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Tractatus Illogico-Philosophicus

Only thought resembles. It resembles by what it sees, hears, or knows; it becomes what the world offers it.
—René Magritte, “To Michel Foucault”

The only thing of which Wittgenstein speaks transparently in his writing is his own failure. The preface to his major work warns the reader in advance that he has failed to write “a good book” (PI §4), a thought that follows after some years the famous disavowal of the book’s value that ends his Tractatus. Even Wittgenstein’s sympathetic Cambridge University colleague G. E. Moore wrote: “I am very much puzzled as to the meaning of what he said, and also as to the connexion between different things which he said . . . which he seemed anxious to make.” The anxiety attached to Wittgenstein’s attempts to communicate what was in his mind is central to the present book’s argument and to the argument it has with itself. Guy Davenport characterized the Wittgensteinian thought dynamic as being obsessive in the sense that as soon as it is asked, his initial question (which speaks to philosophical subject content) proceeds to expose the limitations of its own language. So, a question along the lines of “What can we think of the world?” turns in on itself, engendering such follow-up questions as: “What is thought?” “What is the meaning of can, of can we, of can we think?” “What is the meaning of we?” “What does it mean to ask what is the meaning of we?” “If we answer these questions on Monday, are the answers valid on Tuesday?” “If I answer them at all, do I think the answer, believe the answer, know the answer, or imagine the answer?” Questioning is for Wittgenstein a way of diagramming thought like a sentence and of obsessively checking on language to determine what it lets us say about knowing. But if saying what knowing is can only be shown to be incomplete, then endless questioning of what we say articulates what for Wittgenstein must be a necessary failure.

Beginning with the self-denying Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922), the only book published during his lifetime, Wittgenstein lays out a picture
of the external world that offers the artist an articulated if not wholly con-
crete construction of logical space that is internally attained. This logical
space grounds possibility in the givenness, the thereness of a world that is
impossible to understand, except as a premise, a given circumstance. Wittgen-
stein demonstrates how thoughts and the propositions we use to express the
atomic facts that comprise reality devolve from this same givenness or “self-
evidence of the world,” as he would later call it, “which is expressed in the
very fact that language means only it, can mean only it . . . . No language is
thinkable which doesn’t express this world” (PO 193). And yet understand-
ing this fact does not necessarily translate into understanding this language
in its matter-of-factness, its ordinariness, or why our language puts us in a
state of philosophical unease. The proposition, the human articulation of
what is factual, “constructs the world” (TLP §4.024), but only insofar as
the factual is already there and beyond our capacity to make it be there or to
make it what it already is. Our naming and defining the things of the world
via language come after-the-fact and so do not give subjects and objects
their essential meaning. Our language and indeed (and especially, says Witt-
genstein) our philosophy confuse and obscure what is with what we make
of it. “Philosophy,” says Stephen Mulhall after Wittgenstein, “is essentially
diseased—a pathology of human culture, something that purely and simply
damages the realm of the ordinary.”

(As if someone were to buy several copies of today’s morning paper
to assure himself that what it said was true.) (PI §265)

Wittgenstein offers the foregoing parenthetical statement in reference to
the guesswork of imagination (and of perhaps psychologically driven imagi-
nary scenarios) in relation to factuality, leaving the mind bereft of anything
but slippery, incorrect (but not, he indicates elsewhere, necessarily dismis-
sible or unappealing) means of seeking something akin to factual verifica-
tion of the ordinary. In that the proposition to which this parenthetical belongs,
along with the proposition that follows it (PI §266), specifically reference
timekeeping (imaginary timetables and clocks), it is interesting to see how
Wittgenstein’s “as if” statement takes note of a slippage that, while it relates
to memory, has more directly to do with time itself. Simply put, what does
Wittgenstein mean by “to assure himself that what it said was true?” (1) What
the newspaper said about it having been published today, that it is “today’s
paper,” and further the morning edition? If the paper’s temporality is in ques-
tion, so too is everything else that the paper contains (of course, allowing for
the fact that the paper does not actually contain temporality as such, only its
hypothetically analogized “as if-ness”). (2) Is it possible that Wittgenstein’s
reference to the publication as being “today’s morning paper” is merely meant
to be descriptive and not substantive to his argument (reinforcing the over-
all statement’s parenthetical placement)? (3) Might Wittgenstein instead be
subverting a truth-evaluation that is based upon repetition and multiplicity
(several copies), as being an unreliable, even an irrelevant premise? Wittgenstein, as always shadowed by the anxiety mechanism of his self-created interlocutor, seems to want to establish “an independent authority” (PI §265) as being necessary to establish a claim to truth that cannot otherwise be substantiated. But who or what can play this role on a consistent basis, and is he being truthful with us as to his so-called belief or intention?  

Wittgenstein is here in the midst of his private language/private pain discussion, an argument he used as a means to many ends and not as an end in itself. So, in this context, independent authority must be considered not so much in terms of someone but in terms of the “as if someone,” the conditional subject of a parenthetical statement. And therein lies a mental (and perhaps intellectual) problem that if addressed in a Foreman or a Wellman play would regard the hole or gap in truth as being itself a legitimate form of understanding that remakes truth as a conditional or even a parenthetical notion. No matter how and how often Wittgenstein jousts with the notion of the private and the efficacy of imaginary scenarios, his writing style speaks the language of the imaginary and is enticed by the conditional solutions offered by imaginary scenarios. And why not, since Wittgenstein believed that since “language cannot express what belongs to the essence of the world...[it] can only say what we could also imagine differently” (PO 189). Wittgenstein could no more stop imagining than he could stop doing philosophy (not for lack of trying) or abandon the world (like his suicided older brothers). Obsession is after all a form of persistence. 

Gordon Baker’s mining of Wittgenstein’s writings reveals that the range of “illnesses” his therapeutic philosophy sought to treat included “unrest, torment, disquiet, drives, obsessions, craving, revulsion, angst, irritation, profound uneasiness of mind, profound mental discomfort, obsessional doubt, troubles, compulsions to say things, irresistible temptations, alarm.” In seeking to combat the misleading pictures and analogies we carry in our minds (which, perhaps after philosopher Francis Bacon’s “idols,” he called “prejudices”), Wittgenstein was necessarily battling his own. His philosophy is riven by his incapacity and lifted in its fragments above and beyond any provisional claims that philosophy might otherwise make to achieving even an abstract certainty. Like Hamlet and the play that bears his name in its variants, it is unclear whether Wittgenstein cannot make up his mind or is obsessively continuing to remake his mind in what appears to be both a public setting and a philosophically discredited private one. 

Reading Wittgenstein Aloud

The question at hand is not whether reading happens in the brain, but whether what happens in the brain is reading.

—Daniel Ruppel, “‘And Now’ Presenting Wittgenstein: Time, and the Tension of Thinking Through It All”
Select a passage at random from Wittgenstein’s writing and read it aloud. By doing this, you open the possibility of catching and reversing your expectation of what the writing is doing in mid-thought. You experience something like Heidegger’s belief that “what is called thinking” is that which “calls us into thinking.” Some act of counter-understanding is taking place, whereby what a writer means and especially what the reader wants the philosophical writer to do, which is to reinforce our trust that he is making his case using all his powers of logic and consistency, is undone by a question that is raised in our mind by what we hear our own voice doing. Reading aloud invokes the Wittgensteinian theme of whether or not a series of words can actually sound like a sentence that is well-formed and makes sense. A sentence can be grammatically but not logically well-formed, or else may, as in Lewis Carroll, sound illogical but make sense. That a sentence, owing to its structure, can produce an audible “ring of truth,” however, speaks to what Wittgenstein called “surface grammar” and not to the “depth grammar” which is not so much hidden as newly dimensional. I would liken depth grammar to a conception of mise-en-scène as something other than staging (although it includes staging, much as depth grammar includes sentence structure).

Take, for example, the following statement, which Wittgenstein makes in the course of trying (not very hard) to define thinking:

These auxiliary activities are not the thinking; but one imagines thinking as the stream which must be flowing under the surface of these expedients, if they are not after all to be mere mechanical procedures. (Z §107)

When the writing says “but one imagines . . . ,” the silent reader assumes that “one” here stands for the writer, Wittgenstein, so that Wittgenstein is speaking as and for himself in linking the auxiliary to the mechanical and thinking to flow, which these functions do not capture. In fact, they interrupt the flow of the written passage that contains them. However, when reading this passage aloud, the voice discovers the possibility that the “one” to whom Wittgenstein alludes may not after all be himself, but as the impersonality of the construction suggests, a hypothetical someone (else). This is a more subtle writerly procedure than the interlocutor’s vocal persona, which Wittgenstein wrote into the Tractatus and, especially, Philosophical Investigations to openly second-guess his own propositions. This technique recalls Chekhov’s habit of undercutting many of his own seriously held thoughts by putting them in the mouths of intellectually untrustworthy dramatic characters.

Wittgenstein’s harsh, ascetic persona, which we tend to read into his work, often leads us to misread his writing as following the very philosophical hard line that he set out to bend if not break. What we hear by reading Wittgenstein aloud is the writer’s suspension of judgment, his unwillingness to choose sides as to how best to characterize what thinking is and is not. This unvoiced
motive advances a “both . . . and” hypothetical (supported by the possible transposition of an “if” from “if they are not” to “if one imagines”) that is more poetic than it is normatively philosophical. True to his word(s), Wittgenstein is not philosophizing; he is “doing philosophy,” crafting a new line that puts the reader in mind of what the lines do, and not of what they directly say. From here, one can imagine (and here “one” is inclusive of my personal opinion) reading all of Wittgenstein aloud, much as one would Shakespeare, not solely for meaning but for the subtle values of what sound puts one in mind.

In reading Wittgenstein, we (are encouraged to) find ourselves constrained by our assertions, misled by our creations, even though (and also because) these pictures or representations model the possibilities of what both truth and falsehood are. Like Oedipus, whose limping thought serves as a remainder but not a reminder of the facts that lie outside his comprehension, we get ourselves into more and more trouble by thinking we know the way. Like Oedipus, who is seduced by his own rhetoric and by the body language he has adopted as a king, exterior narratives concerning reality are created and adopted to disguise our incapacity to know in the fullest sense what is, and within that “what,” who we are. He and we cannot infer the form of the thought that our decorative inventions clothe, “because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized” (TLP §4.002). Pained Wittgenstein, with his “riddling, ironic style” that must be “painstakingly piece[d] together in order to get the drift of his thought” (his “way of seeing”), recalls Oedipus or more properly, the self-interlocutory Oedipus-Sphinx as the embodiment of entanglement and the language-game that seeks to disentangle it. The strangler (“Sphinx” in ancient Greek) has its hands around its own neck, chokes on its own grim laughter that only s/he can hear, makes nothing (death) out of something (the life of man), and throws itself into the aporia, the abyss, as if it were the end of something.

So what would Wittgenstein make of Oedipus, who Wellman writes “possessed one eye too many” and goes off to die in a place of visual prohibition at Colonus. “Oedipus is no more,” the Messenger reports. “We turned around—and nowhere saw that man” (death, as always in Wittgenstein, not being an event in life). The Messenger report’s failure to capture vision speaks to a certain Wittgensteinian un/awareness.

In the language-game of reporting there is the case of the report being called into question, of one’s assuming that the reporter is merely conjecturing what he reports, that he hasn’t ascertained it. Here he might say: I know it. That is: It is not mere surmise.—Should I in this case say that he is telling the certainty, the certainty he feels about his report, to me? No, I wouldn’t like to say that. He’s simply playing the language-game of reporting, and “I know it” is the form of a report. (RPPII §287)
Even if we think we understand what someone intends to say, we cannot be certain that he understands the intention of the language-game attached to the role he is playing. The Messenger’s speech says nothing of the world, and as Oedipus’s death is only identical with itself, it therefore, in Wittgenstein’s reading, is tautological—that is, it says nothing too. This is the appropriate lesson to draw from a life that answered fate with the words:

And yet, how was I evil in myself?  
I had been wronged, I retaliated; even had I  
Known what I was doing, was that evil?  
Then, knowing nothing, I went on. Went on.  
But those who wronged me knew, and ruined me.13

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has productively connected the concept of “nothing” (which so occupies Wittgenstein in the form of tautology in the *Tractatus*) with the idea of mimesis that Aristotle retrospectively saw in ancient Greek tragedy:

One must oneself be nothing, have nothing proper to oneself except an equal aptitude for all sorts of things, roles, characters, functions, and so on. The paradox states a law of impropriety, which is also the very law of mimesis: only a man without qualities, the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject (absent from himself) is able to present or produce the general.14

Oedipus the King, who speaks in terms of “we” (i.e., his person and his charges), is blinded by language from seeing the “I,” even before he blinds his eye in a tautological act producing nothing. “Oedipus is no more; / But what has happened cannot be told so simply—It was no simple thing.”15 But there is more here to know, and of knowing there is more here than meets the eye. In his discussion of Wittgenstein’s statement “It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking,’ and wrong to say ‘I know what I am thinking’” (*PI*, xi §315) (part of an attempt to understand the philosopher’s argument regarding whether we can know another’s pain), Stanley Cavell writes:

Knowing oneself is the capacity, as I wish to put it, for placing-yourself-in-the-world. It is not merely that to know I have in fact done what I intended. . . . I have to look to see whether it is done; it is also, and crucially that I have to know that that circumstance is (counts as) what I did.16

There are several thoughts at work in Cavell’s statement that are pertinent to my theme. Cavell makes it clear that knowing oneself is a function of one’s capacity for checking and that such checking is not so easily satisfied,
his conditional and tense changes expressing the anxiety of language as a form of checking in this regard. The checking action is nothing without a consciousness of expectation and some criteria upon which such expectation is based. Furthermore, the checking action is executed in order to know but not necessarily to be certain. Finally, the concept of knowing oneself must not pass unnoticed inside the mind but instead is proved by “the capacity . . . for placing oneself-in-the-world.” Recall Wittgenstein’s parable of the giant eye:

Suppose all the parts of my body could be removed until only one eyeball was left; and this were to be firmly fixed in a certain position, retaining its power of sight. How would the world appear to me? I wouldn’t be able to perceive any part of myself, and supposing my eyeball is transparent for me, I wouldn’t be able to see myself in the mirror either. One question arising at this point is: would I be able to locate myself by means of my visual field? “Locate myself,” of course here only means to establish a particular structure for the visual space. (PR §72)

This locating oneself “by means of [a] visual field,” that is, “establishing a particular structure of the visual space,” is what in theater (Oedipus’s domain) is called creating a mise-en-scène, a placement of the subject not in the world but in a consciousness of the world and in the world’s consciousness, which the stage treats as an imaginary scenario.

Thought is always overwhelmed by existence, and existence never stops being exceeded by thought.17

Knowing oneself is a matter of emplacement, relation, and proper fit. With this in mind, the interlocutory mode of discourse in Wittgenstein’s work becomes a sort of checking not on what he knows but on what he thinks he can say. And since this is in turn based on a process of discovering meaning as a mode of making, an active process, there is already a measure of self that can mistakenly pass for the fullness of self-knowing and lead one further away from the world. If Wittgenstein, as Mulhall states, “does not commit himself to the assumption that knowledge is a matter of certainty,” it is, I would say, because Wittgenstein’s brief is not for knowledge’s body nor even for knowing, but for learning how we know and how knowledge’s body is figuratively pierced and parsed, analogically and analytically wounded in the process.18 This teaching function constitutes the aphoristic lesson-plan template of the Tractatus and carries over as the premise, structure, and first object lesson of the Philosophical Investigations. Here Wittgenstein questions whether we can assume that a child sent to the store to purchase five red apples can know not just what “apple,” “red,” and “five” look like but what and how individual meaning attaches to each word-concept.19
The Greek oracle instructed Oedipus to “know thyself,” but the subtext of this message would be blunted and the expectation demanded by the message would go unreceived if the King took this to mean simply “accumulate knowledge of thyself.” Knowledge is not itself a way of knowing. If it were, Handke’s language-constructed/-constricted fool Kaspar would be king. As Kaspar demonstrates, knowledge normalizes thought rather than letting it go to find alternative places in the world, as did Oedipus at Colonus. Oedipus’s pursuit of knowledge (initially of a self-knowledge predicated only on the equation that he drew between king and state) is relentless. Wittgenstein writes, “Now can I imagine ‘every rod has a length.’ Well, I just imagine a rod; and that is all” (PI §251). In the beginning, this is all Oedipus (thinks he) needs to know about being a ruler. It is only by making the decision to acknowledge, to act upon the beyond-ness of what he knows and what it means that he becomes a true ruler, death’s instrument for measuring the nothing that becomes all men and that all men become. In this case, the analogy of ruler as subject and ruler as object reads or sounds like it should be illogical but is not, like the pun: “The tailors called a council of the board to see what measures should be taken.”

The vanished Oedipus leaves behind nothing but the lesson of what nothing is—a self-fulfilling prophecy that for me (re)turns the physical to the psychosomatic, to the imaginary scenario of the pathological condition being identical only with itself—tautological, performative. Thus do I imagine the deposed and self-blinded ruler Oedipus led by his daughters, walking with the aid of a long staff on the road to Colonus. The staff’s mimetic prop(ping up) says something about the ex-ruler taking his own measure as mise-en-abyme. In my ticcing mind and body, I am Antigone (another of Oedipus’s props), speaking out of turn and after the fact, after the father’s example (acknowledgment coming only when he is “late”), in the obsessive-compulsive non-linearity of recurrence as a performative pathology. Time, like everything else that is subject to human thought, to human making, checks back on itself and is part of the dis-ease.

Is Oedipus a Boiling Pot?

The Messenger who retails the circumstances surrounding Oedipus’s death can speak of the scene without necessarily being able to say with any certainty what the meaning or facts of the scene are, or how these facts can reveal anything of meaning’s mystery and of mystery’s meaning. He has no standard for measuring beyond his conventional stage role, which is only to speak and not to say, to cite a polarity that Wittgenstein describes without firmly defining in the Tractatus. While it is clear that for Wittgenstein “saying” means saying something, whereas “speaking” may include saying nothing, there is a meaningful slippage here. It is certainly possible to speak
nonsense (we don’t commonly say “say nonsense”), but can we also say that it is possible to say nothing in the sense of negating something, making nothing of something via saying? Can we undo just not meaning but the capacity of a word to mean what it says? Is this not what the Sphinx does by reducing knowing to a riddle that only goes so far as to foresee the limit of man’s physical decrepitude? Having riddled the aporia into storyboarding his mortal condition, Oedipus enters into the depth grammar of the theatrical un-seeing place to realize incapacity’s overall design. Oedipus has entered the theater of my dreams, of which the Messenger spoke without realizing what he was saying: this “cannot be told so simply—It [is] no simple thing.”

Let us turn to Wittgenstein’s famous question concerning a picture of a boiling pot:

Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot, and also pictured steam comes out of a picture of the pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something boiling in the pictured pot? (PI §297)

Wittgenstein creates this “parable,” as Cavell calls it, in his discussion of the sensation of pain and the question of whether you can ever know someone else’s pain. How much must you know about the pain to say that you know it? Must you know the contents of the pot in the picture to accept the fact that it is boiling despite the fact that what is boiling inside the pot is not pictured? The philosophical debate that arises from this question centers on the translation of Vorstellung (image/imagination) and Bild (picture/artifact), the two words that Wittgenstein twists and turns leading up to his proposition, “What is in the imagination is not a picture, but a picture can correspond to it.” (Eine Vorstellung ist kein Bild, aber ein Bild kann ihr entsprechen.) (PI §301). But is what Wittgenstein is saying in his parable and in his “explanation” of it a combined example of “meaning something incoherently”? Is Wittgenstein asserting the necessity of connecting “something inner and an outer something”? Cavell offers this summary interpretation:

The philosophical task posed by Wittgenstein’s parable . . . is to describe what is wrong with the assertion that “something is in the pictured pot”—i.e., to describe the emptiness of the assertion, the momentary madness in the assertion, that is, its failure to amount to an assertion within an insistent sense that it is one—without at the same time seeming to deny that something is in the pictured pot.

But what is this to Oedipus or Oedipus to it?

The first question the Chorus asks after ascertaining that Oedipus is, in fact, dead is whether his death was painful. Given his role, the Messenger allows himself words in which to wander before answering the Chorus’s
question, and when he does answer their question, he does so in Oedipus’s voice. It is life that is painful, the Messenger heard Oedipus tell his children, meaning that death is the surcease of pain. Of Oedipus’s death, the Messenger cannot say whether or not it was painful in any actual sense, since he did not hear such pain spoken of. The Messenger’s characterization of Oedipus’s death as being “marvelous” refers rather to the scene of his death, in effect the pictorial representation of his dying, and not even that, as the Messenger did not actually see Oedipus die. The Messenger’s word “marvelous” describes the scene leading up to the banished king’s unseen death, the scene before the vanishing, his taking leave of his daughters. The rest is just surmise on the Messenger’s part, intuiting an inside to an outside picture (“But in what manner / Oedipus perished, no one of mortal men / Could tell but Theseus . . . But some attendant from the train of Heaven / Came for him; or else the underworld / Opened in love the unlit door of earth. / For he was taken without lamentation, / Illness or suffering; indeed his end / Was wonderful if mortal’s ever was.”) The Messenger has, in effect, made something out of nothing: “It was not lightning, / Bearing its fire from Zeus, that took him off; / No hurricane was blowing.” Despite not knowing what happened inside Oedipus during the actual unseen moment when “he was taken,” and given the fact that the Messenger even speaks of the late king as having been taken, he asserts the truth of his report with certainty and without apology (“Should someone think I speak intemperately, / I make no apology to him who thinks so.”)

Cavell says further of Wittgenstein’s boiling pot parable:

The sense we are to have of the person supposed in the parable is that he still wants to say something (about something). The sense is: nothing could be clearer than the scene he has had set out for him . . . everything is free and self-confessed, nothing up the sleeve, there is not even a sleeve.

And indeed, the Messenger still wants to say something, because he believes that he saw something and that what he saw is enough to offer an opinion of what he did not see. Certainly, there is room for doubt in this proposition, but whereas Wittgenstein’s interlocutory voice registers such doubt, doubt can only be ascribed to the Messenger. Cavell continues:

And yet, and notwithstanding all that, this man [who comments on the picture of the boiling pot] doubts—or maybe not so much doubts as pangs—something is on his mind, he has some reservation, he is not free and clear. He may say nothing at all; he may not have the courage to, or the words. (If he has both, they will come forth with insistence.) This is the philosopher’s cue; he enters by providing the words.
Unlike the messengers in Shakespeare’s plays, Sophocles’s prototype is not philosophical. He has not been given philosophical words to say. The pot boils in the picture and Oedipus vanishes in air like steam, but we cannot ascertain beyond reportage of ostensible facts, ostensible because the facts in question coincide only with an image that is conflated with imagining. (‘‘Wittgenstein’s point is that any conception of fact, of what is the case, requires as a backdrop a conception of what might be, even if it is not, the case.’’ So that the fact is always contingent on imagining, as the Messenger’s example illustrates.) And in turn we know only what the report is compelled to say, that is, we know only owing to the pathological conventions of play structure, assertions that are empty and mad at the same time. This form of ritualized, recurrent behavior insists on reporting on what it does not actually know, acknowledging this lack of knowledge but not as grounds for dismissing this performance, this insistence on saying, as a form of knowing in its own right. “We want to say,” writes Cavell, “that when we express our recognition of the other’s pain we are recognizing not merely an expression but also that of which it is the expression; our words reach as immediately to the pain itself as to the behavior—that, the pain itself, is what our words mean.” But can our performance in so many words speak directly to the experience they describe? And who would believe this as being the case, other than maybe the speaker himself? And why would he even want to say these words? To which Cavell responds, “We do not know why we want to say them, what lack they fill.”

How Is the Tractatus Like a Calligram?

Wittgenstein offers the artist a blueprint for interiority while, at the same time, eschewing the idea of private language and experience. Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism surveys a logical field (not quite a system) of thought based upon propositions that are provable only within the field of logic they construct. The problem that this presents is best illustrated by several interlocking or inexact mirror/echo propositions that Wittgenstein sets forth in his early writing. Thus, his proposition, “The picture cannot place itself outside of its form of representation” (TLP §2.174) later appears as “No proposition can say anything about itself, because the propositional sign cannot be contained within itself” (TLP §3.332). This is in turn restated and extended in the proposition, “That which expresses itself in language, we cannot express by language” (TLP §4.121). Note that by moving the imagined vocal (speaking) emphasis from the adjectives “in” and “by” to the subject words “itself” and “we,” Wittgenstein tells us that his meaning (his saying) is not merely semantic, not just a play on words and sentence structure; his thought instead speaks to agency and the lack of agency in the form of language that is the problem. Logical structure becomes a shrinking model that puts us in mind of a limit-space.
We imagine ourselves upon a stage that is bound by the very thing it expresses, bound to express the very thing it is, ontologically speaking. But it’s a long way to the stage to which we travel by way of thought, which is already modeling itself in ways and forms to which it is likewise bound, in which it is imprisoned, repeats, obsesses, thinks itself as and into a *mise en abyme*. The stage becomes for thought the often inarticulate outer expression of what it is unable to say for, by, and about itself. Bound by stage conventions as we are by thought’s self-constraints, our mind and our body begin to tic, to act out, to give themselves (through thought) the runaround, to imprison and pathologize themselves, to occult in the philosophical turn of mind that Wittgenstein sought to free but which he could not help, it seems, embody.

What W. G. Sebald sees in Handke’s Wittgensteinian play *Kaspar* as an insight into “the pathological connection, which inevitably exists between the possession of property and education,” I wish to recast in terms of a pathology of thinking with and even without knowing. Similarly, I take from Sebald’s image of “the blank spaces in the atlas we have made for ourselves out of reality [that] disappear only so that the colonial empire of the mind may grow,” not his rich metaphor for the process of comprehension but instead the image of the mind that colonizes itself in the process of appearing to conquer the world by knowing it. I take up the naming function to which Sebald is referring to further colonize thought’s self-pathologizing agency and counter-agency in relation to the world and its teachable lessons that are not necessarily learned according to the social lesson plan. Sebald says that Kaspar does not yet recognize “the voices of society as something different, something outside him; instead, they echo within him as the part of himself that became strange to him when he was cast up in this new, overbright environment.” The overbright environment into which Kaspar steps is, of course, a stage, the site of a confused exteriority/interiority that over-insists on appearing to be real. Do we hear the voice or the echo, not of others but within ourselves, and do we need to be not just bright (i.e., sentient) but “overbright” (i.e., possessed of theatrically vexed self-awareness) in order to know, in order to know the order in which we know, the form, the logical space (however illogical or even alogical it appears)? What constitutes and enables this knowing in the overwhelming thought-space that analogizes, almost without thinking, to the stage trope of performance’s anxiety? We feel ourselves being overwhelmed, if only by constraint, but is even this constraint a mere convention, a performance behavior, the thing that binds us to and pains us to be who we are?

Standing before thought in the moment that anticipates the advent of idea, Wittgenstein allows form to birth paradox and unease. Most famously the *Tractatus* demands that the reader see the correction from the first to the second part not as a form of self-denial of the writing but as a writing over, as in thickening the code of the future that his thought has already entertained. When I returned to reading Wittgenstein, I expected to find perfectly formed (framed) thought on the order of aphoristic writing. What I found instead is...
writing that chafes against any illusion of completeness and offers up remainders, clues to what thought, and specifically definition, constrains. I found a language of incapacity that could not or would not speak its name, naming being only a subsidiary activity of limited value (senseless) for Wittgenstein in any case. Wittgenstein’s writing is Sisyphean. The form it makes of mass threatens always to revert, to invert, to contradict itself even as it speaks of origin in its appeal to foundational concepts, elemental terms like fact, object, color, all of which are subverted by the picture and the frame (i.e., representation) from and into which they pass. We may perhaps compare Wittgenstein’s writing, especially in the Tractatus, to Foucault’s characterization of Magritte’s painting of a pipe that takes its title from the written legend it contains, Ceci n’est pas une pipe (1926):

The operation is a calligram that Magritte has secretly constructed, then carefully unraveled. Each element of the figure, their reciprocal position and their relationship derive from this process, annulled as soon as it has been accomplished. . . . There we have evidence of failure and its ironic remains.

The calligram is a mise en abyme composed in the shape or image of what its language represents. Although Wittgenstein’s writing does not admit to being ironic, it lends itself to irony. Certainly, his writing speaks of building and mimics the form of construction (reflecting his interest in architecture), so not only is it logical that there be remains but also the apparent digression from and even abandonment of said construction renders it and whatever remains as being ironic.

Of course, Wittgenstein’s writing, even in the Tractatus, his most formally self-conscious text, is not literally a calligram, which being nothing if not literal means that for a piece of writing to be only likened to a calligram itself signals a certain paradox and a failure to achieve its own form. This, I think, is what Wittgenstein intended. Wittgenstein’s writing and the structure of that writing roughly retrace the calligram’s deconstructive play with showing and naming, shaping and saying, however managing to cite tautology rather than inhabiting and fusing with it. Still, the impossibility of simultaneously speaking and showing in Magritte’s calligram in turn bodies forth a calligram of Wittgenstein’s thinking that is composed from his own writing. And in this calligram, the word “speaking” only partially conceals the word “saying” in the sense that Wittgenstein wanted the reader to understand (without actually telling him) the important difference between the two seemingly synonymous words as to meaning (i.e., You can speak without saying anything.). The calligram enacts the double drama of the things that words are bound to show (representation) and the things that words are bound to say (meaning), which is also the space that Wittgenstein’s writing describes, strives to efface, and in the end contains. It is Wittgenstein’s careful, complex, frustrated and
frustrating articulation of this double bind that invites the artist in to unpack his own idiosyncratic thought-baggage.

Wittgenstein’s is the philosophy of incapacity in the sense that it runs counter in meaningful ways both to its discipline and to itself. Like Magritte’s famous painting Le soir qui tombe (1934), depicting a view through a broken glass window along with the representation of this view as remainder on the glass shards that have fallen to the floor underneath the window frame, Wittgenstein shows us the figure destroyed inside the space of its construction. For “the figure,” substitute “philosophy,” “image,” “object,” “meaning,” “language,” “thought,” “proposition,” “representation,” and within “representation,” “theater.”

Why Is the *Tractatus* a Decreation Myth?

The picture represents what it represents, independently of its truth or falsehood, through the form of representation.

What the picture represents is its sense.

In the agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality, its truth or falsity consists. (*TLP* §§2.22–2.222)

The *Tractatus* begins as a sort of creation myth, a decreation myth really, if one considers that Wittgenstein was attempting to disassemble the universalist notion of “maximally general truths” proposed by Frege and Russell as being the unchallengeable foundation of logical formulation.41 In the beginning was not the word, but the sentence. On this the three philosophers could agree. But in rejecting the self-evidence and unprovability of the logical axiom as being sufficient to justify its status, its givenness, as a way into the world, Wittgenstein set himself a course of understanding representation and relation in which logic is in the details. Thus, he was able to separate names from objects in the case where the former merely labeled the latter and to consider the meaningful relation of names to objects only within contexts (propositions) in which logic attends. Otherwise, there is no reason why an object must have a particular name or a name must stand in for a particular object. It is the logical context that makes it so.

Wittgenstein sought not only to clarify the relation between names and objects, sentences and objects, and finally states of affairs, but to thicken them, to deepen by way of particularization.42 The nature of this thick correlation, Thomas Ricketts argues, can be seen in the treatment of the picture, which is the model upon which we base the idea of representation:

Pictures are themselves facts. Wittgenstein says that for a picture to model reality in the way it does, it must, as a fact, have something in
common with the reality it models. Wittgenstein calls this common something the form of representation (Form der Abbildung, of modeling) (2.17). He goes on to say that in order for a picture to model reality in any way at all, there is a shared minimum it must have in common with reality, what Wittgenstein calls logical form. (2.18)43

Wittgenstein goes on to open up this correspondence between representation and reality from the generalizing appellation of commonness to the unequally generalizing concept of possibility. A sentence, like an image or a model, “presents a possible state of affairs,” giving the sentence a truth-function without necessarily making it in all senses true. In short, Wittgenstein creates a logical structure that arises from minimal rather than from maximal assumptions and from which structure projects out logical forms that articulate (and in the process allow for) the difference that is inherent in possibility.

Wittgenstein moves the science of logic closer to the symbolic realm of art, in which “logical connectedness” is “understood in ‘formal’ terms,” in structure rather than in content, or else in content insofar as it relates to structure.44 Structure here, like form, refers not so much to the content’s container as to logical thought, although the container should in some ways articulate this thought. “Logical” in this context means “makes sense,” as opposed to being senseless. But again, the standard for making sense is not predetermined by some presupposition regarding logic being self-evident. Logic, in a sense, must be earned by the formulation and articulation of thought that is not so much the truth (a matter of abstract judgment predicated upon general assumption) as truth-functional, truth-operational, truth-possible. This is not to say that Wittgenstein posits subjectivity as a new standard for logic. Truth, for him, agrees with facts, but these facts are evidentiary rather than self-evidentiary as Frege and Russell had proposed. Wittgenstein posits a solid but more fully and generously articulated platform or framework for “logical connectedness” between names and objects, sense and sentence.45 In his thinking and writing, Wittgenstein pursues truth as a form of agreement not solely with logic but with reality.

In moving away from the acceptance of universally judgmental logic as his standard, Wittgenstein allows that truth and falsehood can, in a sense, agree to disagree despite appearing to be poles apart. That is, “a picture that in fact agrees with reality might have disagreed, and vice versa,” meaning that truth and falsehood are aware of the possibility for mis/understanding they share. While Wittgenstein’s neo-logical framing of agency/counter-agency as a non-dyadic bipolarity does not go so far as to summon forth Lautréamont’s proto-surrealist neological image-brokering of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table, it does open up the possibility of allowing such constructions to pursue links between logic and correspondence.46 Wittgenstein wrote: “Just as we cannot think of spatial objects at all apart from space, or temporal objects apart from time, so we cannot think
of any object apart from the possibility of its connexion with other things”\(\text{TLP }\S\text{2.0121}\). Correspondence being context, the question becomes not could such a spatial juxtaposition of the sewing machine, the umbrella, and the dissection table equate with the meaning that is ascribed to it (a boy’s physical beauty) but rather given the representation’s sui generis identity, its context-as-proposition structure, is it possible to say that the comparison it makes is not both logical and true? For Wittgenstein, logic is useful insofar as it allows the mind to formulate a space for reality’s and not its own (i.e., not logic’s) self-expression, the world being everything that is the case, a rigorous yet relational and non-prescriptive matter of fact.

**What Is “Apparent Desire”?**

The incapacity of which I speak is inextricably linked to an unspoken but not unseen (i.e., a not just shown, but a dramatized representational) desire. Let me here introduce a passage to which I will have reason to return over the course of this book. It is the epigraph to Handke’s play *The Ride Across Lake Constance*:

> It is a winter night. A man rides across Lake Constance without sparing his horse. When he arrives on the other side, his friends congratulate him profusely, saying: “What a surprise! How did you ever make it! The ice is no more than an inch thick!” The rider hesitates briefly, then drops off his horse. He is instantly dead.\(^47\)

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (*PI* \§\text{107}). There is in this passage a manifest threat to one of our basic human capacities, the ability to walk. Cavell interprets Wittgenstein’s raising the inability to walk as a possibility “not as a description of some specific failure, but as what the *Investigations* elsewhere calls ‘a symbolic expression [which is] really a mythological description’ (*PI* \§\text{221}), presumably in this case signifying something about our inability to move ourselves in accordance with our apparent desires.”\(^48\) It is Cavell’s phrase “apparent desires” that interests me here, although not in the specific sense that he ascribes to Wittgenstein—that is, returning words “from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (“Back to the rough ground!”), marking the user’s escape from the myth of perfection.\(^49\) My interest is more closely allied to what I read as being Cavell’s rhetorical question in relation to Wittgenstein’s slippery ice example: “Does this suggest that our grounding in the world is weak (because our ground is unsurveyably vulnerable to our capacity for dissatisfaction with ourselves) or that it is
strong (because we could not, or would not, actually go so far as to destroy the grounds of our existence, our natural history)?" My brief in this study is for the counter-agency, “our capacity for dissatisfaction with ourselves,” the self-afflicting philosophical proposition on which Wittgenstein bet his life.

In relation to the epigraph’s icy, unknowingly slippery ride, I ask the question, when do we know that we desire to deny ourselves and does this point necessarily coincide with the awareness that we are treading on thin ice? Does the mind entertain thoughts of incapacity as an alternative way of meaningfully experiencing a life whose end is not foretold except in the telling and in a world whose naturalness mocks the unnaturalness of our thoughts that try to make sense of it? Is the horse-rider a combined calligramatic figure of the bipolarity of in/capacity as, or possibly cloaked as, “apparent desire”? Does the journey across the apparently frozen lake combined with the dire reverse prediction of what could have happened on the other side represent the mind’s capacity to show us our desired incapacity as a form/in the form of spatiotemporal illogic? Does this incapacity in turn conceal our capacity to know what is and is not really true? Do we really “desire to break free of our disappointment with our constructions,” incapacity being foremost among those constructions?51

How Do We Distinguish Knowing from Acknowledging?

The grammar of the word “know” is evidently related to the grammar of the words “can,” “is able to.” But also closely related to that of the word “understand.” (To have “mastered” a technique.) (PI §150)

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about. (PI §203)

Anxiety: not a state, but an incessant, unbearable happening.
—Handke, The Weight of the World

In Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder, Jackie Orr likens mise en scène to a surgical procedure, “a technique for producing (carving, inscribing) an opening, for framing an origin. Out of the void of possibilities, an incision toward meaning—toward a particular mise-en-scène—is made. Every opening of a story, every gesture toward staging an origin, becomes then, ‘a repetition of that which cannot be repeated: the first cut.’”52 The fact that this cut happens in the dark connects theater as a social function with terror in the mind of the author who herself suffers from panic disorder. Orr’s book begins forthrightly with the statement: “I am a sick woman who studies history, looking for cures, searching for more potent forms of dis-ease.”53
It is a sentiment and a purpose with which my own book and I, as someone diagnosed and living with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), attention deficit disorder (ADHD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and depression (along with more common hypochondria, phobias, etc.), have the capacity to identify. Orr’s sense of theater in the dark as a frameable and repeatable original terror immediately makes the inevitable move to Artaud’s theater of cruelty, situating it within the wider socio-historical context of “the merciless language of non-madness” defined by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization.* Foucault’s notion that knowledge is (like history) “made for cutting” bears a familiar Wittgensteinian trace.\(^5^4\)

Wittgenstein writes: “Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement” (OC §378). This statement (returning to my earlier theme) speaks to an awareness that is not only personal (even confessional) but also social.\(^5^5\) Acknowledgment normatively frames a certainty that is predicated on a cutting and a cutting out of what the word “knowledge” can and cannot contain. But in Wittgenstein, the cut goes deeper, down to the bone, which for him is grammar, whose substance is ontological, far more structural than ornamental to the discussion of thought and communication. So, Wittgenstein writes:

> If someone says, “I know that that’s a tree” I may answer: “Yes, that is a sentence. An English sentence. And what is it supposed to be doing?” Suppose he replies: “I just wanted to remind myself that I know things like *that.*” (OC §352)

In Wittgenstein, then, a grammatical certainty is able to coexist with a mental uncertainty. Thus:

> But on the other hand: how do I *know* that it is my hand? Do I even here know exactly what it means to say it is my hand?—When I say “how do I know?” I do not mean that I have the least doubt of it. What we have here is a foundation for all my action. But it seems to me that it is wrongly expressed by the words “I know.” (OC §414)

If the word “know” is itself suspect (“One is often bewitched by the word. For example, by the word ‘know’” [OC §435]), then knowing and knowledge do not only represent a cutting or cutting out of what is im/possible in terms of human (i.e., social) logic and behavior; it cuts to the core of being able to say who and what you are. One can be driven mad or at the very least to distraction by a word, and none more potent than the word “know.”\(^5^6\) Wittgenstein (like Orr after him, although she does not cite him) illustrates his idea anatomically: “What reason have I, now, when I cannot see my toes, to assume that I have five toes on each foot?” (OC §429). Wittgenstein’s rhetorical question, “For may it not happen that I *imagine* myself to know something?” (OC §442) reopens the wound of im/possibility that
we call “art” but also “madness,” as in the universal signifier of the “both/and”—“Artaud.”

The great maw opens terrifyingly wider when Wittgenstein asks himself in the linguistically perspectival guise of a/the third person, “Do you know or do you only believe that your name is L.W.? Is that a meaningful question?” (OC §486). Wittgenstein’s argument proceeds (here as elsewhere) from a logical basis and intends in each instance to make a more circumscribed, austere logical point (often via what he believes to be rhetorical questions)—for example, “What is the proof that I know something? Most certainly not my saying I know it” (OC §487). The already self-questioning mind of the reader as mental interlocutor is driven to ever more desperate measures to keep acknowledgment and knowledge from being torn asunder. This mental crisis incites a desperate, hypochondriacal (I think that this other is me and his condition is my own), paranoid almost to the point of schizophrenic performance or acting out of the catastrophe of self-doubt. Wittgenstein is able to maintain his own sense of logic and mental health by maintaining, “Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt” (OC §519). Although true (“doubt” must already be known as such in order to cite it), this is cold comfort to all but the most purely logical, grammatically denotative minds (“Instead of ‘I know what that is’ one might say ‘I can say what that is’” [OC §586]). Most of us let our psychological and emotional states rather than our reason define who we are, and when not otherwise taking (especially spoken) language for granted, aim it at objects in ways that are meant to reflect back upon us as subjects.

This problem is exacerbated by what in relationship to Wittgenstein’s philosophy is called the question or problem of “private experience.” Wittgenstein writes:

The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own specimen, but that nobody knows whether other people have this or something else. The assumption would thus be possible—though unverifiable—that one section of mankind had one impression of red, and another section another. (OC §272)

You can no more know for certain another person’s mind than you can know whether or not Schrödinger’s cat is dead inside the box. For the human mind, this not knowing how or what the other thinks circles around what may already be a preexisting thrall to or proclivity for alienation and result in further acting out as the other, or alternatively, taking the other into oneself in a frantic and illogical effort at reconciliation and making knowledge and acknowledgment whole, that is, one (again).

The more his thinking about philosophy tended toward action, the more closely Wittgenstein came to resemble an actor or a playwright. Judith Genova writes: “Philosophy became a performance with him reading the lines of his
script as if in a play. This fictional frame allowed him to perform the correct way of seeing, rather than describe it, bringing language closer to direct action.”

When one adds to this the architectonic nature of the aphoristic-seeming proposition that he employed as a “quasi-poetic” building block of thought, Wittgenstein predicted Foreman’s role as playwright-designer-director of the philosophical theater of the here and now operating in the guise of the no-body in no-space and no-time.

Unsurprisingly though, Wittgenstein (an artistic conservative) believed that he fell short of achieving even the most basic level of poetic expression:

> I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as *poetic composition*. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do. (CV §24)

This is Wittgenstein’s sense of personal incapacity again speaking, breaking faith with his admonishment to himself and others at the conclusion of the earlier *Tractatus* to honor silence either when something is unsayable or does not need to be said. Wittgenstein’s lifelong performance of incapacity in the form of self-complaint falls within the measurable boundaries of obsessive-compulsive thought-behavior. And like a true obsessive-compulsive, he has discovered his thought’s enabler in language, which as he defines it has its limits and defines the limits of our world and so justifies in his mind the performance of incapacity as the only possible, if illogical, response.