



Transcendental Twaddle: Saying Wittgenstein

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THE RIGHT METHOD OF PHILOSOPHY WOULD BE THIS. TO SAY NOTHING EXCEPT WHAT CAN BE SAID, I.E. THE PROPOSITIONS OF NATURAL SCIENCE, I.E. SOMETHING THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH PHILOSOPHY: AND THEN ALWAYS, WHEN SOMEONE ELSE WISHED TO SAY SOMETHING METAPHYSICAL, TO DEMONSTRATE TO HIM THAT HE HAS GIVEN NO MEANING TO CERTAIN SIGNS IN HIS PROPOSITIONS.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

PREVIOUS PAGE: GARY HILL
Remarks on Color, 1994. Single-channel video/sound installation
with color video projection, dimensions variable.
Courtesy of Donald Young Gallery, Chicago.

BELOW AND RIGHT: ANNE WALSH
Two Men Making Gun Sounds, 1996. Two-channel video.



IN GARY HILL'S 1994 VIDEO *REMARKS ON COLOR*, HIS EIGHT-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER READS

out loud from Ludwig Wittgenstein's book of the same title. Negotiating the task as best she can, she mostly appears cognizant of the words she reads, followed by instances in which she shows no comprehension at all. She seems to understand "bluish green," "reddish," and "painting," but she stumbles on "intermediary," "monochromatic," and "criterion." Though lulled by the focused quality of her act of reading—the resolute turn of the page, the way her head dips down to meet the words that are difficult for her, the deep breaths she takes before starting another of Wittgenstein's propositions—it's a bit unsettling to hear and watch her mispronounce "know" as "now." You think she must know "know" if she's reading such books. When "angled" becomes "angels" during a passage about mathematical figures the mispronouncement suggests a bit of whimsy, an imaginative insertion of the mystical amidst the heuristic talk of geometry. But her apparent lack of experience with such advanced texts means it's not clear whether it's an error, whether this reading is a clever game for her own amusement, or an exercise assigned by her father.

Wittgenstein wrote the passage quoted at the beginning of this article toward the end of his first book *Tractatus*

Logico-Philosophicus, in which he demonstrates what can sensibly be said within the limits of language and what must be passed over in silence. Wittgenstein concludes that only the language of empirical facts has any reference to the world, and that sentences or "propositions" have clear meaning only when they refer to direct sensory experience. The "pseudo-propositions" of ethics, aesthetics, and religion have the appearance of something sensible but in fact are nonsense (literally "without sense" since for Wittgenstein sense is tied to real-world reference). Scientific language mirrors the world, but, strictly speaking, metaphysical matters—the traditional province of philosophy—are subjects of pure speculation, without any reliable way to relate our words to the way the world is or to verify whether our metaphysical assertions are true or false. To borrow a quote from the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, Wittgenstein seems to "judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature."² But where the prolific Borges indulged his imagination, pursuing the type of elaborate thought experiments that the absence of reference allows (worlds without a past, worlds without nouns, worlds of infinite transformation), Wittgenstein focused on articulating the concrete ways we can

and cannot communicate clearly with one another.

In Hill's video, the self-reflexive nature of the girl's reading is compounded by the self-reflexive nature of Wittgenstein's musings, which repeatedly call our attention to the hidden intricacies of our ordinary use of language. Reading Proposition 3, the child quotes, "Lichtenberg says that very few people have seen pure white. So do most people use the word wrong, then? And how did he learn to correct us?" She unconsciously reveals the pressure she must be feeling not to make mistakes, as this last bit actually reads, "And how did he learn the correct use?" Continuing her reading of the book, the girl restates Wittgenstein answering this question by describing how an ideal use of "white" is constructed from an ordinary use of the term, refining the concept along certain lines until "something is carried to extremes." His explanation leads a viewer to wonder what part of this process of creating meaning is accessible to the young girl when even the ordinary use of some terms is beyond her reach. Throughout *Remarks on Color* Wittgenstein describes people who do and do not grasp certain concepts, who speak within and without shared contexts, and in the video each reference to this reminds the viewer of the



girl's precarious relationship with the words she reads. Do the words lose meaning because one interlocutor does not understand them, even if the other does? Does their status as nonsense rest with the speaker's cognition? The girl's seeming lack of comprehension interferes with the delivery of the information, demanding intense concentration from the viewer. Reading Proposition 15, she says, "In every serious philosophical question uncertainty extends to the very roots of the problem. We must always be prepared to learn something totally new." Given her inability to imbue certain words with meaning, the uncertainty centers around her rather than in a seemingly impossible philosophical puzzle. Like the girl in Hill's video, we do not understand the possibilities of learning or communicating if from the outset words are experienced as nonsense. To return to the epigraph, the girl "has given no meaning to certain signs in her propositions" not because she's speaking metaphysically but because of something much simpler: she can't understand what others understand. Retroactively this extends to our doubt as to whether we ever fully understand what we ourselves say even when we appear to.

Disenchanted with trying to apply language to metaphysical concepts, Wittgenstein turned toward the rigor of

logic and a self-imposed silence. With the *Tractatus* written, he promptly quit philosophy, and did not return to it until a decade later.

I've always been sheepishly enamored of Wittgenstein's early ability to argue his way out of philosophy and into silence. During those moments when I just can't seem to make sense of what's going on, or when words fail me because I'm trying to think about something that's beyond my experience or comprehension, I like to imagine Wittgenstein, safe in the knowledge that *some things just don't make sense*, period. I can talk coherently about how red, juicy, and sweet an apple is, but get me started on love, justice, or God and it's all just a mess of confused, unverifiable utterances. Wittgenstein's conclusion in the *Tractatus* posits a way out of difficult conceptual and moral dilemmas and suggests that my confusion and incomprehension are not a result of a lack of vocabulary, patience, or understanding on my part but a fundamental, irrevocable condition of the world. There's a kind of comfort in believing that if we want to speak with coherent meaning, some things just can't be talked about.

On the other hand, there's a kind of terror in this position. It implies that there's no use in talking about the difficult complexities of our day-to-day realities, that language can't help us

think through controversies, and when push comes to shove that there's nothing on which we can ground our belief systems. Given the potential for nihilism—the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be communicated—it seems best to use Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* not as a prolegomenon to any future metaphysics (since it precludes such a project) but as a check to the strange conundrums we get ourselves into when we're thinking and talking too abstractly. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that our language with its unavoidable confusions and vagueness tends to disguise our thinking rather than reveal its logical form,³ and in all of his writing he seeks to clarify the philosophical mistakes that arise when "language goes on holiday."⁴

Within the last decade a number of artists have heeded Wittgenstein's warnings about the reliability of our casual attempts to communicate with one another and confidently relate our words to the subjects about which we speak. Paradoxically, in doing so artists have taken language on a vacation, removing it from its normal contexts and applications to explore issues of meaning and social, linguistic protocol. For example, our tendency for metaphysical posturing received an affectionate wallop last spring by the participants in a series of lectures at the Hermetic Gallery in

Milwaukee. Defying expectations of the usual concerted effort to defend and explain a given body of cultural production that artist/critic lectures are supposed to be, the Hermetic Lecture Series invited participants to give a talk about a topic of which they had no knowledge, in effect, to talk nonsense. All but one of the speakers chose their own topics, though artist and gallery owner Nicholas Frank and co-organizer Jennifer Montgomery had veto power if they thought the speaker knew

rather than any causal or argumentative trajectory. Because ideas were linked by similarity, contiguity, and analogy, the lecturers' responses to "unknown" topics created an expanded notion of meaning that operated via tangential rather than linear connections. This deliberate anti-expert, amateur stance (albeit on the part of people who otherwise are quite professional and sophisticated in various fields) calls into question the authority we give certain forms of scholarship and rhetorical

one-to-one correspondence between words and that to which they refer doesn't mean the absence of *all* reference and *all* meaning. Just because in most cases reference is not simple, this does not imply that we can't talk meaningfully about complex phenomena, even if that speech is consciously playful and imaginatively constructed.

Los Angeles artists Anne Walsh and Chris Kubick have taken the search for an absurd language game one step further. Under the name "Archive" they



Scherzo di Follia, 1863-66.
Albumen silver print.



COUNTESS OF CASTIGLIONE
The Hermit of Passy, 1863.
Albumen silver print, gouache.



The Hermit of Passy, after 1863.
Salted paper print, charcoal, and watercolor.

the terrain too well. Shepherded by Frank, poet Matt Cook lectured about first ladies, filmmaker Carl Bogner spoke about revolving doors ("Always open, always closed"), and filmmaker Montgomery discussed baby vegetables. Photographer Claire Pentecost tackled darkness, inspecting a litany of "dark" subjects: holes, the night sky, bats, bugs, fur, curtains, chaos, Moors, Algerians, heathens, anesthesia, film, and sleep, one subject segueing to the next in rapid-fire word play. To more or less compelling effect, the lectures were a mix of lists, anecdotes, literary references, fiction, history, obscure trivia, and popular imagery. The "logic" throughout favored sheer free association

delivery. Implicit is a critique of an overly specialized deployment of language that potentially inhibits one's imagination.

Such intellectual brainstorming activates a middle ground between the exact empirical coherence and the radical relativism or "nonsense" of the *Tractatus* model. Frank calls it "serious play" and it shows what can happen when our imaginative capabilities are unleashed from the constraints of pseudo-science. Viewed as a plus, not a deficit, the lack of direct reference is actually what enables us to think creatively and to juxtapose ideas in a freewheeling fashion. The intentional delving into potential nonsense shows that, contra Wittgenstein, the absence of a fixed,

are producing a series of recordings in which they profess to speak with dead artists. Their first release, "Conversations with the Countess of Castiglione," records four encounters with the nineteenth-century aristocrat best known for her performative photographic self-portraits. For 40 years she dramatically reinvented herself as Beatrix, Judith, nun, prostitute, Chinese woman, queen, and many other identities. Walsh and Kubick interview the Countess with the aid of professional psychics who contact her spirit using various channeling methods. Each psychic was shown a single picture of the Countess and once her spirit was present the artists asked her the same

questions. They discuss her fascination with role-playing, the camera, her lovers, the female body, solitude, growing old, and death. For example, when asked what she has to say about contemporary photography, she replies, "Splendor and squalor." Bemoaning its

it's then a matter of whether or not we'll accept a supernatural bridge despite the interview's ordinary veneer. Speaking with the dead becomes a metaphor for speaking when reference is not verifiable or readily available (and by extension a metaphor for speaking metaphorically).

possibility—it's only words that separate things. I feel abandoned by the real, leaving what's left. . . .

The speaker here is absorbed by potential failure: of his memory, his perception, his words, and his ability to outrun

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current redundancy and lack of invention, she continues, "It's flatulence on paper." She also describes how angry she is that she's been forgotten and thanks the artists for their interest in her.

The final recording is produced with musical interludes and soothing, informative narration that recall a National Public Radio report: despite the fantastic nature of the dialogue, the familiar broadcast style offers reassurance. Yet this familiarity can't erase the question of origins: Who speaks in these recordings? In a quite pedestrian way, the meaning of the words passed back and forth is clear and understandable—these are ordinary conversations—but because of the questionable nature of who is speaking (the psychic or the spirit, or even the artists as scriptwriters), doubt overrides the immediate sense of the words spoken. The conversation between the dead and the living is at once fugitive and utterly banal, like a search for a relationship that is promising yet unreasonable. Since the speaker (or is it the referent?) is long dead, what could substantiate whether these recorded speech acts are truthful or not: a recourse to history, the psychic's track record, the convincing nature of "Castiglione's" words, the hearer's willingness to believe? Obviously the original connections between speech and speaker, and between words and their intended referents have been severed; the former is mediated by psychic and artistic intervention, the latter by time and history. Given this separation,

Swinging between sense and nonsense, Gary Hill's performance in the recent video *Wall Piece* calls attention to the state in which a desperate attempt at speech overrides all other meaning. This video shows the artist repeatedly smacking his body against a blank, dark wall while speaking, the Sisyphean effort rendering his speech at once comic and pathetic. The explosive force with which the words are expelled from his body combined with a strobe light that harshly illuminates the scene seems to mock the possibility of actually getting out of our own individual private-language hells to make real contact with one another. His words come out fragmented and piecemeal—much of the text is indecipherable because of the physicality of the artist's behavior. Only random phrases pop out: "blind," "alien," "dreaming," "I have no place," "I know it," "Where does it reside?" "This is not me." The readily available typed transcript of the video confirms a sense of paranoia.

Hill's speech hints at a Cartesian delirium: a person on the edge of waking and dreaming, unsure if he's making sense or if there is even a way to make sense. The artist grunts, each word firmly punched against the wall:

Where am I? I can't remember at will. It can only be described as holy for fear of something completely other. Parts come back not quite like what was before but the connection is certain. . . . Thought that won't let go brings to mind the terrifying

the "it" that keeps haunting him. (Is it knowledge, truth, reality?) "It wants to bring me to my knees. It wants me to pray." The artist's hyperbolic search for meaning shows one dilemma of the mind/body problem. When what we seek is metaphysical resolution—an answer to the big "Why?"—our ordinary language use falls apart, making the sounds that come out of our mouths seem linguistically and conceptually awry. Of course, this doesn't stop the artist's search.

Sometimes the gesture of speech is forsaken altogether—at least as a means to speak literally. In the video *Two Men Making Gun Sounds*, Walsh records the subjects puffing, twisting, and otherwise manipulating their mouths to create a series of "realistic" missile and gun noises. Their cheeks puff up and then deflate as air is forced out between their lips; their faces turn red, their eyes bulge; one of them busts himself up laughing. Out of the mouths of adults, it's a childhood game cultivated to incongruous ends, yet the playfulness doesn't outweigh the finesse of their vocabulary or the earnestness of their simulation. Capturing an equal skill for imitation in *The Horse Impressionists*, Lucy Gunning videotapes various women imitating their beloved horses. The women bay and whinny, creating the guttural, animal calls for which horses are known; they get into character by prancing in circles, tossing their heads, and tapping their feet on the ground. Again the performance makes