

On Remarks on Colour

João Carlos Salles Pires da Silva*

I

The remarks on colours written by Wittgenstein in his last years of life contain a detailed treatment of grammatical propositions, that is, propositions situated between logic and the empirical, and, exactly for that, have always been authentic philosophical challenge. (Cf. Wittgenstein, 1977) A few examples relating to colours: "There is no transparent white"; "grey cannot be bright"; "there is no reddish green". Wittgenstein investigates, therefore, the difficult logic of the concepts of colour, and then situates them in language games, installed in forms of life. With that, the classical theme of necessity finds a new formulation, and the current definition of "truth of reason", for example, sees itself menaced as the one which is true in all possible worlds.

Wittgenstein's immediate target in those remarks is Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, but the reach of his analysis is wider indeed. Specifically, against a very well established tradition of Goethe's interpreters, Wittgenstein enunciates a heresy: Goethe did not write for painters. Goethe, he himself a hard-working painter, could not possibly write to the authority whom he preferably addressed. And that paradoxical situation would certify the failure of his specific phenomenological project. However, Goethe finds himself in the paradoxical situation of doing bad phenomenology just and simply for intending to do it, for discoursing on the "character" of colour. Thus, in a more comprehensive way, extremely paradoxical is maybe the project of a phenomenology, whatever that is, for, on trying to fix the identity of the colour, it necessarily stops writing for its favourite authorities (the ones who mostly become masters of distinctions in the visual field), and at most attends to decorators, that is, to limited conceptual games. Phenomenology, condemned in its fundamentals to an ostensive definition of colours, would be incapable of abandoning itself to the learning of the colour, in which field painters have a lot to teach. After all, it escapes phenomenology the game of chromatic occurrence and, above all, the other games which are not at all exterior to the correct use of the words with which we describe our visual field.

With Goethe's paradox, Wittgenstein states the essential paradox of a phenomenology: its incapacity before phenomenological problems, however legitimate. On discussing how internal relationships may be caught by the look, and displayed in the phenomenon itself, his analysis of the logic of the concepts of colours, in *Remarks*

on Colour, offers us a successful example of "therapy" of such problems, no longer involving an intolerable fixing of essences. Thus, the book holds a central place in his work, for it deepens themes which are essential for it, and it still benefits from the most remarkable results of *Philosophical Investigations* and from its remarks on the philosophy of psychology.

II

Also from a material point of view, *Remarks on Colour* constitute a very refined collection, one even especially resulting from an investigation plan carried out literally. Besides, they are Wittgenstein's last collection of reflections that have the complete mark of procedures which characterise his work as an author, lacking only the typing stage. As an investigation process, it was carried out in a concentrated way in a few months, in 1950, so that they prepare and precede (chronologically and theoretically) the substantial part of what today is named *On Certainty*. However, Prof. G. E. M. Anscombe's edition, in spite of its many merits, compromises the dating, the ordering and even the selection of its paragraphs. Consequently, the edition makes difficult the reconnaissance of the importance of the work, of its position in the wittgensteinian *corpus*, and, moreover, it makes difficult the reading of its central theses, which I partially summarised above.

In fact, the comparison of Anscombe's edition of *Remarks on Colour* with the photocopies of manuscripts 176, 172 and 173 leads us to the discovery, in that edition, of a damaging absence of paragraphs and variants, mistaken dating and wrong ordering of paragraphs in MS 172, which compromise its sense and value. While I was working on the grammar of colours in Wittgenstein, I could make that comparison and, taking into account the mistakes I identified in her edition, I decided to write Prof. Anscombe asking her for an opinion. At that point, I was still translating the text - which today is already completely reestablished and translated, including the variants and paragraphs omitted in Anscombe's edition, with another ordering for the second part, and even with the addition of a fourth part. Being the work over and done with, it would be possible, now, to write a more precise argumentation, but I prefer to recover the text of the letter, mailed on October 30, 1995, in which, after indicating that I would be making a translation of *Remarks on Colour*, parallel to the making of my thesis, I argued as follows:

"(...) I was able to compare the text you edited to the photocopy of Wittgenstein's manuscripts found in the edition of Cornell University. That work led me to a few conclusions which I would like to submit to your appreciation, for I fear to be mistaken due to the lack of data or just to sheer misjudgement in evaluation. My conclusions have led me to diverge from some information given in your preface and, especially, from the

ordering of the paragraphs in Part II of the *Bemerkungen über die Farben* [Remarks on Colour], so I would like to submit the summary of those conclusions to your appreciation:

"First, it seems to me that the original ordering of the text in Part II differs from the one you edited. The text ought to begin at § 11 up to § 20, and following them §§ 1-10. This way, I believe, the text would improve in force and clarity, for (a) the present § 1 will be no longer isolated, and will complete the series of fictitious situations contrary to Goethe's phenomenological analysis; (b) new argumentative groups would arise and none would be dissolved; (c) §§ 11, 12 and 13 would then accomplish the perfect function of introducing a proposal for treating the problem of colours. I feel then that the text is a clear analysis project of the grammatical propositions about colours - a project which will be explored and accomplished in Parts III and I. Besides, there are empirical indexes showing that this new proposal of ordering does not conflict with the manuscripts, and what is in them even supports it.

"I call your attention (i) to the blank space at the end of § 10, which is an index that the text might end there. And (ii) to the fact that the inversion of the order would be easy and possible. If the four pages of the manuscript happen to be in detached sheets of paper, the change in the order might be made easily. If, however, it happens to be in a sheet of folded foolscap, what might have happened was that the internal pages were transformed into external pages. I am including a composition of the manuscript that shows that both orderings are possible; the one you have proposed, that is to know, page 1 (§ 1 up to part of § 5), page 2 (part of § 5 up to § 10), page 3 (§§ 11-14), page 4 (§§ 15-20); and the ordering that I propose, according to which we would have the following order to the pages: 3, 4, 1, 2.

"Secondly, I have some doubts concerning the date of composition of Part I. You state that it would have been composed in March 1951, at Dr. Bevan's house. However, it seems somewhat unlikely to me that Wittgenstein, having such a short lifetime ahead of him and having so much to say about certainty, dedicated the first days after resuming work, after radiotherapy had been suspended, to the review of texts that he had already written. Besides, if he really did that, he would have had little time left to compose Part I, because from March 10 on there are almost daily notes - with registered dates - about certainty, which begin in a notebook (MS 175) and continue on March 21 in another notebook (MS 176) in which we also find notes on colours. It is evident that he only changed into another notebook (MS 176) after there were no more pages left in the other notebook (MS 175). Besides, there is the clue offered by the vertical lines in Part II (which was left at your home) which suggest that review work was done aiming at the composition of Part I. Since every note about certainty is dated (MS 175, MS 176 starting from sheet 22 and MS 177), as if to indicate the importance of every work day, because

of the nearness of death, I feel that it is very strange that there is no date on the first 22 sheets of manuscript 176, where Part I of the notes about colours is found. I finally observe that, if the dates presented by Mr. Ray Monk in his biography of Wittgenstein are reliable, contrary to what is stated in your preface, Part III would not have been composed in Oxford, but in London and in Cambridge. Would it not have been Part I the one you claim to have been composed at your home? It is obvious that the questions I raise about the dates of composition of the manuscripts are not remarkable, except to indicate the continuity of a work about colours and even the priority that was given to them in relation to the reflections about certainty, taking into consideration that both themes are contiguous in MS 172. (...)"

After having sent that letter (to which, unfortunately, there was no answer), it was possible to come to other findings. From among those I would like to emphasise, as a result of a more likely dating, the clear indication of the agreement of theme and period between the collection of *Remarks on Colour* and eight paragraphs of MS 169, which, to be fair, from now on should be included as a fourth part of it, both for its contents, and still for the presence of signs with which Wittgenstein usually separated a block of text: --|-- (Cf. Wittgenstein, L. 1969, vol. 71, fls 77-80; 2000, MS 169, 77v-80v; 1993, 64-66).

III

A lot of the damaging effects from that edition and from others of Wittgenstein's work were corrected in the recent electronic edition of his estate by Oxford University Press. And, no doubt, it is important to praise an edition that preserves all the hesitations of the original text, keeps its variants and even the revision signs of Wittgenstein himself, for, after all, those ones too are part of the text and indicate, at least, the stage of elaboration - with which very suggestive inter-relations can be restored (Cf. Schulte, 1987). With that, the editor finally stops substituting for the author and competing with the interpreter. However, as an inheritance of previous mistakes, a few slips remain, like the ordering of the Second Part of *Remarks on Colour*, which is still misleading. The persistence of such a mistake by itself absolutely justifies the warning in this text, which may thus be understood both as a praise to the estate monumental diplomatic edition, and as a suggestion that maybe not all the work of textual establishment of the wittgensteinian *corpus* is complete.

Textual criticism is of extreme importance. Undoubtedly, its work does not coincide with philosophical criticism, but, once it prepares the ground for it, it may favour or damage it a lot. And, in the case of *Remarks on Colour*, aspects pertaining to a textual criticism certainly present clear philosophical consequences, such as the possibility to see a more clear connection between the investigation of the logic of the concepts of

colour and the one of the grammar of the expressions "see" and "see as". Then, in that and in other aspects, the edited text should make more clear the project (proper, e. g., of MS 172) of investigation of phenomenological problems without a phenomenology.

References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1977), "Editor's Preface", in *Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colour*.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. & Von Wright, G. H. (1984), "Vorwort", in Wittgenstein, *Über Gewißheit*.
- Schulte, J. (1987), *Erlebnis und Ausdruck: Wittgensteins Philosophie der Psychologie*, München-Wien, Philosophia.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969), *The Wittgenstein Papers*, Ithaca, Cornell University Libraires.
- (1977), *Remarks on Colour*, Londres, Basil Blackwell, 1977.
 - (1984), *Über Gewißheit*, in Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Werkausgabe*, vol. 8.
 - (1984), *Werkausgabe*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1984.
 - (1993), *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie (1949-1951): Das Innere und das Äußere*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
 - (2000), *Wittgenstein's Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition*, Oxford University Press, University of Bergen, The Wittgenstein Trustees.

Endnote

- * Department of Philosophy at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). This work would not have been possible to accomplish without the encouragement and counselling of Professor Arley Ramos Moreno, advisor in my Ph.D. in Philosophy at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP).