

On the Problem of Expression in the *Tractatus*

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According to Wittgenstein, the value of the *Tractatus* lies "in the first place" in the fact that in it "thoughts (*Gedanken*) are expressed"; "this value", he adds, "will be the greater the better the thoughts are expressed. The more the nail has been hit on the head" (*TLP* Pref.). At the heart of the book there seems also to be a problem of expression. In this paper I will try, above all, to identify what this problem consists in (I-III), and I will suggest that several of Tolstoy's ideas on art may have conditioned the perception that Wittgenstein had of it (IV). I will begin with a number of general observations on the content of the *Tractatus*. The idea is that, given the senselessness of its propositions, we must suppose that it is not them that are the object to be understood, but rather an ineffable knowledge, relative to the conditions of representation. I will then argue that the expressive aspects of the book become relevant both in leading the reader in this direction, and for the task of expressing thoughts that cannot be communicated directly.

I

The *Tractatus* is a book of philosophy; it "deals with the problems of philosophy". Wittgenstein denies, however, that it is a "text-book" (cf. *TLP*, Pref.), a book to read in order to learn some philosophical theory. In his opinion "philosophy is not a theory [...]. The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions'" (*TLP* 4.112). According to the Preface, the book shows "that the method of formulating (*die Fragestellung*) these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language" (*TLP* Pref.). This assumption seems to be closely linked to the aim of the book: to draw a limit to thinking or, better, to the expression of thoughts (cf. *TLP* Pref.). What Wittgenstein holds to be the "unassailable and definitive" truth of the thoughts communicated by the *Tractatus*, presumably has something to do with this operation. In order to draw a limit to thinking, it would be necessary to think both sides of it, that is, also to think "what cannot be thought". But that which cannot be thought, simply cannot be thought. With regard to language, however, it seems possible distinctly to separate significant from senseless propositions. The idea is that, if a proposition cannot be a term of the definite series of the general propositional form, it will find itself beyond the limit, in the region of non-sense. And given that, according to Wittgenstein, thought is expressed without residue in the use of propositional signs (cf. Mounce 1997, pp. 3-8), that is to say, the domain of the thinkable and the sayable are coextensive, then the thinkable will also be limited thus (cf. Sullivan 2003, pp. 209-211).

Since the sense of the *Tractatus* lies in this limitation, and it is achieved by identifying the general form of the proposition, perhaps it may be assumed that, in its essence, it concerns the question of the expressible and the non-expressible, of what we can and cannot do with our language. The "thoughts" expressed in it probably correspond to those that Wittgenstein considered to be genuine intuitions on representation and its limits, intuitions accompanied by a clear awareness of what can and cannot be said. Such an awareness is expressed dramatically in the declaration of the senselessness of his own propositions. Not unlike the pseudopropositions of philosophy, signs appear in them which are devoid of

meaning or are used in a way which does not conform to logical syntax. This happens because, on the whole, they assume reflexively, as their content, elements of our representative apparatus; with language, however, it is not possible to go outside language: "That which expresses *itself* in language, we cannot express by language" (*TLP* 4.121); "What *can* be shown *cannot* be said" (*TLP* 4.1212).

According to Wittgenstein, what belongs to form, to the conditions of representation, shows itself once the sayable is clearly represented in an appropriate symbolism. That which can be shown, however, cannot be said, because it does not have the nature of a state of affairs, but rather of form: it is not the accidental and contingent, but the permanent and necessary.

II

Formal realities are *already* present; learning them does not constitute the acquisition of new facts, even of a non-empirical type; hence propositions cannot be formulated regarding them. Since the propositions of the *Tractatus* say many things *about* such realities, they become senseless. Like all other forms of non-sense, they do not in fact say anything; nevertheless not all nonsense *appears* to say nothing. The propositions of the *Tractatus*, in particular, seem to put forward a theory of the world, of language, of logic, etc. This appearance is relevant; it is only through it that the reader can reach the point of view for the essential, necessary, data of our representative system and "*am Ende*", in a sort of *anagnorisis*, recognise the senselessness of the propositions that have led him to it. This is to say, to understand that the conditions of representation are not states of affairs that can be formulated and, above all, that the aim of the author, in drawing clear distinctions like those between content, structure, and form, or the possible, the accidental, and the necessary, was not to formulate a theory, but rather to direct the reader's attention to these conditions and their non-representability (cf. McGinn 1999).

The problem is that this still seems to imply that some senseless propositions are understood, have some content, some sense. Indeed only a sense can be communicated and understood. On the other hand, it seems that, if we understand something, we know what we understand and we can say what we understand; hence, if we cannot formulate what we believe we have understood in a way that makes sense, we simply do not have a thought in our mind. For the *Tractatus* there are no inexpressible thoughts: thought is "the significant proposition" (*TLP* 4). It follows from this that they cannot be thoughts in the technical sense of logical pictures of facts, those that, according to the Preface, the book expresses. If the content of the book is that which has been hypothesised, then such thoughts regard non-representational contents. The formal structures, the conditions of representation, but also the value, are contents of understanding different from the logical pictures of facts; thus the knowledge that concerns them does not consist of representations and consequently cannot be expressed, communicated, in propositions. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein seems to assume that his propositions do concern it and that the reader can understand them; given that they are nonsensical, it is not clear how this is to be interpreted.

III

Perhaps we can also speak of “understanding” with regard to the propositions of the *Tractatus*, as long as we avoid recourse to the untenable idea of ineffable truths (cf. Moore 2003, on whom the proposed interpretation depends). They are not truths of the type that the propositions attempt to express in some way; nor, on the other hand, is anything shown in them. What they do is something else. For Wittgenstein, when we focus our attention on what makes the representation of the world possible, nothing is left to represent. Quite simply something is *shown* to us. What results is a knowledge, but it is ineffable, because it is not representational. As A. Moore notes, it is a symptom of the possession of this knowledge that one attempts to express it and the propositions of the *Tractatus* try to do precisely this: to put into words that which is shown to us when we focus our attention on the conditions of sensible language. It is as if they considered the ineffable knowledge of such conditions a knowledge of something. Their outward appearance of sense derives from this. However there is not *something* to communicate; what they do in reality, under this appearance, is to direct the reader's gaze to what is shown, which is always before him in the clearly formulated propositions. That this is the author's intention can be understood by the reader only thanks to the propositions' appearance of sense: “When he has climbed out through them, on them, over them” (TLP 6.54).

There has been discussion of the fact that while in the Preface Wittgenstein presents his book as an object of understanding, in the final lines, on the other hand, he refers to himself (“he who understands me...”) (cf. Diamonds 1991). The contrast is more apparent than real. After all, the author identifies himself with a textual strategy and a style; his direct intervention by means of the personal pronoun simply activates (involves) the reader with a profile determined by the type of interpretative (and not) operations that he supposes he is now able to carry out. This reader matches the one evoked in the opening lines of the Preface, capable perhaps of understanding the book, having in turn already thought the thoughts that are expressed in it, “or at least similar thoughts” (TLP Pref.). What follows from the reading is, in fact, the acquisition of a vision (cf. TLP 6.54), whose presupposition is the sharing with the author of a genuine knowledge of contents transcending the possibilities of representation. The problem of expression of the *Tractatus* has to do with this “sharing” and with what this presupposes in the reader.

In question is the expression of real “thoughts”, of a state of ineffable knowledge; the propositions of the book are a symptom of the possession of this knowledge and they owe their existence to the need to communicate it, because the solution to the problems of philosophy depends on this. It does not follow from this that the reader understands nonsensical propositions; nonsensical propositions do not offer anything to understanding. In effect it is not the propositions of the *Tractatus* that the reader can understand, but rather the ineffable knowledge that has its closest form of expression in them. I believe that when Wittgenstein stresses that the value of his book “will be the greater the better the thoughts are expressed. The more the nail has been hit on the head”, he is referring precisely to the appropriateness of his propositions in (attempting to) express the inexpressible knowledge of these thoughts.

IV

It seems possible to evaluate the appropriateness in question also in aesthetic terms. Wittgenstein appears to be aiming at a work which is also successful from a literary point of view. The book should also give the reader “pleasure” (*Vergnügen*) (TLP Pref.). It must not be thought that this depends on something like an ornament which is external to the content. Wittgenstein does not seem to consider the literary, expressive aspect as a sort of wrapping for an equally elaborate content. By intending his work to be “rigidly philosophical and at the same time literary” (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 96), he seems instead to want to indicate a profound unitary fact, almost as if what the book was trying to communicate also depended on the *form* in which it is written, as if the form corresponded intimately to the way in which the author had discovered and built the content for himself and for his readers.

That this is how things stand is demonstrated in the first place by two stylistic features which are more readily perceived, that is the system of numbering and the brevity of the propositions of the *Tractatus* (cf. Gmür 2000, pp). The former corresponds to the author's way of working and makes clear for the reader at the same time the structure (and the possible reading pathways) of what the author considered to be the presentation of a system (cf. Meyer 1993). Thanks to the brevity of the propositions, the relations between the propositions, signalled by the numbers, become clearer, noticeable almost at a glance.

On the value of brevity, the motto that we find at the beginning of the book is explicit: “... and everything that one knows, that one knows not only by having heard it as a rumour or a whisper can be said in three words”. If, on the one hand, this demonstrates Wittgenstein's sensitivity to the diffidence towards the inadequate use of language, widespread in Central European culture of the time, on the other, it brings us back to the book's problem of expression, in relation to which his care over its brevity and clarity must not be one of the last things taken into consideration. “What is known”, in this case, is in fact something that the propositions cannot say. This poses a problem of sincerity for the author. Unlike the reader, he knows right from the start that the sense of his propositions is only apparent. However he needs this appearance to place the reader in contact with what he considers to be a genuine state of knowledge; from this comes the problem of a textual strategy that can respond on one hand to the need to communicate ineffable contents and, on the other, to the need for sincerity: it had to become clear that the propositions were not the presentation of a theory. Wittgenstein must have sensed this need particularly strongly (although later and referring to a different question, the testimony in Rhees 1983, p. 174 is particularly significant). Considering his familiarity with and appreciation of Tolstoy, perhaps we may dare the conjecture that, in writing the *Tractatus*, he saw himself working to satisfy conditions similar to those indicated by Tolstoy for artistic creation.

Tolstoy held art to be “a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them” (Tolstoy 1930, p. 123). Hence he considered the sincerity of the artist to be fundamental, “that is, that the artist should be impelled by an inner feeling to express his feeling”; indeed, sincerity impels him “to find clear expression for the feeling which he wishes to transmit” (*ivi*, p. 229). And given that, “if the work of art is good as art, the feeling expressed by the artist is

transmitted to others”, we may go so far as to consider sincerity to be the ultimate condition of the success of art (cfr. *ivi*, 228-229).

Not unlike Tolstoy, Wittgenstein intended art as expression, as a means of coming into contact with something else and thus, we may presume, included the literary aspect of his work. We read in the *Notebooks*: “Art is a kind of expression. Good art is complete expression” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 83e). The reference to Tolstoy is explicit in a later note: “There is a lot to be learned from Tolstoy’s bad theorising about how a work of art conveys ‘a feeling’. – You really could call it, not exactly the expression of a feeling, but at least an expression of feeling, or a felt expression. And you could say too that in so far as people understand it, they “resonate” in harmony with it, respond to it [...]”(Wittgenstein 1980, p. 58e).

Albeit with a critical distance, Wittgenstein seems to share the idea of the expressive nature of art. In the end what he supposes for the ideal reader of the *Tractatus* is an “entering into consonance”. It may furthermore be supposed that his need for clarity depends on a need for sincerity analogous to that which Tolstoy required of the artist. Stressing the philosophical and at the same time literary nature of the *Tractatus*, indeed may also mean perceiving expression as the place of contact between the sense of the argument and the sense of self. His care over the clarity, the construction of propositions which, in their brevity, result as complete communicative constructions, is not separate from his preoccupation that in the end the appearance of sense is set aside and authenticity re-established. In Wittgenstein’s eyes, the clarifying effect of his propositions must have been, finally, precisely this: that he who understands *him* recognises them as nonsensical (*TLP* 6.54). If for the author writing propositions as appropriate as possible to the expression of an ineffable knowledge is the symptom of its possession, then for the reader “throwing them away”, when he has used them as steps to climb up beyond them, is a symptom of the acquisition of such knowledge.

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