

Three Texts

Gabriel Blackwell

COMPLETE

Fenollosa, whose invention was simultaneously Pound's most intriguing and least faithful translation, writes that "no full sentence really completes a thought [because] motion leaks everywhere [. . .] All processes in nature are inter-related; and thus there could be no complete sentence [according to the definition of a sentence as a complete thought] save one which it would take all time to pronounce," giving sentences the quality of a Muybridgean photo-set (or a Thesean ship) and proposing a view of them in which each of us only speaks one long, incomplete sentence, a sentence we start to form when we first begin speaking and which then continues on—even when its parts contradict or supersede earlier elements—until our deaths, each of our words forming a part of one continuous script in which other players—the people in our lives—only ever interrupt and talk over our lines since, until we expire, we have not, in fact, finished speaking them, have not even finished our one thought, have only paused to draw breath (inspiration) or to think of what it is we will say next, though Fenollosa then acknowledges that, in order to make sense out of any of it, in order that any of our utterances may be understood at all, it is necessary to pretend that what grammarians call the sentence, the so-called *complete thought*, is at least a distinct unit—complete in itself, in a way—so that others may, when we speak, know what it is of which we are speaking, a view of things that sees the act of attempting to understand another's speech as also the taking on of the pretense that the speaker is really on the verge of death and in which view all words should therefore be considered last words.

SELECTED LETTERS (IN WHICH I GIVE UP)

Because, before the . . . accident, I used to teach writing, and because, even before that, I studied writing, I know there is this very popular idea that economy in writing is important above all. According to this view of things, if, in trying to communicate some idea or feeling, one writes a paragraph where one could just as easily have written a sentence, the paragraph will be seen as wasteful and superfluous. I would, I remember, be very conscious I was repeating myself on the days I chose to teach this principle (and I could not have chosen not to teach it; it was embedded in every textbook on writing)—conscious because of course I was not, in those moments, modeling such economy myself, though this was, in my case, out of necessity, because my students were surreptitiously looking at their phones, or thinking about lunch, or making plans for later—in other words, imagining their lives outside of class. It is easy to see, I would tell them, how such a principle might scale up: If one writes a book where one could just as easily have written an article—and isn't this the genesis of most books? a single idea that then gets elaborated upon?—one has wasted the reader's time. (There is, I've found, rarely any accounting of the writer's time; I suppose the assumption is that, if the writer has been paid for the book rather than for the article, it has been worth it, at least, to him or her or them. (I have never myself found this to be true.)) Likewise, when it comes to the article, has *it* really been necessary? Perhaps the idea contained in that article could be perfectly well summed up in a single paragraph. Isn't this usually the case? I guess what I mean is that, in writing, we always seem to assume the writer will be tempted to write too much, creating an unhealthy surplus, and we also assume that the reader will not want to read more than is absolutely required, and we therefore assume that the goal of writing is simply to disseminate summarizable data (can feelings be summarized?), and that this is the *only* goal of writing. The problem, I never told my students, is that this same principle never fully makes sense when scaling down: We may accept that a paragraph containing the same general information as an article is preferable to the article and that a sentence having the same relationship to a paragraph is better than the paragraph, but we really must stop there. Beyond that point . . . I think very possibly under sedation or at any rate still groggy from the drugs—I remember I felt nauseous the entire time, and worried I might lose control of my faculties—I asked my brother to bring me the *Tractatus*. I'd just finished reading it for the first time, having never read it before despite taking a course on Wittgenstein, Russell, and formal logic in college. In fact, I'd been assigned the book in that course twenty years before and the copy I had was the copy I'd bought from the campus bookstore—the book still had the store's UPC sticker on it (why had I held onto this book?)—but it was merely one of many books I'd been assigned and hadn't read at the time. Wittgenstein's thoughts only take up about ninety pages in this edition, but the publisher, out of, one supposes, anxiety, has doubled that number by including the original German on facing pages, and then also added Russell's introduction (Wittgenstein thought it betrayed a complete lack of understanding of what he'd written) and an index, all to bring the book up to a still-scant two-hundred pages, presumably to make it more salable. The last thing I found I remembered from . . . before, *from before*, was reading the book's last line—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"—and then thinking about sending an email to my students announcing that class would be cancelled the next day, deciding such an email was unnecessary (there would be no class, there could be no class), and then . . . but the rest is, I think, unnecessary to say.

LE VOYAGE DANS LA LUNE

On his final trip to America, while sitting in a car on a hill overlooking Ithaca, New York at night, Wittgenstein is reported to have said, “If I had planned it, I should never have made the sun at all. See! How beautiful! If there were only the moon there would be no reading and writing.”

