



INCOMPLETE ABECEDARY OF A YEAR
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A. Account

In trying to give a short account of what I have done, workwise, during the ten or eleven months of my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg (which is what I understand an *Arbeitsbericht* to be in the circumstances at hand), I am reminded of the many semantic valences of the English word “count” and its cognates.

Am I to count the tasks I have completed, or the steps I have taken toward their completion? Like anyone, I arrived at the Wiko with a set of goals and expectations. In my case, the main self-assigned missions were: 1) to make some progress with the German language (see Kafka); 2) to write about the issue of logically alien thought, the topic of my research project at the Wiko (see below Alien); 3) to study classics of social anthropology relevant to 2); 4) to complete a draft of a book on the problem of negation (see Negation); 5) to get distracted along the way (see Parentheses). I did not fully realize at first that my set of missions was inconsistent. Had I been more consistent, I might have set 5), the anti-mission par excellence, as my primary mission.

But giving an account of what you have done, I take it, is not necessarily a matter of accounting for it (i.e., justifying yourself), let alone of counting the things that you have done, your academic *Werke* in the broad sense (see Reformation). It may also be a matter of recounting a course of events or experience, or of singling out what counts, that is to say, what matters, has importance, for you, and perhaps in itself.

Nowadays, the assessment of academic research all too often takes the form of a balance sheet, or at the very least a form that you would have thought was reserved for the assessment of military campaigns (which percentage of the targets were hit?). The Wiko releases its Fellows, not only from the weight of virtually all material concerns, but also from the pressure of short-term intellectual productivity, even, I dare say, from the pressure of productivity as such. It knows better than to value products only. It values thinking and conversing, which are not products, but activities.

K. Kafka

Shortly after my arrival in Grunewald, I took part in the intensive German course offered by the Wiko. I found myself in the congenial company of Catherine Wilson and James Simpson. Under the gracious and thoughtful supervision of Eva von Kügelgen, our little group read through Franz Kafka's *Das Urteil* and *Brief an den Vater*. James Simpson convinced me that some aspects of the convulsion of thought and sensibility that Luther initiated were carried to their ultimate consequences in Kafka's writings. During breaks, Catherine Wilson mentioned to me some books relevant to my research project (see Logically Alien Thought), among them A. R. Luria's *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, which we had various occasions to discuss together throughout the year.

L. Logically Alien Thought

The issue of logically alien thought, of its possibility and significance, was the main focus of my research project at the Wiko. My plan was to bring out the structuring role that the problem of the intelligibility of radically alien forms of thought has played, under different guises, in both the advent of modern logic and the constitution of social anthropology.

This topic had intermittently occupied me before coming to the Wiko, ever since I had read Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La mentalité primitive* as well as the forceful criticisms to which it is subjected in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *La pensée sauvage*, and I thought that as an answer to the query "What is your work about?" it would be far less of a conversation-killer than, say, the topic of negation (see Negation) (or, for that matter, certain current scientific topics: see Mathematics and Physics).

In effect, I learned about the history and current state of social anthropology through conversations with Isidore Lobnibe, who ended up joining me in the organization of a workshop on the relations between logic and anthropology in early June. I also had the privilege of discussing with Stanislas Meda Bemile his planned documentary film, *Bio Bir – Seed of the Future*, thereby acquiring an inchoate understanding of the resources and stakes of visual anthropology. Watching former Fellow Michael Oppitz's stunning documentary film, *Shamans of the Blind Country* (see Structuralism), was another memorable experience along that path.

M. Mathematics and Physics

The fields of mathematics and physics were conspicuous by their absence. A quick look at previous lists of Fellows confirmed that the situation was no mere anomaly. Given the equally conspicuous and structural predominance of biology, it was hard to resist the impression that the more mathematical sciences were being evicted by the less mathematical. This little frustration was largely compensated by the good fortune of being around Lorraine Daston, who was tracing the history of the concepts of rule and calculation.

Just as in normal time I would not have had the impetus and luxury to read theological writings (see Reformation), so I would hardly have been in a position to devote time to learning some basic mathematics, such as is contained in William Lawvere and Stephen Schanuel's masterful introduction to category theory, *Conceptual Mathematics: A First Introduction to*

Categories. I also got distracted by Alan Turing’s paper, “On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*”. It was by stripping the process of human computation down to its essentials that Turing arrived at the general concept of a computing machine, as Juliet Floyd stressed in her talk at the Wiko workshop on logic and anthropology.

N. Negation

The problems attending the concept of negation formed the topic of the other, more narrowly philosophical project that I pursued at the Wiko (see *Logically Alien Thought*). As with my other project, I was greatly helped by the inexhaustible resources of the Wiko Library.

During the fall, I attended a seminar co-taught by James Conant and Irad Kimhi largely devoted to this topic at the University of Leipzig. Attending seminars and events at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Leipzig, where I could meet Andrea Kern and Sebastian Rödl, proved highly beneficial to my work.

I spent most of the winter returning to the passages Wittgenstein devoted to negation in his 1939 Cambridge Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics. I came to identify three interrelated puzzles concerning negation. They are laid out in the introduction to the manuscript that I have completed this year, entitled “*Essai sur le problème de la négation*”.

P. Parentheses

As we were painstakingly finding our way through Thomas Bernhard’s *Wittgensteins Neffe* in the German class, it dawned on me that making out the grammatical structure of a complex German sentence was not unlike getting acquainted with Polish notation in logic: at first, one typically finds oneself inserting parentheses around sequences of semantic units so as to make relevant groupings perspicuous. Here is an example taken from chapter 4 of W. O. Quine, *Methods of Logic*. In learning to master Polish notation, it may be useful to rewrite the following formula of propositional calculus, couched in Polish notation:

AsKEKpCqrKApqrt

as A(s (K((E((K(p (C(qr)))) (K((A(pq)) r))) t))

in order to realize that it is the same formula as

$s \vee (p(q \rightarrow r) \leftrightarrow (p \vee q)r)t$

or for that matter, in the notation using dots instead of parentheses:

$s \vee : p . q \rightarrow r . \leftrightarrow . p \vee q . r : t$

A somewhat boring theorem of propositional calculus, easily provable by recursion (see Mathematics and Reformation), says that the number of opening parentheses of a well-formed formula equals the number of its closing parentheses (see Account). A counterpart “theorem” holds, I presume, for well-formed German sentences, even when composed by someone like Bernhard. As a sample, and with an eye to the mental health of future Fellows enlisted in the German course, I tentatively cast the first clause of the first sentence of *Wittgensteins Neffe* in the proposed notation:

(Neunzehnhundertsiebenundsechzig (legte mir (auf der Baumgartnerhöhe
(eine der ((im dortigen Pavillon Herman) unermüdlich tätigen geistlichen
Schwestern) (meine (gerade erschienene) *Verstörung*, (die ich (ein Jahr vorher
in Brüssel in der rue de la croix 60) geschrieben habe))), auf das Bett), (aber ...

Like Kafka (see Kafka), and unlike the author of *Wittgensteins Neffe*, Wittgenstein typically composes bafflingly simple sentences. Thus, for example, Tractatus 5.2341 runs: “Die Verneinung verkehrt den Sinn des Satzes” (Negation reverses the sense of the proposition) (See Negation). Yet, the kind of structure displayed by certain tracts of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is best brought out by means of nested parentheses. Thus, consider for example the sequence of sections §§138–185 in Part I. It should be phrased as follows:

138–142(143–149(150(151(152–156(157–171(172–178)179)))180–184)185)

In a nutshell, my modest proposal is that Wittgenstein, in struggling with the constraints of linearity, came to compose large tracts of his text in the way other German-speaking writers compose their written sentences.

A year spent at the Wiko is a parenthesis within one’s life and intellectual trajectory. It is a distraction of sort. Unlike most parentheses, however, one’s stay at Wiko is apt to feel all too short. My sense is that this feeling is partly a function of the fact that the experience is likely to involve the opening of many parentheses, many of which might get closed, if ever, at a much later stage in one’s life and intellectual trajectory. Consequently, making a count of the parentheses that I was able to close (i.e., the projects and pieces of writing that I was able to bring to a close) during my stay at Wiko would be seriously misleading as an account of what I have been doing, let alone of what I have tried to do (see Account).

P. PowerPoint®

With one single exception, all of the Fellows of this year made use of the software PowerPoint® in their presentation at the Tuesday Colloquium, no matter what the discipline

and topic of their talks were. The normality of this practice was all the more remarkable as there was no pressure emanating from the institution itself (at least, as far as I could tell). Was it a tribute to the unity of knowledge (see *Wissenschaft*)? Was it testimony to the power of images to bridge the gaps between the various objects and modes of knowledge? Evidence that all fields of knowledge are now in the same boat, as none can any longer ensure its transmission by speech and writing alone? What are exactly the point and power of PowerPoint®?

Abnormality, too, raises many questions, some of them philosophical, others more personal (that is, for the deviant person). Can one depart from a rigorously observed practice, or at any rate fail to take part in it, without seeming to take exception to it, as if intent on questioning it? In such circumstances, can the fact of abstaining from using PowerPoint® remain a “gratuitous negation” (like the fact of abstaining from using a synthesizer, or horse, or what not) or is it bound to acquire the status of an “internal negation” (see *Negation*)?

R. Reformation

This past year’s *Reformationstag* took on special significance, as it was on 31 October 1517, exactly five centuries ago, that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Schlosskirche of Wittenberg. His claim was simple: works, being countable, do not justify, only faith does (see *Account*).

Before coming to Berlin, I had resolved to read systematically some of Luther’s works during my stay at the Wiko, to gain a better understanding of German culture in general and of modern German philosophy in particular.

I was further encouraged to do so, not only by the prospect of the celebration of the five-hundred-year anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, but also by conversations with James Simpson, my comrade in the intensive German course, who was engaged in writing a fascinating book on the Reformation. Her main contention is that Protestantism is animated by a spirit of “permanent revolution” and a “literalism” that have shaped, one way or another, virtually all subsequent Western history, including that of the arts.

Thanks to the Wiko, I was able to invite Claude Imbert, my teacher at the *École normale supérieure*, to visit the Wiko in early May. She summarized a certain strand in her work by saying that it was an attempt at showing that Jansenism had the same sort of significance for an understanding of modern French philosophy as Protestantism is commonly

deemed to have for an understanding of modern German philosophy. In Pascal's work, issues regarding salvation combined with the discovery of recursion to make possible the emergence of a calculus of probabilities. I had memorable conversations with Claude Imbert and Lorraine Daston about Pascal's arithmetical machine and what it is to follow a rule or deviate from it.

S. Structuralism

I had assumed that the social sciences, if not the humanities at large, were still struggling with the insights and blindness (in a word, the legacy) of structuralism. What I found instead was that structuralism was in disrepute, not so much contested as disqualified or ignored (sometimes in both senses of the word). I was beginning to think that I should probably keep my admiration for Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss to myself, when Vladimir Tarnopolsky, our Fellow composer, told me of the impact of structuralist linguistics upon some of his musical pieces, and when I came across the works of German anthropologist Michael Oppitz, himself a former Wiko Fellow (in 1986/87), author of *Notwendige Beziehungen: Abriss der strukturalen Anthropologie* and currently engaged in a structural study of variants of the myth of the loss of writing among certain oral cultures (see Negation). Conversations with Vladimir Tarnopolsky were for me immensely instructive. And so was the exhibition about Michael Oppitz's works at Gallery Buchholz on Fasanenstraße, "Forschungen an den Rändern der Schrift" (Inquiries on the Fringes of Writing), which I was able to attend in early March, and a few meetings with him.

V. Value

Saussure compared the value of a sign to the value of a coin (see Structuralism). But what is it that confers value to a coin ultimately? Does economics have a ready answer? Should one turn to social anthropology to get the full story? I learned a lot from my contact with Manu Goswami, who is engaged in a remarkable study of the parallelism between the evolution of the British Empire and the emergence of economics as a discipline, and who is also distrustful of the ultimate consistency of subjective theories of value. Our many conversations also helped me make some conjectures regarding the vexed question of the character of the influence that the unorthodox economist Piero Sraffa seems to have exerted upon Wittgenstein. The question raised by Wittgenstein of whether the standard

meter can be meaningfully said to be one meter long is not unrelated to the issue encapsulated in the very title of Sraffa's book, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*.

W. Wissenschaft

Most languages, including English and French, notoriously lack a word with the meaning of "Wissenschaft". It is as if these languages had long despaired of the possibility of bridging the gaps between the various fields and modes of knowledge (see PowerPoint®). But the Wissenschaftskolleg, as an institution, achieves something of a greater magnitude: it concretely demonstrates the possibility of the unity vindicated by the word "Wissenschaft".