

# The Body in the Library: An investigative celebration of deviation, hesitation, and lack of closure

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## Abstract

The unexpected, if still clichéd, discovery of a body in the library introduces the plot of Agatha Christie's plots starring the genius amateur detective, elderly Miss Marple. We will use the same situation as the starting point of our article and investigation, promising both the unmasking of the culprit and the departure from the currently standard form of an academic text. In a self-consciously rambling and digressive text, we will touch on various issues relevant to writing what we consider good social science, and the difficulties in doing so. Firmly reaffirming the need for writing organization studies and social science in the narrative mode, we trace what we see as the decline in quality and joyousness of contemporary management journal articles, and attempt to demonstrate, both through narrative means and by more traditional academic reasoning, how and why it is important to embrace variety in the ways knowledge in social sciences is constructed and communicated.

## Keywords

writing, knowledge creation, tacit knowledge, fiction, narrative, culture

## The scene

"Oh, ma'am, oh, ma'am, there's a body in the library!"

The phrase, spoken by the parlour maid, introduces the central conundrum at the heart of Agatha Christie's (1942) crime novel starring Miss Marple, the elderly amateur detective: an unknown (though soon identified) woman has been found dead in the stately home library, with few clues as to how she got there and who might have caused her death. At the time of writing, the setup was already a well-known theme, as Christie readily acknowledges in the novel's foreword. It nevertheless provides an opportunity for the author to play with the form of a detective story, and to produce an entertaining

text that continues to attract readers and to serve as a basis for academic discussion (e.g. Klein, 1998; York, 2007) to this day. And so, we will use the same situation as the starting point of our article, promising both the unmasking of the culprit and the departure from the common form of an academic text. Along the way we will touch on various issues relevant to writing what we consider good social science, and the difficulties in doing so. This discussion will not follow a linear line of argumentation not due to lack of attention or due care, but because we believe digressions are important, and hesitation is an underappreciated facet of being a social scientist. We leave it for the reader to decide whether the identification of the perpetrator forms closure to

the investigation, but our wider argument will certainly remain open at the end of the text.

The promised narrative that forms the backbone of this article follows the premise of Agatha Christie's novel with some slight variation, as the dead body discovered in the public library is that of an older woman: well dressed, with platinum blonde hair, and completely unknown to everyone on the premises. She appears to have been strangled. The police are called but the librarian also elicits help of her old friend, the general busybody and keen gardener Miss Jane Marple, who quickly establishes the identity of the corpse: it is the Body of Knowledge.

But who has killed Ms Knowledge and why? Before we can relate the course of the investigation, we need to provide some context establishing its relevance for an article on academic writing appearing in *Management Learning*. In order to do so, we need first to consider why the narrative structure of an investigation is at all suitable for a scholarly text.

Our argument starts with our agreement with Barbara Czarniawska's (2000: p. 2) emphatic declaration: "a student of social life, no matter which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as a form of knowledge, a form of social life, and a form of communication." We, too, believe that stories and the social world go hand in hand: narratives frame and organize the way in which we perceive the world, as well as form the traditional form of human knowledge (Bruner, 1991); they are the most common form of social interaction (MacIntyre, 1997). We make sense of the world around us through stories (Weick, 1995); indeed, they make it possible for us to share our world, as Aristotle noted already thousands of years ago in *Poetics* (1996), and as Hayden White (1973) and David Carr (1986) argued slightly more recently.

The distinction between stories and narratives, and the precise definition of each, is not particularly relevant to our argument, and we shall not attempt to add to the existing tangle of conceptualizations. Regardless of where one draws boundaries, and whether one sees stories as subsets of narratives (like Gabriel, 2000), narratives as particular kinds of stories (like Boje, 2001) or, like us, uses the terms interchangeably, stories/narratives can be seen as the prevalent form of human communication. They come in many different modes,

from epic, through tragic to comic, and, of course, there exist a multitude of hybrids and combinations of them, in everyday life, art, and as well as in science.

For modern societies not only tell stories, but also write them down and ascribe special status to some of them: that of literature or of social science. The latter is, of course, more important for discussing management writing, and also more problematic: it is all too easy to forget that to write social science is to engage in telling stories, to treat research texts as non-narrative, and to consider textual templates (such as the dominant format of a journal article) as rigid rules of communication. And thus, a contemporary guide for academic writers might caution the budding social scientist:

Don't confuse yourself with your friends teaching creative writing in the fine arts department. You're not crafting a deep narrative or composing metaphors that expose mysteries of the human heart (Silvia, 2007, p. 45)

However, if we accept narrativity (and, yes, the possibility of exposing the mysteries of the human heart) as an aspect of all texts, even the academic ones, we might examine the possibilities of conscious engagement with the stories we are trying to tell through our writing. The first and most direct way that academic authors can use narratives is to write with plots (Czarniawska, 1999). The plot is a strategy of transition from one state to another and serves as a sensemaking device, linking together social actors, events and places. These are associations beyond simple chronology, but they do not have to claim cause-effect relationships. Instead, they show what actions have been taken by whom and with what consequences. This used to be a common way of writing in social sciences, also in organization studies, where the case study was very prominent both as method and as a way of presenting evidence (Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994). David Boje (1995) explains that stories facilitate communication but do not define it – they leave a certain freedom for interpretation, which makes them potentially not just enlightening but also emancipating. Umberto Eco (2000) points to yet another good reason to include stories in academic writing: he believes that this helps to anchor scientific reasoning in human experience, making it more meaningful to the readers, as well as just making the text more pleasant to read. Writing specifically about management, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (2007) argues that art and literature

helps us understand totalities, a task that should lie at the heart of any considered research programme:

To have an aesthetic perspective means to assemble knowledge fragments into something that has meaning. (p. 133)

Stories can be used on all stages of research and writing, Barbara Czarniawska (1999) argues, from watching how the stories are created in the field, through collecting them (Kostera, 2005), interpreting others' stories through a narrative frame, analyzing them, and constructing own stories. This requires considering literary qualities of texts we encounter and write, including qualities such as genre, narration, and mode of employment. The tales from the field are mostly, even if not exclusively, realist and documentary (Van Maanen, 1988), but this is not the only genre that has relevance for social sciences (Wolf, 1992).

For our case, it is important that fiction has also been argued as important for social science and management research and writing. We wholeheartedly agree with Barbara Czarniawska and Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1994) call to arms, which is also the title for their jointly edited book: *Good novels, better management! Fiction helps to grasp the context and provides a training for imagination*. By reading more fiction we may be able to solve puzzles that no mainstream management textbook can help us with tackling.

Banks and Banks (1998) and Phillips (1995) have suggested that writing fiction might also play an important role in research presentation: as illustration, as thoughts experiment, as allegory. It can also help enliven the text, as long as the intent is not to mislead the reader. In case of our story of Miss Marple, we have chosen to use a specific genre for our fictional counterpoise to the academic discussion: that of a detective story. Barbara Czarniawska (1999, 2014) has long mused about the similarities between management writing and crime fiction: both share a their tradition of narrative probability, dedication to detail and almost ethnographical realism. Moreover, both social science and detective stories are oriented towards problem solving in a social context and there are valid similarities between a researcher and a fictional detective. Bruno Latour's masterful (1993) *Aramis*, or the *Love of Technology* exploits this similarity to great extent, presenting an ethnographic study as a murder investigation, with detective protagonists tracing the

villains responsible for the demise of a technological research and development project.

Ours is a slightly different project, and a different story: the question we are asking ourselves deals with what happened to meaningful knowledge in the social sciences? Why are so many academic texts bland, unilluminating and formulaic (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013)? The answer we seek is not one that would take the form of critique or solutions rooted in the current trends. We wish to go beyond linear thinking, even of the most radical and critical kind. And for a task of that magnitude, enlisting help of the formidable Miss Marple might just provide us with the resources we need.

## The investigation

Returning to the principal investigation, we find Miss Marple assembling the diverse cast of possible suspects. She is not easily fooled by staunch denials or timorous protestations of innocence; it is clear to her that the culprit must still be found near the murder scene. But who? She investigates, and soon it is time for her to question the suspects. To start with, she turns to a frequent visitor to the library, Monsieur Michel Foucault, easily distinguishable by his basilisk-like panoptical gaze. He knew Ms Knowledge well enough, there is no denying that. But when pressed, Foucault remains elusive. He holds out his hands and explains:

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault, 1977: 27).

"Well, well," says Miss Marple. "well, well... were you worried about her rising power and influence?" Foucault nods, but feels the need to underscore the strength of his conviction. He continues, gesticulating wildly:

There has been an inversion in the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity, "Take care of yourself" and "Know yourself." In Greco-Roman culture, knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of the care of the self. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle (Foucault, 1988: 22).

"You didn't like Ms Knowledge, did you?" Miss Marple

looks him thoughtfully in the eyes. "Is there anything you wouldn't do to stop her?"

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (Foucault, 1984: 50)

Miss Marple nods to herself and smiles. "That's very brave..."

It is not Knowledge alone that Monsieur Foucault had an uneasy relationship with—his attitude towards the Author (or at least some interpretations of authorship) was equally suspect. This is best seen in a series of very well-known texts appearing throughout the 1960s, all dealing with the various aspects of the role of the reader in producing the meaning of any text. The earliest, and also the most relevant for our article, is Umberto Eco's (1982) *The Open Work*, published in Italian in 1962. The titular open work is presented there as a desirable possibility, involving the reader in active interpretation, up to and including the co-construction of meaning together with the original author. Eco does not claim that all artistic endeavours are open, but that development of openness is a historical process allowing for the appearance of richer, more meaningful works that better embody the complexity of a contemporary world. Roland Barthes' (1977) "The Death of the Author" famously undermines the significance of the very act of authorship (and, in particular, the significance of any extratextual attributes of any particular author) for the meaning of the text, but again presents this as a result of historical development: in order to have died, the Author (using Barthes' own capitalization) must have previously been alive. Foucault (1998) flips this notion on its head: in his essay, authorship appears as a historical construct of limited usefulness as well as one which might have reached its sell-by date.

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the above essays, or at least of the strands of thought which they represent, for the practice of literary criticism. Their impact on social science (and management) writing has been more limited. But before we examine it, we need to let Miss Marple question another suspect.

Still in the library, she addresses another visitor: a silent figure, resting morosely in a chaise longue in the corner of the big room. She knows him by sight, that ironic German with his bushy eyebrows and the huge moustache. Even in his best humour he was rarely sociable, he now appears to have sunk into one of his melancholy moods. But could Herr Friedrich Nietzsche be the perpetrator of this horrible crime? He once drafted Ms Knowledge into his mobile army of metaphors, and she appeared thoroughly shaken by the experience. Despite the slumped posture, his eyes gaze piercingly at the elderly detective who calmly meets his gaze. Slowly and deliberately, seeming to carefully pick each and every word, he describes the nature of his relationship with the deceased.

That haughtiness which goes with knowledge and feeling, which shrouds the eyes and senses of man in a blinding fog, therefore deceives him about the value of existence by carrying in itself the most flattering evaluation of knowledge itself. Its most universal effect is deception; but even its most particular effects have something of the same character. (Nietzsche, 1976: 42)

"Oh yes?" Miss Marple feigns surprise. Nietzsche leans back again, and stares resentfully into the ceiling. But after a long moment of uncomfortable silence, he continues:

let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as "pure reason," absolute spirituality, "knowledge in itself": these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing" (Nietzsche, 1989: 119)

Jane Marple takes a sterner tone: "Are you sure you are telling me the whole truth, Herr Nietzsche? It wouldn't do to hold anything back." At last, the philosopher turns his head and looks at his frail-bodied questioner. He starts speaking again, haltingly, as if with overburdened by the sheer weight of his melancholy. But could it be a glint of humour twinkling in the corner of his eye?

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation and decoration [...]; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which

have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour [...]. Yet we still do not know where the drive to truth comes from, for so far we have only heard about the obligation to be truthful which society imposes in order to exist (Nietzsche, 1977: 46)

"I do think you should be more careful in how you choose your friends," Miss Marple concludes and finally leaves the German to his thoughts.

Our detective is far from the only person to find Nietzsche's pronouncements not immediately clear. In his writings, he gradually gravitated towards an aphoristic style consisting of very loosely connected paragraphs and maxims that, while succinct, rarely provided a detailed argument. A useful typology to bear in mind here is Roland Barthes' (1974) distinction between the writerly and readerly texts. The former, much like the work of Nietzsche, actively engage the reader and demand interpretation based on the reader's context, passions, interests, and ideas. Roughly equivalent to the aforementioned Eco's ideal of the open work, writerly texts serve to produce meaning in collaboration between the author and the reader. In contrast, readerly texts narrow down the possible range of interpretations and enforce

the pitiless divorce which the literary institution [or, indeed, an academic one—Authors] maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious (Barthes, 1974: 4).

Seriousness is a damning charge for Barthes, himself an author mostly of academic rather than purely literary texts, much as it was for Nietzsche, whose playfulness (as well as whose works' adaptability) remains one of the many reasons for his continued relevance and readership. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of today's academic publishing institutions, whose ideals skew strongly towards readerliness of scientific output. Another recent book promising to be a guide to publishing journal articles (Becker and Denicolo, 2012) invites the authors to make their texts "relatively reader-proof" (p. 93), or making sure to limit the readers' interpretive agency to as strongly as possible. We might note that there is a strong historical dimension to this stance: not too long ago, management texts published in major journals and as books by major publishers could be found that challenged stylistic boundaries, played

with genre codes and conventions of academic social science. We might note Gibson Burrell's (1997) attack on linear thinking featuring text running through the book in two opposite directions (from the first page to the last and vice versa), with some correspondences between the two lines of argument helpfully pointed out by the author, others left for the reader to explore and discover; Anne Loft's (1995) combination of collage and academic article, or Ann Rippin (2015) more recent work fusing doll-making with research and academic writing. Some authors even speak of a literary turn in organization studies (Glaubitz, 2016; Monin, 2004), though this usually involves scholarly consideration of literature rather than treating contemporary academic texts as literary work. Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (2015) analyse management literature as a genre, but their study concerns bestseller books existing, at best, at the edges of academic respectability, and offers little insight into the possibility of allowing for writerliness in research articles and books. We might also note that one string of well-publicized attacks on the so-called postmodernists (which always remained a curiously fuzzy label) in the 1990s, most notably by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (1997), highlighted the lack of clarity in writing as one of their main sins, and also as an obfuscatory technique allowing such authors to get away with nonsensical theses and meaningless publications. As "fashionable nonsense" became less fashionable, clarity became the chief virtue of social science writing. Even today, when Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen (2017) correctly, in our opinion, bemoan the loss of meaning in so much contemporary social science, they tout greater emphasis on clarity as one step towards a solution. We disagree vehemently.

These divagations have distracted us from Miss Marple's investigation who, having left Herr Nietzsche to his strangely joyful brooding, turned to examine the questionable activities of Mr Karl Popper, a philosopher of science whose acquaintance with Ms Knowledge dates back to his youth. He had been observed acting suspiciously, lately, and had also been the subject of persistent rumours of a long-standing love affair with Ms Knowledge, one that appears to have gone sour. Could he have falsified the clues while testing his hypothesis on ignorance not being the same as the absence of Knowledge? Asked directly about their relationship, he responds with clear indignation:

How can we admit that our knowledge is a human—an all too human—affair, without at the same time implying that it is all individual whim and arbitrariness? (Popper, 1962: 16)

“Well, aren’t we all human, young man?” Miss Marple nods, amiably. Mr Popper clearly feels the need to make his point more forcefully and directly.

The way in which knowledge progresses, and especially our scientific knowledge, is by unjustified (and unjustifiable) anticipations, by guesses, by tentative solutions to our problems, by conjectures. These conjectures are controlled by criticism. They may survive these tests, but they can never be positively justified. (Popper, 1962: vii)

“I would agree with you, but I think everything that has existed still lingers with us,” the detective muses. “Do you not feel guilty about the events?” The philosopher considers the remark for a moment. Then he nods and asserts with a cool calm:

By blaming us, and our language (or misuse of language), it is possible to uphold the divine authorship of the senses (and even of language). But it is possible only at the cost of widening the gap between this authority and ourselves: between the pure sources from which we can obtain an authoritative knowledge of the truthful goddess Nature, and our impure and guilty selves. (Popper, 1962: 17)

This sounds almost like an admission of culpability, but Miss Marple is not convinced. The death of Knowledge is still a tangled mystery, and unravelling it require both skill and tact. She excuses herself, and leaves us to ponder the significance of Popper’s ideas.

The philosopher of science is known mostly for his contributions to epistemology, most directly regarding natural sciences, but with a distinct side-effect of undermining the scientific legitimacy of much social science work. His stance of critical rationalism continues to intrigue management scholars (Thomas, 2010), and his defence of open society (and the associated ideal that entailed this defence) appears as relevant for organization theory as it does for political studies (Armbrü and Gebert, 2002). For the purpose of this investigation, we need to focus on Karl Popper’s vision of science as a tool for reducing uncertainty. His idea of falsificationism, building a system of knowledge out of the realization that scientific theories can be falsified (proven wrong) but can never be verified

(proven true), posits science as a probabilistically utopian endeavour aimed at asymptotic approach towards the truth. It is a vision that dovetails nicely with Zygmunt Bauman’s description of the three different ways in which different societies and eras reacted to the all-pervading uncertainty (we also recommend Teofil Ruiz’, 2002, demonstration of the fear of the unknown as the driving force of history). He depicts these three historical visions as metaphorical utopias that help both in establishing common goals, and in directing communal action against uncertainty.

The metaphors he uses are that of the gamekeeper, the gardener, and the hunter. The gamekeeper believes in a certainty that lies beyond human control, with intervention as an act of last resort that should be avoided in most circumstances. This is the oldest, pre-modern vision in the Western civilization, married to the idea of divine order beyond comprehension of mere mortals. The gardener’s world is one where dedication and attention are needed from the human actors in order to achieve the dream. He or she busies him- or herself with planning, understanding the desired order and then: ordering, adding what is needed and subtracting what does not belong. This is the idea of society championed by Popper, though with the twist of working towards the inclusion of more gardeners in both planning and execution of the utopia. While the blueprint for the garden might be sought out or invented (different interpretations of the utopia championed different approaches), the important feature of all its manifestations was a vision of harmony

in which every insider-plant had its own dignified and praiseworthy slot allocated, whereas all possible blots on the landscape were conspicuous solely by their absence. [...] Gardeners’ utopias were visions of perfect totality - the quality of its parts coming a (sometimes distant) second, as its derivative and after-effect (Zygmunt Bauman in Bauman et al., 2015, p. 74).

The hunter (a solitary figure that should not be confused with the social and sociable hunter-gatherers of anthropological and historical record) has lost faith in the gardener’s grand project and, consequently, drastically narrows the horizons of her or his actions. Thus, while still utopian in their aims, hunters embark on the quest for individual fulfilment, that would allow the creation of a personal and localized Eden. The grand picture is largely unknowable, and the only certainty

that matters is the act of pursuit itself. This

is a 'winner take all' utopia of hunters, concerned as they are, each one of them, with the contents of his hunting bag at the end of the hunting day, and giving little – if any – thought to the predicament of the less dexterous, less sharp-eyed huntsmen or detractors from shooting and killing – let alone to how much, if anything at all, of the game might survive the hunt. Hunters' utopia is not a vision of a perfect world. It is a vision of a perfect (private) spot carved out and protected against hopelessly imperfect and repellent surroundings: of a relatively convenient, comfortable and secure niche to be cut out, individually, from the essentially and irreparably awkward, prickly and insecure world. And, once cut out, it is to be fenced off tightly, impermeably, from the wilderness doomed to decay (Zygmunt Bauman in Bauman et al., 2015, p. 75)

For Bauman, this is the diagnosis of the current era he terms the liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), with hunters representing the dominant role models who have replaced the yearning for social happiness with the imperative of consumption (Bauman, 2007).

It might not yet be clear why presenting a historical account of overarching utopias (at least according to one analysis) is relevant for discussing either Popper's ideals of knowledge generation or writing practices in management studies. But there is an important link, as these overarching utopias serve not only as modes of organizing, but also as inspirations: for research, for writing, for publication. They also shape the ideal of good writing, including good writing in organization research.

The inspired texts of poets, prophets and storytellers, following the rhythms dictated by gods and muses, belonged in the gamekeepers' utopia, that of a perfect harmony existing outside of human manipulation and interference, but one to which writers could, if they wished and knew how, tune in and receive the blessings of expression. For that, inspiration, humility, and sensitivity were needed, but there was also, inevitably, the question of the worthiness of the vessel. Who was worthy of seeking and receiving the gift? How are we, the readers, to know? Hence the discussions and fights over what is and what is not inspired script, more important for their participants than questions of authorship or genuine historical wording. Hence, also, the stories of proven inspiration circulating alongside

the texts. Thus, characteristically, the Renaissance scholar Albertus Hunacius reports on the vision of the great theologian, Thomas Aquinas: one day, a voice emanating from a crucifix assured the weary Thomas: "equidem bene scriptisti de me," or "you have written well of me" (O'Malley, 1974). This was the pursued and valued ideal, and this is the cosmic beauty we admire in the timeless songs of Sappho, in the verses of Ecclesiastes, in the tales of the knights of the Round Table, but also in writings we today regard as (proto-)scientific such as the work of Vitruvius or the philosophy of Confucius.

The second vision of authorship, historically appearing later in Europe, followed the gardeners' utopian dream of order maintained by either discovery or creation. More or less direct human intervention was desired and adopted, from classical authors seeking to detect laws of nature and the human mind and transferring them to a prose carrying the flows and rhythms they strived to portray, to modernist architects and reformers of society and the environment. These writings did not oppose a strongly personal style and form, quite the opposite: the distinctive and man-made became valued and sought after. The pleasure of reading works by Voltaire, Michel de Montaigne, and James Joyce as well as artfully crafted scientific writings of Carl von Linné, Sigmund Freud, Erving Goffman or, indeed, Karl Popper, cannot be explained only by their significance or even by the points they make.

The current era in writing is dominated by hunters, as is easily seen in most published, and highest-rated (by metrics rather than any consensual judgement) articles. The clear aim is to pursue and capture a significant "value-added" contribution, to be brief, fast and to the point, to address stated issues. Text must be explicit, compact, have a key point and refrain from containing an unclear line of argument or multiple arguments. Conclusions should be positive, well-developed, and never surprising (by the point the reader reaches such conclusions). The aim is to contribute to the citeability and impact of the journal, as measured by factors and rankings. On the success of the strivings to publish such work depends the fate of the writers: employability in academic institutions, career, promotion and prospects to, by securing grants, create funding for their universities and be eligible for having time to devote to research and writing. Writing has become measurable, straightforward, linear and governable. But do we read

it and relish it? And what could we do to do so, as authors, reviewers, and readers?

As we ponder the question, we might take the time to return to Miss Marple's ongoing investigation. Her final suspect is the outwardly kind Polányi Michael úr, the Hungarian-British public intellectual once enamoured with Ms Knowledge. He does not try to deny his infatuation, nor the joy their brief sojourns brought him.

To hold such knowledge is an act deeply committed to the conviction that there is something there to be discovered. It is personal, in the sense of involving the personality of him who holds it, and also in the sense of being, as a rule, solitary; but there is no trace in it of self-indulgence. (Polányi, 2009: 25).

Miss Marple nods sympathetically, but wonders about the later development. Did the infatuation last, or did he, like the others, start harbouring doubts and discovering the very numerous shortcomings of Ms Knowledge? Michael Polányi throws his hands up in the air.

The fact that it is impossible to account for the nature and justification of knowledge by a series of strictly explicit operations appears obvious in its light, without invoking deeper forms of commitment. (Polányi, 2009: xviii).

His eyes darken as he pronounces, in a more subdued tone:

But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge. (Polányi, 2009: 20).

Miss Marple leaves the pensive Hungarian to his thoughts, her mind working to assemble all the acquired clues. We, on the other hand, need to turn our thoughts to reading and learning rather than to the writing process. Michael Polányi's most celebrated contribution in this field lies in the distinction between explicit and tacit knowing. The former results in knowledge readily transmittable through step-by-step textbooks, instruction manuals and, generally, readerly texts in Barthes' terminology. The latter leads to knowledge much more difficult to transmit, particularly through formalized and mechanized means. And yet, the two forms of knowing are impossible to disentangle: explicit statements build on tacit assumptions, while tacit

understandings incorporate explicit insights. And both are crucial for the functioning of organizations, both are studied in (and produced through) management research.

There is some evidence (Nussbaum, 1990), that literary texts can serve as catalysts (if not sole carriers) of tacit learning, and that writerly texts are not just better literature, but also better social science. But there is more: Pierre Bayard (2007) in a profound and thoroughly entertaining short book casts further light on the indelible connection between reading, forgetting, and imagining; all books and articles, even the most thoroughly studied, are at best incompletely remembered, even right after the act of reading, and recollection and interpretation relies on context and imagination. Thus, all texts are, to some extent, writerly, and, thankfully, no texts are ever reader-proof. The fixing of meaning is a dream, and even in academic journals, the demiurgic Author has well and truly died, though not without leaving behind destructive textual rules and guidance.

## The Denouement

Jane Marple has, by now, heard enough. All the characters present at the crime scene had clear motive and significant amount of malice. And though one might try to examine each alibi and every unwary footstep, Miss Marple sees little point in doing so. She is convinced that none of the suspects she interviewed had the means or the nerve to murder Knowledge. But the investigation has not been unfruitful: Miss Marple has unearthed traces of Ms Knowledge's recent speeches, traces that shine a completely different light on the murder mystery. She had, indeed, been acting very strangely. Here are some of the things reliable witnesses recently heard from the mouth of the deceased, and in the hallowed halls of distinguished universities, no less:

- Our mission is to develop and enthuse leaders and entrepreneurs who create, share and use knowledge to deliver equitable and sustainable futures around the world.
- We are a hub of shared enquiry and discovery where individuals learn from and collaborate with peers, experts and business leaders. We unite opportunities, people and cultures, developing collective knowledge to define the future of business.

- We are equally committed to developing new scholars and teachers, and to creating and disseminating pathbreaking knowledge, concepts, and tools which advance the understanding and practice of management; we accomplish this through our faculty research and PhD programs.
- Research: To produce and disseminate research of world-class quality, within the School and through international partnerships, which increases knowledge, skills, understanding and impact.
- Developing effective and responsible leaders by creating insightful knowledge and inspiring minds in dialogue with the world around us.

The specific sources, readily available via an Internet search, will remain shrouded here to shield the more sensitive Readers from the outbursts of symbolic violence. They come not from journal articles, but from guidelines and regulations created to steer management research in Britain (similar examples can be found in other countries). Deeply unnerved, Miss Marple mutters to herself as she goes through the list she compiled: the statements (her list goes well beyond the quoted excerpts) are clearly no product of a stable mind, much less one who inspired the sublime work of all the questioned suspects.

It is obvious to her that the poor woman must have been in a bad state and clearly not feeling quite herself. She must have been depressed, and might have been delirious. Was she driven to take her own life, and, if so, by whom?

As Gibson Burrell (1997) convincingly argued, linearity kills, in a metaphorical as well as a literal sense. It kills learning, communication, and the joy of reading, but it also academic knowledge. Linearity sorts everything out while distorting the very texture of the medium it operates in. The oft-declared aim is to ensure stable and trustworthy quality. Yet such a regime of research and publication clearly fails to prevent substandard quality, as any read-through of even the leading journals of the field quickly demonstrates. On the contrary, new monstrous specimens arise and thrive, while making the whole terrain unusable, toxic, unhealthy, and aesthetically repellent. Everything has to be peer reviewed nowadays, even calls for papers, even conference event notifications. It is impossible for an academic author to express a thought that is not revised and rewritten unto unrecognizability, fitted into a Procrustean bed of format and style. The published articles read, in the

words of one of our students, as if written by one and the same person, an undead demiurge of a super-author. State and run, make contribution and never meander, hit and kill another four star publication. Review and never let someone say something in an unexpected or personal way. Publish and perish.

Somewhat unexpectedly, this final clue is hidden in the already examined report by inspectors Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen, in the work otherwise preaching more transparency, clarity, and strong regulation. And yet they have rightly surmised the events leading to the death of Ms Knowledge, possibly building on their narrative knowledge of cases recorded by Patrick Hamilton (1941), where psychological bullying led the central character to the brink of suicide, and by Agatha Christie (1937), where suicide was disguised to look like a murder. Miss Marple must give them their due.

Meaningless papers do not merely fail to have any impact with the social changes that urgently confront us, but they spread cynicism and fatalism among the participants and reinforce instrumentalism. They also clutter the sphere of knowledge with noise so that truly original and meaningful publications have less chance of being developed, noticed, discussed, and acted upon. (Alvesson et al., 2017: 12)

This is an effective and self-perpetuating machine of production and consumption, perfected and punctured by rankings, factors, indexes and quality assurance procedures, a veritable perpetuum mobile, requiring no Muse, no genius, no God, no reader, no jouissance du texte (Barthes, 1973). It is, indeed, so perfect that it produces no discontent from within and it has turned what is without completely irrelevant. But as the murder mystery finally starts to clear, there will still remain just one, nagging, question: What for? Why are we all engaging in the clearly corrupt and useless system, why are we teaching new researchers joyless research approaches and cynical attempts to game the system? Why, in the end, do we end up publishing meaningless and poisonous articles that, even if they start as interesting insights, become homogenized and tedious through the revision and resubmission process.

The amateur detective shakes her head, reluctantly impressed by the clear diagnosis, but also troubled by its implications. Together with the inspectors, she sits down on the library sofa, and the policemen start enumerating all the tasks and procedures needed to

unearth the sources of the problem. Miss Marple's attention starts to wander, but at that point they are interrupted by the librarian, the very person who asked for her help. Having listened to the inspector's ideas, he sighs, profoundly sad.

“But how can we go on from here? It is easy for you to say, you sirs are famous and well respected inspectors. But how can we, ordinary people and anxious academics, live and work without her?”

“We're all very ordinary,” Jane Marple nods compassionately, “but ordinary people can sometimes do the most astonishing things.”

## Concluding musings

Throughout this text, we attempted to describe and actively perform a less rigid way of academic writing, digressive, hesitant, and rarely signposted. We have shown some of the sources of our conviction that such texts are needed, but like the previously described utopians, we too were guided by an overarching dream.

In a book about management co-authored by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman et al., 2015), Monika Kostera proposes a fourth utopian vision, to stand alongside the already described as a possible source for future inspiration. Her metaphor is that of the Arcadian gardener, who, having learned from the failings of the modernist gardening projects, and wary of the meaninglessness of the currently dominant hunters, believes both in human vision and in the extant order, in light as well as in darkness. In short, the Arcadian gardener regards humanity and its doings as part of the ecosystem and is much more relaxed about ordering than the gardeners of the past. He or she laughs at the futility of producing a linear world and has a deep respect for mystery, while at the same time, honours rationality as much as the imagination. This gardener is ready to reclaim the Earth trampled down by a horde of hunters and does not even lose faith in what has been turned into a complete wasteland: he or she is, again, as was the gamekeeper, ready to trust that there is a Grail to be found, one capable of healing the Fisher King and his infertile land. This conviction can guide the gardener's research, but it can also guide the writing and publication process.

Importantly, in this text we can answer that nagging question: what for? We undertake the narrative quest, perhaps more so than with any other academic text we've authored, with a clear aim even if not a clear destination. As promised in the opening paragraph, we seek to uncover the truth, to solve a murder mystery. Symbolic as the murder may be, it is a murder investigation nonetheless, and we let an expert investigator – our protagonist – do the job, while we, the authors, remain modest Arcadian gardeners, letting the plots come together, ideas grow semi-wild, while keeping a careful eye on the composition and the meaning of it all.

In our narrative quest, in the roles of authors aspiring to be Arcadian gardeners, we have pursued a fairly simple plot, inspired by detective novels. We did so for our own satisfaction, but also in order to gain insight into what we perceive as a dramatic loss of meaning in contemporary social sciences, and in management studies in particular. It is a feeling we share with many academic authors, including the already-mentioned Mats Alvesson, Yiannis Gabriel, and Roland Paulsen (2017). The loss is so urgent that we felt justified to portray it as a murder of the body of knowledge. We believe it to be, to a high degree, a consequence of the neoliberal agenda of subordinating academia to principles and ideas alien to universities and running counter to their aims, ethos, and sense (see e.g. Collini, 2012; Izak, Kostera and Zawadzki, 2017). Such subverted academic institutions fail to fulfil their role in the developing, sharing, and, perhaps most importantly, cherishing knowledge and instead produce something which effectively eliminates and depreciates it. Respecting the intelligence of our Readers, we will refrain from spelling out in academic jargon our expectations regarding the significance of our narrative study. As we have indicated in the title of our text, we will not attempt to reach closure, in our argument or in our narrative foray. However, we would like to finish with a coda.

All the suspects we asked Miss Marple to interrogate in our story wrote beautiful prose of deep and enduring relevance to management and organization studies, though none of them published specifically in that discipline. Their works continue to be read, cited, and appreciated by readers of different academic and disciplinary status, different experience, and different goals and passions. We can reasonably expect them to continue in this role long after most of the top-cited and

impact-heavy articles published in leading management journals (including the present one) fall into obscurity. They are all authors we admire, and ones who brought us inspiration in our formation as academics. But we need to strike one final note of cautions: if the work is to be truly seen as open, and its composition writerly, there must always remain the possibility of reinterpretation. Pierre Bayard (2001; 2008) demonstrated it in his books revisiting famous detective novels, where he argues for hidden culprits not revealed by even the most famous literary detectives: Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. We need to remain similarly cautious: even Miss Marple's denouement is provisory, open to re-reading as new facts on the case emerge. We are sure Mr Popper would second this final hesitation.

And yet it is true that Ms Knowledge is dead, apparently bullied to insanity, and most probably driven to suicide. She had been loved by many, envied by perhaps even more. May she rest in peace and may her tormentors meet the deserved punishment. But is this really the end? We do not believe so. Her loving sister, Ms Tacit Knowledge, told Miss Marple, whom she befriended and invited to the funeral, that she was firmly resisting the treatment that killed her sister. Insensitive to the confinement of rules and procedures, rankings, indexes, and KPIs, unbound and unambitious, she is by nature a survivor. But she also revealed a secret to her friendly and wise companion: a long-lost child of the elder Ms Knowledge, taken away from her at birth, as her guardians considered her too serious and too virginal to be allowed in the warm and emotional world of motherhood. The missing daughter is somewhere around, though she has not yet made herself known to the mourning crowd. Finding her would require a work in a different genre, though, and Miss Marple is for once at loss on how to proceed. The younger Ms Knowledge is, for once, reassuring: "we will have to use our intuition, dear Jane".

"Yes", Miss Marple nodded, "and our imagination."

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