

## Of Songs, Texts, and Bleating

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### Abstract

From personal experiences in teaching, I argue that academic writing can become a Bergsonian sign by conceiving norms, genres, and other structures, patterns, or models as something immobile and absolute that takes precedence over context, purpose, identity, and strategies for knowing and sharing a specific reality. To explain this, I focus on how the *essay* becomes a *name* (a form of the Bergsonian sign) and the influence this has on students' learning. I draw on Henri Bergson's proposal of the aforementioned notion of sign, but also on his concept of system and his explanation of the nature of life, as expounded by this philosopher in *History of the Idea of Time*, *The Creative Mind*, and *Creative Evolution*. I conclude that writing as sign and system hinders the assimilation of other processes to approach the understanding of the heterogeneity of reality and creates a type of writing without vitality and alien to the context to which it belongs. This has an impact on critical and creative processes.

*Keywords:* writing, creativity, sign and system, Henri Bergson, knowledge of reality

## Of songs, texts, and bleating

Someone solved a problem for me just a few years ago: “Move and open your mouth wide, and smile when you say the letters e and i”. Before this advice, I could only sing a little of what is called classical music, and I envied my wife, who can even bleat.

I used to think that voice was only good for one type of music<sup>1</sup> and I even came to believe that I had no “talent” for singing. I lost the motivation to keep doing it until I discovered that the problem was not my voice or me, but the technique, and it was due to a constant human illusion: the idea of a “correct way”. I also needed to sing in different situations in order to improve my technique.

It is possible that I did not understand the explanation I was given when I started learning to sing. But I am sure that I did not understand the explanation I was given when I started learning to sing. But I am sure that at some point the words “correct form” were used, and that this was valid and unalterable in all cases, an eternal and absolute entity, a theory of everything for singing. I exaggerate, I probably misunderstood, but this experience gives me one more example to insist on the following: form is not fixed, it depends on the context; stubbornly sticking to it hinders creative processes and an understanding that relates us more broadly to reality, and can even harm our performance and self-confidence.

Despite the consequences, we seem to privilege immobility and immutability to the point that we conceive of what is a continuous and infrangible mobile flow (memory, our life history, our act of perception, etc.) as states, fixed and isolated images (Bergson, 2007, 2013). In the case of writing, this has been evident to me in my context during the little more than fifteen years that I have accompanied people in this practice<sup>2</sup>. First, there seems to be a general belief that writing achieves full mastery at some point in life, almost as a matter of rules to be learned (people often refer to these rules through two specific issues: ‘spelling’ and ‘grammar’). Secondly, in the

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<sup>1</sup> In reality, I did not sing everything we recognize by that name, but mainly pieces by Juan del Encina, Tomás Luis de Victoria and Franz Schubert. I do not say this for boasting, because I did not sing them well, but because they are a very good example of what I want to say: we tend to reduce a heterogeneous reality to a name in which we gather the diverse as if it were one thing, without taking into account the differences between its qualities. This also happens in writing.

<sup>2</sup> I do this for both, academic and creative writing, although I share with you that I find it hard to assimilate writing as a non creative practice.

teaching of writing, there are some harmful tendencies: it is taught apart from its context, purpose, or audience, and instead reduced to lower-order issues<sup>3</sup>. Thirdly, and related to the two previous issues, it is considered that if someone writes with a certain fluency a type of text in a specific context, he/she will be able to do so in other circumstances<sup>4</sup>. Finally, and based on the above, it is considered that each of these products has an unalterable structure and characteristics. The latter is what makes us reduce reality to names, a case of what Henri Bergson called sign (I will share with you later what this refers to).

In the university contexts —and sometimes also in high school)— that I have had the opportunity to know, the essay has been the textuality with which writing has been most worked on. Valeria Benítez (2024), in a previous issue of *Andamiajes*, spoke to us about the character and pedagogical value of the essay, since it helps students “activate critical thinking, learn to argue and develop the linguistic skills that ideally should be consolidated during university education” (p. 13). However, the presence of technology in our communication has made the essay lose its effectiveness, according to Benítez. In my experience, the problem is not the essay as a genre (not even the idea of genre), but the immobility with which it works, without admitting variations, hybridizations and explorations, to respond to a context that -by nature- is mobile, to a creative reality, to a human faculty that is creative and to the identity of the writer. The essay has become a Bergsonian *sign*, a *name*, and this not only affects what is written, but also what is learned and how it is learned.

I teach several different kinds of writing, so the processes and texts we do are different; they even have different names, because just as there is a variety of goats and bleats, there is also a variety of identities and contexts. However, it is common for my students to call their text an “essay”<sup>5</sup>. Calling any text we are working on this way could be a slip, a failed act of consciousness that could matter little, because, as I have said on other occasions, the sign is not the being (Herrera, 2021). The problem appears when students not only use the name, but what they do and how they do it corresponds to the idea they have constructed with that name. This

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<sup>3</sup> Sentence structure, grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.

<sup>4</sup> This is clearly and effectively stated by Navarro (2009, p. 41).

<sup>5</sup> *Translators’ note*. In most academic contexts through Latin America, the term “essay” is used in a similar way to the generic term “paper”.

is an obstacle for them to write differently and to apply other strategies that help them to analyze and understand some aspect of reality from their particularities, and to apply procedures according to them and the intentions they have.<sup>6</sup>

In the classroom, we practice specific strategies according to the text they are going to write, as much as time allows.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the academic writing course, we work on comparison and contrast to evaluate data and sources, and synthesis. In argumentation, we seek to engage in dialogue with opposing perspectives, recognize them, and build our own positions from dialogue, not from prejudice. We also try to develop the ability to recognize the common biases that divert us from the subject of a discussion, attack based on personal issues rather than what is claimed, and reduce an issue to two options with the assumption that if someone examines one, then they are automatically for or against the other.<sup>8</sup> That is, rather than thinking about a specific form for the text, we think about strategies according to purposes, audiences, and contexts. In addition, lately I have been trying to preserve the identity of my students. This gesture is akin to the proposal of *junto con*<sup>9</sup> from Lillis (2021), where the presence and combination of different planes of writing “debería juzgarse en términos del trabajo intelectual específico que se realiza, en lugar de evaluar si se ajusta en términos de adecuación a las normas existentes”<sup>10</sup> (these norms have become fixed forms), for “reconocer la importancia de la relación entre el lenguaje y la identidad en la escritura académica no implica una visión rígida del (uso del) lenguaje ni de la identidad”<sup>11</sup> (p. 58).

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<sup>6</sup> A recent case was a student who did not know how to collect and categorize her information for analysis. When we reviewed together what she had, we realized that she was starting from the intention of proving an opinion, and that, in addition to changing the process, was preventing her from understanding her information and knowing what to do with it. She herself said, “I knew what to do in the procedure, you had already taught us and we even did exercises, but I have a hard time letting go of what I used to do. I keep thinking about an essay and opinions”.

<sup>7</sup> Another problem in writing accompaniment: not having enough time.

<sup>8</sup> *Ignoratio elenchi*, *ad hominem* and false dichotomy fallacies.

<sup>9</sup> *Translator’s note*: “*junto con*” means “along with”.

<sup>10</sup> *Translator’s note*: this quote could be translated to “should be judged in terms of the specific intellectual work being done, rather than assessing whether it fits in terms of conformance to existing norms”.

<sup>11</sup> *Translator’s note*: this quote could be translated to: “recognizing the importance of the relationship between language and identity in academic writing does not imply a rigid view of (language use) or identity”.

Related to the above, I had an experience that I think we teachers need to talk about. I had a student with a very particular way of speaking. When analyzing it, I noticed that it was related to the order of elements in the sentence, the abundant use of subordination, and the lengthening of the sentence by incorporating words that were intended to indicate caution and respect, but often had a meaning that did not correspond to what he was saying. He did the same when writing, so when I read his texts, I could hear his voice in me. For this reason, we worked on conceptual precision and sentence reorganization, accompanied by punctuation decisions. The result was not only that I stopped hearing his voice when I read his texts, but that they seemed to be written by anyone, even a machine. I standardized his expression when there were no major difficulties in capturing his message, only certain ambiguities.

Regarding the intellectual work mentioned by Lillis, I have noticed that analysis often takes time, so I have been modifying materials, activities, and explanations to help them assimilate it. In the case of argumentation, they are slow to construct their position after delving into other ideas; they seem eager to ram their judgments. Also, I have noticed that it is common for them to associate the word essay with an opinion, but one founded on the biases I mentioned earlier; I think it is worthwhile to do some statistics on this idea of the essay.

To combat this rigidity, I usually analyze different examples that are close to the processes we are going to carry out. I don't say the *type of text*, because the examples help them realize that the form of the text can vary and that what is important is the process:<sup>12</sup> analyzing data, engaging in dialogue with ways of seeing the world in order to propose a position, etc. You should know that now I use many more examples, because when I used only one or two, some students used to copy not only the structure, but also the way of analyzing their information (even if it was of a different nature), and they would build their paragraphs even with the same sentences. Now, with more examples, that hardly happens.

With these experiences in teaching —not only writing, but in general (and even in matters related to artistic practice)—, I have noticed that there are challenges in learning due to the

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<sup>12</sup> I think that, before this idea of the process, it is good to share with you that something that is usually given attention is the number of pages or to comply with some structure or format. I have noticed that this often comes from professors who focus on that when assigning a grade, even they do not usually read the complete texts, but only verify that they comply with those characteristics, and not on what the concept of writing implies.

construction of structures that generate a kind of statism in knowledge. Why does this happen? I can't help thinking that maybe it is due to how we know reality.

Almost one hundred years ago, Henri Bergson (2013) published his last work, *El pensamiento y lo moviente*.<sup>13</sup> In it, Bergson sought to clarify what method philosophy needs in order to really know and produce a knowledge distinct from science, with which Bergson disagreed. I take it that his distrust was due to an observation he made, "quién sabe si el mundo es efectivamente uno" (p. 15).<sup>14</sup> In considering his earlier proposals, Bergson bets more on a heterogeneous reality; therefore, he proposes that the method of science is ineffective, because it is opposed to that nature, for science works through systems and they "no son tallados a la medida de la realidad en la que vivimos. Son demasiado amplios para ella" (p. 15).<sup>15</sup> The system is the reduction of plurality and individuality, in short, the living, to an abstraction alien to what it pretends to grasp.

It is true that systems help organize a plural and mobile —and therefore changing— reality. This facilitates knowledge, but only at the beginning, for the system cannot replace reality and make reality behave or act according to that system. On the contrary, the system must *adhere* to what it claims to represent, as Bergson also said (2013).

Therefore, to each aspect of reality, to each variation of life, there corresponds a system that must follow the nature of what is represented. Otherwise, there is the risk that this representation becomes what Bergson called a *sign*:<sup>16</sup> an immobile, fragmented, and artificial reduction that generalizes and does not correspond to what it represents.<sup>17</sup> The concept of name that I mentioned so many times in previous paragraphs is a type of sign.

With signs, systems are built: more complex structures that, instead of adhering to the reality we seek to know, impose themselves as petrified and unalterable absolutes, very different from the nature of life. Thus, Bergson (2013) asked rhetorically: how, by manipulating signs, do

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<sup>13</sup> Translator's note: this work has been published in English under the title *The Creative Mind*.

<sup>14</sup> *Translator's note*: this quote could be translated to "who knows whether the world is indeed one".

<sup>15</sup> *Translator's note*: this quote could be translated to "are not carved to the measure of the reality in which we live. They are too broad for it"

<sup>16</sup> This does not refer to the linguistic sign.

<sup>17</sup> See "Segunda lección" (pp. 43-63) in Bergson (2017).

we fabricate reality (p. 205). The answer is that the reality fabricated by signs is alien to the nature of life; it neither adds to it nor takes away from it, since reality is not bound to be as the sign dictates, which is an artificial construction.

Bergson (2007) used an image (in the rhetorical sense) to help us look at what this nature of life is like and called it impulse (*élan vital*). He explained it as follows: “Tratamos aquí con un obús que inmediatamente ha estallado en fragmentos, los cuales, siendo ellos mismos especies de obús, han estallado a su turno en fragmentos destinados a estallar también, y así sucesivamente durante largo tiempo” (p. 95).<sup>18</sup>

With this example, Bergson renders visible his concept of *creative evolution*. With it, he proposes that life does not follow a linear and unique trajectory, but rather is a chained, unstoppable, and dispersing creation. This concept serves to establish a relationship between *reality* and *life*, which can be understood in two ways. First, reality is something alive, since it moves and transforms; but also, life itself is what is real, and life is creative, without limits. That is why there are, for example, at least 60 breeds of goats, not because each variation has a specific function, but because life realizes all its possibilities according to contexts, which in turn are variations that also result from the nature of life (although variations occur within the limits imposed by matter; p. 96).

It is because there is unpredictability, abundance, and what I would like to call the *creative whim* of life that we make signs and systems. It seems to me that it is a necessity founded on the anguish in the face of what seems to be chaos to us.<sup>19</sup> That opening, that yawning that is chaos and from which everything sprouted (or sprouts) in different and unpredictable directions, seems to lead us to need something defined: a drawn line that gives us security, sense, and a sense of certainty to achieve knowledge. Such knowledge and sense are usually achieved with order (not for nothing did the Greeks, very wise in this case, say that chaos was followed by the cosmos).<sup>20</sup> But for there to be order, we need to immobilize, we need to have control over how much and

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<sup>18</sup> *Translator's note*: this quote could be translated to “We are dealing here with a howitzer that has immediately exploded into fragments, which, being themselves species of howitzer, have in turn exploded into fragments destined to explode as well, and so on for a long time”.

<sup>19</sup> In case you wish to have an after-dinner conversation topic, it seems that our word chaos has its root in an Indo-European word meaning yawning.

<sup>20</sup> For in *The Iliad* the words referring to the action of ordering derive from cosmos.

how it flows from that opening, as happens with sound when singing —that is why, when I was taught to sing, I was told that “the correct form” implied control over the opening of the mouth.

The need for meaning and order is understood, but the risk lies in subjecting and reducing reality to the signs and systems with which we organize plurality and movement; it is like wanting to hold back a herd of goats that come running towards us and, moreover, to silence their bleating. To do so, we have to isolate and limit movement; this turns the living into something artificial, makes us ignore its nature, and become uninterested in its particularities. The system helps, but it must be adapted to the characteristics of reality itself or risk destroying its vitality, depressing it like an enclosed goat.

By naming all writing as an *essay*, we are faced with the name as sign and system. This means that the contexts, needs, audience, purposes, and, even more, the experiences and voice of the writer are subordinated to a structure and its conventions for standardization. But standardization runs the risk of producing (rather than creating) texts with no personality, immobile and, therefore, lifeless.

Moreover, this has an impact on students’ learning, on their generation of knowledge. Something that systematization and the sign have shown is that it is very difficult to make a person change a scheme: novelty and change are not usually accepted, or it is simply hard to assimilate and adapt to them. Therefore, it takes time for learners to understand and use new processes and strategies, and even to create their own models according to what they seek to say. In other words, there is an impact on critical and creative abilities.

As I mentioned when talking about Bergson’s image of impulse, there is a creative tendency in life, and it is creativity that disappears from writing when it becomes a sign. I take this opportunity to say that I have noticed this not only in academic writing, but also in so-called creative writing, for example, in poetry. There is a fixed image of it that implies certain forms, tone, structures, and even lexicon —words that are considered poetic and others that are not. The poetic is identified with elements that are circumstantial, that are only strategies for poiesis. But I’ll discuss this later; for now, I’m going to have my wife teach me how to bleat.



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