

## Footnotes and Finitude

I stand before you on this occasion bearing some thoughts that somehow extend to all of us present, although under the guise of something slightly strange. To grant me your attention as I divulge these strange thoughts that I am honoured to impart on this day, is to grant me, in the words of Simone Weil, “the rarest and purest form of generosity.”<sup>1</sup>

My oration today is an ode to footnotes – the enumerated snippets of text we sometimes find at the bottom of a page. Let us compare these for a moment to endnotes, which are more uncompromising, forcing us, very confusingly, to endure some acrobatics to get to them at the back of a book, or at the end of each chapter. Footnotes, I believe, are a much more considerate form of organisation. Quite unfairly, they both produce the same result: the event of slipping in information that is relevant but not quite relevant enough to make it to the main body of text.

### A Case of Idiosyncrasy

We all use footnotes differently, in a manner that is particular to us. I personally use them to line the pages of what I write with a bit of mischief. Here’s an example from my own dissertation:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally from a letter to Joë Bousquet dated 13 April 1942, in which Weil writes: “L’attention est la forme la plus rare et la plus pure de la générosité.” Simone Weil and Joë Bousquet, *Correspondance*, Bruit du temps (Lausanne: Editions l’Age d’Homme, 1982), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Lara Zammit, “Prepositional Participation: An Inquiry into the Linguistic and Ontological Manifestations of the Indo-European Preposition ‘With.’” Master of Arts Research Degree Dissertation, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 2019, 61.; note 32.

The text proper reads: “[T]he nature of language ... is adamantly dynamic.<sup>[32]”</sup>  
Its corresponding footnote reads:

The dynamicity of language might be dismaying for certain prescriptivists who would prefer that language adhere to the quasi-divinely-revealed rules of ‘correctness’ that are not subject to the tampering of time, or the horrors of relativism. Descriptivists, on the other hand, are quite overjoyed by the prospect of endless dynamicity in language, and find all attempts at ascribing grammatical ‘correctness’ onto language to be tantamount to fascism. The author of this dissertation may find herself siding more with the prescriptivists than the descriptivists, although she prefers to fall under the category, put forward by David Foster Wallace, of a ‘SNOOT’<sup>3</sup> ...

Whether jovial or austere, footnotes inject a text with a degree of idiosyncrasy. If we examine the dynamics of footnotes, we can see them as the result of tangents that occur within the mind of the author while writing, which are therefore specific to the mind of the author.

### Compendiums of Connections

Perhaps many of us can relate to what happens when we read what we had written months after writing it and feeling perplexed or confused, or in disagreement with what we are reading; or even, perhaps more seldom, finding something new between the lines. In both cases, we do not recognise what we had written or the person who wrote it. But if we read the footnotes we had injected, whether they are playful anecdotes or a chunk of original Latin from Aquinas’s *Summa*, we are never out of touch with why we included them and what led us to them.

If, sometimes, we find ourselves reading back what we had written only to begin to wonder who really wrote it, we can always turn back to our footnotes as though to hark back to something recognisable.

I was once told by the professor who supervised my dissertation that intelligence is not a question of breaking down a subject to its most basic constituent parts, but, rather, a matter of making connections between subjects.

Tangents and serendipitous findings that come to us while writing are specific to the makings of our minds and emerge because of who and what we are. They are the products of every book we have ever opened and every conversation we

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<sup>3</sup> David F. Wallace, “Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage,” *Harper’s Magazine* Collin. (April 2001): 39–58. Cf. note 3, where Wallace defines the term ‘SNOOT’ as a “highly colloquial” acronym used by his family to describe “a really extreme usage fanatic” (41).

ever had. They are laden with the experiences that compose our lives and all the knowledge and sentiment that went into them. The connections we make as we type sentences into our word processors all emerge from the specificity of being singularly ourselves. So, then, if we think for a moment about the words we type, sprawling with caffeine and fervour, and the dissertations and assignments that these ultimately produce, what could we call these products if not compendiums of connections?

### Within the Bounds of Finitude

Alfred North Whitehead said that philosophy is “a series of footnotes to Plato.”<sup>4</sup> And if a footnote is a tangent of the mind, the result of a connection made, and if our dissertations are compendiums of connections, then it is only fitting to call the dissertations we have written footnotes as well. They are the fruits of curiosity and endeavours in finitude, written by our own hands and several invisible ones. We stand on the shoulders of giants, after all, and nothing is new under the sun.

To think that we are singularly responsible for what we produce is an error in judgement. The organisation of what we write is laden with the space and time of the person who wrote it, but what is written is a creature entirely its own – the product of the books, experiences and sentiments that, while certainly personal, are not *only* personal since they are also universal. What we write, if written well, contains us but is not exhausted by us.

Let us then never cease to endeavour in this way under the sun, contending with the devastating and the marvellous, wrestling like Jacob with the angel within the bounds of finitude with what is infinite, even if in a small, inconsequential way, as a footnote would appear within a sea of text.

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 39.