

## June 12

I'm horrified. I've been planning this trip for months. Two years of intensive philosophical education were designed to climax exactly on June 12th. Now it is June 12th, *Swissair* is faithfully carrying me to the carefully selected European destination where I will spend the next three weeks writing my MA thesis, and there is no climax in sight. Not only is there no climax, my mind is completely blank. It's not that I didn't anticipate this feeling. It's perfectly natural to feel 'as if' one's mind is blank five minutes before the test begins. In fact, I told myself a thousand times over the last months: Do not panic! It will come. If not on the first day, then on the second. Now I am on the plane, still closer to Israel than to Holland, and already in deep, genuine panic.

Panic was due only after long hours of futile stare at the empty white screen of my laptop. But if panic is inevitable, the sooner the better. I might as well resort to the pre-planned antidote for the dreaded predicament of mental drought: writing a diary. This was my premeditated solution to any attacks of muteness I may suffer from. This diary is to serve a dual purpose: First, it was to keep me writing. Like sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, writing enhances and intensifies writing: Making it invokes more of it, and the more you do it, the more you want it. But keeping a personal diary in parallel to the main project, an MA thesis in philosophy, would also serve a second purpose: It could serve as a monitoring device - a place of reflection. In it, I could write **about** the thesis, besides writing **the** thesis. I could record my doubts, hesitations, feelings. It could serve as a logbook, a notepad into which anything may be scribbled.

And there is also the issue of the audience: On one hand, I'll be writing a formal document: a professional paper that has to conform with certain academic standards and include a multitude of footnotes, endnotes and bibliography. It will be read by a handful of professional academics that have the authority to entitle me with (or deny me) an academic degree. On the other hand, I also have a promise to keep: Two years ago I embarked on this philosophical adventure and practically deserted several social circles and many dear friends, leaving behind me this solemn promise: To write a thesis, a book, they will **understand**. Academic dissertations are usually written for very limited audiences and are notoriously unintelligible. They are hardly ever read, nonetheless understood, by laymen. This, I promised, will not be the case. I am out to acquire knowledge, and when some is acquired, I will not only share it, but will make it intelligible.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The first to emphasize the obligation of a philosopher to share his findings with his fellow humans was **Socrates**, in the simile of **the cave**<sup>1</sup>. Socrates deserves the first footnote not only because he is considered the forefather of western philosophy, or because he is the first philosopher I heard of as a child, but because of his legacy to philosophers to follow; The simile (or, rather, allegory) of the cave stresses the duty of the philosopher to his un-enlightened fellow men: "*We... shall be quite fair in what we say when we compel the [philosophers] to have some care and responsibility for others... You must therefore each descend in turn and live with your fellows in the cave.*" The narrow context of this allegory concerns the **political** duty of the philosopher: His obligation to lead, despite his dissent. But the force of this claim transcends this narrow context: It is also a general directive, an imperative that is a central principle in Socratic thought. It is a commandment to every philosopher: "*Share thy knowledge*". He who had seen the light, is required to

Can it be done? Is it at all possible, within a period of three weeks, to write a paper that will qualify as a legitimate academic MA thesis, and at the same time be intelligible (and hopefully, to some extent, interesting) to the general public?

Here is the trick: The diary is the text you are reading now. the text above the line (down there, about three quarters of the way down this page). This text should be intelligible to everyone, in particular my friends. It requires no philosophical background. In this text I keep my promise, in accord with Socrates' directive: Share your findings! (with your fellow non-philosophers). But this text alone will not satisfy the second, academic audience; It will not qualify as an MA thesis. Therefore, the academic text lies below the line - as footnotes.<sup>2</sup> These footnotes, taken collectively, are meant for professional philosophers, for academics. This does not imply that ordinary people must ignore the footnotes. It just means that the footnotes are optional. In fact, I believe that even professional philosophers may prefer to ignore the footnotes on a first reading.

I feel a little better now: I managed to extract from my blank mind a whole page of general and administrative babble. I still don't know how to write, be it above or below the line. At least I have decided on the format: I know **where** to write **what** - and I hope the **how** will follow. This may sound a bit vague, but it shouldn't: The same problem arises every time something needs to be articulated. Think, for instance, of the American soldiers returning from Vietnam: They know exactly what they have been through, but very few of them found the way to explain, describe, articulate. Knowing something does not guarantee its successful communication to others. **Telling** is a skill in its own. Knowing what to tell is a necessary condition for telling, but it is far from sufficient. Successful **telling** is a project of interpretation, or translation: **From** the unarticulated "mode" of this knowing, of **what** is known, **to** a sequence of words: to **text**. This translation is considered successful if the reader (or listener) to the text seems to have captured the same "**what**" that was translated to text. This is what writers do: they translate, or convert, those "**what**"s to **text**. (Writing) philosophers are no exception: Some are better **translators** than others, and some are more talented translators than original thinkers.<sup>3</sup>

---

advertise his findings. Well, I have (to some extent), seen light. This is a conscious effort to convey, in two distinct **languages** in parallel (One above the line, the other here, below it) what I have discovered. For a "scientific" paper this may seem a fuzzy target. But hopefully things will get more focused soon. At any rate, Socrates provides me with the justification for the unorthodox attempt to write a philosophical thesis that is both significant (in the sense of "meaningful") and nevertheless intelligible to the non-philosophical ordinary reader.

<sup>2</sup> Here in the footnotes, superscripts refer to endnotes, mostly bibliography. E.g., in footnote 1 there appears a reference to endnote 1. Footnotes and endnotes are numbered independently and continuously.

<sup>3</sup> The tradition of *analytic philosophy*<sup>2</sup> has brought this business of **translation** to the highest peaks: As **language** is identified as the means to grasp (and describe) reality, the clarification of language became the focus of philosophical endeavor. If it is clearly put in words, it is (must be) **understood**. Or is it? More to come.

We are about to land in Amsterdam. About 20 Kilometers north of it lies a picturesque little village called **Edam**, world famous for its traditional cheese industry. In its center sits a small guest house called *De Fortuna* - “The Fortunate”. When I accidentally encountered this magnificent place last winter, I immediately chose it as the ideal location for a concentrated effort of writing. Were I a novelist, or poet, I would probably devote the next few pages to a detailed description of the beauty of the place. But I am not.

Holland seemed a good choice not only because of the tranquil setting, but also for its traditional tolerance towards philosophy, writing, and freedom of expression in general. Not that it makes any difference nowadays, but there were times when Holland was one of the few, if not the only, place where people could not only think what they thought, but also print and publish these thoughts. It is the Dutch liberalism that enabled immortal thinkers such as Descartes and Spinoza<sup>4</sup> to operate in (relative) peace.

The battery of my laptop computer is running low and the seat-belt sign above my head just came alive. I doubt whether I’ll have the chance to write any more today. But tomorrow morning I shall try to tell you something about the thesis itself.

---

<sup>4</sup> Spinoza lived in Holland all his life.<sup>3</sup> How ironic is it, that Spinoza suffered mostly from his fellow **Jews**, and hardly from the Christians around him! Spinoza’s philosophy, to which I shall return later, was just as offensive to Christianity as it was to Judaism. If Spinoza happened to live (and express himself) in Italy, for example, He would most likely have joined Socrates in paying for his thoughts with his life. Incidentally, I believe that extreme acts such as Socrates’ acceptance of his death sentence and Spinoza’s excommunication from the Jewish community make a significant contribution not only to understanding those thinkers, but also to taking them more seriously. If the early Platonic dialogues genuinely portray the historical Socrates (and they are so commonly considered), then his conduct strongly supports his enigmatic claim that there is **really** something extraordinary outside the cave, or that there **is** a cave at all.