

Showing and Saying An Aesthetic Difference

Vicente Sanf elix Vidarte

1. In a letter Wittgenstein wrote to Russell from Cassino, where he was imprisoned, he says regarding his book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

Now I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop(osition) is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop(osition)s – i.e. by language – (and, which come to the same, what can be *thought*) and what cannot be expressed by prop(osition)s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy (Wittgenstein, [1997] 124)¹

This text proves that for Wittgenstein the distinction between saying and showing and the critical thesis – since it marks a limit – associated with it – this is, what can be shown cannot be said – was crucial to understand his first philosophy.

But, just for his first philosophy? There are reasons to think that the distinction and the thesis, although formulated in other terms, persist throughout the evolution of Wittgenstein's thought. For example, in paragraph 501 of *On Certainty*, work in which he endeavored until two days before his death, we see how he asks himself: «Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described [*beschreiben*]? You must look at the practice of language; then you will see it». This means that for the latest Wittgenstein there is also something that cannot be said – described – but can be shown – seen.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the distinction between showing and saying and the associated critical thesis that goes with it, what can be shown cannot be said, play a key role in understanding the Wittgensteinian point of view on aesthetics. In the only entry of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in which it is mentioned, 6.421, it says: «It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed [*aussprechen*]. Ethics is transcendental. Ethics and

¹ Letter to Russell August 18th, 1919.

aesthetics are one».

And in paragraph 20 of the first part of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* it can be read: «It is not only difficult to describe what appreciation (aesthetics) consists in, but impossible. To describe what it consists in we would have to describe the whole environment».

Our aim here is, first, to clarify the distinction and the reasons behind the associated critical thesis that go with it and secondly, to see what the implications are when we apply it to the aesthetic realm.

2. Much has been discussed about the sources from which Wittgenstein could drink to come to formulate the distinction between to show and to say and his thesis of what can be shown cannot be said. For some people, Wittgenstein could be inspired on this point by Frege, for others by Tolstoy. Other names could be mentioned such as Hertz, Weininger or even Mauthner. We will not go in search of historical causes – highly problematic, as Wittgenstein gave no clue about it. What we can know for sure is when it made its first appearance in his writings and in what context. It appears in *The notes dictated to Moore in Norway*, from March 29th to April 14th, 1914. In the first observation they gather reads: «Logical so-called propositions *show* (the) logical properties of language and therefore of (the) Universe, but *say* nothing».

In other words, the distinction between show and say is introduced for the first time in the writings of Wittgenstein to address an issue related to the philosophy of logic, namely: the statute of its propositions.

It is not difficult to understand why logical propositions say nothing. They say nothing because they are tautologies, this means logically necessary truths, so that they do not describe any contingent fact that may occur in the world. If we say “it's raining or not raining” we are not saying anything about the weather.

However, Wittgenstein states, these propositions do show something: the logical properties of language, and therefore of the universe that it describes. Tautologies show them because just from looking at them, those properties can be seen. We look at the logical proposition “ $(p) p \vee \sim p$ ” and we immediately see that our language has the logic property that every proposition with sense can be affirmed or denied in it (language); which is to say, we see that the universe has the logical property that any contingent fact described by a meaningful proposition can occur or not in it. And to see this, to “know it”, we don't have to look at the world unless we want to know strictly whether the world actually has the property that the fact described by a meaningful proposition occurs or not in it; for example, to know that it rains is the case indeed, as the

proposition “it rains” says that it occurs.

So we have a first type of propositions, although it would be better to say pseudo-propositions, which say nothing but do show. They are the “propositions” of logic: tautologies (and its negation: the contradictions). They enunciate truths (or untruths) logically necessary which show the logical properties of language and of the world it describes. Wittgenstein will call this type of propositions “senseless”.

But meaningful propositions, propositions that do say something, also show. The proposition “it rains” says the situation it describes is the case, what can be true or false; and shows, regardless its particular value of truth, this is for the sake of making sense, a logical property of the world, as well as logical propositions. In this case, that in our world the rain is a possibility.

We now have a second type of propositions. They are meaningful propositions or sensible. Authentic propositions, “real propositions”. Propositions that do both, say and show. They say that the situations they describe are the case. And they show that situations they describe are a logical possibility of our world.

From here it is easy to understand the critical thesis of Wittgenstein. The sense that meaningful propositions show cannot be said. If we try to do it, we immediately slide to the field of nonsense. A meteorologist who said “it rains” without specifying the date or place of the rain, this is that he only wants to inform us of the logical possibility of rain (i.e.: the possibility of rain in the past, present and future, at any time and in any place) tells us so little about the actual weather like someone who just say “it's raining or it's not raining”. The attempt to say the sense that a sensible proposition shows becomes a nonsensical (Unsinn), which is not strictly a tautology, but something as necessarily “true” as tautologies.

The attempt to say the sense that sensible propositions show generates then, a third type of propositions or, to be more stringent, a second type of pseudo-propositions to add to the logical “propositions”. These are the nonsensical. Like tautologies, they say nothing because the “truth” they herald is necessary. But like them and meaningful propositions, which are similar in their syntactic form, do show something; namely: once more, logical properties of our language / world. Hence, they are to meet, in certain contexts, an elucidative function. For example, if we try to teach someone the meaning of a term – “this is a hand” – (Cfr. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.263)² ... or more generally if we try to give a class of ontology – «The world is everything that is the case ... it is the

² From now on T with the proposition number.

totality of facts, not of things» (T, 1, 1.1).

It is very important, I would say essential since it is an unusual habit, noticing the proximity between the propositions of logic, tautologies, and this type of nonsensical propositions. In a way, we could say that they are crypto-tautologies. Behind the syntactic or grammatical appearance of the meaningful propositions, there is nothing hidden, but a logical need, a tautological truth.

3. What is the meaning of the distinction between show and say and the critical thesis that what can be shown cannot be said in the aesthetics realm? In a letter dated April 9th, 1917 addressed to Paul Engelmann, Wittgenstein expresses his enthusiasm with a poem by Ludwig Uhland – *Count Eberhard's Hawthorn* (cfr. Appendix 1) – he had sent to him: «The poem by Uhland is really magnificent» he states (Engelmann [1967]: 7).

Some commentators have not shared this Wittgensteinian enthusiasm, but the point here is not so much attune or discrepancy to our taste with the young Wittgenstein's, as to understand that most likely his esteem for the poem of Uhland was due to see in it the realization of the qualities that, in his view, a work of art had to meet.

Indeed, in justification of his judgment, and corroborating something Engelmann himself had already pointed out in the letter in which he transcribed the poem of Uhland, Wittgenstein says: «And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter [*auszusprechen*] what is unutterable [*Unaussprechliche*], the nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably [*unaussprechlich*] – contained in what has been uttered [*Ausgesprochenen*]!» (*ibid.*).

We quoted earlier observation 6.421 of the *Tractatus* in which, after asserting that ethics cannot be expressed, Wittgenstein identified it with the aesthetics and now we see the merit of the poem by Uhland, in his view, is that it does not attempt to utter the unutterable but this is, in some way, contained in what has been uttered.

Perhaps, this could be generalized. According to Wittgenstein, the objective of the work of art should be giving us access somehow to the area of the unutterable, of what, to put it with *Tractatus* 6.522, shows itself (“zeigt sich”), that is: the mystical. Incidentally, an aim that would be subscribed by supporters of the so called by many in Spain, tradition of metaphysical or meditative poetry; and a Wittgenstein's aesthetic thesis that would not be difficult to relate to some of his most characteristic philosophical strategies, for example: his criticism to Russell's theory of types.

Indeed, facing Russell's aspirations to construct a theory in order to *tell* us the logical type each of the expressions we use in our language belongs to, and explicit which

symbolic combinations are legitimate and which are not, the proposal of Wittgenstein was to design a notation that immediately *show* all this, namely: both the logical type that each expression exemplifies and the symbolic combinations that may occur between the different types of terms. In short: replace the nonsense, in which the propositions of Russell's theory incurs necessarily by trying to say what cannot be said, by perfectly meaningful propositions that show what this theory sought to express in vain. This is a strategy we might well call hertzian, which ultimately ends up defining what according to the young Wittgenstein should be the only correct method in philosophy (Cfr. T, 6.53).

Well, similarly, although the artwork has the objective to show the inexpressible, the mystical, it should use the second of the three types of propositions that we noted above, i.e.: "real" propositions, perfectly meaningful. As the poem by Uhland does – and the advocates of the metaphysical poetry recommend.

Engelmann, certainly at this time in perfect ethical-aesthetic harmony with Wittgenstein, clearly states: «Each one of Uhland's verses was simple – not ingenious, but tersely informative» (Engelmann [1967]: 84). («Each of these verses was simple in itself, neither "simple" but "objective"», *ivi*, Spanish edition, p. 137).

But if the integral verses of a poem are, considered in isolation, perfectly meaningful propositions, informative, objective (in the letter in which Engelmann transcribed the poem to Wittgenstein said «It is a marvel of objectivity» [*ivi*, 31]), that say what can be said, then how can the poem show the unutterable? And even more, what would the unutterable be? Engelmann gives us an answer to both questions: «the poem as a whole gives [...] the picture of a life» (*ivi*, 85).

That is, what single verses do not do, when taken together they do. The showing function, we might say, is a Gestalt quality of the poem; an emergent property of the poem taken as a whole. We should not be surprised. Tautologies have the same property. They are also composed of perfectly meaningful propositions, "objective", "real", they say something – namely: the situation they describe is the case. And yet, their combination does not say anything ... although they show something – logical properties of the world, as we already know. And if anyone is tempted to think that this comparison is inappropriate, would do better to notice what Wittgenstein writes in his *Notebooks* on March 4th, 1915: «A tune is a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself, it satisfies itself»; as previously, on February 7th of that year, he had written: «Musical themes are in certain sense propositions».

Obviously, the whole of a poem, or a novel, do not make a tautology up strictly

speaking, so we should rather say that what they make up is analogous to that third type of propositions previously mentioned: those nonsensical, (unsinnig) propositions that said nothing but showed something as necessary as what tautologies show in the strict sense and that, please recall, could have an elucidative function, either in language learning or in the philosophical task itself (which, incidentally, would have as a corollary that for the young Wittgenstein, the statute of philosophy would be close to the artwork's).

But from Engelmann statements regarding Uhland's poem not only can we deduce something about the logical status that according to Wittgenstein would correspond to the artwork's – as a whole, a nonsense similar to a tautology; even though in the case of a literary work, all phrases or verses in isolation, may be perfectly meaningful propositions – but also about what the artwork shows unsaid. Recall: *The picture of a life*.

One might think that, on the one hand, this would be Engelmann's point of view, but it would not have to be Wittgenstein's view; and on the other hand, this would be the case for the poem of Uhland, and perhaps for other similar poems or works of art, but not for the work of art in general. However, some observations of Wittgenstein give pause for thought. For example, we read in the entry of August 1st, 1916: «Only from the consciousness of the uniqueness of my life arises religion – science – and art». (But, is it not the uniqueness of the life of Count Eberhard – a crusader in holy land – what Uhland's poem show?). And yet in an observation of August 22nd, 1930, gathered in the aphorisms of *Culture and Value*, comes back to a similar idea:

Nothing could be more remarkable that seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. (Wittgenstein, 1989: 4e).

We said before, relying on *Tractatus* 6.421 and 6.522, that the purpose of the work of art is to show the unutterable, the mystical (“das Mystische”), but now we can understand that the mystical does not need to be understood in a platonic way, as a kind of parallel world. The mystic can be found in most every day activity, in any “quite simple everyday activity”... in the same way, and not by chance as we shall see, the miraculous as Wittgenstein advocates in his *Lecture on Ethics*, does not have to be found

in any extraordinary event. If this aesthetic theory initiates a dualism, it is not an ontological dualism but of perspectives. The text of *Culture and Value* that we quoted continues as it follows:

But then we do see this every day without its making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view. – Well, when E(ngelmann) looks at what he has written and finds it marvelous... he is seeing his life as a work of art created by God and, as such, it is certainly worth contemplating, as is every life and everything whatever. But only an artist can so represent an individual thing as to make it appear to us like a work of art... A work of art forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like another (Wittgenstein [1989]: 4e)

When Wittgenstein said that art is rooted in the consciousness of the uniqueness of my life, he did not want to imply by this that all art had to be biographical in its theme. The consciousness of the uniqueness of my life is, in fact, the consciousness of the fact that another one without a loss cannot replace my life; everything that happens to me and ultimately forms my world. Or, as he would express it in his *Lecture on Ethics*, it is the consciousness that my life has an absolute value. So what art does, based on an object most unnoticed that may be one with which we have the most common treatment (think, for example, in the pair of boots painted by Van Gogh), is to force us notice its uniqueness and, thus, become aware of the uniqueness of our own experience when we contemplate it:

As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant; as a world each one equally significant. If I have been contemplating the stove, and then I am told: but now all you know is the stove, my result does indeed seem trivial. For this represents the matter as if I had studied the stove as one among the many things in the world. But if I was contemplating the stove *it* was my world, and everything else colorless by contrast with it. (*Notebooks*, 8.10.16)

4. Wittgenstein calls this perspective in which art has installed us «*sub specie aeternitatis* vision», perspective whose adoption for the whole world is equivalent, for Wittgenstein, to adopt an ethical attitude:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics. The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way that they have the world as background. (*Notebooks*, 7.10.16)

Since art presents objects and ethics the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, we might

think that the latter includes aesthetics as one of its chapters. And sometimes, Wittgenstein expresses himself in these terms («Now I am going to use the term Ethics in a sense ... in fact which includes what I believe to be the MOST essential part of what is called Generally Aesthetics» he says at the very beginning of his *Lecture on Ethics*). But if we reflect on a little, we could conclude a strict equivalence between both proclaimed in the *Tractatus*, since we could also say that ethics is nothing but to look at the whole world as a work of art: «Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist. Is the essence of the artistic way of looking at things, that it looks at the world with a happy eye? Life is serious, art is gay» (*Notebooks*, 20.10.16). «For there is certainly something in the conception that the end of art is the beautiful. And the beautiful is what makes happy».

An entry that makes us notice that, in fact, the equivalence could be expanded to include religion, because if ethics consists in looking at the world as a work of art, it also consists in looking at the existence of world as a miracle («What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics» (Wittgenstein [1989]: 3e).

Moreover, if the art comes from the *sub specie aeternitatis* view of objects we can understand that what the artist is looking for with his work is to give expression to that experience: «Art is a kind of expression. Good art is complete [*vollendete*] expression» (*Notebooks*, 19.9.16).

That is, when the art is good is a perfect expression. So there is nothing that can be added or subtracted to the work, nor change it, without making it worse. In those rare and happy cases, we might say, the work is really like a tautology, because we could not modify any of its components while being (in “(p) p v ~ p” we could not replace “p” by “q” not even when “q” would have the same truth value as “p”; to do so, we would not have a tautology anymore). Therefore, and no matter how much the work of art seeks to show the ineffable, what it utters is absolutely essential to it. And at the end of the day, if the aim is to show the uniqueness, the absolute value, the expression that shows it should be equally valuable, unique, irreplaceable. In his opinion, Engelmann expounded:

What I have learned before as a reader of Karl Kraus was here for the first time brought home to me by direct experience: the fact of poetry can produce a profound artistic effect beyond (but never without) the immediate effect of its language. It is true that it needs a rare and felicitous conjuncture to bring off that effect. (Engelmann [1967]: 84)

If the work of art is to provide a vision *sub specie aeternitatis*, and this is a vision, so to speak, that contemplates the world and its objects as from above – «[...] capturing

the world sub specie aeternitatis [...] it is as though it flies above the world and leaves it as it is – observing it from above, in flight» – the work of art is not a ladder we can throw away once that vision has been achieved.

A final consequence of this understanding of art, about which little will be required to stress here, is the irreducibility of the aesthetic to the scientific perspective. Wittgenstein explicitly underlines it in his *Lecture on Ethics*: «[...] the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle [...]». (But we already know that the aesthetic perspective makes us look at the existence of an object, or the world itself, as miraculous). «[...] Ethics so far as it spring from the desire to say something about [...] the absolute valuable, can be no science». (But we also know by now that ethics and aesthetics are one and the same thing).

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for this impossibility. Science moves in the same area than the meaningful propositions. Its goal is to be able to say what can be said, to formulate the laws governing the occurrence of events. Installed in this perspective, we can be interested in the phenomena whereas exemplification of these laws (or objects as examples of a kind of thing). That is, interested in what makes them typical instead of singular. So, in the world described by science, everything has the same value. Or at best, everything can only have a different relative value. If p is sought, then the best thing to get it is q. To face science, aesthetics (and ethics) aims to show an absolute value of things (or the world), as necessary as it may be the truth of a tautology, using a work which, although it may be built with meaningful propositions, as a whole is nonsensical. And that is because its aim is to show what cannot be said, the ineffable, what shows itself, the mystical.

Thus in ethical and religious language [and we might add as well, in the aesthetic language] we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be simile now seems to be mere nonsense. [...] I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. (Wittgenstein [1993]: 43)

5. When Wittgenstein gave his *Lectures on Aesthetics* many of his “old thoughts” on logic, the meaning or philosophical method had already changed. Furthermore, his problem in these lessons was not so much the statute of the work of art as the grammar governing our aesthetic judgments or appreciations. And yet his “new thinking” on

aesthetics keep in close “family resemblance” with those held in his youth. This is a particular illustration of the complex relationship between his first and last philosophy.

Indeed, Wittgenstein maintains his critique of Platonism. Against what superficial grammar tends to make us believe, given that “beautiful” is an adjective, we must resist the temptation to understand the aesthetic judgments as ascribing a property to something, the beauty, whose essence should unravel the philosophical research.

Moreover, the analogy between work of art and language remains. The same way our linguistic expressions only make sense in the context of a way of life, the works of art can only be understood against the background of a culture.

We could even say that, in a way, the “expressive” and “quasi-tautological” conception of the work of art we have seen assumed in his first thought, remains. The works of art and the expressions of our language are subject to certain rules. These rules, as the grammar of our linguistic expressions, are autonomous. They are not the effect of any natural or super-natural reality in our mind, but the result of our praxis, shaping what we call a tradition. It is precisely the setting of a work to these rules what we judge in our appraisals. When the adjustment seems to happen we experience a kind of “click”, a satisfaction with the work that suddenly appears to us as coherent, as a whole in which everything falls into place.

Obviously, the critique of reductionism and scientificism remains. Aesthetics is not a branch of psychology or any other natural science. Understanding a work of art, to be in the position to evaluate it aesthetically, has nothing to do with the ability to make statistical assumptions about the reactions of approval or disgust caused in spectators. It is, rather, to be able to practice an extraordinarily wide range of different activities that have to do with the work, such as establishing comparisons, making analogies, highlighting certain aspects of it...

But above all, the most important thing in this work for our interests is upheld, as we noted at the beginning, the critique thesis of inexpressibility of aesthetics or of the grammar of our aesthetic appreciations, more precisely. This is so, ultimately, because it makes no sense to attempt to make a complete enumeration of the elements that make us recognize a work as a suitable expression of a particular artistic culture. Among other things, we could add and on our own, because as those who have reflected on hermeneutic issues are well aware, our own critical practice helps shape that tradition, so that this can never be declared concluded.

Appendix: *Count Eberhard's Hawthorn*

Count Eberhard Rustle-Beard,
From W rttemberg's fair land,
On holy errand steer'd
To Palestina's strand.
The while he slowly rode
Along a woodland way;
He cut from the hawthorn bush
A little fresh green spray.
Then in his iron helm
The little sprig he plac'd;
And bore it in the wars,
And over the ocean waste.
And when he reach'd his home;
He plac'd it in the earth;
Where little leaves and buds
The gentle Spring call'd forth.
He went each year to it,
The Count so brave and true;
And overjoy'd was he
To witness how it grew.
The Count was worn with age
The sprig became a tree;
'Neath which the old man oft
Would sit in reverie.
The branching arch so high,
Whose whisper is so bland,
Reminds him of the past
And Palestina's strand.

Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862).

Translation by Alexander Platt, 1848; quoted by Engelmann ([1967]: 83-84).

Bibliography

Engelmann, P., 1967: *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Wittgenstein, L., 1950-51: *On Certainty*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1969.

Wittgenstein, L., 1969⁴: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London & New York.

Wittgenstein, L., 1989: *Culture and Value*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Wittgenstein, L., 1993: *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Hackett, Indianapolis.

Wittgenstein, L., 1997: *Cambridge Letters*, Blackwell, Oxford.