

Mystic Mountain

Koen Roelandt

As a novice, I was sent to the Frontier of Western Thinking. More specifically, I was dropped off in a place called Mystic Mountain. It breathed the air of ancient philosophy and sported mines and caverns. The site had been used for centuries by diggers looking for the golden ratio or the ancient Cones of Red, Green and Blue. I didn't have any time to get my bearings: before I was even aware of what was happening, I was forced into a decrepit square cart, pulled up Mystic Mountain and pushed down a winding train track. There I was, taking sharp corners, dipping down steep slopes, dodging landslides and negative corners, dashing through ghost towns called Aristotle, Wittgenstein and Blanché. Sometimes I got lost in dark non-natural mine shafts, myriads of mereology and universal kites. The ride went on and on, always up the same mountain, down the same slopes, but with different caverns, landmarks and vistas every time around. The outlaw country music of Willie Nelson echoed through the canyons at night.

I did leave Mystic Mountain at some point, as silly novices tend to do, and hitchhiked my way to Silicon Valley, tempted by the gurus of hardcore computational linguistics who said that all the old-fashioned mine digger stuff was a thing of the past. You need lambdas, lots of them! And statistics! And laziness, strong types, monads and functions! You need a functional way of thinking to go down the way of Zen, or the art of linguistic sanity. It was only then, crunching functions, trying to understand natural language, that I looked up at Mystic Mountain in the distance and saw it for what it was: a thing of beauty.

Doing research with Dany is a bit like being sent to Mystic Mountain. You are quietly doing some armchair linguistics, staring at data that make no sense at all, minding your own business... When suddenly Dany's eyes start to flash. He pulls you up a mountain of some more data that he happened to be looking at the week before and then pushes you down a winding track of A, E, I, O, Y and U corners, hexagons with squares, triangles and kites. The wondrous caverns of opposites marked by universal and non-natural corners. The work of Wittgenstein and Aristotle and Blanché! Dodging that dangerous Russellian landslide

again and again. Until you stare at the whiteboard he has filled, with your mouth wide open, amazed at the brain dump you have just witnessed. You see the dots but somehow fail to connect them. Dany often has two fingers to his forehead at this point, hands shaking in excitement, exhausted by the feat. Sometimes he has lost his glasses in the process. Or his phone. It takes several research rides with Dany to get used to the trip down Mystic Mountain. To recognise the corners and shapes, the names and the caverns. To get used to the rhythm of the cart riding down the track. And finally to see what he had been showing you all along.

At some point I left the world of the hexagon and plunged into Haskell, a functional programming language, to answer the research questions in the PhD project written by Dany (and his brother in arms, Hans Smessaert). It was probably a bit strange for him to see his student go and read lambda hipster stuff from down the valley. But he followed me every step down the way. It was only when looking at the lambda functions that I realised how beautiful Dany's world of natural logic is. How it could be used to account for so many different concepts. How it explained the riddle that had been bugging me for months. And I returned to his Mystic Mountain, dug a new non-natural shaft, and struck gold. It wouldn't have been possible without all the rides with Dany. He somehow burned hexagons and kites into my head and the way I think. That is something I am thankful for.

It would be improper to only mention kites and hexagons when talking about Dany's research. He is a remarkable linguist who knows the literature and can point you to obscure papers with interesting data. If linguistics were athletics, Dany would be an excellent heptathlete, well-versed in so many different areas. He can be passionate in the heat of big discussions, but that is merely a token of his love for linguistics. And as a true mine digger, he has a heart of gold. His fierceness in linguistic discussions also appears in the face of injustice targeted at colleagues, students, innocent asylum seekers or any other human being. He shows remarkable energy then, visiting people, supporting them, making them laugh.

I always felt that Dany wanted to be a 'good' supervisor. And he was. He somehow managed to suck me into the Mystic Mountain of logic and kites. At the same time, he let me take that trip down to Silicon Valley and explore Haskell. That's more than one can wish for as a PhD student. Cheers, Dany.