unlike.)

However, Wittgenstein belongs in a select group of major thinkers whose writings for the most part exist as *Nachlass*. With other authors, we may look at a publication and say what we find there. Assuming that publishing gives a stamp of approval, we can attribute opinions to the writer, at least for a period of his life. In the case of Wittgenstein, not only are there few publications, and few commentators restrict themselves to those, but the *Nachlass* has a very distinctive character. Wittgenstein wrote and rewrote, cut and pasted, endlessly making changes in single sentences and in their placing. This suggests, more than anything else, a restless mind, never happy with existing formulations. How can we then conclude as to what Wittgenstein *means*? We may say, he wrote such and such, in those and those places, but it takes a daring interpreter, having perhaps culled remarks from all over the *Nachlass*, to conclude: this is what he means. Writing about Genet and his contemporaries, Edmund White says, referring to the present: “In our culture of gossip we make no distinction between remarks and published texts, between first impulses and revised statements, but for a real writer this is an important difference [...]”⁶ An additional problem is the sorry state of publications from the *Nachlass*. I would suggest, as a way out of this situation, that what we need is a survey of themes, and the varying constancy of themes, in his thinking. A need made easier to satisfy today, with the whole of *Nachlass* available as computer files.

A while ago a friend recommended a volume, *The Translator’s Art*, honouring Betty Radice, for many years the editor of Penguin Classics. One of the editors of the book, Barbara Reynolds, herself contributes an essay. In it she reflects on her own work as translator, and some of her remarks are well worth remembering. One is that, when struggling to translate *Orlando Furioso*, she learnt to trust the English language, realizing again and again the truth of a line in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, said by the Duchess to Alice: “Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves”. Another sentence by Reynolds is: “Translation is also

6 White (2005), Edmund, *My Lives: An Autobiography*, Bloomsbury, London, p. 323.

the slowest and most observant form of reading possible.”⁷ I quote that line because, as member of a group scrutinizing passages of PU, §§ 520–536, in the autumn of 2005, I found myself reading Wittgenstein in German, English and Norwegian. (The group had native speakers of all three languages.) Testing the translations revealed the difficulty of translating, but also the truth of what Reynolds says. The text seemed to yield up (more of) its sense when one tried to replace the original words with those of a foreign tongue. It was also plain, I believe, that Wittgenstein was found more at home in Norwegian than in English.

Bergen, March 2008

7 Radice (1987), William and Barbara Reynolds (eds.), *The Translator's art: Essays in Honour of Betty Radice*, Penguin, London.