

A Life Between Art and Philosophy A Note on Jean-Pierre Cometti and His Work

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Abstract This note offers a brief introduction to the previously unpublished text “Pragmatism and the Question of Language: Words and the Rest” by Jean-Pierre Cometti (1944-2016). It serves two purposes: first, to provide some biographical information about Cometti and his role in French philosophical culture; and second, to offer some insights – along with bibliographical references – into the themes that he explored throughout his long scientific life. These themes include: 1) Musil and the philosophical significance of his work; 2) Wittgenstein’s philosophy; 3) American pragmatism, with reference to Dewey and the so-called ‘neo-pragmatists’; 4) aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

Keywords Jean-Pierre Cometti. Musil. Wittgenstein. Pragmatism. Art.

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The text “Pragmatism and the Question of Language: Words and the Rest”, translated here from French to English, is an unpublished work by Jean-Pierre Cometti (1944-2016) that he himself – according to a few preserved marginal notes – considered in need of revisions and expansion. Nevertheless, or perhaps even precisely for this reason, it offers a valuable glimpse into Cometti’s working methods, style, and the breadth of his philosophical interests. It is also worth mentioning that this text was read and discussed at length in a seminar at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice in 2015, at which Cometti was invited to speak by Roberta Dreon and Luigi Perissinotto. Moreover, this was not the only seminar that Cometti held in Venice over the years, although unfortunately it was the last one. Indeed, since the 1990s, a strong connection has been forged between Cometti (and Aix-Marseille University) and Perissinotto (and Ca’ Foscari University), both scientific and institutional, leading to an Erasmus exchange between the two universities. Another important milestone in this collaboration was marked by the three conferences on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy organized by Cometti in Aix-en-Provence, Perissinotto in Venice, and Silvana Borutti in Pavia, between 2003 and 2005. The papers presented at these conferences – conceived as a unified whole – were later published in *Il terreno del linguaggio. Testimonianze e saggi sulla filosofia di Wittgenstein*, edited by Borutti and Perissinotto (2006). Cometti’s essay, included in this volume and translated into Italian by Ilaria Pirone, is titled “Il linguaggio e l’imprevedibile: sull’ambiente dei pensieri” (Cometti 2006) and anticipates some of the themes and issues explored in the text translated here. In this context, it may also be interesting to note that Cometti was well acquainted not only with Italian studies on Wittgenstein, but also with contemporary Italian philosophy more generally. His writings feature numerous critical discussions and references to Gianni Vattimo and Aldo Giorgio Gargani, for example. Incidentally, Cometti played a key role in introducing Gargani’s thought to France by translating *Lo stupore e il caso* (Gargani 1985) into French as *L’étonnement et le hasard* (1989), and *La frase infinita. Thomas Bernhard e la cultura austriaca* (1990a) as *La phrase infinie de Thomas Bernhard* (1990b).

This note, which serves as a brief introduction to Cometti’s text published here for the first time, has two fairly limited purposes. The first is to provide some biographical information about Cometti and his role in French philosophical culture. The second is to offer some insights – along with bibliographical references – into the themes that Cometti explored throughout his long scientific life. These themes, which are closely connected and often intertwined, include: 1) Robert Musil and the philosophical significance of his work; 2) Wittgenstein’s philosophy; 3) American pragmatism, with particular reference to John Dewey and the so-called ‘neo-pragmatists’ (especially Richard Rorty); 4) aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

Jean-Pierre Cometti was born in Marseille on 22 May 1944 into a family of Italian origin. He began his philosophical studies at a relatively late age (see Morizot 2025) and taught philosophy in secondary schools in France (Millau) and abroad (Morocco, the Netherlands, and Germany) before joining Aix-Marseille University in 1992. He taught and conducted research at the university for two decades, and, after retiring in 2007, he remained active in academia continuing to teach at the École Supérieure d'Art in Avignon.

Following Pascal Engel's words in a tribute after his death, Cometti and his philosophical work can be succinctly presented as embodying an approach to philosophy that was "that of cultural circulation" (Engel 2016; translation mine). This is true in two senses: first, as an editor and translator, he introduced into French philosophical discourse many philosophers who were little known in France; second, his own philosophy drew freely on sources without any dogmatic limitations or divisions tied to a particular school. Although he was not an analytic philosopher, Cometti engaged with themes in the philosophy of language and mind that were far removed from those central to French philosophy at the time. He also helped to circulate philosophers and philosophical traditions that were either unknown or had been largely neglected in France – for example, Wittgenstein, with whom a growing minority of French philosophers are now engaging; Dewey and the tradition of pragmatism; and Nelson Goodman. Cometti thus left behind what can rightly be described as not only "a rich and original", but also a "courageous oeuvre" (Engel 2016; translation mine).¹ In short, his presence had a lasting impact, as Engel writes, leaving "above all, the feeling that philosophy would not quite be the same in France if he had not been there" (Engel 2016; translation mine).

Cometti published a vast body of work over the course of his career,² making it all the more surprising to learn that his initial contact with writing was, "paradoxically", "almost fortuitous" or accidental: as Jacques Morizot (2025) recalls, Cometti was introduced to Musil's then little-known work by Marie-Louise Roth (1926-2014), one of the leading experts on Musil. He went on to dedicate four volumes to Musil: two on his fiction – *Robert Musil ou l'alternative romanesque* (Cometti 1985) and *Robert Musil. De 'Törless' à 'L'Homme sans qualités'* (1986) – and two on his essays – *L'homme exact. Essai sur Robert*

¹ The complete list of works is available on his personal website at the following link: <https://sites.google.com/site/jipcompagne/bibliographie>.

² Morizot 2019, 199: "As everybody knows (or not), Jean-Pierre Cometti's relation to writing was insatiable. In fact he was something of a bulimic: more than one hundred books, either as an author, translator, editor, director of a collective publication, without even counting his multiple activities as consultant for publishers. Quite rightly, he was not reluctant to qualify himself as a Stakhanovite".

Musil (1997) and *Musil philosophe. L'utopie de l'essayisme* (2001b). In addition, he co-edited the French re-edition of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Musil 2004) with Philippe Jaccottet and Marianne Rocher-Jacquin. This edition offers a new interpretation of the unfinished second part and includes extensive previously unpublished material (translated by Cometti and Rocher-Jacquin), revealing the many traces of Musil's literary "building site" (Gödicke 2004, 153; translation mine; for further comments on this translation, see also Cerisuelo 2025). It should be noted here that Cometti's interest in Musil is always philosophically motivated. For example, in *L'homme exact*, Cometti examines the ways in which Musil attempts to overcome the duality between soul and reason, and between science and feeling (see Cometti 1997, 21-5). This duality, as is evident, would later be addressed, on the one hand, by thinkers of the pragmatist tradition and, on the other, by Wittgenstein: precisely those philosophers to whom Cometti devoted much of his intellectual energy.

Reflecting his enduring fascination for Austrian culture, Cometti regarded Wittgenstein as one of his major philosophical references. His interest in Wittgenstein was shared with – and to some extent shaped by – the renowned epistemologist Gilles-Gaston Granger, who, among other achievements, produced in 1972 the French translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that would remain the most authoritative version available for many years. Cometti wrote three major works on Wittgenstein's philosophy: *Philosopher avec Wittgenstein* (1996), *La maison de Wittgenstein ou les voies de l'ordinaire* (1998), and *Ludwig Wittgenstein et la philosophie de la psychologie. Essai sur la signification de l'intériorité* (2004) – a book that he mentioned he had completed in just a few months during his stay in Canada. Along with these works, he also authored countless articles, contributions, and translations. By devoting himself to Wittgenstein – who is primarily known as a philosopher of mind and language – Cometti helped to shed light on some of the lesser-explored aspects of his philosophy. For example, as Jerrold Levinson points out,

Philosopher avec Wittgenstein contains an extended examination of Wittgenstein's views on the affinity between aesthetic and conceptual questions, on the nature and role of religious beliefs, and on the use of philosophy for self and societal transformation. These are topics often omitted or glossed over in more standard interpretations of Wittgenstein as a philosopher. (2019, 18)

Furthermore, although it focuses less on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and more on "Wittgenstein's ultimate picture of philosophy" as presented in *Philosophical Investigations* and his other later works,

Cometti succeeds nicely in demonstrating the continuity of Wittgenstein's later thought, putting that thought in relation with his earlier thought, though without minimizing the real differences between them. (Levinson 2019, 18)

One could also regard Cometti's engagement with Wittgenstein (not just with Musil), as Morizot (2025) suggests, as resulting in his focus on uses and conditions of use, his anti-essentialism and his preference for what he termed 'fragile ontologies' (*ontologies friables*) (Cometti 2012). This led him, in alignment with the 'later' Donald Davidson, to advocate "a relationship with the world freed from, *cleared of*, conventions and superfluous attributes that oppose, like so many as obstacles, a more authentic interaction with beings, things, or with God" (Cometti 1999, 10; translation mine). Accordingly, he called for an art he referred to as 'art without qualities' (*sans qualités*) – a notion he elaborated in his well-known 1999 book, the title of which echoes this expression (Cometti 1999; cf. also 2001a).

Moving beyond any dualistic framework and a strictly normative view of rules (Cometti 1996, 63-96) – and building on Wittgenstein's work, though not exclusively – Cometti gradually embraced American pragmatism. He drew mainly not from Charles S. Peirce or William James, but from Dewey (and Rorty). He oversaw the French publication of Dewey's most significant works, and helped foster their dissemination. Among Cometti's most notable contributions are *Qu'est-ce que le pragmatisme?* (2010) and *La démocratie radicale. Lire John Dewey* (2016b).

More than through overt references, Dewey's impact or influence on Cometti is evident in the distinctive philosophical method he employed, which is apparent in the variety of issues he examined – a point that can also be made about his engagement with Wittgenstein's work. As previously mentioned, one area in which this impact or influence is particularly evident is that of art and aesthetics. Firstly, it must be said that, for Cometti, art was not only a constant subject of reflection, but also, so to speak, a deep "secret gravitational centre" (Morizot 2025; translation mine). It is worth recalling that, as Morizot reveals, Cometti was a jazz guitarist and therefore "from the start" he "kept close contact with art and the world of the arts" (2019, 200). As for his philosophical work on art specifically, the following trilogy devoted to art is clearly and emblematically informed by a pragmatist, or rather neo-pragmatist, spirit: *La force d'un malentendu. Essais sur l'art et la philosophie de l'art* (2009), *Art et facteurs d'art. Ontologies friables* (2012), and *La nouvelle aura. Économie de l'art et de la culture* (2016c). To complete this overview, it is useful to mention at least three other significant works on art: *Art, modes d'emploi. Esquisses d'une philosophie de l'usage* (Cometti 2001a), which, as the title suggests, examines the various ways in which art can be employed;

Art, représentation, expression (2002), which addresses the questions raised by the search for a definition of art; and *Conserver/Restaurer. L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa préservation technique* (2016a), which explores the paradoxes surrounding the institutional management of art. Cometti's work on aesthetics and the philosophy of art is densely packed with subtle insights, detailed analyses, and rich information. Yet it consistently rests – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly – on a single foundational stance: the rejection of any doctrine or theory that seeks to make art an autonomous domain, isolated from the varied and complex fabric of experience.³ As Dreon points out, it was primarily “Dewey’s work in the philosophy of art [that] represented a crucial influence in pushing Cometti’s interests toward the political dimension of artistic practices”: Cometti’s “engagement seems to answer’s Dewey’s rather polemical idea” (2019, 217) – as expressed in particular in *Art as Experience* – that a philosophy of art remains ineffective and sterile unless it reveals how art connects with other modes of experience.

Finally, attention should be drawn to another substantial and truly important aspect of Cometti’s work, partly mentioned earlier: his remarkable activity from the very beginning of his career as an editor, translator, and director of collections and journals. In the series “Tiré à part” (Éditions de l’éclat), launched jointly with Michel Valensi, Cometti aimed to publish short, seminal essays by leading contemporary authors in analytic philosophy. The collection was a success: over the course of twenty years, Cometti published works by Davidson, Goodman, Rorty, Roderik Chisholm, David Lewis, Karl R. Popper, Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell, Jacques Bouveresse, Daniel Dennett, Jan Hacking, Jaakko Hintikka, Adolf Grünbaum, and many others. Thanks to this initiative, Anglophone philosophy expanded significantly in France. As Engel puts it, “[t]he young (and few) philosophers in France who were interested in analytic philosophy at the time had the opportunity to translate and comment on their favourite texts” (Engel 2016; translation mine). Cometti translated and published an exceptionally wide range of works – more than anyone else of his generation, as Engel (2016) admits – drawing from German, Italian, and American philosophical traditions. His translations include major figures. To give a few examples: among the German speakers, in addition to Musil and Wittgenstein, Karl-Otto Apel and Peter Bürger; among the Italians, besides Vattimo and Gargani, Umberto Eco and Maurizio Ferraris; and among the Americans, Rorty – to whom he was very close –⁴ as well as Dewey, Goodman, Levinson,

³ For a more in-depth exploration of this aspect of Cometti’s thought, see also Oliver Quintyn’s preface to Cometti 2009 (i-xxx).

⁴ Although Cometti disagreed with the undervaluing of experience in favour of language that characterised Rorty’s approach.

Lewis, Putnam, John Searle, Richard Shusterman, and Robert Brandom. The philosophical significance and relevance of this careful work of selecting and translating the texts are, once again, clarified by Engel's words, which deserve to be quoted in full:

Translation broadens the field, breaks away from schools and specialists, and shows that it is possible to move from one community to another without relying on predetermined frameworks. This is why translation was consubstantial with Jean-Pierre Cometti's work. I don't like the term 'passeur' sometimes used to label those who do this work, because it suggests someone merely passing through without building on their own foundation, whereas Jean-Pierre Cometti clearly had his own. Yet the term did suit the spirit of his project, which rejected any belief in the Eternal, in inviolable norms and values, in Truth, Beauty, Meaning, and Ideas. (Engel 2016; translation mine)

Cometti was also the driving force behind numerous edited volumes and special journal issues, demonstrating his commitment to fostering scholarly dialogue. Beyond his editorial work, he organised several important conferences, including notable ones in collaboration with the Ca' Foscari University research group, which brought together leading experts and stimulated vibrant academic exchanges. These events contributed decisively and significantly to the development of debates and collaborations within a broader scholarly community.

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