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The limits of my language : Wittgenstein and contemporary American poetry

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THE LIMITS OF MY LANGUAGE:
WITTGENSTEIN AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

A dissertation presented

by

Benjamin J. Leubner

to

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of
Northeastern University, April, 2009

Abstract

Applications of Wittgenstein in literary studies are far from copious. There are, to be sure, many significant works, including Marjorie Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Walter Jost's *Rhetorical Investigations*, and the small but thriving industry of Ordinary Language Criticism (where work by both Perloff and Jost, among others, can be found). The present study seeks to contribute to this growing body. But where Ordinary Language Criticism often champions Wittgenstein for the resistance he offers to theory, this study, while acknowledging his emphasis on description over explanation, finds much in his philosophy which bears upon continental modes of thought, modes which his so-called analytic method is said to oppose. Part of the study's originality thus consists in its refusal to stigmatize Wittgenstein in relation to literary studies by regarding him as non-continental or anti-theoretical and therefore as having little or nothing to offer to literary theory. In particular, I seek to reduce the supposed rift between Wittgenstein and Derrida by way of illustrating a connection between the two which has important ramifications not only in the world of poetry but in other circles, as well, both "theoretical" and "ordinary." The contention, simply put, is that Wittgenstein's private language argument and Derrida's assertion that errancy is integral to the structure of the mark, taken together, thoroughly dispel any philosophical position which asserts that the mind is in some fashion a self-contained entity and/or that meaning can be guaranteed by a sole, or private, intention.

The effect of this contention on our conception of the lyric speaker as an isolated figure might be guessed. Recent studies in lyric theory have stressed the publicity of both the lyric and its speaker as opposed to their privacy, the fact, that is, that both are always operative first and foremost *in a world*. The aim of such studies is to bring poetry back from the margins of culture (where to it is often relegated as a private, and thus politically irrelevant, practice) to its centers. My own aim is to augment these endeavors by stressing the untenability of lyric privacy from a Wittgensteinian standpoint and via a consideration of the limits of language (what they prohibit *and* what they enable) as they are explored not only by Wittgenstein but by several contemporary American poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, Charles Wright, Jorie Graham, Carl Phillips, and Frank Bidart.

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Bach wrote on the title page of his *Orgelbüchlein*, 'To the glory of the most high God, and that my neighbour may be benefited thereby.' That is what I would have liked to say about my work.

-Wittgenstein, to Maurice Drury

Introduction

The Uses of Wittgenstein

"I got to wear them blamed clothes that just smothers me, Tom; they don't seem to any air git through 'em, somehow..."

-Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

I.

Wittgenstein's current popularity is evident from his susceptibility to use in a recent "possessive" trend in titling. I have in mind such books as Richard Wolin's *Heidegger's Children* (2001), Peter Atkins's *Galileo's Finger* (2003), Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error* (2005), and Neill G. Russell's *Newton's Riddle* (2008). I don't condemn these books (Wolin's study, for instance, is especially good), but I do find such titling disturbing when it presumes that Galileo's or Descartes's discoveries need some sort of pop hook to merit the reader's attention.

In any case, at least four recent books and one article on Wittgenstein employ such titles, starting with Marjorie Perloff's excellent 1996 study *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, and continuing with David Edmonds's and John Eidinow's *Wittgenstein's Poker* (2001), Martin Cohen's *Wittgenstein's Beetle* (2004), Susan G. Sterret's *Wittgenstein Flies a Kite* (2005), which might have been titled *Wittgenstein's Kite*, and finally, in the recent volume *iPod and Philosophy* (2008), Alf Rehn's "Wittgenstein's iPod." The titles in this list (particularly the last four, as Perloff's book may belong less in their company than in that of Allan Janik's and Stephen Toulmin's 1973 study *Wittgenstein's Vienna*) all capitalize on the fact that

Wittgenstein is perceived as an eccentric figure with a still more eccentric philosophy. They both confirm that reputation and inflate it, giving Wittgenstein a popular appeal, or charm, of the sort that Freud (as doped up, sex-obsessed psychologist) and Einstein (as pacifist, tongue-wagging, vegetarian physicist) already "enjoy."

In 1924 Wittgenstein's colleague and friend, Frank Ramsay, wrote to his mother from Austria, "We really live in a great time for thinking, with Einstein, Freud and Wittgenstein all alive" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 224). That most people know considerably more (however distorted their knowledge may be) about the first two names on this list than they do about the third is a phenomenon on which Wittgenstein had his own thoughts. The popularity of Einstein and Freud, he says, has something to do with the charm that their ideas possess, a quality Wittgenstein tried hard to resist in his own formulations, fearing its potential for bewitchment, its capacity to serve as "a totem" (*Lectures and Conversations* 51). Wittgenstein felt that his particular way of thinking was not in line with "the main current of European and American civilization" (CV 6), a current the mark of which was a scientific paradigm that sought explanations for all phenomena. In 1946 Wittgenstein said to Rush Rhees, "I have been going through Freud's 'Interpretation of Dreams'. . . and it has made me feel how much this whole way of thinking wants combatting" (*Lectures and Conversations* 50). In the same year he wrote, "Freud's fanciful pseudo-explanations (precisely because they are brilliant) perform a disservice" (CV 55). Each of these remarks indicates Wittgenstein's genuine respect for Freud's intellectual capacity. Wittgenstein's anxiety concerning Freud

reflects his sense that Freud had (or has) cast a spell over an entire civilization, a spell which Wittgenstein considered it his duty to combat. He felt similarly about Einstein's physics and Russell's philosophy. And after hearing that G. E. Moore had written a brief autobiographical sketch to preface a collection of essays on his philosophy, Wittgenstein wrote to him, "I fear that you may now be walking at the edge of that cliff at the bottom of which I see lots of scientists and philosophers lying dead, Russell amongst others" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 473). Presumably these figures had abandoned the rigor demanded of them by their tasks in favor of fame or, worse, as a result of contentment with their own explanations. To be under the impression that a dream, or the universe, or the meaning of a word, has a right explanation that excludes all other explanations is to be charmed, bewitched. Philosophy, in Wittgenstein's hands, became a form of resistance to such sorcery: "Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us" (*The Blue and Brown Books* 27).

Now, however, it seems that Wittgenstein himself, along with Einstein, Freud, and others, possesses just the sort of fascination for us which he so painstakingly sought to dispel. Pop culture has situated him in the realm of eccentric geniuses: he angrily brandishes pokers, conducts kite-flying experiments, and works on philosophical problems which he alone could presume to understand. He is the epitome, in the words of Alexander Waugh, of "the handsome, stammering, tortured, incomprehensible philosopher" (32). While Wittgenstein himself, whose origins, after all, were in *fin de siècle* Vienna, was obsessed with the notion of "genius," we, on the other hand, live in an age in which that concept is

supposed to have lost its luster, its romantic appeal. Within the academy, at any rate, the romantic notion of genius is supposedly a discarded, or at least discredited, phenomenon. In our everyday lives, however, and within the culture as a whole, it seems that we are just as enamored of or bewitched by it as we have ever been. The forms of our expressions do indeed exert great force, or cast strong spells, upon us.

In an early 2009 review of a collection of Wittgenstein's letters and documents (Brian McGuinness's *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*) Simon Blackburn reported that over 900 books featuring Wittgenstein as a subject have been published. "Yet," says Blackburn, "metaphysics and naive philosophies of mind now flourish as if his work had never been written" (18). Still, alongside Wittgenstein's budding status as a cult figure in the popular market, there continues to be unending interest in and rigorous research conducted on him in philosophical circles, circles which are aware of the extent of his impact on metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Additionally, he not only continues to inspire artists of all sorts but is now beginning to generate considerable interest within literary studies, as well. Marjorie Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder* is a seminal work in this respect. One of Perloff's aims is to correct, at least in part, an imbalance between the number of writers who have been inspired by Wittgenstein and the number of critics who have either noted this interest or been similarly inspired themselves. Perloff certainly numbers herself among the latter, though she was by no means the first person to attempt to make lasting connections between Wittgenstein and the world of literature, a distinction which belongs, it seems, to Stanley Cavell.

Cavell, of course, is not so much a literary critic as a philosopher who often (and expertly) makes expeditions into the field of literary studies. Books such as *The Senses of Walden* (1972), *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987), and *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (a collection of essays written over the course of many years) bring Wittgenstein's philosophy to bear on the world of literature, whether it be by way of an investigation of skepticism in Shakespeare's tragedies or by means of an advocacy of the ordinary as it is found in both Wittgenstein's philosophy and New England Transcendentalism. Cavell's writing on Wittgenstein has slowly led to the founding of an informal school of criticism called ordinary language criticism, which defines itself largely by way of its opposition to literary theory, just as Wittgenstein offered his manifold descriptions in place of anything resembling a cohesive theory or explanation. Studies in this school of criticism have since been compiled in an anthology edited by Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost, *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (2003). Included in the anthology are essays by such notable critics as Perloff, Charles Altieri, Martha C. Nussbaum, Gerald L. Bruns, and Dauber and Jost themselves, and an afterword by Cavell. The literary subjects covered range from *Don Quixote* to the Language poets. A slightly more recent anthology, *The Literary Wittgenstein* (2005), edited by John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer, also features essays written by Cavell and Perloff, in addition to many others, and has a more theoretical cast.

Lately, more specifically, there has developed a small but noticeable body of work on Wittgenstein and American poetry, much of which could not profitably be

called ordinary language criticism but which nonetheless similarly seeks to establish connections between Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and various literary forms. *Wittgenstein's Ladder* is perhaps the standard here, but predecessors such as James Guetti's *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience* (1993) and successors such as Jost's *Rhetorical Investigations* (2004) are also exemplary. Additionally, articles on Wittgenstein and American poetry continue to appear in significant journals: see, for example, Andrew Osborn's "'A Little Hard to See': Wittgenstein, Stevens, and the Uses of Unclarity" (from *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Spring 2004) or John Koethe's "Wittgenstein and Lyric Subjectivity" (from *Literary Imaginations*, Fall 2007). While the present study is meant to be a continuation of all of this work, it perhaps owes most to the criticism of Thomas Gardner. In the introduction to his 1999 book *Regions of Unlikeness*, Gardner writes, "What I investigate in this book is the way a number of our most important contemporary poets frame their work as taking place within, and being brought to life by, an acknowledgment of the limits of language" (1). I might say the same thing about this study, only whereas in Gardner's book Wittgenstein, although an important presence, remains somewhat in the background, in this study he is foregrounded.

Gardner's use of the word "acknowledgment" in the passage just quoted echoes Cavell's assertion that Wittgenstein's response to skepticism takes not the customary route of attempting to prove what can be known but instead posits that skepticism itself, in order to advance its position, must acknowledge a number of things which it would presumably doubt, including the meanings of words in a

language. Thereby, in Wittgenstein's view, skepticism undermines itself. Our shared forms of life render a philosophical skepticism which would doubt them ultimately nonsensical, and yet skepticism, the capacity for doubt, plays an important role in our forms of life, which are themselves less immune to than predicated upon change. By drawing our attention to our activity-based acknowledgment of such shared forms of life, Wittgenstein confounds the skeptic who would doubt everything without painting himself into the corner of Idealism.

What we acknowledge, that we acknowledge, and how we acknowledge, are all matters for both philosophical investigation and poetic experimentation; to engage in such activity is to engage in a liaison with the limits of language which is neither hopeful in the sense of aspiring to overcome those limits nor completely doubtful or despairing in the face of them. The poets covered in this study engage, each in his/her own way, not unlike Wittgenstein, in an "unwillingness," as Robert von Hallberg phrases it, "to subordinate difficulties to explanatory principles" (12).

II.

The attempts of ordinary language critics like Dauber and Jost, in their introduction to *Ordinary Language Criticism*, to dissociate both themselves and their "school" from current trends in theory and, in fact, from theory itself, stem, no doubt, both from Wittgenstein's own refusal to posit general theories within the field of philosophy and from his denial that such theories *could* be posited. But while Dauber and Jost may provide a legitimate correction in pointing out certain limits of theory, the polemical, anti-theory strand of their effort, in addition to treating theory

itself in a simplistic fashion, carries with it the unfortunate side effect of relegating the application of Wittgenstein in literary studies to a dark corner. The result of this relegation is that Wittgenstein takes on something of the same image in the minds of many literary theorists that he now has for much of the general public, that is, he becomes an eccentric who by virtue of his eccentricity needn't be taken seriously.

Of course, Wittgenstein never did much to ingratiate himself in literary circles. Despite his friendships with John Maynard Keynes, G. E. Moore, and others, he was never comfortable with the thought of belonging to groups like Bloomsbury or the Apostles. As Ray Monk notes, "There was little common ground between the peculiarly English, self-consciously 'civilized,' aestheticism of Bloomsbury and the Apostles, and Wittgenstein's rigorously ascetic sensibility and occasionally ruthless honesty" (*Duty of Genius* 256). A fine example of this "honesty" might be the occasion on which Wittgenstein hailed F. R. Leavis with the words, "Give up literary criticism!" (272). Wittgenstein saw his own philosophical investigations of language as more serious than literary studies; he might have viewed the latter as he viewed certain branches of mathematics: as "a cancerous growth, seeming to have grown out of the normal body aimlessly and senselessly" (439). Of course, he often had equally harsh things to say about philosophy itself. Even so, however, his antagonism towards both the literary lifestyle and the literary criticism of Cambridge coupled with his own lack of sustained writing on literary subjects (compared to, say, Heidegger or Derrida), makes his marginal presence in the field of contemporary literary studies understandable if not entirely forgivable.

What is certainly not forgiveable is the notion that Wittgenstein's philosophy is completely divorced from and antithetical to current literary and theoretical concerns. Dauber and Jost, to their credit, never make this claim directly, but their desire to check the "cancerous growth" of theory by a return to the ordinary and familiar can't help but imply such a divorce, regardless of what concessions they may make. While they preface their dichotomy of "theory/ordinary language criticism" with an acknowledgment of the oversimplification it implies, the result is nevertheless the creation of what seems an unbridgeable rift. "The goal of ordinary language critics," they write, "is not the rather facile one of sophisticated disengagement through the construction of a theoretical overview from which we may observe our lives at a comfortable remove from them, but rather reengagement at the level of our lives themselves" (xii). Where "theory" offers facile generalizations, then, the application of Wittgenstein in literary studies does the dirty work, as it were, of examining particulars. While this claim no doubt rings true in some senses (that is, in regard to particular instances of theory), it is itself a simplistic "overview" or "construction"; that is, the assertion that theory operates "at a comfortable remove from our lives" itself operates at a comfortable remove from theory, or from the manifold particulars of various theories.

To see how ordinary language criticism and literary theory might cooperate rather than quarrel, consider New Historicism, a practice which has dominated the landscape of literary studies since the early 1990s: isn't the goal of this particular "theory" a turning away from the construction of theoretical overviews in favor of the examination of particulars "at the level of our lives themselves" (say, an

investigation of how Wittgenstein's encounters with Bloomsbury and the Apostles may have indirectly influenced his philosophy)? Thus the "dogged" work of ordinary language criticism, formulated by Dauber and Jost as the rigorous investigation of particular uses of language (xviii), seems to have a lot in common with New Historicism's project of illustrating how a variety of specific contexts are involved in the production of literary works of art. And if New Historicism, in seeming contradistinction to its mission, attempts to justify itself by way of framing its particular investigations within the context of a specific theoretical position or ideological overview, the same can and must be said of ordinary language criticism itself. Such attempts, as Dauber and Jost realize in their introduction, are, after all, themselves instances of particular uses of language in a given time and place, manifestations of our forms of life at the level of our lives themselves.

My study, then, does not seek to reinforce the anti-theoretical application of Wittgenstein to literature. Neither, however, does it seek to pose a "Wittgensteinian" theory of literature. It exists, rather, somewhere between those extremes, just as Wittgenstein himself was, in an importance sense, between Vienna and Cambridge, between continental and analytic philosophy. Too often he is associated solely with the primarily British school of analytic philosophy, an association which makes it easy to turn him into a mere opponent of, to take a most likely instance, Derrida. In this version of things, Derrida is the "father of Deconstruction" and the originator of such apocryphal sayings as "There is nothing outside of the text," and Wittgenstein is the champion of ordinary language, one who eschews superfluous theoretical carousing and instead adheres solely to

language as it is used everyday. This contrast, of course, is false, and one of the more important consequences of this study is the establishment of a crucial link between Wittgenstein and Derrida, a link that has important ramifications not only for the world of poetry but for other circles, as well -- both "theoretical" and "ordinary." The idea, simply put, is that Wittgenstein's private language argument and Derrida's assertion that errancy is integral to the mark, taken together, thoroughly dispel any philosophical position which would assert that the mind is in some fashion a self-contained entity and/or that meaning can be guaranteed by a sole, or private, intention. For such a position to gain stable footing, it would first have to appeal to outward criteria, most importantly to the use of language, and in doing so would undermine itself, since that criteria exists and is checked in the very world which the asserted position claims is unnecessary to the securing of an intention.

For Derrida, according to Derek Attridge, a mark (or any collection of marks, any text) is not a "hermetically sealed space" but rather a "repeatable singularity that depends on an openness to new contexts and therefore on its difference each time it is repeated" (16). That is, any mark, be it written, spoken, implied, or drawn, is necessarily both singular and repeatable, but its singularity depends on its repeatability, and its repeatability ensures its "difference each time it is repeated," or its errancy. Discourse is thus always in the process of disclosing itself to new contexts, and yet at the same time we are tempted by discourse (or bewitched by language, to use Wittgenstein's phrase) to seal off such possibilities by way of a series of definitions that would limit, if not eradicate altogether, the

errancy inherent in the mark. We forge such definitions through discourse itself, though, and thus there is always a way for air to get in, so to speak, where we would exclude it. This air, though, or errancy, threatens meaning less than it secures it, which is not to say, however, that it doesn't threaten it. As Keith Jenkins writes, *différance* is both "the 'condition of possibility' for meaning-making" and "the condition that ensures permanent/absolute meanings are impossible" (189). Derrida's disowning of what "*différance*" eventually came to stand for and his adoption of "errancy" in its stead (though one can see the latter word in the former) serve, in a way, to illustrate Jenkins's assertion. That is, *différance* qua word or concept began to take on "permanent/absolute" meanings much to Derrida's chagrin, to the point where a school of thought which opposed other schools of thought was formed, resulting less in the liberation than in the constriction of meaning. Derrida's own response to this development was to initiate a series of reformulations and redefinitions (often seemingly reversing previous stances he was supposed to have taken), reformulations and redefinitions which were, ironically, perfectly in keeping with the "condition of possibility" which *différance* itself had originally and indirectly (that is, not as a word or concept) stood for.

To repeat, Derrida's appropriately paradoxical assertion of the fundamental errancy of the mark has a correlate in Wittgenstein's private language argument. A private, or inviolable, language, a language wholly in the possession of its creator and inaccessible to anyone else, cannot exist, is a contradiction in terms. Such a language would presumably seal off the errancy which is necessary to the functioning of language. But the user of this language would have no means by

which to check his use of words save only the language itself (as opposed to other users of it) and so would have no criteria for determining whether a word was used correctly or whether a word was even a word (appeals to memory presuppose that he knows what "memory" means). Such a language, then, is an impossibility. One must be able to check the use of a word in the world via an appeal to other users, or rather to other players of the language-game, an act which carries with it the necessary possibility of errors being made, of differences introducing themselves, of meaning occasionally eluding us. "An idea," wrote John Ashbery in an unpublished review of Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets*, "to mean anything to anybody, must be conjugated, made kinetic, be on its way to some other place" (*Selected Prose* 118).

The admission of errancy, by Wittgenstein, by Derrida, and by the American poets I engage in this study, does not mean, of course, that we may as well cease defining things altogether, that all definitions are futile, but rather that we have to stop insisting on the inviolability of our definitions. According to Wittgenstein, we "constantly compare language with a calculus proceeding according to exact rules," where in fact "we rarely use language as such a calculus" (*The Blue and Brown Books* 25). We might insist on such an analogy in the name of intelligibility, but intelligibility itself is secured by the potential for violation inherent in the mark. That is, the principle of intelligibility is not jeopardized by the affirmation of errancy, but exists by way of it. Marks function along, but not at the poles of, a spectrum between utter privacy and utter publicity, and the sum total of this activity is, in many senses, the language-game of which both skepticism and solipsism,

much to the ultimate detriment of the positions they would advance, are a part. As Wittgenstein maintains throughout his later writings, explanations and doubting must -- and do -- eventually come to an end in activity (*PI* §1; *OC* §392); language ceases idling and goes into gear. "Giving grounds [and] justifying the evidence, comes to an end; --but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (*OC* §204). This acting constitutes our forms of life, the acknowledgement of which is necessary for any explanation or doubting to occur in the first place.

III.

For the purposes of this study, whether or not a poet was directly influenced by Wittgenstein is secondary to the fact of the poet's exploration of what might be called a similar field. "Wittgensteinian practice," Perloff notes, "provides us with access to some of the most enigmatic poetries and artworks of the later twentieth century," poetries and artworks made, "whether explicitly or implicitly, under the sign of Wittgenstein" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* xiii). While the subject of my study is how we encounter, respond to, and conceive of the limits of language, the limit of the study itself lies in its restricted coverage. I have chosen mostly well known (even canonized) poets, first and foremost because they reflect my own tastes and interests over the past several years, but also in order to attempt, in my own way, to bring Wittgenstein into the mainstream (of literary studies, at least) and to do so without, I hope, sacrificing in any way the integrity of his thought. Where Perloff's

focus, then, is Wittgenstein's influence on the "enigmatic" (and sometimes marginal) poetries of, for instance, Ron Silliman and Rosmarie Waldrop (although she also focuses on Robert Creeley), my own focus is on the more widely read (but sometimes nonetheless enigmatic) poetries of Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, Charles Wright, and Jorie Graham, poets claimed as subjects of study, for the most part, more often by Gardner than by Perloff (Ashbery being the exception). I am thus in a sense trying to fill in a gap between these two critics while at the same time carving out my own space of investigation, a space less limited than its being positioned between two critical luminaries might seem to imply. My final chapter (on Frank Bidart and Carl Phillips) continues this work towards independence and indicates, I hope, along with the project in its entirety, the possibility of further application of the ideas therein. Poets considered for but ultimately not included in this study (primarily for reasons of expediency) include Louise Glück, William Bronk, James Merrill, and Gjertrud Schnackenburg, among others. The sign of Wittgenstein does indeed cast a wider net than his particular influence; as Gardner has it, the "drive" to explore the limits of language in contemporary poetry "is remarkably wide ranging," being "visible" in the practice of all manner of poets, from the more traditional work of Elizabeth Bishop to the experimental Language poetry of Michael Palmer (4).

The six poets on whom this study does focus do not represent a single "school" in any sense. I find that all six of them, in various ways, (to reiterate a phrase from Gardner), "frame their work as taking place within, and being brought to life by, an acknowledgment of the limits of language" (*Regions of Unlikeness* 1).

Each poet's manner of thus "framing" his/her work, I find, can be profitably illuminated by examining it alongside certain strands of thought in Wittgenstein's work. Thus his private language argument sheds light on Bishop's own concern for privacy (both poetic and personal); his manifold, multiform, and end-resisting characterizations of both language and its functions on Ashbery's work; his conception of ethics on the poetry of Charles Wright; his later work in epistemology, *On Certainty*, on Jorie Graham's own poetics of knowledge; and his conflicted stance (or stances) towards metaphysics on the poetries of Carl Phillips and Frank Bidart. By aligning each poet's work with a particular "Wittgensteinian" issue, however, I do not mean to establish an intricate grid the many borders of which are subject to no adjustment. Ashbery's work alone, for instance, can be read not only in terms of Wittgenstein's various characterizations of language but also in terms of his work in epistemology, his stance towards metaphysics, and his conception of privacy (as I argue at the outset of that particular chapter). The connections between chapters, then, are just as important (and, I hope, as evident) as each chapter's individual "theme." The overall thesis which emerges as a result of these connections has to do with the fact that "vagueness and error," to quote von Hallberg, "are inevitable constituents not only of poetry but of analytical thinking as well" (113), that is to say, philosophy. In fact, I argue, these aspects of "vagueness and error," or the limits of our language, are not only "inevitable" in poetic and philosophical thought, in the sense of being something we must endure, but also positive conditions of such thinking, conditions a pious acknowledgement of which un-bewitches us from the charm of our own presumptions, freeing us for what

Gardner calls a more "intimate, awestruck relation to what words *would* grasp -- another, the world, one's self" (*Regions of Unlikeness* 85, my emphasis).

Chapter one makes a case for the necessity of addressing Wittgenstein's private language argument in relation to the conceptualization of the lyric subject as a "private" entity, a *res cogitans* of the poetic variety, as it were. In 1948 Bishop said to Robert Lowell: "When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived" (*One Art* x). There is both an unprecident melodramatic morbidity in these lines (as it turned out, Bishop would write an elegy for Lowell) and a great deal of accuracy, as Bishop's life from 1911 until 1951 was indeed severely, if hardly uniquely, lonely. In the terms of her late, semi-autobiographical dramatic monologue "Crusoe in England," these years were her period on the island before the arrival of Friday: she had no father, no mother, no siblings, no long-standing lover, and no permanent home (her house in Key West being not much more "permanent" than Jeronimo's). When she settled in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares, however, much of this changed. She found, or rather made, a home, found the love which until then had eluded her, and in a sense became, among other things, a mother, helping to raise several children who grew up around her, including the daughter of Mary Morse and one Maria Elizabeth, the cook's daughter, named after Bishop. Even if this period of happiness lasted only "for ten years or so" (458), or "12 or 13" (469), it changed Bishop permanently; her claim to being the "loneliest person who ever lived" was no longer valid. In the wake of Lota's death she was aware that the happy times they had spent together were "a great deal in this unmerciful world" (469), and she was thankful for them.

The change in Bishop's fortunes that occurred in 1951 can be seen in her poetry.

Whereas the early lyric "Love Lies Sleeping" (1935-7) seems to take place in an abyss of lyric loneliness or interiority and ends in what appears to be death, the later just so identified "Crusoe in England," written with the benefit of hindsight, finds humor both in Crusoe's early (abysmal) suicidal tendencies and in his efforts to thwart these tendencies, a humor which is allowed for by the eventual arrival of Friday on the island, an arrival which signals Crusoe's rescue from the abyss and which is therefore far more significant than his eventual "rescue" from the island. I do not mean to imply by this analysis that there is anything like a clear and unmistakable trajectory in Bishop's work from *North & South* to *Geography III*, at least not one which calls for our attention above all other possible trajectories, for certainly there are "sociable" poems in her first volume ("Jeronimo's House," for instance), as well as poems in her final volume in which the abyss is once again confronted.

Bishop's private nature, sprung from her often isolated life, is well documented; it surfaces in her poems, her letters, and her short stories, and is therefore often addressed in criticism. Approaches to it, however, almost always tend to be psycho-biographical, rarely, if ever, epistemological. Wittgenstein's epistemological investigation of privacy, though, when applied to recent studies in lyric theory which posit the ultimate publicity (as opposed to privacy) of the lyric voice, shed light on Bishop's work from a new angle, revealing that its struggle between the potentially dangerous desire for privacy and the need for company and publicity is as philosophical as it is autobiographical. In Bishop's poetry, that is, we

find both the threat of privacy (often in the guise of a yearning for it) and our means of deliverance from it, sometimes intermingled in the same poem ("In the Waiting Room," for instance), a phenomenon which helps illustrate the epistemologically grounded public/private dynamic of the lyric itself.

While John Koethe aptly points out that Wittgenstein's "interlocutory style" is "an intense example of the characteristic mode of the romantic poetic meditation" which is "steeped in interiority" (98), he fails to note that this "*talking to yourself*" is also steeped, and perhaps somewhat more so, in exteriority: the insistence on or necessity of an additional speaker or participant in the language-game even when there isn't one. If "In the Waiting Room" makes palpable, as Koethe maintains, "the idea of a disembodied existence detached from the physical world" (101), it also makes palpable the necessity of a world, and quite a vast one at that, in order for such an idea to occur in the first place.

Chapter two continues the argument concerning privacy with a brief reading of Ashbery's famous (and infamous) "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." From there it builds a case, working from the perspective of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, for the merit of Ashbery's more recent poetry, which occupies itself with, among other things, the variety of functions performed by language (some sensical, others not) and the corresponding interest which our forms of life might exert upon us if we would only investigate them with alacrity.

In the *Investigations* alone Wittgenstein characterizes language as many things: a tool-box containing many tools that aren't clearly associated with one another (a hammer and glue-pot, for example); a system of interlocking and

overlapping games, some of which have strict rules while others apparently have none; a complex, ever-expanding and ever-changing city which we must get to know by walking about in it; and so on. Not only do these characterizations, taken individually, indicate, each in its own way, the complexities of human language, but taken together they also illustrate or enact (or show) those very complexities in action: language is none of these things literally, each of these things figuratively, and, with enough imagination, all of these things collectively. An appreciation for language which takes into account the range and mutability of its workings forestalls foreclosure on this or that picture of it and instead puts a premium on our ability to allow for a variety of interpretations in/of a variety of cases. We establish this premium not in the hope of eventually erecting a Babel-like tower out of our awareness of every possible case, but because language resembles "something," according to Ashbery, "where you see only a partial arc of several events, segments that are supposed to add up to something much less than the sum of their parts, something purposely deficient in meaning" (*Where Shall I Wonder* 53). To be "purposely deficient in meaning" is a paradox by way of which sense and nonsense are revealed less as opposites than as twins whom it is often difficult to tell apart, the result of which is a necessary affirmation of errancy in language, its built-in inability ever to be brought to summation. To endorse a picture of language which admits such an affirmation, we must relinquish our obsession with ends achieved by way of explanation in favor of a stance that is "open to all kinds of interpretations" (13). To make this endorsement involves not a relaxation on our part, where we might say something along the lines of, "Oh, now it can mean anything you want,"

but something quite the opposite of that: an increased vigilance and alertness towards the intricate workings of language (including explanation), an awareness of the manner in which not only poetry but intelligibility itself is grounded in language's incapacity to add up to the sum of its parts. We -- you -- communicate
 for the sake

Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
 For other centers of communication, so that understanding
 May begin, and in so doing be undone. (*Houseboat Days* 46)

That understanding always involves, from its very beginning, its own undoing, is detrimental not so much to philosophical idealism itself as to the particular notion that the ideal affirmed thereby could somehow be accomplished or achieved or realized. As Ashbery says in an essay on Fairfield Porter, "It is not idealism that is dangerous, far from it, but idealism perverted and destroyed by being made 'useful.' Its uselessness is something holy" ("Respect for Things" 11).

With these words of Ashbery in mind (words which recall both Wittgenstein and Derrida), chapter three addresses the subject of ethics as it is found in the poetry of Charles Wright and the philosophy of Wittgenstein, particularly his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics." Wright's ethical imperative is sitting still. Wittgenstein's, not dissimilarly, is silence. And yet Wright moves about quite frequently and freely in his poetry, from California to Montana to Virginia to Italy (and is always moving about associatively in his recollections), while Wittgenstein often enough speaks of ethics, of what constitutes, or would constitute, an ethical pronouncement. Something of the essence of ethics, then, for both Wright and Wittgenstein, lies in

the contradiction of the ethical imperative, a contradiction that enhances more than it threatens that imperative. The grammatical sleight-of-hand involved in formulations such as this impels meaning toward a point of disappearance.

Wright's poetry takes place precisely on this threshold of meaning's evaporation, or its continuous flitting away and then back again, always remaining just beyond reach -- a conception as altogether different from an assertion of meaninglessness or of the arbitrariness of meaning as it is from any naïve confidence in the exactness and/or permanence of meaning. Similarly, Wittgenstein's 1929 lecture attempts to make sense out of a human tendency that is palpably senseless, what he calls the ethical sensibility, the senselessness of which is to be wondered at and even admired, not condemned or dismissed. Thus, Angus Fletcher couldn't be more wrong when he writes in *A New Theory of American Poetry*, "Modern philosophy, for example with Wittgenstein, may see nothing good in the Transcendental, but humans seem to want intercourse with the Ideal and the Idea" (73). Such cursory assessments of Wittgenstein unfortunately still seem to be more the rule than the exception in literary studies, though this state of affairs is improving and hopefully will continue to improve as more people read Perloff, Jost, and Gardner, for instance, and, more importantly, read Wittgenstein himself, the conclusion of whose 1929 lecture clearly implies that humans do, in fact, "seem to want intercourse with the Ideal and the Idea," and that this want is to be respected rather than ridiculed. That we cannot have this intercourse in any direct manner by no means logically implies that there is "nothing good in the Transcendental." That we cannot have it is what makes it, or keeps it, transcendental to begin with, and thus worthy of the

designation "good" at all. For both Wright and Wittgenstein, the goal is to come to terms with what is invisible to language and therefore cannot be come to "terms" with; the goal is the acknowledgment of the impossibility of attaining the goal, an impossibility which, far from rendering the effort ignoble, actually gives the effort its significance. Wright sits in his back yard and looks at, or toward, what he calls the "negative blue" of the sky; he describes what he sees and is thereby put in close contact (or close to contact) with what he can't see, a process described by Kierkegaard in the following manner:

If I imagined two kingdoms bordering each other, one of which I knew rather well and the other not at all, and if however much I desired it I was not allowed to enter the unknown kingdom, I would still be able to form some idea of it. I would go to the border of the kingdom known to me and follow it all the way, and in doing so I would by my movements describe the outline of that unknown land and thus have a general idea of it, although I had never set foot in it. And if this was a labor that occupied me very much, if I was unflaggingly scrupulous, it presumably would sometimes happen that as I stood with sadness at the border of my kingdom and gazed longingly into that unknown country that was so near and yet so far, I would be granted an occasional little disclosure. (*The Essential Kierkegaard* 46)

Wright has been just such an unflaggingly scrupulous tracer of limits, one who sits about in his backyard, engaged in following the borders, awaiting the occasional disclosure of, say, the "chardonnay-colored light-slant" (*Chickamauga* 52) or the "last leaves like live coals / banked in the far corners of the yard" (60).

In his last writings, *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein asks, "Suppose it were forbidden to say 'I know' and only allowed to say 'I believe I know'?" (§366). This epistemological question asks, in essence, what would happen if we conceded to the skeptic's assertion that we can't know anything with certainty, that we should therefore preface any claim to knowledge with the phrase "I believe." While such a concession might placate the skeptic, it does not placate Wittgenstein, for whom it would lead to a sort of infinite regress in which we would have to "believe" that we were correctly using every word we uttered -- and then what of the verb "to believe" itself? The fact of the matter is that when I refer to, say, my hands, according to Wittgenstein, "I use the word 'hand' and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed . . . I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings" (§370). To replace "I know" with "I believe I know" in all cases would thus be nonsensical. So much of what we are uncertain about (including uncertainty in the use of language) rests upon our confidence in our daily use of language, in our mastery of the technique of a language. This confidence and mastery, however, are neither themselves absolute nor predicated upon an absolutist conception of language, but are instead steeped in flexibility, always adapting and responding to a variety of contingencies. The skeptic's doubt is predicated upon a certain confidence in language, but that confidence itself is based not on an absolute ground but on a maneuverable (and always maneuvering) bedrock, even the most minute seismic activity of which we must be alert to if we would position ourselves responsibly to the histories of, say, poetry, philosophy, science, and history itself. The dynamic of language which results from this

activity (both our own activity and that of language itself, the two separate and yet inseparable) is one that posits both constancy and errancy, sedimentation and erosion, secure meaning and uncertainty. In chapter four of this study I examine the various ways in which Jorie Graham explores this dynamic, playing not so much now the skeptic, now the defender of language, but almost always both at the same time.

Of particular interest in the variously eroded and yet confident texts of Graham and Wittgenstein are the ways in which they take up the metaphor of erosion itself, particularly as it can be said to relate to language. In Graham's case, many of her poems either feature, as a setting, shores of one kind or another, or investigate the shores, edges, and beds of language -- and some of her best work uses the former as a metaphor for the latter. Similarly, the most striking passage in *On Certainty* is a series of remarks which likens the layers of our language to the layers of a river, from its slowly shifting bedrock to its swift-moving current. Both Graham and Wittgenstein confirm not only the destructive, disintegrative, and doubt-inspiring force of erosion (how we generally conceive of the phenomenon), but its integrative, or integral, nature, as well, the fact that it is as complementary as it is opposed to sedimentation, that it helps make possible as much as it hinders the course of a river or, metaphorically, the circulation of meaning.

Chapter five looks at the work of two poets, Carl Phillips and Frank Bidart, and establishes connections between their conceptions of both poetics and metaphysics and Wittgenstein's own ideas regarding metaphysics. My primary contention concerning Phillips is that his use of such poetic devices as syntax,

prosody, line break, and enjambment calls attention to, or even exhibits, the ways in which language can be made to accommodate metaphysics without betraying either itself or metaphysics in the process. Wittgenstein often strictly tempers, restrains, and curbs the high-flung attempts of his predecessors and contemporaries to stage articulations of the unsayable, to exert a force or pressure on language which, ultimately, despite any value inherent in the attempt, reduces the endeavor to nonsense masquerading as "philosophy" or "metaphysics." Phillips's poetry, on the other hand, would seem to make attempts of just this sort, but where a philosopher might embark on such a venture with the aim of attaining the truth, a poet, according to John Koethe, "isn't so much concerned to establish the validity of the ideas [he] engages as to *inhabit* them, to enter into an imaginative possibility to see what it feels like and where it leads" (101). This is not to say, of course, that poets necessarily lack or avoid pretensions to truth or that the efforts of philosophers are necessarily recklessly truth-obsessed. For even the most cautious of philosophers or poets can be all attentiveness and yet still make the crucial error of placing more weight on language than language cares to bear, a circumstance which might lead us to believe that it is part of the character of language to tempt us into just such an error, to bewitch us into thinking that our endeavor is preeminently reasonable: "(The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent)" (*PI* §308).

Frank Bidart, much like Wittgenstein, has a highly ambivalent attitude towards metaphysics and the many forms of violence in which it is implicated. By "highly ambivalent" I mean perfectly undecided (and perhaps undecidable), for

Bidart and Wittgenstein are both by turns champions of metaphysics and its besiegers. On one hand, the metaphysical impulse is the commendable and necessary impulse towards the ascertainment of meaning in life. On the other hand, as a presumptuous drive towards truth, metaphysics often ends up embodying or taking part in what Bidart calls "*the ancient hegemony of POWER and PRIESTHOOD*" (*In the Western Night* 212), a phenomenon resulting less from a commendable urge than from variously masked manifestations of "SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS and FANATICISM" (214). Studies in metaphysics, then, are both a potential source of revelation and the means whereby the philosopher, according to Wittgenstein, is led "into complete darkness" (*The Blue and Brown Books* 18). On some occasions we may "stride straight through the thicket of questions out into the open," freed from the charm of our forms of expression, but at other times we will end up wandering "along tortuous or zigzagging paths which don't lead out into the open at all" but instead keep us lost within the enchanted forest (*CV* 80).

IV.

Wittgenstein found explanations of phenomena which would preclude all other explanations dangerous. Even the idea that there could be only multiple explanations, as opposed to descriptions, beliefs, and so on (or that explanations were inherently superior to descriptions and beliefs) troubled him. He found the scientific worldview of the Twentieth Century particularly alarming for just this reason, and wondered if in delivering ourselves over to it we might be falling into a

trap that meant "the beginning of the end for humanity" (CV 56). His own philosophy was thus dedicated to combating certain explanations, theories, preconceptions and conjectures in order to dispel (that is, to break the spell of) the threat of a closed-mindedness masquerading as enlightenment, a closed-mindedness steeped not in ignorance but in a particular sort of knowledge that lacks self-reflexivity, or the ability to recoil from itself.

"The philosopher," said Wittgenstein, "is not a citizen of *any* community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 247). This is as much a political aphorism as it is a philosophical one. The paradox embedded in it is clear: a philosopher both is and isn't (or can't be) a citizen. To be a citizen of no community of ideas means not "inhabiting" any particular set of philosophical, political, or religious assumptions (to name only three categories), or at least doing one's best to prevent such assumptions from lulling one into complacency. There is also a biographical component to the aphorism. Much of Wittgenstein's identity as an Austrian, or Viennese, collapsed with the Hapsburg Empire at the end of World War One. And many years later he only reluctantly became a citizen of England, since his sole alternative at the time was to become a citizen of the Third Reich. His political homelessness, then, which was both forced upon and chosen by him, not only reinforced but also probably caused in some fashion his conviction that an abode of fixed ideas of any kind was no place for a philosopher to take up residence. The philosopher-king, according to Wittgenstein, ruled only over himself.

His restlessness, his self-imposed imperative to be a citizen of no community, led Wittgenstein to change his political outlook as often as he changed the course of his philosophy. In fact, the two, it could easily be argued, were not unconnected. As a soldier in the First World War, Wittgenstein served in the Austro-Hungarian Army, defending the Eastern Front against the Russians. In the Second World War, though, he aided the Allied Powers by working first as a dispensary porter at Guy's Hospital in London and then as a lab assistant in Newcastle. In between, in the 1930s, he seriously considered, and took several steps towards, moving to Stalinist Russia to work as a laborer under the Communist regime (although eventually, the plan fell through). Over this same period of time (roughly three decades), his philosophy "changed sides" as much as he did. Anthony Kenny, one of the premiere Wittgenstein scholars, recounts the following conversation with G. H. von Wright, Wittgenstein's friend and eventual successor at Cambridge: "I asked [von Wright], 'How can people say there are two Wittgensteins? Now that the works of his middle period have been published you have to choose between one Wittgenstein and three.' 'No,' he replied, 'The choice is between one and four: you have forgotten *On Certainty*'" (*Wittgenstein* xx).

If Wittgenstein, then, was held captive from time to time by certain strands of political thought (whether it be nationalist sentiment or flirtation with communism) or by distinct approaches to philosophy (if not distinct philosophies), he was rarely held for very long. His fixations with, endorsements of, and, mostly, resistances to multiple world-historical ideologies ran parallel to the engaging guard he kept up against both the tyrannies of philosophy, and, more fundamentally, the

ever-present threat of bewitchment by language, itself capable of generating and sustaining precisely those ideologies.

Of all the places in which Wittgenstein lived, the philosophical and political aspects of his resistance to "communities of ideas" were most intertwined at Cambridge, where his struggles with the asphyxiating atmosphere of academia were offset, or overcome, only by his ability to, as he phrased it, "manufacture my own oxygen" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 6). It was in academia that his powers of resistance, his ability to sustain himself as a community-less citizen, were tested most strenuously. Over the course of nearly forty years, he attended, left, returned to, taught at, and ultimately gave up his post at Cambridge, having been for the majority of this time uneasy in, if not disgusted by, its confines. Having arrived as a student in 1911, he left for Norway in 1913, looking to escape the pressure to conform which the academic environment exerted upon him. This led to what would become a fifteen-year hiatus in which he performed stints as, among other things, a soldier, a prisoner, a gardener, an elementary school teacher, and an architect. In the 1930s and '40s his appointment at Cambridge was interrupted not only by the Second World War but also by several voluntary retreats to Norway, Wales, and Ireland. And eventually, in 1947, he left the school for good. "Cambridge is a dangerous place," he wrote to von Wright in early 1948. "Will you become superficial? smooth? If you don't you will have to suffer terribly" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 521). Doing one's best to survive as a citizen of no community, then, meant constantly exposing oneself to suffering, refusing to give in and become "superficial" or "smooth." In this view, of course, suffering is a virtue.

When his oldest sister, Hermine, expressed astonishment at Wittgenstein's decision to teach elementary school in rural Austria, he said to her: "You remind me of somebody who is looking out through a closed window and cannot explain to himself the strange movements of a passer-by. He cannot tell what sort of storm is raging out there or that this person might only be managing with difficulty to stay on his feet" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 170). Remaining outside of any community of ideas meant being caught in a storm, and that in turn meant not only suffering but also the need to work up one's own most intense energy solely in order to stay on one's feet. One might engage in such a strenuous struggle in order to maintain or safeguard the spirit of wonder, of openness to ideas and impressions, which characterizes (or once characterized, or ought to characterize) philosophy, a spirit which the imperative for explanation at all costs, for the de-mystification and de-mythologization of all phenomena, would jeopardize were it to go uncombated by individual thinkers the intensity of whose thought was capable of resisting it. Such thinkers, of course, may be found not only in the field of philosophy but in the sciences, as well. In fact, the spirit of scientific explanation which Wittgenstein found so threatening can be found just as easily in philosophy as the philosophical spirit he embraced could be found in the sciences. His own fascination with mathematics and engineering, coupled with his ambivalence towards philosophy, illustrates this point clearly.

The poets covered in this study might be said to similarly embrace the spirit of philosophy as Wittgenstein conceived it. That is, through such strategies as repeated self-correction, structural experimentation, the allowance of semantic

migration, and the interrogation of various traditions, they might be said to submit explanatory principles to difficulties more often than they do the reverse. Again, though, this is not to say that they are "Wittgensteinian" poets. To work in the spirit of Wittgenstein means less to take up the threads of his thought and attempt to follow them as he would have done than to investigate, explore, and ultimately renew, in an earned style of one's own, the uses of human language.

V.

To renew our own wonder in the uses of language is to renew language itself, to keep it from calcifying into a rigid system the operations of which would imprison us in a room the door to which opens, only it does not occur to us to pull instead of push (*CV* 42). But to thus renew language does not necessitate the annihilation of grammar, the invention of a new vocabulary, or an insistence on some other form of deliberate subversion at all costs. Such programs, by virtue of the fact that they are programs, often end by recapitulating in some form the very thing that they set out to combat, namely, the programmatic capacity of language, a capacity which, far from being diametrically opposed to the possibility of error, is in fact steeped in it. Errancy, that is, is already inherent in our language, even in its most programmatic manifestations; no deliberate injection is necessary, or perhaps even possible. Renewal comes from a sensitivity to the already built-in capacity of language to perpetually discover and elude itself.

Given Wittgenstein's awareness of just this dual propensity of language, its ability to consolidate and unravel its own forms, his stylistic peculiarities as a writer

should make sense. The *Tractatus*, despite the rigidity of its claim of having solved all of the problems of philosophy, was ultimately proven to have been eluded by them. Even as the book progressed in its delineation of the nature of propositions, it escaped the clutches of its own ruthless formulations by ultimately announcing, on its final page, their nonsensical form and purely practical purpose. Something similar, though quite opposite, happens in the *Investigations*, where, despite Wittgenstein's repeated insistence on the possibility of multiple approaches to philosophical problems, despite his constant redirections and re-beginnings, despite his steadfast resistance to the offering of a theory, something now referred to as "Wittgenstein's later philosophy" definitely emerges. It is the mark of this philosophy that it both resists its own momentum with the passion of a vigil and yet secures that momentum precisely by virtue of that resistance.

I should like to make a similar claim for this project, but its form (that of a doctoral dissertation) may, in this regard, prove deceptive. Still, the project is written decidedly in the spirit of Wittgenstein, however academic its form may be. By "the spirit of Wittgenstein" I mean, primarily, both resolution and humility in the face of language, a persistent acknowledgment and persual of not only of the limits of language but of the limits of one's own language. Where the academic nature of this project demands a certain form and style, a form and style capable of accommodating a theoretical exposition, the spirit in which the project is written demands that the ultimate tenuousness of such an exposition be acknowledged. In fact, that tenuousness, in this case, is the very subject of the exposition: my readings of the poets in question under the sign of Wittgenstein are not intended as

definitive; instead, they are offered as formulations of connections which I have observed over the course of several years and which I feel might assist readers of any of the principal figures covered. An acknowledgment such as this is by no means an acknowledgment of a shortcoming of the project, but rather an affirmation of what, though it might be perceived as a shortcoming, is in fact a limitation inherent in the nature of the project itself and which is therefore, I feel, not so much to be lamented for rendering impossible any decisive explanation as lauded for keeping other explanations, other approaches, possible. While I perform "readings" of poems within these pages, I recognize that the actual reading of poems (at least for myself) takes place elsewhere, in an environment less marked by academic imperatives than by a need for, say, consolation.

Chapter One

Delicate Subjects: Elizabeth Bishop, Private Languages, and Lyric Theory

[What would] have given me access to that way out of oneself, that connecting road which, though private, opens on to the highway along which passes what we learn to know only from the day when it has made us suffer: the life of other people?
-Marcel Proust, *The Captive*

How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?
-Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room"

I.

"Some of our critics," said Elizabeth Bishop in 1966, "can find something in common between just about anything. Comparing me with Wittgenstein! I've never even read him. I don't know *anything* about his philosophy" (Monteiro 43). In early 1965, however, Bishop, in a postscript to a letter to Robert Lowell, wrote, "I am reading Wittgenstein -- with great difficulty -- 'Philosophical Investigations'" (*Words in Air* 569). It is most likely, I think, that the "great difficulty" brought the project to a premature end, so that Bishop could say not even two years later that she had never even read Wittgenstein, or that her frustration with him led her to simply dissociate herself from his work. It is not inconceivable, though, that in Wittgenstein she saw something quite close to concerns of her own (something, indeed, in common with them), which therefore needed to be resisted more than it needed to be absorbed.

Despite the fact that Bishop was born just 22 years after Wittgenstein, however, it is hard to imagine two people from more disparate worlds. Bishop was an only child who had lost, by the age of five, both of her parents; she was raised by maternal relatives in rural Nova Scotia and by paternal relatives in Massachusetts. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, was the youngest of eight children in one of the wealthiest families of the Austro-Hungarian empire and was raised in the culturally dense milieu of *fin de siecle* Vienna. Nevertheless, it is easy to "find something in common" between the two, or, as Wittgenstein would have it, to "see connexions" between them (*PI* §122).

One could start with the fact that both Wittgenstein and Bishop were obsessed with geographical relocation throughout their lives, whether it be from Austria to England to Norway to Ireland, or from North America to Europe to South America. While Wittgenstein never lived in a single place for more than three years during his twenties and thirties, Bishop was constantly on the move for the first forty years of her life. And what Brian McGuinness says of Wittgenstein could also be said of Bishop, although perhaps with some qualifications: "At every point in his life he was apt to see very clearly the deficiencies of the place where he then happened to be living" (54).

Or one could start with the issue of sexual orientation. While both Wittgenstein and Bishop flirted at some point in their lives with heterosexuality, both were strongly inclined to same-sex relationships and both, as they grew older, developed lasting attachments to and relationships with younger men and women, often (especially in the case of Wittgenstein) students. Bishop, though (and one

could speculate at length on the reasons for this), was more at home with her sexual identity than Wittgenstein, who was often tormented by feelings of guilt.

A shared sexual orientation and a preference for moving one's habitation often, though, do not of themselves form the basis for a critical comparison. But profound methodological resemblances between Wittgenstein and Bishop invite us to consider whether or not such shared biographical details as the two outlined above might have had some influence on their methodologies. Bishop, talking about organized religion in a letter to Richard Wilbur, wrote, "You really don't believe all that stuff. You're just like me. Neither of us has any philosophy. It's all description, no philosophy" (quoted in Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World* 3). While this remark is intended to separate her from various systems of religion and philosophy, it aligns her precisely thereby with Wittgenstein, who, throughout his later writings, emphasized the importance of description in the untangling of philosophical problems: "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (*PI* §109). It is hard to imagine Bishop not endorsing this assertion. Both their emphasis on description and their remarkable capacity for it can perhaps be attributed somewhat to lifestyles which continually placed both Wittgenstein and Bishop in new and unfamiliar surroundings, making accurate observation an imperative. In this case the biographical similarity seems linked to the shared methodology.

One can make a similar claim about both Wittgenstein's and Bishop's same-sex orientation. David Orr, in a *New York Times* review of Bishop's *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-box*, differentiates between difficulty and subtlety: "Difficulty is

straightforward -- you either figure out what's difficult, or you don't ... Subtlety is different, though. Subtlety wants to be missed by all but the chosen few" (April 2, 2006). Orr's point, of course, is that Bishop is more subtle than difficult.

Wittgenstein, in a remark of 1930 on a similar theme, wrote:

Telling someone something he does not understand is pointless, even if you add that he will not be able to understand it. (That so often happens with someone you love.)

If you have a room which you do not want certain people to get into, put a lock on it for which they do not have the key. But there is no point in talking to them about it, unless of course you want them to admire the room from outside!

The honourable thing to do is to put a lock on the door which will be noticed only by those who can open it, not by the rest. (CV 8)

The final sentence echoes Orr's point about subtlety, and although Wittgenstein is speaking here of the spirit of his philosophical work and not about sexuality, the parenthetical remark in the first paragraph (as well as the reference to secret rooms) suggests that the latter is not entirely disconnected from the former. Both Wittgenstein and Bishop have a penchant for putting their most striking -- and often most crucial -- remarks in parentheses, themselves secret rooms of a sort in which one may conceal -- conspicuously or inconspicuously -- pertinent aspects of one's own identity and/or ideas.

Stanley Cavell has said that in Wittgenstein's later philosophy words "are to be led home, as from exile" (82), a condensation of the following remark from

Philosophical Investigations:

When philosophers use a word -- "knowledge," "being," "object," "I," "proposition," "name" -- and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?--

What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (§116)

This aspect of Wittgenstein's thought is connected with his emphasis on description in the sense that describing the ways in which words are used constitutes his method for dissolving philosophical problems, problems created by ingenious but often ill-founded metaphysical speculations. Bishop, in her own predilection for description, can also be seen as bringing words home, and for Bishop, of course, the very idea of "home" is a repeatedly explored poetic theme (see, for instance, the poems "Jeronimo's House," "Sestina," and "The End of March," to name only three). Robert Lowell has famously commemorated the painstaking efforts Bishop took to provide admirable stanzas, or rooms, for the words of her poems: "Do / you still hang your words in air, ten years / unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps / or empties for the unimaginable phrase--" (595). The price one pays for finding perfect homes (for oneself or for words) is long periods ("ten years") of homelessness, or of being glued to an expedient board. While we cannot say anything about how Wittgenstein may have reacted to Bishop's poetry, he certainly

would have respected such caution in word choice. In fact, Wittgenstein comes eerily close to Lowell's description of Bishop's practice in the following remarks:

The familiar physiognomy of a word, the feeling that it has taken up its meaning into itself, that it is an actual likeness of its meaning ... How are these feelings manifested among us?-- By the way we choose and value words.

How do I find the 'right' word? How do I choose among words? Without doubt it is sometimes as if I were comparing them by fine differences of smell: *That* is too....., *that* is too....., --*this* is the right one. (PI II.xi, 218)

In "The Map" Bishop describes how peninsulas "take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 3). In addition to functioning as a metaphor for careful word choice that echoes Wittgenstein's remarks above, these lines highlight two others facets of Bishop's poetry which can also be found in Wittgenstein's philosophy: an emphasis on geography and a striking gift for simile.

A glance at the titles of Bishop's four volumes of poems serves to illustrate the importance of geography in her work: *North & South*, *A Cold Spring*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*. Only the second volume's title is not overtly geographical, and yet *A Cold Spring* contains some of Bishop's finest "geographical" poems, most notably "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance." Wittgenstein, too, considered his writing in terms of geography and such related concepts as terrain and landscape. In the preface to the *Investigations*

he refers to his remarks as "sketches of landscapes" made in the course of "long and involved journeyings" (v), and in his lectures he likened himself to

a guide showing you how to find your way around London. I have to take you through the city from north to south, from east to west, from Euston to the embankment and from Piccadilly to the Marble Arch. After I have taken you many journeys through the city, in all sorts of directions, we shall have passed through any given street a number of times -- each time traversing the street as part of a different journey. At the end of this you will know London; you will be able to find your way about like a born Londoner.

(quoted in Monk, *Duty of Genius* 502)

Himself a Viennese, Wittgenstein, as an adult, had to learn to find his way about London. Again the facts of his biography can be seen to have led to a significant (and famous) formulation from the *Investigations*: "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (§49). And if Wittgenstein's various topographical sketches and albums of routes seem more transient than Bishop's map, that is perhaps due to the fact that maps, like the lichen of "The Shampoo," simply change more slowly over time; still, though, they, too, are always only drafts. Bishop's use of a map of North and South America by the 16th century cartographer Sebastian Munster for the cover of *Questions of Travel* illustrates this point. The map-maker, like the tour guide, is trying to give us a sense of the extents and limits of our world.

Bishop's capacity for striking similes is well-documented. "The Fish," to take an early poem as an example, is built almost entirely on simile; the creature,

caught by the poet, avoids being captured in all but a literal sense by virtue of so many of its features being like other things and therefore somewhat elusive. That the poet lets the fish go at the end of the poem is therefore an appropriate gesture, for she never fully possesses it. Jeredith Merrin goes so far as to make the case that Bishop's preference for simile over metaphor indicates an "un-Wordsworthian sense of the limits of imagination" (96). With this in mind, one might say of Wittgenstein that his own preference for simile as opposed to metaphor corresponds to his sense of the limits of language. While such generalizations must be taken cautiously for what they imply rather than for what they literally say, one cannot doubt the importance that simile plays in the writing of both Wittgenstein and Bishop; in its insistence on both likeness and difference, simile is an indispensable tool when it comes to keeping the mind alert and well-tuned. Having gone back to Norway in 1936 and hearing that G. E. Moore and Rush Rhees were having difficulty writing in Cambridge, Wittgenstein wrote to Moore, "One can't drink wine while it ferments, but that it's fermenting shows that it isn't dishwater . . . You see I still make beautiful similes" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 363). While the "like" which links the writing process to wine-making is submerged here, it is a simile nonetheless, and a rather self-congratulatory one at that: making beautiful similes is a sign that the mind is working, that the wine is, in a sense, fermenting.

In the early 1930s Wittgenstein wrote, "I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*" (CV 24). Part of the gist of this statement is that to write philosophy as if it were poetic composition is to remove philosophy from its pedestal of

pretension whereby it conceives itself as that discipline capable of ascertaining a context-independent truth. Poetry, by way of contrast, is more an experiment in subjectivity, not necessarily unconcerned with truth or questions of truth but not presumptuous to the point of claiming to have discovered the ground of all things, either. To thus take philosophy down a peg was also to lend it more credibility, not unlike the way in which a word has its meaning restored to it when it is brought back from its metaphysical to its ordinary uses. Wittgenstein, however, did not imply by his assertion that he himself was writing poetry but rather that he was "someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do." Philosophy, that is, *ought* to be written this way. His own philosophy, though, was perhaps but a bridge whereby philosophy in general could cross over to poetry. And while Bishop would likely have scoffed at the notion of her "poetic compositions" *as* philosophy, the similarities between her and Wittgenstein outlined above call at least, I think, for further investigation of her as a poet writing philosophy as a poetic composition.

Bishop's claim that she'd never read Wittgenstein is, in addition to being false, largely immaterial, especially since Wittgenstein did not want to found a school, did not want to be imitated, and was uneasy at the prospect of disciples: "I am by no means sure," he wrote in 1947, "that I should prefer a continuation of my work by others to a change in the way people live which would make all these questions superfluous" (CV 61). And in a related comment of the same year he said, "I ought never to hope for more than the most indirect influence" (CV 62). This disdain for imitation, along with a preference for indirection, cautions us

(obliquely, appropriately) against the establishment of what Marjorie Perloff calls a Wittgensteinian poetics, or against the use of the word "Wittgensteinian" at all.

Perloff's elucidation of Wittgenstein's philosophy in a literary context in

Wittgenstein's Ladder is, however, illuminating. His thought, she says, "is charged with drama: we witness its continuous unfolding" (79). It unfolds, we might say, in the way that a landscape one is moving through unfolds: one thing presents itself after another, different and yet related to what precedes and what comes after it.

Consider §§151-163 of the *Investigations*: they begin with the words *but; but; we are trying; but wait; thus; this will become clearer if; consider the following case; but; but; but imagine the following case; and remember too; let us try the*

following; and again, but. Paragraphs within these same remarks begin with *let us imagine; or again; or; or; now; now; if; we also say; but I want to say; if; or; but; but; or again;* and once more, *but.* These conjunctions are not the joints of a static logic; they are charged with the drama of difference and connection and sometimes even with agony.

Parallel to Wittgenstein's "charged" and "unfolding" thought is Bishop's preference for what she called both a "cumulative effect" (*One Art* 11) and a "proliferal style" (71), where cases spawn endlessly like the islands of Crusoe's nightmare. In contrast to the limited number of poems she published in her lifetime (fewer than a hundred), Bishop's poems themselves are marked by a variety of forms of proliferation, whether it be proliferation of simile (as in "The Fish"), proliferation of place (as in "Over 2,000 Illustrations," which also obviously features proliferation in its title), proliferation of vegetation (as in "Brazil, January

1, 1502"), or proliferation of loss (as in "One Art"). Throughout her poetry she frequently uses "but" and "and" to mark what are often simultaneously stops and starts; it is a business of fitful exfoliation. Perhaps the most notable instance of proliferation in Bishop's poetry, though, comes in the epigraph to *Geography III*, where questions from a school primer follow one another quicker than we can answer them: "*In what direction is the Volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait? The Mountains? The Isthmus? What is in the East? In the West? In the South? In the North? In the Northwest? In the Southeast? In the Northeast? In the Southwest?*" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 148). There is both anxiety and a sense of inexhaustability here. "We do the most various things with our sentences," says Wittgenstein. "Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions" (*PI* §27). And he goes on, like Bishop, to list with both anxiety and a sense of wonder, such exclamations as *Water!*, *Away!*, *Ow!*, and *Help!*

Closely allied to Bishop's "proliferal style" is her desire to portray, in the words of W. M. Croll (whom she was reading in 1933) "not a thought, but a mind thinking" (*One Art* 12). Certainly Wittgenstein provides us with heavy doses of just this (see the example two paragraphs above), while in Bishop's poetry it is often more subtly portrayed. Consider the following two lines from "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 72-3), in which Bishop is describing Brazilian flora: "big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves"; "purple, yellow, two yellows, pink." In the first line we see the leaves as the poet sees them, first big, then little, then giant; we are not presented with a scientifically ordered classification in which they are arranged by size from smallest to largest or the other way around. There is

a palpable but muted surprise in the appearance of the giant leaves; we catch the mind in the moment of "the ardor of [the idea's] conception" (*One Art* 12). In the second line we see the same sense of immediacy of experience illustrated more clearly. The difference between "purple, two yellows, pink" and "purple, yellow, two yellows, pink" is significant insofar as the latter line portrays more clearly "a mind thinking" as opposed to a retrospectively ordered observation.

II.

To some, the main justification for the 2006 publication of the uncollected poems, drafts, and fragments which make up *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-box* is Bishop's own interest in the mind in the act of thinking. While Bishop herself exquisitely portrays this act within her poems, the publication of her unfinished work would, arguably, allow readers to see another facet of this dynamic process. Not all people, though, have felt this way. Helen Vendler, in particular, felt that the volume betrayed Bishop, and Motoko Rich, in a *New York Times* article on the controversy which ensued after its publication, quoted Tree Swenson of the Academy of American Poets: "[Bishop] was . . . an enormously private person," and her sense of privacy would likely have her "turning over in her grave" at the publication of fragments and drafts. Many readers and scholars, however, nevertheless want, according to Marcella Veneziale in a review published a fortnight later in Vassar's *Miscellany News*, "a glimpse into the workings of this private writer's mind."

Several of the "poems" in the *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-box* (two of which I shall consider here), provide us with glimpses of Bishop's relatively lonely

childhood. "Where are the dolls who loved me so..." is a lament for the disappearance of the poet's childhood companions, her dolls:

Their stoicism I never mastered
 their smiling phrase for every occasion--
 They went their rigid little ways

To meditate in trunks or closets
 To let [life and] unforeseen emotions
 glance off their glazed complexions (102)

The dolls' "love" for the speaker is both contrasted and associated with their mechanical "stoicism," their "rigid little ways" which the speaker herself cannot so much attain as attempt to emulate and ultimately fail to master. Bishop, wracked from early childhood by "unforeseen emotions" (see, for instance, the short story "Gwendolyn"), had reason to envy the stoicism of the dolls, the glazed shields of their faces. Whereas the dolls were hardly affected by the calamities of life, Bishop, unable to master the withdrawal of an automaton, was sorely beset by them. The removal of the dolls to trunks and closets, where they go to "meditate," might bring Descartes to mind, who, in the preface to *Meditations on First Philosophy*, writes, "I would not encourage anyone to read these pages unless they are willing and able to meditate with me seriously and to detach their minds from the senses and simultaneously from all prejudices, and I know that there are few such readers" (13). Certainly Bishop's dolls would have qualified for the job.

"Salem Willows" (*Edgar Allan Poe* 164-5) evokes a similar scene of a child left alone with non-human playmates. This time the solitary child rides the golden lion of a carousel while her aunt Maud waits for her and knits. Again, the poem is cast as a lament: Bishop uses the word "gold" or a variation thereof nine times in the first three stanzas, recalling with longing the passing of the fabulous experience of riding the merry-go-round: "Were we all touched by Midas? / Were we a ring of Saturn, a dizzy, [turning] nimbus?" Just as she aligned herself with her dolls in the earlier poem, so here she aligns herself, or tries to align herself, with the "other golden creatures" of the carousel. Eventually, though, "The carrousel slows down," and the child must return to her aunt, leaving behind its "sumptuously, slowly" spinning world, along with its decidedly un-sumptuous "coarse, mechanical music," whereby the appeal of stoic automatism is once again elicited. While Bishop inevitably outgrew the world of dolls and golden creatures, then, she nevertheless maintained a strong affection for and envy of its hermetically sealed psychological parameters.

The date for the events of "Salem Willows" is 1919, when Bishop would have been eight (*Edgar Allan Poe* 351). The action of "In the Waiting Room" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 149-51) takes place a year earlier and reveals that the episode of the merry-go-round belonged to a world that was already, to a significant extent, lost, even as it happened. Having heard her aunt (Consuelo, not Maud) cry in pain from within the dentist's chamber, the young girl is suddenly and unexpectedly inaugurated into an awareness of the precariousness of her own existence: "Without thinking at all / I was my foolish aunt, / I -- we -- were falling,

falling." The child here identifies neither with dolls nor with golden creatures, but with another human being. And what provokes the revelation is not an admirable stoicism or the pride of the lion, but instead "an *oh!* of pain / -- Aunt Consuelo's voice -- / not very loud or long." The child riding the carousel a year later, then, may already be too old for such games, stubbornly, though understandably, persisting in the perpetuation of an innocent state.

That the speaker of "In the Waiting Room" identifies with her aunt's "*oh!*" of pain brings up the longstanding issue in philosophy of the pain of others and to what extent one person can know another person's pain. Wittgenstein's contribution to this issue is unique, for he rejects the assumption of empirical privacy (based on which only I can know my own pain, reading it off from internal evidence to which no one else has access) not as incorrect but as nonsensical. The assumption, that is, is based less on faulty reasoning in need of correction than on a grammatical error in the misapplication of the verb "to know." In the *Investigations* he conducts the following dialogue:

In what sense are my sensations *private*?-- Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.-- In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word "to know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain.-- Yes, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself!-- It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean -- except perhaps that I *am* in pain? (§246)

This remark constitutes part of the "private language argument," the effect of which, says Ray Monk, "was to have undone 300 years of Cartesianism" (*How to Read Wittgenstein* 89). The word "undone" is important here, because it is not the word "refuted." In the *Meditations* Descartes was attempting to refute skepticism by proving the certainty of such propositions as "I exist" and "God exists." In the sixth meditation he writes, "From the fact alone that I know that I exist and that, at the same time, I notice absolutely nothing else that belongs to my nature apart from the single fact that I am a thinking thing, I correctly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing" (62). The result of this conclusion is the misconception of the mind as a private entity, itself similar to the misconception that pain is a private sensation. Wittgenstein's unique endeavor was not to refute either skepticism or Cartesianism but to "undo" the entanglements into which both have placed us. He aims to show us the nonsensical character not only of thoroughgoing skepticism but also, by extension, of the Cartesian attempt to refute something which doesn't make sense in the first place. Anthony Kenny, in agreement with Monk, thus says, "In philosophy of mind, the importance of Wittgenstein in history arises from his exposure of confusion which philosophy inherited from Descartes" ("Wittgenstein on the Nature of Philosophy" 26). Taking up the issue of thought in much the same way he takes up the issue of pain, Wittgenstein says:

I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking.

It is correct to say "I know what you are thinking", and wrong to say "I know what I am thinking."

(A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar.)

(*PI* II.xi, 222)

What immediately stands out here is, of course, the parenthetical remark. That 300 years of Cartesian confusion can be undone by or condensed into a drop of grammar recalls Nietzsche's notion of philosophy as a lamentable history of by no means unavoidable errors. What Wittgenstein's dissolution (again, not refutation) of the Cartesian problem obviates is the conception of the mind as a sealed, self-sufficient thinking entity. "If Descartes' innovation was to identify the mental with the private," writes Kenny, "Wittgenstein's contribution was to separate the two" ("Cartesian Privacy" 361-2). In proposition 6.51 of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had written, "Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked" (107). Kenny is correct in asserting that "the program of the private language argument can be well summed up "by this particular proposition (*Wittgenstein* 142). What the proposition accomplishes is a dramatic shift in focus in the history of philosophy, as a result of which philosophical problems are no longer to be solved via metaphysical assertions but rather dissolved via perspicuous representations which expose the frequent misconstruals often embedded in philosophical discourse.

One of the "clouds" of philosophy which concerns Wittgenstein is epistemology. His contention is that it is nonsensical to say "only I know I am having this pain" or "I know what I am thinking," either of which presupposes the existence of a private mind which, despite a complete absence of available criteria, is sure of the certainty of what it knows, of what it is somehow able to read off from

itself. This presupposition eventually becomes an epistemological cloud that covers entire centuries, the condensation of which into a drop of grammar is, Wittgenstein maintains, akin to "the treatment of an illness" (*PI* §255). If the illness consists of a Cartesian delusion concerning the mind's private existence, Wittgenstein's therapeutic drop takes the form of placing a grammatical emphasis on propositions previously thought to have been empirical, a presupposition perhaps forced on philosophy by way of the natural sciences but one which ultimately generates not "scientific" results but instead nonsense. "*This* is what disputes between Idealists, Solipsists and Realists look like," writes Wittgenstein. "The one party attacks the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being" (*PI* §402). What happens here is a sort of philosophical shadow boxing; nothing, according to Wittgenstein, actually gets accomplished in this manner, except perhaps the inducement of a fever.

"What took me / completely by surprise," says the speaker of "In the Waiting Room," "was that it was *me*: / my voice, in my mouth." Through a reflexive act the child, knowing from the "*oh!*" that her aunt is in pain, becomes aware of her own capacity for such exposure to the world. She does not "know" that she herself is in pain, but instead becomes aware of her own capacity for pain through knowing that her aunt has just experienced it. Far from pain being something private, then, something that only the person who experiences it can know the reality of, our own capacity for pain actually depends on the capacity of other people for it, otherwise we could not call it "pain." The child does not

consider herself a self-contained thinking thing capable of identifying, independently of the world, private sensations and thoughts (her revelation, in fact, occurs "without thinking at all"). Instead, her awareness of her own individual existence is caught up with the existence of her aunt: "I -- we -- were falling, falling." Obviously, the "I" comes first, but the "we" that follows is a corrective which replaces as much as it succeeds the "I." Both the duplication of "we" in "were" and the repetition of "falling" emphasize an insistence on plurality.

The speaker's sense of simultaneous isolation and participation (or of isolation through participation) is further expressed in the now famous opening lines of the second stanza:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.

I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.

But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.

Why should you be one, too?

Having unexpectedly inherited, in the public domain of a dentist's office, the susceptibility to existential vertigo, the child resorts first to counting, a mechanical, automatic activity which recalls her attempt to master the stoicism of her dolls. As

she failed to ever master that stoicism, though, so she fails here, in that counting proves unsuccessful; the child feels, both acutely and helplessly, that she is falling off the world. Talking to herself, counting, insisting on an incontrovertible fact (her birthday) -- none of this helps. She cannot help feeling that she is each in a series of things, things which seem both suddenly strange and seemingly incompatible. That she is an "I," an "*Elizabeth*," and "one of *them*," all at the same time, furthers her sense of being torn between being both herself and her aunt ("or anyone," as she says later in the poem). The sense of "You are an *I*" is undermined by its impossible identification of one's self as an other; the sense of "you are an *Elizabeth*" is undermined by the implication of something that sounds disconcertingly mechanical, as if "Elizabets" were but a certain make and model of human being; and "You are one of *them*" both revises and repeats the problem of the first proposition (how can the second person be either the first *or* the third?) in addition to echoing the immediately preceding one ("*them*" being not necessarily people but perhaps Elizabeths, or just People-in-a-Waiting-Room). The question with which the passage ends, "*Why* should you be one, too?" caps the difficulty of reconciling singularity with plurality in the pairing, "one, too," whereby we are brought back, after a series of attempts at naming, to the counting with which the passage began, though this is a markedly different form of counting, one steeped not in a desire for reassurance but in sheer bewilderment.

In *Becoming a Poet*, David Kalstone says, "For Bishop, the actual existences that lie outside the self -- geography, other minds, the world as prior creation -- are like rafts, respite and rescue from guilt" (246). "In the Waiting Room," though,

depicts an experience in which these "rafts" of "actual existences that lie outside the self" have been punctured and thus rendered temporarily unserviceable. As a result, the child slides "beneath a big black wave, / another, and another," utterly defenseless against this brief onslaught of angst brought on by the self-reflexive identification of herself as her aunt. When a young student at the University of Washington asked Bishop if she thought he had too many defenses, she responded: "Too *many*? Can one ever have *enough* defenses?" (Monteiro 44). The child of "In the Waiting Room" has not yet acquired the adult's (or poet's) means of keeping the abyss at bay, not that these means are themselves always sufficient, or "enough," as the propulsion towards breakdown in a poem like "One Art" makes abundantly clear.

Bonnie Costello says of the helpless child in "In the Waiting Room": "She clings to the cover [of the *National Geographic* magazine] as to the rung of a ladder which has come loose from the structure supporting it. The bits and pieces of the personal . . . no longer have much meaning" ("The Impersonal and the Interrogative" 112). Jeredith Merrin echoes Costello's assertion of the loss of meaning when she says, "This is a terribly odd landscape, in which people -- by a sort of violent synecdochical reduction -- are seen only as agglomerations of physical parts or of objects" (49). She refers to the following lines:

I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
-- I couldn't look any higher --

at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.

In the second meditation Descartes looks outside his window at people below him on the street: "But what do I see apart from hats and coats, under which it may be the case that there are automata hidden? Nonetheless, I judge that they are people" (29). Something similar is happening at this point in the poem, only where Descartes is secure in concluding that what could be automata are in fact people, the young girl is virtually paralyzed by the very thought that people could perhaps be something other than what they are (or that what they are is by no means clear). Bishop's attributing to automata (dolls, carousel figures) human feelings such as love is, in "In the Waiting Room," frighteningly reversed. The idea that what humans are is uncertain (and that she is one of them) keeps the girl from regarding those surrounding her; instead, gripped by fear, she looks high enough only to see "shadowy gray knees" and "different pairs of hands," strange objects divorced from their usual contexts that, as a result of this divorce, suddenly present a menacing aspect. Helen Vendler is thus perfectly right to call the dramatic action of the poem a "guerilla attack of the alien" ("Domestication, Domesticity" 37), where the alien potentially waits for us around every corner, in every room. It perhaps makes more sense, however, to speak of a bombardment here, for nowhere was the metamorphosis by subtraction outlined above more gruesomely realized than in the attrition philosophy enacted in trench warfare, the horrors of which had been

sufficiently brought home to Massachusetts by 1918. Looked at from a certain angle, then, the passage above reads more like a description of a World War One battlefield than of a dentist's waiting room. Even the "skirts" and "lamps" seem to refer to battle tactics and searchlights. The horrors of trench warfare undoubtedly produced innumerable instances of people scarcely daring to look at what it was they were or had become, and what, anyway, were the trenches themselves but awful waiting rooms from which one heard the cries of pain of others? Indeed, Alan Moorehead describes waiting in the trenches during the evacuation of the Galipoli peninsula thus: "One simply waited for the summons and it was absurdly like the atmosphere of a dentist's waiting room" (Hannah 66).

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says: "I can easily imagine someone always doubting before he opened his front door whether an abyss did not yawn behind it, and making sure about it before he went through the door (and he might on some occasion prove to be right)" (§86). Of course, the child in the poem isn't, like Wittgenstein's imagined person, always expecting the presence of the abyss; instead, it catches her off guard and therefore at a considerable disadvantage. That one should be able to recover from such an ambush at all seems "unlikely," to use the word which the girl employs to describe the fact of her -- our -- own existence. How *does* the child recover from this attack? It evaporates as unexpectedly as it descended. The child's abrupt recovery of her senses, "Then I was back in it," is just as abrupt and inexplicable as Crusoe's removal from his island ("And then one day they came and took us off"). In this regard it hardly feels like a return to safety, just as Crusoe's return to England is hardly a rescue. To "be back in it," in fact,

sounds more like a return to the front line after a leave of absence than a removal from harm's way. One's security is relative, and the abyss is just as likely to lurk inside the front door as beyond it. The child is brought back from the edge of the world to the surroundings of war, Worcester, "night and slush and cold," hardly an encouraging improvement. Knowledge that the abyss can open anywhere, that it can suddenly yawn in front of us even in ostensibly harmless conditions (after all, we usually go to the dentist to have gaps filled, not created), permanently alters the disposition of the mind, lending to it that form of self-reflexivity which, when cultivated, proves integral to both poetry and philosophy.

III.

The figure of Robinson Crusoe looms large behind Wittgenstein's private language argument. Crusoe, alone on an island for over twenty years, is Descartes' *res cogitans* played out on a geographical scale. His island is his cloister, and he is alone on it with his thoughts. His language, it seems, must therefore be private. However, as Saul A. Kripke notes, "The falsity of the private model need not mean that a *physically isolated* individual cannot be said to follow rules; rather that an individual, *considered in isolation* (whether or not he is physically isolated), cannot be said to do so" (110). Crusoe, by virtue of being isolated on an island, is therefore no more necessarily a practitioner of a private language than someone who is isolated in New York City (as Bishop often was). The fact that he was raised in England, brought up in a specific culture the rules and customs of which he had mastered, implies that he is just as well grounded in a form of life as anyone else

similarly raised. His isolation on the island over the course of many years would likely weaken his grasp on some of the rules and customs which his language in part constitutes, so that his language itself would deteriorate somewhat (the books he has read, in Bishop's version, become "full of blanks," for instance), but his eventual return to England provides him with the opportunity to reacquaint himself with any regulations which he has forgotten or abused and so enables him to write the narrative which we read. Even were he not to return to England, however, but instead to stay on the island for the rest of his life and never encounter Friday or any other human being, he could still never be said to practice a private language. He might come closer to it asymptotically, so to speak, but the line connecting him to his culture could only become thinner thereby; it would not break. Eventually the gaps in his understanding and use of words might lead to what we would recognize (could we observe him) as a form of derangement, but never would his language become private in the sense that only he could understand his words, regardless of whether or not anyone was observing him. His lack of criteria for the use of his words would result not in a private language but only in an increasingly dysfunctional one.

The bedrock of the private language argument consists in the fact that no matter how many big, black waves wash over us, we remain "in it" (the waiting room, the world) via what Wittgenstein says "has to be accepted, the given ... *forms of life*" (*PI* II.xi 226), and what he elsewhere refers to as our "inherited background" (*OC* §94). If the techniques of counting and naming are from time to time rendered temporarily incapable of fending off the threat of the abyss, the abyss itself cannot

engulf a human being entirely save in death. Inauguration into forms of life (which occurs whenever one human is born of another) precludes this. Even Descartes, despite his deliberate withdrawal into the chamber of his mind and room, inhabited and acknowledged the day-to-day world of his surroundings on a daily basis: "Familiar beliefs return constantly and, almost in spite of me, they seize hold of my judgement as if it were bound to them by established custom and the law of familiarity" (21). While for Descartes this return of familiar beliefs is a nuisance, for Crusoe it is a lifeline; alone on his island, he recreates a home from the scant materials which he has salvaged from the sunken ship and which represent "established custom and the law of familiarity."

Bishop's Crusoe's "miserable philosophy," the only one of his "island industries" for which he feels no deep affection, could have served as a motto for Wittgenstein. In 1942 he wrote, "A man will be *imprisoned* in a room with a door that's unlocked and opens inward; as long as it does not occur to him to *pull* rather than push it" (CV 42). This simple and yet dramatic adjustment is, as it were, the adjustment that Descartes failed to make in his confrontation with skepticism. Wittgenstein's slow cure for the dilemma is to bring the words (of both the skeptics and Descartes) back to the language games in which they have homes, to rescue them from the misery of metaphysical exile. Bishop's Crusoe is no philosopher, but merely one who parenthetically remarks that he'd "time enough to play with names." Like Defoe's Crusoe, he has opted to tell us his story, but what he tells us is not a tale inflated by religious and metaphysical flight (removed from Descartes' *Meditations* by less than a century), but just description. In a 1977 interview with

George Starbuck, Bishop recounted her experience of reading Defoe's narrative and subsequently writing her own poem: "I had forgotten it was so moral. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to re-see it with all that left out" (Monteiro 88). The result, of course, is a much shorter piece of writing, the focus of which is neither metaphysics nor religion but rather the issue or question of what constitutes a home (or prison).

"Put a man in the wrong atmosphere," writes Wittgenstein, "and nothing will function as it should. He will seem unhealthy in every part. Put him back into his proper element and everything will blossom and look healthy" (CV 42). What happens with Crusoe is that he gets put into the "wrong atmosphere" (the island) and nothing functions as it should; his surroundings are strange and largely incomprehensible and he lacks human company. Over time, however, the island atmosphere transforms itself into the proper element, and everything blossoms and looks healthy (for Bishop's Crusoe this blossoming occurs both with Friday's arrival -- "he had a pretty body" -- and in retrospect, when he realizes how much he misses what initially "got on [his] nerves"). When he returns to England, then, the situation reverses itself: now *this* is the "wrong atmosphere" in which nothing functions and in which Crusoe seems "unhealthy in every part": he is bored, old, and decrepit; his knife won't look at him anymore; his goatskin trousers are moth-eaten; and his handmade parasol "looks like a plucked and skinny fowl." His question, "How can anyone want such things?" makes sense until we remember that museums specialize in precisely this sort of removal of things from their natural environments. That is, Crusoe's things, placed in a museum, become not unlike

animals on exhibit in a zoo, words shut up in the pages of a dictionary, or thoughts retrospectively ordered into a systematized philosophy.

"Crusoe in England" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 151-6) follows "In the Waiting Room" in *Geography III*. There are several similarities between the two poems: they are both, in their own ways, autobiographical dramatic monologues; both feature volcanoes, waves, and other geographical wonders; both display an obsession with counting on the part of the narrator ("three days / and you'll be seven years old," "I had fifty-two / miserable small volcanoes"); and both concern themselves with the human response to the sense of disorientation which our metaphysical homelessness occasionally imposes on us. In "In the Waiting Room" the child suddenly loses her footing and finds herself falling; in "Crusoe in England" Crusoe loses his footing upon being shipwrecked, regains and refashions it over the course of many years, and then loses it again once he gets back to where he originally had it. This issue of orientation is tied up closely with the question of language, and, not surprisingly, both poems address this connection. The child in the dentist's waiting room, having had a sense of her own mortality sprung on her by her aunt's cry of pain, says, "How -- I didn't know any / word for it -- how 'unlikely'..." And Crusoe, all of the books he has read "full of blanks," finds himself trying to recite Wordsworth to his "iris-beds" (which are in fact snail shells):

"They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?

One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up.

In the first poem we see the child encountering the limits of language; her epiphany has had a disorienting effect on her, and her attempts to characterize it, to formulate it, meet with frustration. She cannot think of a word to describe "How I had come to be here, / like them." The word hit upon, "unlikely," is both the inadequate best effort of the child and Bishop's own choice of word for the poem (which means, given her practice of hanging words out to dry, that it is wholly adequate). Bishop, in fact, given her already noted penchant for simile, could not have found a better word than "unlikely" to get at the sense of being cut off from the world of things (where one thing is always like another and thereby oriented to its surroundings) and being suddenly placed in a vortex of alien objects, one of which is the self. The word, then, which the child comes up with is in fact the right word for what she is trying to describe, validated several decades later by the poet.

In the case of *Crusoe* we see not a child encountering the limits of language for the first time, but an older man in some ways losing his grip on language while in other ways retaining it. He chastises himself for not having known enough of something, "Greek drama or astronomy." The result of his ignorance is, naturally, that his knowledge is riddled with gaps, and, presumably, the longer he stays on the island, the greater the gaps become. He cannot remember the next word in Wordsworth's poem, which is, comically, "solitude." But *Crusoe's* own solitude is not exactly "blissful," and nor was Bishop's own frequent sense of being alone in the world. After over two decades on the island, *Crusoe* finally returns to England, and one of the first things he does is look up the missing word that has been tormenting him, thus beginning the process of both filling in the blanks in his

reading and closing the gaps in his knowledge, the process, that is, of reorientation. Wittgenstein poses the following question: "(Ask yourself: 'What would it be like if human beings *never* found the word that was on the tip of their tongue?')" (*PI* II.xi 219). Bishop's Crusoe eventually does find, or recover, the word, but he goes without it for several years, the result of which is that things get on his nerves so much that he begins to identify with the surrounding volcanoes "with their heads blown off."

While Crusoe cannot remember the word from Wordsworth's poem (a small itch that could quickly become maddening), though, his capacity for language nevertheless remains largely intact on the island. He recounts, for example, the following instance: "With my legs dangling down familiarly / over a crater's edge, I told myself / 'Pity should begin at home.'" While on one hand the young the girl of "In the Waiting Room" is terrified by the existential abyss, figured for her by the image of a live volcano in a magazine, on the other hand, Crusoe, as it were on site and at home in that setting, lets his legs dangle "familiarly / over a crater's edge" while carrying on conversations with himself and playing with names (he "christens" one of his volcanoes "*Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*"), indications of a freedom of movement despite being on the verge of a precipice (though it helps, of course, that Crusoe's volcanoes are "small" and "dead," unlike those featured in the *National Geographic*). While many of Crusoe's practices on the island would surely strike us as strange, perhaps even as indications of insanity (or despair), were they performed in the midst of a city (reciting poetry to snail shells, for instance, and insisting that those snail shells are iris-beds), they are rendered quite sensible

given the circumstance of being isolated on the island; that is, Crusoe talks to himself and recites poetry to inanimate objects to counter his physical isolation (and, in a way, to preserve hope) in the same way that the young Bishop depended on her dolls for company. Philosophical privacy may have encroached upon Crusoe, but it could only have done so in the manner of the overlapping rollers which encroach upon the beach: "closing and closing in, but never quite."

IV.

Both "In the Waiting Room" and "Crusoe in England" recount experiences that take place at a point of tension between privacy and publicity, experiences concerning, among other things, the relationship between human beings and language. In her introduction to *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry*, Helen Vendler recounts how clear it is to her that "the traditional lyric desires a stripping-away of the details associated with a socially specified self in order to reach its desired all-purpose abstraction" (3). "The portion of life it undertakes to represent," she says later, is "the life that the soul lives when it is present to itself and alone with its own passions" (6).

Vendler's assessment of the voice of lyric poetry, as I hope to have shown over the course of this chapter, has a philosophical antecedent in Descartes, who also attempted to engage in "a stripping-away of the details associated with a socially specified self in order to reach [a] desired all-purpose abstraction." Of course, Descartes's experiment was epistemological, not poetic, but the similarity seems striking, as if post-Cartesian poetics (especially as they pertain to the lyric) often took for their starting point an assumption of the necessity of privacy in the lyric

project. In the work of such various 19th Century philosophers as Arthur Schopenhauer, John Stuart Mill, and Søren Kierkegaard, for example, one can find characterizations of the lyric subject which all feature withdrawal as a prominent component and thus inform, either directly or indirectly, Vendler's own assessment of the lyric. Despite their strong insistence on the necessity of withdrawal in one form or another, however, all three thinkers just mentioned posit the equal necessity of an external force or presence from which the subject withdraws or is withdrawn, and thus the lyric is rendered more a manifestation of tension between the public and the private than an attempted Cartesian removal from the former sphere to the latter.

Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Idea* (1819), writes that the lyric poet "vividly perceives and describes only his own state, so that by reason of the topic it treats, a certain subjectivity is essential to this genre" (156). He considers the lyric an "unadulterated" form of song (thus dissociating it from "the ballad, the elegy, the hymn, the epigram"), in which "the singer, through the sight of surrounding nature, becomes conscious of himself as the subject of pure, will-less knowing, whose imperturbable serenity now forms a contrast with the pressure of will which is always constrained and always craving" (157). We have here a variation on the Cartesian experiment of describing only one's own state. And while Schopenhauer was certainly no Cartesian, it is difficult to not see the influence of Cartesian withdrawal in Schopenhauer's conception of the lyric subject. That the "pressure of will," however, remains "always constrained and always craving," seems to mitigate considerably that "pure, will-less knowing" of the lyric

subject, just as, much to his frustration, Descartes's meditations were frequently interrupted by "established custom and the law of familiarity." But whereas Descartes viewed such interruptions as a nuisance to be overcome by subjectivity in the quest for certain knowledge, Schopenhauer sees them as more of a counterweight to subjectivity (that is, as both an oppositional and a necessary force) in the forging of the lyric sphere.

Similarly, Mill, in "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" (1833), likens poetry to soliloquy and stresses that "the actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he act as though he knew it, he acts ill" (195). The public and private are here in tension with one another, with the goal of the poet being to have the sense of privacy prevail:

A poet may write poetry not only with the intention of printing it, but for the express purpose of being paid for it; that it should *be* poetry, being written under such influences, is less probable; not, however, impossible; but no otherwise possible than if he can succeed in excluding from his work every vestige of such lookings-forth into the outward and every-day world, and can express his emotions exactly as he has felt them in solitude, or as he is conscious that he should feel them though they were to remain for ever unuttered, or (at the lowest) as he knows that others feel them in similar circumstances of solitude. (195)

The idea here is that poetry can be made public and retain its status as poetry only if it somehow keeps hold of its private essence. Poetry, that is, must exclude "all lookings-forth into the outward and every-day world" and function as a sort of

"pure, will-less knowing" if it is to reach its audience *as* poetry. The audience, though, is, of course, precisely a substantial portion of that outward and every-day world which poetry must both resist and reach. Mill verges on paradox, or even nonsense (from the standpoint of Wittgenstein's private language argument), in the penultimate clause of the passage quoted, which states that the poet must write in such a way that his feelings are depicted just as they would be were they "to remain for ever unuttered." What he calls, in the final clause, "the lowest" condition for poetry would likely be, in Wittgenstein's estimation, the "only" condition: that the poet can write of experiences which he "knows that others feel . . . in similar circumstances of solitude." Solitude is hereby rendered a radically public phenomenon and we are spared the abyss of private emotions known only to the self that feels them.

In an early aphorism from *Either/Or* (1843) Kierkegaard, or rather one of his pseudonyms, writes:

What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music. It is with him as with the poor wretches in Phalaris's bronze bull, who were slowly tortured over a slow fire; their screams could not reach the tyrant's ears to terrify him; to him they sounded like sweet music. And people crowd around the poet and say to him, "Sing again soon" -- in other words, may new sufferings torture your soul, and may your lips continue to be formed as before, because your screams would only alarm us, but the music is charming. (*The Essential Kierkegaard* 38)

Mill's subtle actor on the stage has here been transformed into a "poor wretch" trapped in a torture chamber acoustically designed in such a way that his cries from the heat of a fire are transformed into beautiful music. Despite the fact that the presence of an audience can and often does ruin poetry (either through the poet's over-awareness of that presence, as in Mill, or through the audience's own misunderstanding of what it hears, as in Kierkegaard), "a poem," as Timothy Bahti notes, "which was a poem only for the author would not be a poem at all" (3). Thus even in Schopenhauer, whose formulation of the lyric subject seems utterly Cartesian, the "pressure of will" (construable in a number of ways, including as an awareness of audience) is always necessarily exerting itself upon the otherwise blissfully isolated poet, just as in Mill the actor's awareness of the presence of an audience is always in contention with his need to act as if he were not aware of it. The lyric may indeed be a private phenomenon, the lyric subject a private speaker, but the second term in each of these formulations, with its emphasis on publicity ("phenomenon" as observable fact, "speaker" as one who speaks *to*), is as crucial as the first.

In *Wittgenstein's Ladder* Marjorie Perloff writes that insofar as the lyric is conceived as a private utterance in a "formalized, first person mode," a "Wittgensteinian 'poetics' would seem to be one that denies that 'poetry' exists" (73). That is, if poetry is a strictly private utterance, and a private utterance is an impossibility, poetry, therefore, is impossible. Perloff herself, of course, contests this conclusion, asserting that Wittgenstein's conception of poetry (and art in general) had less to do with any abstract, aesthetic definitions than with "*artistic*

activity" (73), the practice of poetry as a technique embedded in our forms of life. Even many of those aesthetic definitions, however, as we have seen in the cases of Schopenhauer, Mill, and Kierkegaard, acknowledge, in some fashion, just this embeddedness even of lyric withdrawal. If "the emphasis on an extralinguistic 'individual,'" as Mutlu Konuk Blasing says, "is a historically specific form that the repression of the material and formal rhetoric of poetic language takes" (5), this "historically specific form" is found less in, say, Mill's conception of the lyric speaker as an actor giving a soliloquy than in its philosophical antecedent, Cartesian epistemology. Mill, that is, despite his condemnation of publicity, recognizes that the seemingly private utterance of the lyric poet is in fact "a radically public language" (Blasing 4). Our conception of the lyric subject as a private, "extralinguistic individual," then, might be as much a product of various inherited poetics as a result of our frequent misreading of those poetics, a misreading caused by the charm which Cartesian epistemology has cast upon us, whereby we are bewitched into confirming pictures of the mind as private in order that we might then, from a supposedly enlightened, post-Cartesian perspective, refute them.

"One of Wittgenstein's most important conceptions," writes James Guetti, is the "relocation of rules and paradigms . . . from the individual mind, or from the metaphysical order of such mental presences as 'ideas,' to the sites of their actual applications" (36). Guetti perhaps has in mind such a remark as the following, from *Zettel*: "One of the most dangerous of ideas for a philosopher is, oddly enough, that we think with our heads or in our heads. The idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, gives him something occult" (§§605-6). The

idea of the privacy of the lyric subject, its representation as an "extralinguistic individual," is no less dangerous, no less occult. "Poetry," as Robert Pinsky says, "to some extent . . . always includes the social realm" (30). That we often tend to think otherwise has resulted in the relegation of the lyric to a culturally marginal position, one in which it is viewed as "largely irrelevant to the central discourses of the time" (Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder* 73). It is our understanding of the lyric, though, and not the lyric itself, that stands in need of revision. The lyric, that is, need not be replaced by an overtly socio-political form of poetry, one which would likely turn the lyric's radical publicity into, say, mere political rhetoric. Instead, it is imperative that we recognize just that radical publicity and the subtlety which imbues it, a subtlety based on the fact that while the lyric might thrive on resistance to the public sphere, it is nonetheless dependent on that sphere as well.

V.

In 1977 Bishop said, "I think I've been, oh, half-asleep all my life" (Monteiro 93). Many of her early poems would seem to confirm this, engaging as they do, according to Jeredith Merrin, "in a kind of inconclusive musing associated with the liminal state between waking and sleeping, when the drifting, associative mind takes up and mulls over a set of problems or emotions, often indefinitely or mysteriously linked to romantic love" (131). This "mind," in many of these early poems, is figured as a series of lyric protagonists, many of whom, as David Kalstone writes, "have trouble accommodating the claims of the world" (*Becoming a Poet* 13). In this respect they are not unlike Descartes, who says in the first

meditation, "I can never distinguish, by reliable signs, being awake from being asleep . . . I am confused and this feeling of confusion almost confirms me in believing that I am asleep" (19). He goes on in the second meditation to point out that though he knows he exists, "it is possible that [all he perceives] and, in general, whatever pertains to the nature of bodies may be merely dreams" (26). Descartes is aware that in conducting his experiments in scepticism he is positioning himself dangerously close to "some of those mad people whose brains are so impaired by the strong vapour of black bile that they confidently claim to be kings when they are paupers" (19).

Bishop's early poem "Love Lies Sleeping" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 12-14) begins as an address to "Earliest morning," which is called upon to "draw us into daylight in our beds / and clear away what presses on the brain," presumably both the darkness of the night and the ambiguities of our dreams. The poem's speaker then observes from the window "an immense city, carefully revealed." Sparrows begin to sing but are soon overridden by the "Boom!" of a wrecking ball. Workers uneasily "turn in their sleep" at this sound that, to them, "says 'Danger,' or once said 'Death'." While light is thus flooding the city as sparrows sing, while the machinery of industry starts up, at the same time, as though in a symphonic score, simple (or solo) acts are also occurring: "A shirt is taken off a threadlike clothes-line," and a water-wagon comes by and throws its "hissing, snowy fan" of water. All of this activity constitutes both the sites of production and the sites of (de)construction of which the poem's speaker is a functional part. The poem's

would drag a limb. What began as a dreamy address to the morning city, then, has quickly acquired the tinge of a nightmarish romanticism. The speaker of the poem therefore pleads with the cupids, as the poem concludes, to "Scourge" the people "with roses only, / [to] be light as helium,"

for always to one, or several, morning comes,
 whose head has fallen over the edge of his bed,
 whose face is turned
 so that the image of

the city grows down into his open eyes
 inverted and distorted. No. I mean
 distorted and revealed,
 if he sees it at all.

Part of the surreal effect of the poem's last five stanzas lies in the ambiguity of their designations. As I make it out, the "cupids" are first referred to in the third person plural "they" ("they will prepare all day") and then, three lines later, in the second person plural "your" ("your business"), while the people represented by the cupids are referred to in both the second person singular "you" ("you will dine well") and in the third person plural "their" and "them" ("their loves," "scourge them"). All of this suggests that there is less difference between the "cupids" and the "people" than we might suppose. They are perhaps less two distinct breeds than two aspects (something like "id" and "ego") of the same beings.

The "one, or several" ("I -- we --"), "whose head has fallen over the edge of his bed," is the poem's doomed protagonist. However the speaker might plead with the cupids, it always happens that one incapable of accommodating the demands of the outward world ends up, having finally been scourged too harshly by love, either dead, drunk, or dead-drunk in his cell. While this protagonist is "carefully revealed" as a distinct character at the poem's end, there nevertheless seems to be some measure of identification between such a doomed figure and the poem's more confident speaker. In fact, the thinly veiled references to queerness and inversion (not to mention alcohol) present throughout the poem would seem to point also to the poet herself, a third entity both separate from and conjoined to the other two. In any case, the image with which the poem ends is one of a figure (or "several" figures) who is confined to a private space of some sort, and who is somehow suffocated or killed in that space, by the surrounding world: a rare specimen, as it were, of the would-be lyric subject.

Kalstone, in *Becoming a Poet*, points to an entry in Bishop's notebook of 1934-35 that echoes the descriptive, surrealist language of "Love Lies Sleeping:"

The window this evening was covered with hundreds of long, shining drops of rain, laid on the glass which was covered with steam on the inside. I tried to look out, but could not. Instead I realized I could look into the drops, like so many crystal balls. Each bore traces of a relative or friend: several weeping faces slid away from mine; water plants and fish floated within other drops; watery jewels, leaves and insects magnified, and strangest of

all, horrible enough to make me step quickly away, was one large long drop containing a lonely, magnificent human eye, wrapped in its own tear. (14)

The convex specter of a "lonely, magnificent human eye" mirrors the poet's own observing gaze; it is strange and horrible, and the poet's immediate reflex is to step away from it as from an abyss. It is significant that Bishop's first desire upon coming to the window is "to look out," as if into the world of the city, those sites of production that make up the world. The rain and steam on the glass of the window, however, prevent her from engaging in this activity and instead present her with a threatening surrealist parade of sliding, floating images, culminating in the specter of the solitary eye. It is Bishop's ability to "step quickly away" from this specter, one might say, that separates her from the protagonist of "Love Lies Sleeping."

"Love Lies Sleeping" follows and complements "The Man-Moth" in *North & South*. Both poems are about creatures that do not (or cannot for long) exist: the Man-Moth is no less a fabulous invention than the protagonist of "Love Lies Sleeping" (and in the former poem, of course, that solitary tear of the notebook entry reappears as the Man-Moth's only possession). The "carefully revealed" city encountered by both is, it seems, not revealed carefully enough. The proliferation of mirrorings and inversions inherent in subjective self-reflexivity (prominently featured in both poems) work to create a feeling of existential vertigo not unlike that experienced by the child of "In the Waiting Room," but where the waves which threatened her eventually subsided, in "Love Lies Sleeping" they sink their subject. In this sense, many of Bishop's later poems (the dramatic monologues "In the Waiting Room" and "Crusoe in England" among them) function as recoveries of a

lyric sensibility which in its earlier manifestations was incapable of accommodating the claims of a world which it perceived more as a threat to than as an integral part of its private nature.

Chapter Two

Forms of Life and Lyric: John Ashbery & Wittgenstein

I.

Elizabeth Bishop's phrase, "distorted and revealed," might serve as a motto for John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." In Ashbery's poem, as in Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping," we are confronted with a variation on the specter of the Cartesian mind: "It is what is / Sequestered" (*Self-Portrait* 68).

David Baker, in *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry*, writes that while "sometimes we hold that the self is an autonomous and independent entity," at other times "we think of the self as a more fluid or deconstructed thing" (199). He then claims that the self of lyric poetry need be neither one nor the other: "Privacy is a social act or, as Matthew Arnold points out, 'a dialogue of the mind with itself'" (205). While Baker's attempt to loosen the epistemological shackles that often bind our conception of the lyric subject is commendable, it is not quite supple enough to accomplish its goal and so only creates further enmeshments. He divides our ideas of the self into two distinct camps and then attempts to synthesize them in the quotation from Arnold. The dialogue of the mind with itself, however, seems, almost insidiously, to simply recapitulate the notion of the self as an "autonomous and independent entity" capable of its own private conversation. Baker goes on: "Lyric poetry is never merely about a self but is always also a social performance" (205). In this comment he echoes Robert Pinsky, who says that "the solitude of

lyric, almost by the nature of human solitude and the human voice, invokes a social presence" (18). Whether Baker's "social performance" is identical to "a dialogue of the mind with itself," however, remains unclear. Additionally, his acknowledgment of a dichotomy between privacy and performance and his subsequent assertion that such a dichotomy need not exist is perplexing: why acknowledge what we wish to affirm is not the case? Baker's confusion, though, is perhaps less a shortcoming on his part than a built-in feature of our language. That is, the capacity of language to "bewitch" us (*PI* §109) is formidable; one of Wittgenstein's cautions to us on this matter is that the more stringently we cling to a certain way of looking at things, at the expense of other possible angles of vision, the more trouble we will run into as we proceed with our arguments. This is not so much a caution against intellectual steadfastness as a plea that we at least from time to time step away from our claims concerning an issue and attempt to come at it from another, perhaps hitherto untried, street, alley, or by-way. In Baker's case, to assert that the lyric self is socially constructed is highly akin, in a grammatical sense, to asserting its private autonomy; in both cases, that is, the same move is being made, only, as it were, on different sides of the board. In the proposition, "The lyric self is x ," the problem is less solving for x (private speaker, social phenomenon) than dispelling the charm that such formulations have over us. Ashbery's poetry, rather than presenting us with a version of the lyric self as x , precludes foreclosure on any definitive conception of the lyric self, even if it be a conception which posits that self as a fluid, changeable thing (just an x , say), for in definitively asserting changeability we are bewitched by language into thinking that we are no longer definitively asserting

anything, when in fact we are. Ashbery neither allows himself to be thus bewitched nor attempts to resist such bewitchment by way of theoretical argumentation. Instead, he enlists and marshals the very bewitching element of language itself in his poetry, the result of which is the establishment of a set of parameters un beholden to the strictures of a would-be prescriptive logic.

"The soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?" (*Self-Portrait* 68). Ashbery is making use here of a framework similar to the one employed by Baker, but where Baker sets up the framework for the sake of establishing a point within it, Ashbery uses it more for the sake of generating an image, or images, as if the framework were a viewfinder. First the soul establishes itself as a steady, autonomous presence. Then, like a fish, it swims out through the eyes as if they were gaps in coral. Following what might be called this "social performance," however, the soul seeks to return to its nest and is now suddenly more birdlike than fishlike. By thus rapidly shifting from one image to another (rather than positing a conception of something that rapidly shifts), Ashbery does not invite us to respond with counter-arguments or the pointing out of flaws in his reasoning, but instead carries us along in the stream of his poem's own momentum. Our resistance to his poetry, if we resist it, betrays our own lack or fear of a conceptual suppleness which is equal -- or nearly equal -- to the maneuverability of language itself.

The first section of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" describes Parmagianino's painting in terms which are decidedly Cartesian: the soul "fits / Its hollow perfectly . . . it is life englobed" (69). It exists in the midst of a world which

may consist entirely of illusion, or of indeterminacy: it rests "On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball / Secure on its jet of water" (70). As soon as this conceptualization is established, though, and thus has the chance to stiffen, "The balloon pops, the attention / Turns dully away" (70). The poem, however, is anything but dull; its images transform themselves in protean fashion: from a hollow globe to a ping-pong ball to a popped balloon to, eventually, a merry-go-round: "I feel the carousel starting slowly / And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books, / Photographs of friends, the window and the trees" (71). This acknowledgment of so many external entities may seem like a breaking of the Cartesian spell, but Descartes himself, even if it was against his will, was also susceptible to the "round" of everyday life. At the end of the first meditation he has already lost enthusiasm for his program of doubt: "But this is a tiring project and a kind of laziness brings me back to what is more habitual in my life" (22). If he went on from here to tell us what he was having for lunch that day, we would swear he was imitating Ashbery.

Angus Fletcher has pointed out that "traditionally and critically, the Ashbery poem might be called meditation" (192). He names two precedents: first, Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, which perhaps lines up better with Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency*; and second, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. But whereas Descartes returns to "familiar beliefs" and "established customs" in spite of himself (21), Ashbery goes to them willingly and, intoxicated by their rush, incorporates them *into* the meditation (that is, he does tell us what he had for lunch that day). David Lehman has written that "the subject of Ashbery's

poetry is his consciousness, and what makes it exemplary . . . is that it is so inclusive of the world beyond his room" (107). Andrew DuBois has recently echoed this assessment: "A lyric poet pays attention especially to consciousness. Because an engagement with consciousness is so obvious in Ashbery, it must be emphasized that such an engagement implies engagement with the world and its objects" (103). DuBois' comment especially resembles Baker's assessment of the lyric subject as both private and public; it bears repeating that such a judgement, while useful, perhaps oversimplifies the traffic between inner and outer states that characterizes much of Ashbery's work. That is, in Ashbery the difference between "consciousness" and "the world and its objects" is not always readily apparent. He does not merely incorporate the latter into the former or vice versa, but instead often beguiles in his refusal to settle on terms to begin with; he bewitches us with poetry that we may be unbewitched by language. His conceptual lackadaisicalness paradoxically entails a strenuous effort to make affirmations that do not affirm anything (*Self-Portrait* 70).

Ashbery, while indeed a kind of spokesman for the multifarious, is not immune to "the action of levelling, / Why it should all boil down to one / Uniform substance, a magma of interiors" (71), for he has inherited the tradition of the West, which, beginning with the pre-Socratics, has sought after just such a uniform substance. But retrospectively, in both Parmagianino's painting and Descartes' philosophy, that tradition, for Ashbery, has taken on the guise of a "*bizarria*" the "distortion" of which, however, "does not create / A feeling of disharmony" (73). Ashbery lifts these words from and attributes them to Sydney Freedberg's

Parmagianino; in doing so he draws on an authoritative, traditional source for the purpose of staking a claim for the possibility of other traditions, which, in this case, does not so much mean an alternative tradition as an accepted tradition approached from a different angle. That is, the distortion of a received tradition can be revelatory and not disharmonious. The passage cited above continues with the voice of Freedberg, which Ashbery interrupts and appropriates, or distorts, for his own purposes:

["]The forms retain

A strong measure of ideal beauty," because

Fed by our dreams, so inconsequential until one day

We notice the hole they left. (73)

The references to dining and to dreaming recall Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping," as does the image of a life left with a "hole" in it. Bishop's poem depicts the expiration, or at least exhaustion, of a would-be lyric sensibility, and does so within a lyric medium. Something similar happens quite often in Ashbery, and yet his poetry is never threatened by this happening, or, if it is, the threat is vital to the propagation of the poem. Despite its revelation through distortion, his lyric form retains "a strong measure of ideal beauty" and is "Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up / Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape" (73). Helen Vendler says that the "Renaissance youth" of both the painting and the poem longs to "find an exit from the eternizing artifact. In vain: the law of circular form forbids an escape from the chamber of art into actual physical intimacy with others" (*Invisible Listeners* 68). What perhaps does manage to escape from the chamber is the "one

bullet" it has room for, which then creates a life with a hole in it. In this way the "circular form" of the poem (from globes to balloons to carousels to holes) is maintained despite all ominous implications that its extinction is immanent.

"I don't think my poetry is inaccessible," said Ashbery in 1976. "People say it's very private, but I think it's about the privacy of everyone" (quoted in *Five Temperaments*, Kalstone 200). Ashbery is here confirming Mill's theory of lyric poetry, only where for Mill poetry in its public exposure must somehow retain its private essence if it is to be worthy of the label "poetry," in Ashbery there is no such process of sanctification: "the privacy of everyone" sounds, in fact, rather mundane (what Mill calls "the lowest" condition for poetry). In "Self-Portrait" Ashbery speaks of

a vague

Sense of something that can never be known

Even though it seems likely that each of us

Knows what it is and is capable of

Communicating it to the other. (77)

In this passage both the autonomous self and the socially-constructed self are acknowledged, but neither is foreclosed on. Ashbery neither sets them in opposition to one another nor favors one over the other. Instead, he presents us with a "vague sense" of "something" that "seems likely." But what seems in these words like uncommitted shiftiness is in fact a flexibility which keeps language from idling or breaking down. In other words, although it may often look as though Ashbery is irresponsibly refusing to point us in any one direction for any definite

period of time, what is in fact the case is that he is insisting, not exactly obliquely, on an imperative to go in many directions.

Lyric withdrawal, like Cartesian doubt, can be thought of as a "Life-obstructing task;" "necessity circumvents such resolutions" (*Self-Portrait* 80). What Ashbery does is welcome just that necessity into his lyrics, even though that means the circumvention of the lyric program as it is often conceived. Where before there was "A cloth over a birdcage" (77), now

A ship

Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor.

You are allowing extraneous matters

To break up your day, cloud the focus

Of the crystal ball. Its scene drifts away

Like vapor scattered on the wind. (81)

Ashbery, it seems, is addressing himself here: he has allowed "extraneous matters" to "break up" his poems. The "crystal ball" of the clear, Cartesian mind becomes clouded, and "its scene drifts away." The charm of the lyric's hallowed cloister is thus dispersed, and while Ashbery acknowledges that it "could have been our paradise," he just as steadfastly insists that "that wasn't / In the cards, because it couldn't have been / The point" (82).

Ashbery ensures the survival of the lyric not by defending one or many of its prior conceptions but by "ambling on" away from them (as "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" has it), leaving them to scuttle. This is less fatal than vital to the projects of poetry and communication. Like his peer, "Francesco," Ashbery is an

"unlikely / Challenger pounding on the gates of an amazed / Castle" (*Self-Portrait* 76), insisting on the possibility of "other centers of communication." In "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" (*Houseboat Days* 45-6), from which the last phrase is taken, the injunction "You can't say it that way any more" is just as much a continuation as it is a countering of traditional aesthetic and/or lyric theory. Similarly, the instruction, "Now one must / Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed, / Dull-sounding ones," functions in seemingly contradictory ways. It desanctifies the poem, breaking it into simple technical units which, apparently, don't require any virtuosity, for who can't find a lot of "low-keyed, dull-sounding" words? At the same time, however, this desanctification creates a veil of its own, wrapping the poem in a new mystery, for if poems consist of "a few important words and a lot of low-keyed, dull-sounding ones," why are they so difficult to write? It may turn out that finding low-keyed words (in the musical sense, so that "dull-sounding" implies acoustics), is more difficult than one thinks. One might give it a shot and come up with only a "clangor of Japanese instruments" and "humdrum testaments." Of course, this is exactly what happens in Ashbery's nonetheless highly regarded poem, further complicating the matter. There is no simple distinction between high, elevated language and low, common language that the postmodern poet simply reverses or blurs, but rather a traffic, or even pandemonium, of words and contexts that exacerbate our expectations and defy our attempts at containment: "Suddenly the street was / Bananas." If we persist in any sort of rigid rationalism amid such circumstances, there's bound to be an accident of some sort: "The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind / Colliding with the

lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate / Something between breaths," perhaps. And the accident, in Ashbery's poetry, is not necessarily something that occurs between two or more bodies in what is otherwise an orderly flow of traffic along the streets and between buildings. Sometimes, as in "Daffy-Duck in Hollywood," the accident occurs between the streets and buildings themselves: "Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland / Fling Terrace" (*Houseboat Days* 31).

Baker says: "Newscasts and sports pages, political novels and thrillers, creative nonfiction and biographies -- to say nothing of gossip columns, self-help memoirs, and blogs -- have become part of our literacy and our imagination; as a result, poetry has found its own specialized but urgent function. Lyric poetry is largely a poetry of the self" (204). This seems like a decidedly un-Ashberian formulation. The notion that poetry has this sort of "specialized but urgent function" in the 21st Century is particularly wrongheaded, unless of course one turns it on its head and specifies that its specialized function is *not* to withdraw from these other centers of communication but to incorporate them, as Ashbery assuredly, and often notoriously, does. What DuBois refers to as "a growing fragmentation of the lyric subject" (16) in Ashbery seems to be less a fragmentation than an increasingly diversified portfolio. His lyrics are supple enough to provide a home for any of the uncountable language-games we play.

II.

If Wittgenstein's endeavor was to bring words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use, Ashbery might be said to remove words from their ordinary use and put them into a lyric context. He does this, however, without sacrificing the ordinary ring of the words; that is, he incorporates segments of non-lyrical language-games into his lyrics, the result of which is both a certain erosion of the lyric and a strengthening of it (or a strengthening by erosion). Ashbery erodes the lyric by producing poems apparently haphazardly, at a prodigious rate, with little to no revision, and with a distaste for refining certain aspects of language that, generally, if they were to be worked into poems, would have to undergo modifications (metrically, syntactically, or in terms of the import they generate). He strengthens the lyric, though, by just these same means, as it were providing the lyric with a tougher stomach, or possibly more stomachs, so that it might incorporate rawer forms of language.

Wittgenstein speaks of language both as something capable of bewitching our intelligence and as something possessing "capricious features" (*PI* §556). If we are philosophers, it is our task to guard against such bewitchment and to not be tricked by such capricious features. Of course, the primary tool at our disposal in this vigilance is language itself: it is that by which we must not be bewitched and that by means of which we guard against bewitchment. Ashbery's willingness, then, to let language run amok in his poems, as well as his seemingly unheeding joy at pouring such a vast array of discourses into the funnel of his poetry, would seem to run against Wittgenstein's injunction, but this is not the case.

Wittgenstein had both great admiration and great disdain for nonsense. He admired it insofar as it is a means by which people attempt to run beyond the limits of language and the limits of the world in order to attain a viewpoint from eternity which could in turn provide a basis for, among other things, the formulation of ethics. He also admired it insofar as it provided a welcome relief from the rigors of philosophy: thus his indulgence in nonsense letters exchanged with Gilbert Pattison, his predilection for American Westerns, and his delight in American detective magazines. Of course, however, one underwent the rigors of philosophy precisely in order to expose nonsense, so how was it at all excusable for Wittgenstein to indulge in exactly that which, as a philosopher, he disdained? On this point Wittgenstein himself made a distinction between "disguised nonsense" and "patent nonsense" (*PI* §464, 524). Philosophical, or metaphysical, propositions are often nonsense disguised as the products of reason. Wittgenstein's reconception of the role of the philosopher involved the apprehension of such impostures. Having done work of this sort for a long while, though, one was perfectly free to take part in non-sensical uses of language, provided one was aware of the fact that nonsense was precisely that in which one was trafficking. This awareness-imperative holds as well for ethics as it does for Westerns (that is, one must, in the presence of both, be cognizant of the attendant nonsense); in fact, indulgence in the latter could lead one to the frontier of the former, as if they were somehow on a similar scale: "A typical American film, naive and silly, can -- for all its silliness and even *by means* of it -- be instructive. A fatuous, self-conscious English film can teach one nothing. I have often learnt a lesson from a silly American film" (*CV* 57). Indulging in patent

nonsense thus not only provided one with a respite from the rigors of philosophy, but it also spurred one on to philosophy as well: "For a philosopher there is more grass growing down in the valleys of silliness than up on the barren heights of cleverness" (CV 80). Wittgenstein's predilection for select venues of pop culture as means to philosophical insight (or exposure), then, provides an intriguing point of contact between him and Ashbery. "Don't *for heaven's sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense!" exclaims Wittgenstein, "But you must pay attention to your nonsense" (CV 56). Ashbery, for all of the free rein he gives to language, and for all of his allowance of its bewitching and capricious features, undoubtedly pays attention to his nonsense. This attention, though, as Andrew DuBois points out, often takes the form of apparent inattention. Ashbery's lyrics parade about as self-conscious nonsense, but that very self-consciousness denotes a craft which forbids us to say with a toss of the hand, "Simply nonsense."

One of Ashbery's latest volumes, *Chinese Whispers* (2002), is named after a British game known in the United States as "Telephone," where one person whispers something to another person, who in turn passes the message on to a third person, and so on. What invariably happens is that what is said at the beginning gets transformed as it passes from person to person and thus comes out as something quite different at the end. This is a literal language-game, one which, says DuBois, we do not always necessarily choose to play (133). DuBois' primary context for this remark is the fact that in old age the capacity for language often begins to break down without our consent. Ashbery, in the poetry of what DuBois calls his "dotage," plays with this idea extensively without excusing himself from

its rule. It thus makes sense, then, that in *Chinese Whispers*, published when Ashbery was in his mid-seventies, just this feature of language is highlighted. However, the phenomenon of linguistic breakdown is not limited to old age but is a prominent feature of language in general. To say so is not to counter DuBois' argument but to extend it.

Wittgenstein, in giving examples of what he will call language-games, says: "[I] will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game . . . And the processes of naming [things] and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games . . . I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game.'" (*PI* §7). This last-mentioned game is in a sense a macro-version of "Chinese Whispers"; it is "the whole" of our language, capable of generating immeasurable quantities of both sense and nonsense. That language is naturally susceptible, on the broadest scale, to transformation can be demonstrated using Wittgenstein's term "language-game" itself as an example. Suppose that he started the "whisper" of this term, providing, along with it, examples of how it can be used, as in the passage quoted above. Since that moment, then, the term has been passed on and transformed in a number of ways, many of which bear little resemblance to Wittgenstein's original "message." Thus something of a confusion has been created, making it difficult or impossible for us to pin down the exact meaning of the term. In order to subdue this confusion, we might ask for, or even attempt ourselves, a stalwart definition of "language-game," one that is air-tight, so to speak. In this endeavor we might go to Wittgenstein as a primary source or we might denigrate him as an unreliable one

who failed to provide satisfactory definitions of the terms he employed. But to clamor for or attempt such a definition misses the point of Wittgenstein's later philosophy: one cannot definitively cut off the circulation of language at any one point in order to establish a stable meaning; the result of such an effort would be less the establishment than the asphyxiation of meaning. Wittgenstein does not definitively define "language-game" because to do so would run counter to his earlier assertion (in *PI* §1) that a word's meaning is its use. And he does not fail to provide us with a number of ways in which "language-game" can (or will) be used. Those uses, subsequently, change over time, both in his philosophy itself and in the history of its reception. This unsettled quality of language does not threaten intelligibility so much as it secures its possibility (a point which Derrida insists on), which is to say that language thrives on its pliancy, on its ability to both adapt and elude. The supposedly subversive (or even anarchic) assertion that language is "arbitrary" is itself predicated upon a complex language-game and therefore presupposes not only an agreement on rules but also an agreement on their necessity. The fact is simply that these rules are often broken.

Chinese Whispers is replete with allusions to those aspects of language which seemingly pose the greatest threat to our ability to communicate effectively but which, in both Ashbery and Wittgenstein, are affirmed as vital to language precisely because of the threat they pose. "Don't hit the bull's-eye," says Ashbery in a poem called "The Big Idea" (14). Later he reports to us as if from a news desk or an academic report: "The most optimistic projections confirm / the leakage theory" (18). Is this supposed to be a threatening confirmation or a reassuring one?

"Ambivalence . . . came in a flood sometimes, / though warm, always, for the next tenant / to abide there" (23). This was perhaps inevitable: "Sometimes you end up in a slough no matter what happens, / no matter how many precautions have been taken" (26). Such a scenario can be frustrating as well as "warm," but in neither case does it imply the stunting or breakdown of linguistic capacity:

I don't know what to do with all my acquired knowledge.

I could give it to someone, I suppose. Wait, no then
they wouldn't know what to do with it.

I suppose I could be relaxed.

Yes, that's more the ticket we smiled. (30)

The idea of giving our "acquired knowledge" to someone refers us back to the game of "Chinese Whispers." The title of the poem from which this passage is taken, "Haven't Heard Anything," makes the connection more apparent. The anxiety attendant upon acquisition and transmission of knowledge leads the speaker to resolve to be relaxed, and, right on cue, he relaxes and concludes with a cliché ("that's the ticket), a form of expression that has indeed been passed, or handed down, from one person to the next. Thus by the end of the poem it is not an "I" who smiles but a "we." Acquired knowledge, despite the difficulties attendant upon its delegation, is apparently irresistibly shareable.

In the title poem of *Chinese Whispers* Ashbery writes, "Finally the rumors grew more fabulous than the real thing," (31) the real thing, in this case, being a "pancake clock" recalling Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*. One might reasonably ask oneself, "How does one conduct one's life amid such circumstances?" (34).

That is, if rumors begin to outweigh real things, and if things formerly thought substantial become subject to all sorts of distortion (like time in Dali's painting), how can we maintain a firm grip on reality? Distortion, though, is always coupled with revelation, and "it always turns out that much is salvageable" (32). And conversely, even if "for a long time things seemed to go astutely" (37), eventually the most we'll be left with is "a firm maybe" (43), "errant orbits" (61) which, though they flood us with ambivalence, also disabuse us of illusions concerning what only seemed to be the case.

In assembling such a collage of lines from the poems of *Chinese Whispers I* am not implying that "these extracts [contain] within themselves the 'meaning' of the poem[s] in question," a procedure Marjorie Perloff wisely warns us against when it comes to reading Ashbery, whose poetry rarely "contains" meaning in that particular sense ("Normalizing John Ashbery"). To both read Ashbery and to perform readings of Ashbery is to continue a game Ashbery himself has started: his poems are like whispered phrases, phrases whispered not from a stage (as in Mill's conception of the lyric speaker) but as part of a game which demands that we, when we hear them, do something with them ourselves: "One further loop" (*Chinese Whispers* 43). Ashbery is perfectly aware that the fate of his poems is thus indeterminate: "And ever as I talked to you / down the decades in my letters one thing was unsure: / your reply" (53).

In Ashbery as in Wittgenstein, the consolations of philosophy often turn out to be illusions, nonsense masquerading as metaphysical assurance. The poem "Under Cellophane" begins:

None of it helped much,
 not even my beloved Philosophy,
 sitting dejected, hands in her lap,
 moving her head slowly from side to side.

"You naughty, wicked boy..." (59)

Ashbery is "naughty" and "wicked" from the viewpoint of philosophy because he obsessively indulges in the capricious features of language, an indulgence which renders our reply uncertain. David Kalstone points out "how much [Ashbery] enjoys some of the meandering of unfocused public vocabularies" (*Five Temperaments* 175), an enjoyment which overrides whatever they might happen to be meandering from: "Which brings me to my original argument. / Ah, what was the argument?" (*Chinese Whispers* 64). In the penultimate poem of *Chinese Whispers*, "Heavenly Days," all of this indulgence eventually leads to what appears to be an outburst of exasperation: "Well what is the fucking point?" (93). Even this, though, leads only to further dubious oscillations: "light is now swaying from the chandelier, like an orangutan / awaiting further instructions, in mid-mischief, wondering if / all this is porridge after all" (93).

Many readers of Wittgenstein's later philosophy often run into a wall of frustration, wondering where and what the point of his philosophy is, as he rarely offers anything resembling a thesis. Perhaps it is "porridge after all." As I argued earlier, however, for Wittgenstein to offer a point, a "bulls-eye" or "Big Idea" that would encapsulate his entire philosophy, or even a segment of it, would run counter to the method of that philosophy, which is intent less on divining the essence of a

word than on describing the many ways in which that word is employed at the level of our lives. In this respect he reverses the funnel of philosophy, so that whereas before the landscape of context was eliminated in attempting to come at an essential meaning (or core), now the word is returned, or brought back home, to its original, dynamic environment; the contextual landscape itself becomes the "visible core" (*Self-Portrait* 70), conjoining essence and accident. If the presence of multiple unknown variables within that landscape affronts our understanding's desire for an air-tight enclosure, so much the better for our understanding. If language is indeed a porridge lacking any sort of readily apparent ultimate structure and stability, it is nonetheless a substance which is perfectly capable of nourishing us.

III.

In *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*, Mutlu Konuk Blasing writes, "Ashbery's poetics rests on the recognition that the intention to make sense, the desire to communicate, and the reciprocal desire to understand matter more than what is communicated" (40). To illustrate this point, Blasing appropriately cites the conclusion of "*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name.*" One could also, however, look at the volume *Your Name Here* (2000), the title of which offers not only an exchange of places with the reader but an invitation to the reader to somehow inhabit the volume of poems. What gets communicated in the poems is not as important as the Welcome mat encouraging the reader to take up a place among them and so become a part of the lyric exchange. This is, then, another way in which Ashbery simultaneously subverts and strengthens the lyric tradition.

Whereas before the reader was intended to merely overhear the poem, she is now encouraged to step over the threshold which previously separated the audience from the actor (or, in Kierkegaard's terms, the spectator from the tortured).

One of the themes of *Your Name Here* is thus orientation: how are we supposed to orient ourselves to Ashbery's freewheeling lyrics so as to be able to reside in them? Certainly in *Your Name Here* we can't expect a home tailored to our needs, because the ambiguity of *Your* implies that there has to be something for everybody *Here*, where *Here*, of course, could itself be any number of places. An aesthetic (and perhaps ascetic) adjustment to a specifically Ashberian form of ambiguity (his simultaneously vague and precise employment of pronouns being infamous) is therefore necessary. Additionally, where before as readers of poetry we may have been accustomed to intelligible references, explanations, and ornamentations, we must now adjust to the seemingly sparse and/or unintelligible referentiality of the Ashbery lyric, a referentiality which, however, turns out to be quite lush (or perhaps hyper) once we have mastered the technique of residing in it. That is, what at first seems like little or nothing to latch onto in Ashbery often turns out to be a case of too much to latch onto. Ashbery makes the best accommodations he can, as in the opening stanza of "The Impure" (*Your Name Here* 119):

Your story ... most enjoyable.

I sat down and read it through from

beginning to end at one sitting,

whatever it is. Reams and reams of it.

Orientation, one gathers from these lines, is just as much an issue for the poet as it is for his readers. What makes it difficult for us to accommodate him attempting to accommodate us is the fact that it is nearly impossible for him to accommodate us to begin with. Who, after all, is the "You" in this stanza? Ashbery's unspecific pronouns have a correlate in Wittgenstein's mysterious interlocutors, a phenomenon that, as Marjorie Perloff specifies, is "no doubt motivated, at least in part, by the felt need to encode all overt references to sexual identity" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 91). Perloff's qualification, "at least in part," saves the proposition, for while one could certainly make this assertion with regard to Wittgenstein and the young Ashbery writing in the mid-twentieth century, it seems less pertinent to the Ashbery of the twenty-first century. In the lines quoted above Ashbery seems less interested in concealing a sexual identity than in wreaking havoc on the lyric tradition: where the reader was once traditionally conceived as an audience member overhearing a lyric soliloquy, the poet in "The Impure" is now reading and responding somewhat inattentively to an audience member's story, as if they were together not in a theater but in a small room, quietly enjoying a *tête-a-tête*. In fact, the opening lines of the poem sound more like an instructor addressing a student during office hours than an actor addressing a theater-going crowd. And with so many poets (including Ashbery) taking up university positions in the past century, perhaps that is now a more apt metaphor for the lyric scenario than the isolated stage figure.

The title of "The Impure," though, may indeed have something to do with sexual identity, to return to Perloff's assertion quoted above. It could be a reference to stereotypical opinions concerning "alternative" sexual preferences, but one reads

the poem in vain for a conclusive confirmation of this (just as reading it as a commentary on lyric theory is no doubt a "stretch"). Again, though, to reiterate Blasing's claim, the poem is not about what is communicated so much as it is about the desire to communicate. What the poem means depends largely on who "You" are and what "Your story" is, and this is necessarily left unclear. In a remark on the Gospels, Wittgenstein wonders why the four accounts of Christ's life vary from one another and are often ambiguous on seemingly crucial points. He then asks: "But who is to say that the Scripture is really unclear? Isn't it possible that it was essential in this case to 'tell a riddle'? And that, on the other hand, giving a more direct warning would necessarily have had the *wrong* effect?" (CV 31).

Wittgenstein's idea here is that if the Gospels were clear and accurate to the point of being very historically plausible, people would be inclined to take them as history. He says in the same remark that often enough "a mediocre account suffices, is even to be preferred . . . (Roughly in the way a mediocre stage set can be better than a sophisticated one, painted trees better than real ones)" (31). I would argue that Ashbery's poems, then, though often indeed mediocre and unclear, often enough find in mediocrity and unclarity the source of their exceptional quality as poems. "Low-keyed, dull-sounding" words and mediocre stage props facilitate rather than hamper the Ashbery lyric. Or, as Ashbery himself has it in a lecture titled "Poetical Space," a poem's "blurred copy" of the "visual world" can be "all the more meaningful for being imprecise and out of focus -- accurate in its inaccuracy" (*Selected Prose* 215).

The penultimate stanza of "The Impure" reads: "Casting about for some impurities / in your rock-crystal speech, I was struck by a tone / only mute dragonflies can keep up for long." Traditionally impure material for lyric poetry abounds here, though coded: drag, for instance, and keeping it up. Just as surely, however (which is to say, not all that surely), this stanza is "about" fishing: casting, striking, and flies. What started at the beginning of the poem as "Your story," the content of which was forgettable, has now become either a speech with a rock-crystal quality or a speech about rock-crystals. Again and again, the question, "What is this poem about?" presses upon the reader. Or: "What is the poem trying to convey?" In asking such questions of Ashbery, though, we are almost ourselves as it were "casting about for some impurities," or at least for something to latch on to in a medium that expressly forbids just such a response on our part (the tone of a mute dragonfly, that is, seems as though it would be evasive by nature). "Do not forget," says Wittgenstein, "that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information" (*Z* §160). One has to modify this assertion when dealing with Ashbery, for he often writes specifically as though he were playing the game of giving us information, but in most cases he does so, it seems, with the intent of undermining, or at least toying with, either the information given or the game itself (and Ashbery, certainly, is not alone in doing this; it may in fact be applicable to poetry in general, though nowhere is it done more deliberately and in a more complicatedly teasing fashion than in Ashbery). We can say, then, "Ashbery's poems are unclear," but in doing so we are importing the word "unclear" from the language-game of giving information,

in which it has a specific use. But Ashbery is not playing this language-game, at least not directly, and once we stop attempting to equate his poems with the language-game of giving information, we realize that his poems are more often than not perfectly clear in what they are trying to do, which, capriciously, often happens to line up exactly with what we call being "unclear" in the language-games we perhaps more frequently play (reading the newspaper, for instance). If we insist on judging Ashbery's poetry negatively by saying that the poems are "inexact," Wittgenstein, serving as mediator, will at first give ground, saying, "Very well, [they are] inexact," but then he will say: "Though you still owe me a definition of exactness" (*PI* §69). And this cannot be given once and for all: "exactness" is a term the uses of which have various family resemblances, but there is no common feature shared by all uses of the word. "Exactness" means something different in Scripture than it does in science, for instance. Rather than attempting to explain the meaning of the word by definition, then, Wittgenstein proposes descriptions of various ways in which it can be used. In doing so he allows language to breathe, to circulate. Words like "clear" and "exact" can mean precision of measurement in one field, crispness of sound in another, and so on.

Often we can look to the end of a lyric poem for a moral or explanation or some other form of tying up any loose ends that the poem may have presented to us. Here is the end of "The Impure":

Then I thought about your brother Ben,
gone for so long in the far land.
Would he return with the car,

with garlands flowing from its fenders,
 to utter the word "drizzle"? Oh, Ben,
 we liked you so much for such a long time.

Then you became insufferable to us
 in just a few moments, for no reason. And now
 we think we like you, Ben.

We still don't know who the initial "You" is, though his/her having a brother named Ben would seem to at least narrow the possibilities (or make them more maddening). But then where is the far land exactly? Does it refer to some Old Testament place that pairs with "Ben"? And whose car did Ben borrow? Is he returning as a newlywed (the garlands on the fenders)? And why on earth would he come back "to utter the word 'drizzle'"? At this point the poem ceases to address the "You" it began with and instead addresses Ben directly, though "directly" is perhaps not the word for so wishy-washy an assessment as "we liked you, then we didn't, now maybe we do again." There is an echo here of Frank O'Hara's "Poem" about (if one can say "about" here) Lana Turner: "oh Lana Turner we love you get up" (78), and, as in O'Hara's poem, so in Ashbery's the "I" which began it ends as a "we." Obviously, rather than resolving things for us at the end of the poem, Ashbery has presented us only with more enigmas, more possible but not necessarily likely allusions. Our own uncertainties regarding the poem mirror the collective uncertainty over whether Ben is to be liked or not.

In *Zettel* Wittgenstein poses the following question: "'Heap of sand' is a concept without sharp boundaries -- but why isn't one with sharp boundaries used

instead of it?" (§392). We might answer, "Well, because then it wouldn't be a heap." This would be a correct answer, and it would hopefully lead us to the realization that the premium on concepts with sharp boundaries employed, say, in physics or geometry, is not universal to language as a whole (nor, for that matter, to physics and geometry as a whole). We can say, "Take a few paces in that direction," without having to specify that a pace is equivalent to 75 centimeters (*PI* §69). To ask why Ashbery's lyrics don't as it were "have sharp boundaries," or why he isn't "clearer" in his poems, is to presuppose a specific language-game when we ought to be trying to learn a new one, for there is surely a difference between reading an instruction manual and reading an Ashbery poem called "The Instruction Manual." In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says:

"When I read a poem or narrative with feeling, surely something goes on in me which does not go on when I merely skim the lines for information." --
 What process am I alluding to? --The sentences have a different *ring* . . .
 "But what is this queer experience?" --Of course it is not queerer than any other; it simply differs in kind from those experiences which we regard as the most fundamental ones, our sense impressions for instance. (II.xi 214-5)

Acquiring a sense of orientation with regards to Ashbery, then, is largely a question of simply becoming accustomed to his poetry, of getting to know it. There is no manual we can consult for exact rules in this matter; it is a game we must learn on the fly, making use of whatever assistance we are fortunate enough to come across. Ashbery's lyrics may frustrate us and strike us as "queer" because they do not fulfill our expectations of either what lyrics fundamentally ought to be or how language

fundamentally ought to function. That is, we may be much more accustomed to lyric poems as things that work *this* way (with rhyme and meter perhaps, or with an identifiable theme) and to language as something that works like *this* (with an emphasis on conveying clearly pertinent information, maybe). Ashbery, in largely eschewing such customs, thus acquires the reputation of a renegade, when in fact he is fulfilling his task of ensuring that a tradition "ambles on."

Simply to say, though, that we are to read a poem like "The Impure" *with feeling*, will do little to satisfy most critics. Wittgenstein, however, offers us more than this:

I can imagine some arbitrary cipher . . . to be a strictly correct letter of some foreign alphabet. Or again, to be a faultily written one, and faulty in this way or that: for example, it might be slap-dash, or typical childish awkwardness, or like the flourishes in a legal document. It could deviate from the correctly written letter in a variety of ways. -- And I can see it in various aspects according to the fiction I surround it with. And here there is a close kinship with 'experiencing the meaning of a word'. (*PI* II.xi 210)

One merely has to make a number of substitutions in order to convert this remark into one that deals with poetry. The key phrase, however, would remain unchanged: "according to the fiction I surround it with." This need not mean that I devise a specific fiction in order to make sense of the poem; that is, I do not need to concoct a story in which the poet initially begins by addressing my brother and ends up addressing me, Ben. I certainly could adopt such an extreme form of reader-response criticism, but to read all of Ashbery's poems in such a ludicrous manner

would be exhausting if not impossible, and, of course, grossly incorrect. Rather, we ought to read Ashbery's lyrics not necessarily as poems somehow awaiting fictions of our own concoction but as poems which themselves exploit the many fictions which surround us on a day-to-day basis. The phrase, "the fiction I surround it with," that is, does not necessarily imply that we must laboriously construct a series of bridges in order to make sense of the poem. In fact, to do so would be to manipulate the poem in order to make it fit either our preconceived notions of what a poem traditionally ought to do or our preconceived notions of what language ought to do. This, of course, in Ashbery's case, would ruin not only the poem but the entire poetics, as Blasing has it, for Ashbery's poetry is dedicated to stretching and expanding just these preconceptions without obliterating them. In reading him we have to go with him in this endeavor; that is, we have to take up a temporary abode in the poem, make ourselves at home there, rather than scrutinize it from the outside, hoping to extract the kernel of its meaning. Wittgenstein writes:

"After he had said this, he left her as he did the day before." --Do I understand this sentence? Do I understand it just as I should if I heard it in the course of a narrative? If it were set down in isolation I should say, I don't know what it's about. But all the same I should know how this sentence might perhaps be used; I could myself invent a context for it.

(A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction.)

(*PI* §525)

The sample sentence Wittgenstein begins with here could very well be the opening line of an Ashbery poem. The pronomial ambiguity, at least, is perfectly

established. While Wittgenstein maintains that he could "invent a context" for the statement if he chose to, his more important point, it seems to me, is reserved, as usual, for the parentheses. That a "multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction" implies both a pliancy on the part of language and the mastery of a technique on our part. What is important then is not the "what" of a specific context we might invent but the "how" of communication and intelligibility itself. And since Ashbery's poems do not exist "in isolation" to begin with, the need to "invent a context" for them is less pressing than in the cases Wittgenstein gives us (the arbitrary cipher, the isolated sentence). Ashbery's poems have been establishing their own context, their own fictions, for over half a century now, and once we have mastered the technique of reading the poems, such exasperated questions as "But what does it all mean?" and "What is this poem about?" become superfluous.

IV.

To relegate Wittgenstein to the "analytic" school of philosophy is to pigeon-hole him in the same way that he maintained the meaning of a word could not be pigeon-holed (in this case the word is "Wittgenstein"). To assign him to the "continental" school would be to make the same mistake (again, as it were, on the other side of the board). Of course, a similar argument could be made concerning Ashbery's inclusion in the "New York School" of poets. On a superficial level such designations make sense, insofar as they provide us with a means of provisionally placing the work of a philosopher or poet. But to continue to insist on such

classifications once the preliminaries are over, so to speak, goes directly against what both Wittgenstein in his philosophy and Ashbery in his poetry are attempting to accomplish. Wittgenstein writes:

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what *one* man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action. (Z §567).

Lurking behind this passage is one of Wittgenstein's most important, and perhaps nebulous, concepts, "forms of life." It is only nebulous, however, in the way that "language-game" is nebulous. That is, nowhere does Wittgenstein offer us a definition of the concept. Instead, we encounter it throughout his work and come to understand its meaning by its various uses. In the *Investigations* he says, "What has to be accepted, the given, is -- so one could say -- *forms of life*" (II.xi 226). This assertion is made tentative by the interruption of "so one could say." The reason for this is that Wittgenstein, in making such an assertion, knew he was coming dangerously close to a metaphysical proposition. He guards against this temptation not only by means of the interruption, but also by means of saying that this is what is to be "accepted," or, as he says in other places, "acknowledged." He is not, then, asserting that forms of life are x , where x is a definite entity. I think that we could just as easily say that what has to be accepted is "the hurly-burly." In either case what's being asserted is that in order for us to understand anything it has to be surrounded by a certain amount of activity that can operate, in part, as criteria *for*

our understanding; this is our "inherited background" (*OC* §94). Of course, as Stanley Cavell points out, "forms of life" is a more apt phrase here than "hurly-burly," for two main reasons. First, it is a plural term, which further safeguards it against ascending to such metaphysical heights as, say, Schopenhauer's concept of will. Second, it has two equal emphases, one on "forms" and one on "life" (Cavell 40-52). This fact prevents us from foreclosing either on a constructivist interpretation (*forms* of life) or a biological interpretation (forms of *life*) and instead asks us not only to consider the two in tandem but also to consider neither as such. Because forms of life are what allow understanding and interpretation to happen, or take place, understanding and interpreting "forms of life" themselves (or itself) becomes a tricky business. The phrase has its own background, or hurly-burly, in Wittgenstein's philosophy and its antecedents, which supports *it*, but it also designates, or functions as a place-holder for, just that multifarious background. Its nebulosity is thus entirely appropriate for what, as a concept, it is meant to do.

We cannot sufficiently describe Ashbery's poetry by looking closely at what one poem is doing now, isolated. Nor can we describe Ashbery himself by what he said or did on any one occasion. What's most notable about a study such as David Herd's *John Ashbery and American Poetry* is that it attempts to present Ashbery in relation to the hurly-burly of American poetry, which provides an "inherited background" for both him and his work. Of course, even so broad a synopsis as this is insufficient, as Herd would no doubt acknowledge. One would have to look at both French and Russian poetry, as well, not to mention the fine arts, and so on, in order to fully trace Ashbery's inheritance. And while scholars may be admirably

engaged in just such projects, there can't possibly be an end to them; that is, the forms of life which surround and inhabit Ashbery's poetry are, in a sense, fractal: each new segment of the background explored provides us with a link to some other, often "smaller" segment which we must look at equally closely (this, it would seem, is part of the legacy of New Historicism). One would like to say that all of these segments must add up to a definitive theory of Ashbery's poetry, but to say so would skirt the edges of sensible formulation in an undesirable fashion. The minutiae of literary history are not pieces of a puzzle that add up to a "Big Picture" but instead are more like the features of various members of a family; resemblances among these features allow us to identify patterns of likeness and difference without having thereafter to posit the existence of the Platonic Form of Ashbery.

Wittgenstein says of our picture of the world: "We believe, so to speak, that this great building exists, and then we see, now here, now there, one or another small corner of it" (*OC* §276). We might make a model of the building in order to survey it in its entirety, but then, of course, we're really not looking at the building at all, or even merely a "small corner" of it anymore. To use another example: we believe that the world wide web exists, though we can only ever see, "now here, now there," small portions of it. While there may then similarly be a "great building" of material by (and on) John Ashbery, we can never see the building itself in its entirety but only here and there a "small corner" of it. We can neither complete it in any sense nor view it in its entirety, as its very nature runs counter to such notions as "completion" and "entirety" (this is not however, to denigrate outright the act of constructing models). There are several rooms, sites, or poems,

more visited than others, as well as rooms, sites, and poems which are our own personal favorites, and we can always get out of all-too-familiar ruts simply by "surfing" about and looking for new, refreshing things, which sounds like a decidedly Ashberian thing to do. If one objects to all of this on the grounds that there is in fact a certain uniform quality to all, or even most, of Ashbery's work, it warrants keeping in mind that "we remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike" (*PI* II.xi 224).

DuBois, in *Ashbery's Forms of Attention*, speaks in terms that unmistakably, if inadvertently, recall Wittgenstein: "One of Ashbery's pedagogical goals, to put it roughly, is to get us all to pay attention to everyday language or to whatever language we use" (xvi). DuBois' use of the caution flag "to put it roughly" indicates that this is not to presume that Ashbery is a "pedagogical" poet. Nevertheless, Ashbery does often seem to be saying to us, "Pay attention to language!" -- again the teacher addressing the student. And in this his effort to secure our alertness he most resembles Wittgenstein, whose philosophical imperative is not "to know" or "to understand" but "to look," and often with an exclamation point. Wittgenstein's wealth of remarks, like Ashbery's cache of poems, can at times seem overwhelmingly uniform and repetitive, but on such occasions it is as likely our own as their eyes getting tired. The vigilance and alacrity required to read both writers well cannot be underestimated, for while Wittgenstein's call to us is to not let ourselves be bewitched by language, we are just as likely to be bewitched, in the

sense of charmed or drugged, by his as by anyone else's words if we do not have our eyes open to the "prodigious diversity" of language.

James Guetti, in a summative remark, says that Wittgenstein's "larger or more synthetic analogues for language's overall condition are . . . disintegrative rather than otherwise" (31). And yet the fact that language continually disintegrates in our attempts to secure or keep it is precisely what allows it to keep its status as language. According to Wittgenstein, this protean flexibility (or even phoenix-like quality) of language is what keeps us on our toes when doing philosophy. Of course, though, it is just this same feature that is likely to drug or charm us (in Circean fashion), to prevent us, as both Proteus and Circe tried to prevent Odysseus, from seeing clearly in a particular situation. So it is with Ashbery: his poetry, depending on our state upon approaching it, is just as likely to keep us on our toes in the work of discovery as it is to keep us from accessing itself at all by, say, putting us to sleep. Being alert as opposed to being sleepy, paying attention as opposed to being heedless, make up some of the subject matter (if one can speak of "subject matter" here) of Ashbery's 1988 volume, *Wakefulness*, the title of which, in addition to its implication of alertness, paradoxically has a ring to it of being full of waking and therefore sated and perhaps even sedated. The title of the poem "The Friend at Midnight" (29) is a garbled version ("one more loop" in the literary version of Chinese Whispers) of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight." Awareness of this fact can both help and possibly hinder us in reading Ashbery's poem. Certainly, knowing its antecedent (its previous protean incarnation) allows us to grasp his own poem more fully, but we nevertheless still risk being drugged by, instead of

ignorance, presumption, if we expect to find an explanatory key to Ashbery's text in Coleridge. Ashbery's allusions generally don't work this way. Instead of leading us, if we be alert to them, to a source which provides an answer or explanation of sorts and thus provides a home (of sorts) for our understanding, they more often than not frustrate just this kind of expectation and so render it imperative that we increase more than we lessen the amount of attention we pay to both our forms of expression and what we expect them to do for us.

The first eight lines of "The Friend at Midnight" read:

Keeping in mind that all things break,
 the valedictorian urged his future plans on us:
 Don't give up. It's too soon. Things break. Yes, they fail
 or they are anchored up ahead, but no one can see that far.
 As he was speaking, the sun set. The grove grew silent. There
 are more of us taking ourselves seriously now than ever,
 one thought. We may never realize about our lives
 till it's too late, and a man with a dog comes to shoot us.

One gets the impression that this is likely a high school valedictorian, insofar as he speaks in stunted, self-motivational clichés such as "don't give up." Then, however, comes the temporal metaphor of the anchor, which is quite ingenious. This juxtaposition of a few daft clichés and a deft metaphor within a few lines exemplifies the rapid rate at which language, in an Ashbery poem, can shift in tone, sophistication, and style, daring us to follow its maneuvers rather than be beguiled by an apparent uniform appearance.

Immediately after things are first said to break we are offered an alternative conception: that they are anchored up ahead at a distance which our power of vision is too weak to reach. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein writes, "In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by side-roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed" (§426). It may be the case that "up ahead" things are anchored to, say, a Platonic Form or Kantian thing-in-itself, but it is not in our nature to be able to take that highway, or even to be able to follow it with our eyes, and so we make detours and go by broken-down side-roads, relying on an array of clichés and metaphors (some deft, others daft) in order to express ourselves or "urge" our future plans on others. In *Zettel* Wittgenstein both confirms and revises the passage from the *Investigations*: "But what is the right simile here? That of a road that is physically impassable, or of the non-existence of a road?" (§356). The confirmation consists in the continued insistence on our use of "side-roads," the revision in that he now supposes there may be no "straight highway" which is closed or impassable, but *only* detours and side-roads. Of course, if we subscribe to this revision, then the detours and side-roads cease to be detours and side-roads (for what would they be detours and side-roads *to*?), and we ourselves are left at an impasse. Ashbery's poem corroborates this sense of being in the dark: the sun sets, reducing vision, and the grove grows silent; thought replaces speech, and "We" come to understand that we may not realize "about our lives" until it is too late. There is, of course, an echo (or whisper) of Thoreau's famous lines from *Walden* here: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not

learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (182). The speaker of Ashbery's poem seems to be speaking, though, less for Thoreau and more for the "mass of men" who "lead quiet lives of desperation." This link to Transcendentalist philosophy brings Emerson to mind, as well, and his own commencement-related address, "The American Scholar." But whether we are concerned with Kantian transcendentalism as it relates to Wittgenstein's later philosophy, or with Emersonian transcendentalism as it relates to Ashbery's poetry, the aim encouraged by both Wittgenstein and Ashbery, I think, is not to seek a "solution" to a "problem" here but rather to simply see and pay attention to all of this as part of the background of our interactions and relations with one another.

Following on the heels of the reference to "a man with a dog" cited above are the following three lines: "I like to think though that everything is its own reward, / that liars such as we were made to last forever, / and each morning has a special chime of its own." The "though" here serves to turn our thoughts away from such unfavorable images as being shot and towards a more positive outlook on life. That positive outlook, however, is hardly convincing, expressed as it is in three decidedly Transcendentalist clichés: everything being its own reward, our being made to last forever, and every day being special. These placid encouragements, underscored by the fact that "we" are "liars," don't quite stand up to the vivid image of a man with a dog coming to shoot us.

The second stanza of the poem opens: "Thus we were pitted against the friend who came at midnight / and wanted to replace us with a song. We resisted furiously." The word "furiously" recalls Ashbery's earlier poem, "At North Farm,"

which begins, "Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you, / At incredible speed, traveling day and night, / Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes" (*A Wave* 1). The two poems share not only the specific word, but similar imagery, as well. The "someone" of "At North Farm" could very well be the "man with a dog" coming to shoot us of "The Friend at Midnight." Both figures recall Kafka's "An Imperial Message," a parable about a "powerful, indefatigable" man who "immediately sets out on his journey" to deliver to you a message from the emperor. There are too many obstacles, however, for him to push through, and even if he had millennia to make his journey, he would never be able to complete it. Thus while in Kafka it is a foregone conclusion that the Imperial message cannot be delivered, in Ashbery's "At North Farm" (and, to some extent, in "The Friend at Midnight"), it is not certain that the "someone" whom we await will ever make it to us; Ashbery resists even foregone conclusions of foregone inconclusiveness.

The "someone" of Ashbery's "At North Farm" also seems to have a different purpose than Kafka's messenger. Ashbery's character (once again, both the "someone" of "At North Farm" and the "friend" of "The Friend at Midnight") seems more analogous to Death, while Kafka's seems a bearer of metaphysical certainty. Of course, though, death and metaphysics go hand in hand, as is made clear by their frequent dual appearances not only throughout the annals of philosophy but throughout the history of literature, as well. Death is, in large part, the province of metaphysics. Take, for instance, that other school of literary transcendence, the Beats. In *On The Road* Kerouac's Sal Paradise says: "Suddenly I

had a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating toward me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed, pursuing me like the Shrouded Traveler on the plain, bearing down on me" (212). The vision goes on, is expounded, but from this passage alone the resemblance to "At North Farm" and "The Friend at Midnight" should be clear (Dean Moriarty, after all, is indeed a friend whom Sal resists furiously). Dean is both an angel of death and the Dean of metaphysical surety, "knowing time," as he says throughout the novel. Similarly, in *Moby-Dick* Father Mapple, in his sermon (another address), describes how Jonah slept deeply in the hold of the ship giving him passage: "He sees no black sky and raging sea, feels not the reeling timbers, and little hears he or heeds he the far rush of the mighty whale, which even now with open mouth is cleaving the seas after him" (51). The whale, in this case, is a harbinger of both doom and revelation. Such fatedness (sometimes frustrated, sometimes not) as we find in these instances from Kerouac, Melville, and Kafka often both collides and coincides with Ashbery's preferred modes of ambling and meandering, by virtue of which a message is rarely, if ever, delivered directly. Proteus will not pronounce for us a truth unless we first manage to hold onto to him through a series of wily transformations, and nor will Circe unless we successfully resist her desire to cast a spell over us.

The conclusion of "The Friend at Midnight," like that of "The Impure" and many other Ashbery poems, resists *our* likely desire for it to yield an explanation or moral of sorts:

nothing is adrift

for long. Perhaps we will be overtaken

even in our happiness, and waves of passion drown us.

Now, wasn't that easy? A moment's breath and everyone

has gone inside to ponder the matter further.

Outside, children toboggan endlessly.

That "nothing is adrift" recalls us to the poem's earlier idea that everything may be "anchored up ahead." It seems, though, that things are anchored in, if anything, oblivion, to which we ourselves will eventually be consigned. Whatever furious resistance we might make as a result of this is not unlike that of a child refusing to take his medicine, where once the spoonful finally goes down, he is told: "Now, wasn't that easy?" This, though, is also the poem's speaker (having taken us through the poem itself) saying, "Now, wasn't that easy?" after which we can leave the poem to "ponder the matter further." However, if we have just been drowned (in poetry, passion, oblivion), it might be everyone *else* going inside to ponder the very matter of our death (whether it be figurative or literal). The "everyone" here, though, is, surely, not the same bunch from the summertime graduation speech of the beginning of the poem, but a group of people gathered now during the winter, for there is snow on the ground. Here is one point (perhaps among many) where we might feel the urge to recall Coleridge's address to his child at the end of "Frost at Midnight":

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,

Whether the summer clothe the general earth

With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
 Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
 Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
 Smokes in the sun-thaw. (47-8)

Between the addresses of Coleridge and Ashbery there is a vast distance across which nothing can travel without arriving as something other than what it was when it started out. Similarly, all seasons may be sweet, each morning have a special chime of its own, but this cannot mask completely the advance of age, the approach of death: we are no longer what we were when we started out. While “everyone” retires to “ponder [this] matter further,” “Outside, children toboggan endlessly.” A poem “about” ends, then (whether they be ends of school years or of lives), ends with the word “endlessly” and uses it to modify an image of children playing in winter (youth and age, vitality and death coexisting). This is Ashbery's characteristic way of simultaneously completing and unraveling a poem, in the process leaving his readers, to their advantage, I think, outside with the children.

Wittgenstein provides us with a model of wonder we might adopt in reading a poem such as “The Friend at Midnight”:

Hearing a word in a particular sense. How queer that there should be such a thing!

Phrased *like this*, emphasized like this, heard in this way, this sentence is the first of a series in which a transition is made to *these* sentences, pictures, actions.

((A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction.)) (*PI* §534)

The notion of familiar paths leading off in different directions was a cornerstone of his later philosophy, from his notion of himself as a guide through the city of London to his insistence on the fact that in the use of expressions we "go by detours and side-roads." Expressions, not unlike children, toboggan endlessly, "over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction" (*PI* v).

V.

Bonnie Costello has aptly referred to Ashbery as "the Houdini of poetry who can escape any box he puts himself in, while still insisting on the necessity of the box" (*Shifting Ground* 194). The lyric form is just such a box, one which Ashbery is continuously both escaping from and insisting on. He says in the long poem, "A Wave":

By so many systems

As we are involved in, by just so many

Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be

Part of us, as though we would ever get away. (*A Wave* 71)

Wittgenstein, too, has something of the magician in him. In writing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he constructed for himself a masterful "box" from which he spent the next several decades escaping while simultaneously insisting on its necessity. The fact that he wished to have it published side-by-side with the *Investigations* points to his own notion of the importance of the "box" in the game

of showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle (*PI* §309). (As though we would ever get away.)

Chapter Three

Revelations from the Back Yard: Charles Wright

"All there is to thinking," he said, "is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren't noticing which makes you see something that isn't even visible."

-Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Reality is never more than a first step towards an unknown on the road to which one can never progress very far.

-Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive*

I.

It was not an uncommon experience during the First World War for a soldier to feel, in the midst of battle, completely safe. Lieutenant Colonel Alan Hanbury-Sparrow says, "At that moment [of a shell bursting nearby] I realised that whatever happened I wasn't going to be killed. It's impossible to describe this consciousness. It's not like ordinary consciousness at all, it's something like a prophet of old when the Lord spoke, something quite overwhelmingly clear and convincing" (Arthur 224). Private S. C. Lang says of being caught in a barrage, "Suddenly, as I lay in my shell-hole, I had a premonition -- I became convinced, utterly convinced, that nothing could be done that day that would hurt me. I became perfectly calm and almost went to sleep" (Arthur 237). German soldiers, too, had such experiences. Walter Horwitz, a student of philosophy at Heidelberg, wrote, "We are all looking death in the face almost daily, and that makes the soul quite calm in the presence of eternity" (Hannah 121). And Gotthold von Rohden, a student of theology at

Marburg, wrote of being stuck behind enemy lines: "I was perfectly calm and never felt a moment's fear of what might happen, knowing myself to be in a Higher Hand" (Hannah 124).

The accounts cited above utilize decidedly religious language (premonitions, the "presence of eternity," being in a "Higher Hand") in order to describe the experience of feeling safe. In his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein describes two general experiences which give him a sense of "absolute or ethical value": first, a "wonder at the existence of the world," and second, "the experience of feeling absolutely safe" (8). He qualifies the latter experience thus: "I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens'" (8). Wittgenstein first encountered this sentiment in his youth, when he saw the play *Die Kreuzelscheiber* by Ludwig Anzengruber, in which one of the characters expresses such a feeling of safety "no matter what happened in the world" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 51). According to Norman Malcolm, hearing these lines was a revelation to Wittgenstein: "for the first time he perceived the possibility of religious experience" (7). This possibility, in turn, would eventually lead to Wittgenstein's desire to be sent to the front in World War One, a desire which was fulfilled in 1916, when he was posted near the Romanian border.

The experience of being on the Eastern Front was for Wittgenstein a perpetual test, a self-trial conducted to find out how he would act and react in life-threatening situations. Would he experience fear in the face of death, or would he be calm? He experienced great danger on the front and noted, "From time to time I was afraid. That is the fault of a false view of life" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 138). A

true view of life would mean calmness in the presence of the imminent threat of death, a belief that no matter what happened to one, one was safe. Wittgenstein had gone to the front with Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* and Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in his possession, and he experienced there, as had been his hope, the spiritual transformation that so altered the final form and import of the *Tractatus*. He was as much preoccupied with ethics as with logic during these years. As Brian McGuinness notes, "Grasping the essence of propositions or of an operation had something to do with adopting the right attitude towards life . . . The critic of Russell [was] fused with the reader of Dostoevsky" (245). The notebook entries from the front clearly justify this assessment. Consider the following two entries: July 8th: "Fear in the face of death is the best sign of a false, i.e. a bad life" (*Notebooks 1914-1916* 75); and August 13th: "The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world" (81). Such entries compete with and merge into delineations of the nature of logical form. For instance, on October 7th of the same year, Wittgenstein wrote, "Each thing modifies the whole logical world, the whole of logical space, so to speak. (The thought forces itself upon one): The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space" (83). It is clear from this entry that his work on logic led Wittgenstein into the realms of ethics and aesthetics, or rather that thoughts concerning these realms forced themselves upon him as his work in logic collided with his experience at the front. "My work has extended from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world" (79).

In the "Lecture on Ethics" Wittgenstein says that he has experienced moments of peace during which he has felt, regardless of the circumstances, absolutely safe. Such experiences, he goes on, along with the feeling of wonder at the world's existence, formed part of the bedrock of his ethical sensibility. The attempt to formulate that sensibility, however, could ultimately result only in nonsense: "To be safe essentially means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to me and therefore it is nonsense to say that I am safe whatever happens" (9). Certainly, to claim having felt absolutely safe in the midst of a bombardment is nonsensical; it is difficult, in fact, to imagine a more dangerous set of circumstances. In the lecture, however, Wittgenstein states that what he wants to impress on his audience is that "a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through all ethical and religious expressions" (9). These expressions have the character of nonsense not because we have yet to find the correct expression for the experience, but because it is necessary to the essence of the experience for its expression to be nonsensical. The point of using such expressions, of giving way to the force which they exert upon us, is "*to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language*" (11), to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Despite the demand for silence with which the *Tractatus* closes, we cannot help continually trying to speak of that whereof we cannot speak, of that which lies "beyond significant language." "This running against the walls of our cage," says Wittgenstein in the lecture, "is perfectly, absolutely hopeless" (12). In 1929, then, Wittgenstein still maintained, as he had in the *Tractatus*, that ethics is something

about which we cannot speak. He acknowledges, however, that we speak of it nonetheless, as if compulsively, and that the urge to do so frequently if not regularly overpowers the imperative not to. Indeed, it seems less a case of an urge battling an imperative than of two imperatives colliding. And while Wittgenstein does refer to our attempts to formulate ethics as a "tendency," he maintains that it is "a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply," adding, "and I would not for my life ridicule it" (12). This assertion, which concludes the lecture, clearly and deliberately separates Wittgenstein from the Logical Positivists who did ridicule this particular human tendency, and did so under the influence of a misreading of the *Tractatus*.

Throughout his adult life Wittgenstein maintained a profound respect both for that "whereof one cannot speak" and for attempts to speak thereof in which the speaker was aware that he was "misusing" language, and that this misuse was essential to what he was trying to say. In a 1938 lecture on religious belief Wittgenstein said, "Today I saw a poster saying: 'Dead' Undergraduate Speaks" (*Lectures and Conversations* 65). He points out that "Dead" is in quotation marks to indicate that the student isn't really dead, but then cautions that in such circumstances "you're almost deliberately preparing misunderstandings. Why don't you use some other word, and let 'dead' have the meaning it already has?" (65). Thus, were one to say that one felt safe during a bombardment, Wittgenstein might be expected to counter, "Why not use another word and let 'safe' have the meaning it already has," but in ethical discourse this sort of misuse of language is actually imperative if the ethical import of the expression is to resound. Unfortunately,

however, people generally tend to think, perhaps under the influence of a particularly scientific paradigm, that possessing the character of nonsense must necessarily demean an utterance, that in order for a formulation to have legitimate meaning it must be eminently rational. Operating under such a misconception, philosophers, among others, will busy themselves with the formulation of ethics as if it were entirely subject to the demands which reason makes, notably the demand for empirical proof. This, says Wittgenstein, does a disservice to both ethics and reason. "Suppose someone dreamt of the Last Judgement, and said he now knew what it would be like . . . Why should I regard this dream as evidence -- measuring its validity as though I were measuring the validity of the evidence for meteorological events?" (*Lectures and Conversations* 61). When someone makes this move of citing evidence for a religious or ethical precept, he is carrying a feature of one language-game into another in which the only function it can have is to import an orderly hierarchy in which reason clearly outranks nonsense, a hierarchy that belongs more to science than to ethics. "If you compare [citing evidence for belief in the Last Judgement] with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can't credit that anyone could soberly argue: 'Well, I had this dream . . . therefore . . . Last Judgement.' You might say: 'For a blunder, that's too big'" (61-2). That is, there is no mere mistake in reasoning here, but an entire misapplication of reason. If someone claimed to have felt absolutely safe during a bombardment and offered us "being in the hand of God" as evidence to support his claim, we would have to cite this as a double misuse of language. The first misuse (of the word "safe") is necessary to ethical discourse, by means of which we seek to

express something beyond significant language, beyond the world. The second misuse (citing being in God's hand as "evidence") is employed in order to lend credence to the first misuse, but this move abuses both reason and ethics, for the ethical import of the statement, which depended on its not making sense, is nullified by the misapplication of evidentiary citation. None of the examples from the First World War referred to above makes this mistake; they feature only the "characteristic misuse of language" which is natural and necessary to the language-game of which they are a part. The speakers do not go on from there to attempt a justification of their expressions via the application of criteria for justification imported from a quite different language-game (that of citing empirical evidence). All too often, however, in supposed ethical discourse, Wittgenstein saw such attempts at justification being made, as in the case of a certain Father O'Hara who wanted to make religion "a question of science" (*Lectures and Conversations* 57-9). "What seems to me ludicrous about O'Hara," said Wittgenstein in 1938, "is his making [religious belief] appear to be *reasonable*" (58). Earlier, in the "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein anticipated someone demanding of him a rational description of what he means by feelings of absolute value:

When this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance. ("Lecture on Ethics" 11)

Ethico-religious beliefs and expressions, according to Wittgenstein, play a fundamental role in our lives and are not to be ridiculed for themselves; only the attempt to justify them on empirical or logical grounds is to be exposed as ridiculous. The expressions themselves indicate "a tendency in the human mind" for which Wittgenstein had the utmost respect, namely, the tendency to want to go beyond the world and beyond significant language. Ultimately what we need to guard ourselves against is the urge to justify, by way of rational discourse and empirical evidence, nonsensical expressions in the domain of ethics and religion (and aesthetics), for it is *this* urge that performs the work of bewitchment, all the more powerfully for the fact that when we are under its influence we are inclined to regard any religious or ethical formulations unfounded in reason as merely superstitious. By attempting to justify ethical expressions by appeals to significant language, we become blinded to the very essence of ethical expression, which lies in the attempt to move beyond significant language. "Is my understanding only blindness to my own lack of understanding?" asked Wittgenstein near the end of his life. "It often seems so to me" (*OC* §418).

One might take this last remark as a motto for the work of Charles Wright (one could actually almost mistake it for a passage from Wright), whose poems regularly busy themselves with attempts at going beyond significant language, with the urge to understand what is essentially incapable of being understood, and, consequently, with the perpetual formulation of an ethics that never goes any further than the poet's back yard.

II.

David Young says of Charles Wright: "[he] might well subscribe to Wittgenstein's notion that 'The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world' (*Tractatus*, 5.632), for he is fascinated with the way we can and cannot connect ourselves to the world of appearances and the fortunes of language, elements that sustain us even as they can be said to seduce, subvert, and betray us" (44). The capacity of language to induce in us a desire to go "beyond the world" provides us not only with sustenance in the form of our ethical sensibility but also with reason to be wary insofar as that capacity can also function as a temptation which lures us into untenable positions and often thence to righteousness. For each instance in which language (or, for Wright, landscape) compels us towards the ineffable, then, there needs to be an adequate counterforce present to protect us from bewitchment, whether it be the bewitchment of a haughty metaphysical assertion, a superficial mysticism, or a quasi-scientific surety. In Wright's *Black Zodiac*, the title of which indicates the unreadability of a nonetheless existent and alluring metaphysic, instances of language attempting to go beyond itself are repeatedly countered with ordinary, seemingly tossed off responses; as Helen Vendler puts it, "Just when Wright is being most biblical, the colloquial thrusts itself into the lines" ("The Nothing That Is" 74). Thus in the opening poem of the volume, "Apologia Pro Vita Sua," one encounters the following: "The meat of the sacrament is invisible meat and a ghostly substance. / I'll say" (4). Or, in the five-part poem "Lives of the Saints": "*In dread we stay and in dread depart... / Not much wrench room*" (45). The latter two lines, on Wright's page, look like this:

In dread we stay and in dread depart...

Not much wrench room.

They are, in a sense, then, really only one line, the second half of which is dropped, or brought down, becoming what Wright calls a "low-rider." The purpose of the low-rider is to break a line in such a way as to emphasize its nonlinear continuity through a disparity which can work in a variety of ways: spatially, semantically, syntactically, or, as in the example above, through difference in tone. The religious proclamation is offset by the colloquial, workman-like expression; the gravity of the former is simultaneously deflated and reinforced by the ordinariness of the latter. There is less "wrench room" between the two half-lines than the disparate tones of their expression would indicate, as they must rely on each other to constitute a complete movement, a brief stepping out over the abyss and then the stepping back. Language both can and cannot express ethico-religious truths: its ability to do so depends on its inability to do so. One cannot say which is the ethical half of the two half-lines quoted above, for the ethical import lies in there being only one line (which, in a sense, there is, and which, in a sense, there isn't), the two halves of which put pressure upon each other like clashing weather systems. The alleviation which results is both somber and humorous.

"Death's still the secret of life, / the garden reminds us. / Or vice-versa. It's complicated" (73). *"The restoration of the nature of the ones who are good / Takes place in a time that never had a beginning. // Well, yes, no doubt about that"* (76). The "characteristic misuses of language" which begin these lines unmoor language from sense; the responses which finish them keep the "biblical" utterances from

ascending to the spheres of a falsely proclaimed metaphysical surety. Both actions in this call and response are necessary to the balancing act that is ethical sensibility: the unmooring is neither more nor less imperative than the gravitational finish.

In "Sitting at Dusk in the Back Yard after the Mondrian Retrospective" (the poem's title is characteristic of Wright in its specification of time and place),

Wright muses:

Destruction takes place so that order might exist.

Simple enough.

Destruction takes place at the point of maximum awareness.

Orate sine intermissione, St. Paul instructs.

Pray uninterruptedly.

The gods and their names have disappeared.

Only the clouds remain. (62)

The first line, including its low-rider, features an essentialist generalization met with something of a shrug of the shoulders. The second line builds on the generalization of the first, making the thought more original, less "simple." For order to exist, there must be destruction: a rather bland, or simplistic, expression of a dualistic truth. In order for destruction to take place, though, there must be "maximum awareness," a maximum awareness which we might first have been inclined to assign not to destruction itself, but to the order which arises from it. Wright has moved us, then, from the comfort of a cliché to the position of having to assemble a thought. Furthermore, in likening "maximum awareness" (the point at which destruction takes place) to uninterrupted prayer, Wright implies that prayer

is, essentially, a destructive act, an act which partially fulfills even while it is predicated upon the removal of the gods. Maximum awareness depends on the condition of that which we might be aware of being significantly hidden or removed, lest our attention become dull or complacent. As William Blake wrote in a letter of 1799, "The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act" (402). In Wright's case, neither language itself nor landscape is "too Explicit" on the matter of the gods. While "only the clouds remain," then, in Wright's poetry clouds are of the utmost significance both because of and despite the fact that what their scrawl signifies is unreadable. The gods have wiped themselves out, leaving us in a roused position where, through alertness and vigilance, *we* can constantly redeem *them* via a resistance (or destruction, or deconstruction) of any expression which would too easily, or once and for all, encapsulate them.

In the final poem of *Black Zodiac*, "Disjecta Membra," Wright heeds a voice which drones, "Simplify, open the emptiness, divest--"; and then, as if delivering an edifying discourse, he notes the lesson of the landscape: "The trees do, each year milking their veins / Down, letting the darkness drip in, / I.V. from the infinite" (71-2). Clouds, trees, and other aspects of landscape, along with language itself, put us in the presence of eternity only in the sense that they hook us up to an "I.V. from the infinite" which sends a certain something through our spiritual veins and so sustains us in our mortal constitution for the duration of our abidance -- *if* we are able to "simplify" (the ethical imperative of Thoreau), "open the emptiness," and "divest." What is implied by these verbs is similar to, or attendant upon, the

"maximum awareness" of "Sitting at Dusk in the Back Yard," where sitting about is an ethical act of alertness, and where the back yard is both its mundane self and the threshold of the known world. Minding one's own business in such a way, in such a setting, is as much an ethical imperative for Wright as it was for Thoreau, who considered unminded business (or mere busy-ness and bustle) a supremely deadening force: "I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business" (369).

Just as the back yard is, for Wright, both an arena of the transcendent and, quite simply, *just* the back yard, so the items and organisms which reside in or visit it are both merely themselves (as we encounter them on a day to day basis) and indicators, or likenesses, of other things. The compromise between our desire to go beyond significant language while yet employing the language of significance often expresses itself by way of analogy, metaphor, simile, where a thing is likened to another thing and thus extended beyond itself, for instance: "Chipmunk towering like a dinosaur / out of the short grass" (*Scar Tissue* 36). We can easily forego the simile here and simply report what is being observed, a chipmunk in the grass, but to do this would be to negate both the entire body and import of Wright's verse, where likenesses are established between things which are unlike for the purpose of transcending materiality while remaining firmly grounded in it, both movements being essential to achieving an understanding of the world. As Socrates says in the *Phaedo* when discussing the transmigration of souls, "The earth itself is not of such a quality or such a size as it is thought to be by those who are accustomed to describe the earth" (513). That is, the earth is also paradoxically made up of what it

is not. As Socrates's earth contains many hidden passageways through which wandering souls travel, so both Wright's back yard and the poems he writes about it function as material thoroughfares for the non-material, conduits for images, with an emphasis on "magic."

In the "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein states:

In ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes.

But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so what at first appeared to be simile now seems to be mere nonsense. (10)

Consider the expression, "I felt as though I were in a higher hand." What is this a simile for? What would a mere description of the facts consist of here?

Wittgenstein's point is that there are not "facts" to describe here, that the "characteristic misuse of language" of ethical and religious discourse largely eschews facts and in so doing attempts to move beyond the world. Wright's similes, even when there are "facts" which correspond to them, often work as propellers in just this sense; that is, they attempt to move us beyond the merely factual world of the back yard, either by reaching out from it towards the factless ephemeral or by incorporating the prehistoric into it.

The urge to move beyond the back yard always remains firmly grounded in the back yard. "Passing the Morning under the Serenissima" (*Appalachia* 11)

begins, "Noon sun big as a knuckle, / tight over Ponte S. Polo." And later in the poem, as the poet sits about and reads on a hot day, he observes "The flies and nameless little insects / circling like God's angels / Over the candy dish and worn rug." Where Wittgenstein points to similes with no facts behind them in order to get at the essence of ethical and religious expression, Wright seems to be intent on elevating mere facts via simile in order to cultivate a religious or ethical (or poetic) sensibility. In both cases the drive is to move beyond significant language via significant language, whether it be by employing a simile which lacks a fact ("as though I were in a higher hand") or by likening flies and "nameless little insects" to angels or, conversely, the sun to a bruising knuckle. "Butterflies flock like angels / and God knees our necks to the ground" (62). Butterflies here replace flies and insects (that's more appropriate, one thinks), and the sun's knuckle is replaced by God's knee. In this example the figurative expression is employed in the manner described by Wittgenstein: there is no fact corresponding to God's knee, and yet the sensation expressed by the phrase is firmly grounded in human experience.

Wittgenstein calls this "the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value" ("Lecture on Ethics" 10). The paradox lies in the disjunction between a natural fact (some butterflies) and the sensation one receives from it of a value which supersedes the natural, humbles it, in fact. Proposition 5.6 of the *Tractatus* reads, "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*" It is a proposition apt to be misinterpreted as either structuralist or positivist in nature, yet while it does perhaps possess structuralist and positivist overtones, its primary import lies elsewhere. This proposition is, in fact, very much a microcosm of the

Tractatus itself, where what is stressed most of all, at least according to Wittgenstein, is what is *not* written, that second, absent half of the book which is dedicated to that whereof one cannot speak. In a letter to Ludwig von Ficher Wittgenstein wrote, "The Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it" (Monk, *Duty of Genius* 178). That the limits of my language are the limits of my world, then, is only half of the picture. The fact that the world is everything that is the case is itself, paradoxically, only half of the picture. For beyond the limits of language (and therefore of the world) there lies, absurdly, that which is not the case, the realm of which can be delimited only by digging out, probing, and inhabiting the limits of the sayable. Then, from this point, there is often a tendency to want to go further, to carry language beyond itself, a tendency which often leads to "babbling" and much metaphysical illusion, but which when properly understood and carefully dealt with commands respect. A poet of Wright's caliber and disposition lives at the border between what can and cannot be said and learns how to cast language just a little ways out beyond that border, in order to see what, if any, frequencies can be picked up. "To believe in a God," wrote Wittgenstein in 1916, "means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter" (*Notebooks 1914-1916* 74), though they may be the end of matter.

In "Watching the Equinox Arrive in Charlottesville, September 1992" (*Chickamauga* 75), Wright writes, "The quince bush / Is losing its leaves in the

fall's early chemotherapy." How does one characterize this figuration? The diurnal course of the change of seasons is compared to radiation treatment; there seems to be little "sense" in this. And yet the loss of leaves at the outset of fall is not unlike the loss of hair at the outset of chemotherapy, and both, of course, are precursors to death. But the falling of leaves inaugurates death, while the loss of hair that comes with chemotherapy is meant to stave off the life-threatening disease. The loss of leaves, though, enables the tree to hunker down for the winter in preparation for the spring, and so is also as much a defense against death as an inauguration of it. The similarities of the comparison lie in the differences, and vice versa. "How unlike it is. How like" (84). Such complications of sense in Wright's comparisons wear down significant language to the point where it becomes a thin membrane on the other side of which we can just make out, by way of strange figures, stranger ones still. Attempting to go beyond significant language involves a loss "we get strange gain from" (67), for what we gain is nothing more than what we lost in the first place. Several philosophers have attempted to make this clear over the centuries, from Nāgārjuna's insistence that between samsāra and nirvāna there is not the least difference, to Nietzsche's claim that the worlds of being and becoming are the same. Wittgenstein's assertion that a word's meaning is its use is not out of place in such company insofar as it involves the collapse of the general difference between the "essential" and the "accidental" in favor of difference in general.

In Wright's poetry the distinction between the physical and the metaphysical collapses. In "Nine-Panel Yaak River Screen" he writes:

language, additional light is cast on the scene. What one should say, though, is that the additional light is cast by way of the inadequate conditions. Is the paradox that experience should have supernatural value? or that the supernatural should have experiential value? Wright's "daytime metaphysics of the natural world" (*Black Zodiac* 19) implies that everything that is beyond us is also right here.

III.

"The metaphysics of the commonplace," says Wright, "the metaphysics of the quotidian, is what I'm after" (*Halflife* 22). And: "The organization of things in relation to each other, not to a fixed ideal" (23). Wright's preference for syntactically complex descriptions of everyday sights and sounds functions as a means to achieving these two ends, though it must also be noted that "ends" are precisely what Wright is not intent on achieving; his descriptions do not operate as elaborate systems designed to elicit a "fixed ideal" but rather, and in this they share a similarity with Wittgenstein's philosophical method, as illustrations of connections. In fact, Wright's syntax often breaks down and/or starts over again mid-sentence, as if to announce the fact that it is not teleologically driven (which is not to say that it is without direction at all -- far from it). Midway through Wright's long poem, "A Journal of the Year of the Ox" (*The World of the Ten Thousand Things* 150-90), the poet, while sitting in a yard in Italy, has an epiphany the nature of which is mirrored in the syntax of its telling:

Last night, in the second yard, salmon-smoke in the west

Back-vaulting the bats

unlike Augustine, is not converted to a fixed ideal by his revelation. Instead, he remains concerned with establishing things as they are in relation to one another, the night, the bats, his son, the fruit trees, and so on. The sudden epiphany, a realization "that everything was a shining," that anything the poet could put his hand on would "burst into brilliance," actually threatens to consume the connections between things, a possibility which Wright resists. In this respect the thesis Kierkegaard attributes to Lessing can also be said to apply to Wright: "If God held all truth in his right hand, and in his left hand the lifelong pursuit of it, [Lessing] would choose the left hand" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 97). Wright similarly foregoes enlightenment in favor of the pursuit of it, a pursuit which takes the form of stasis:

But I sat still, and I touched nothing,
afraid that something might change
 And change me beyond my knowing,
 That everything I had hoped for, all I had ever wanted,
 Might actually happen.

So I sat still and touched nothing.

The poet's epiphany does not spur him to action, but his inactivity is deliberate, not so much a failure as an act itself. In fact, the real epiphany of the passage might be the poet's continuing to sit still *after* the revelation. He does not want to be changed "beyond [his] knowing," for that would erase his awareness of the connections between things and consume him in the "burst into brilliance." Willard Spiegelman says of Wright that "no poet has ever so clearly resisted his own enthusiasms . . . He

approaches ecstasy and then turns away from it because he cannot bear too much beauty, however mesmerizing he finds it" ("Metaphysics" 358). In the poem quoted above, though, I do not find Wright "turning away" from ecstasy so much as "sitting still" on its threshold. And it seems to me not so much that Wright "cannot bear too much beauty" as that he cannot bear too much beauty being lost. "Maximum awareness" of beauty means seeing the connections between the things of this world; any burst into brilliance would blind one to such things beyond one's knowing. It is true, as I myself have been arguing, that Wright often tries to go beyond significant language or beyond the world (and thus, in a way, beyond his knowing) in his poetry, but he insists on doing so *via* language and *via* the world (and thus via his knowing). Wright's poems do not preach the act of renunciation but rather the discipline of looking at and describing (and thereby indulging in) all that there is to renounce, all that is there to be lost. "Don't just do something, sit there," says Wright, reversing the clichéd call to action. "And so I have, so I have" (*A Short History of the Shadow* 79).

"For Wright," says Spiegelman, "the world is implicitly *not* everything that is the case, but it is all that we can be sure of" ("Metaphysics" 346). Unfortunately, this remark is fairly typical of applications of Wittgenstein in literary criticism. It is a misreading of the first proposition of the *Tractatus*, and it can only create confusion for someone who is trying to understand Wittgenstein. Spiegelman, an excellent reader of poems, by virtue of the grammar of his claim, sets Wright off against the young Wittgenstein. The claim says that for Wright there is more that is the case than the world, but that the world is all we can be sure of. Rather than

going against the grain of Wittgenstein's project in the *Tractatus*, this assessment might fairly be said to summarize it. One amendment, perhaps, needs to be made: Wittgenstein would not identify that which lies beyond the limits of language and beyond the world as also "being the case." This does not mean, however, that he consigns it with a positivistic flourish to irrelevance. Both Wright and Wittgenstein attend to describing the world which surrounds them as a means to gaining a negative sense of what is not the world, of what cannot be said and is therefore not the case. This is not a religious renunciation of the world in any sense, in which its status as a means is meant to belittle it in favor of the end that lies beyond in the form of a truer world, but rather a dependence on the world for its uncanny way of hinting at the presence (or absence) of what cannot be seen or said. As human beings in possession of language we are capable of tuning in to this specific frequency, even if, whether of necessity or due to our own conditioning, we are unable to decipher what comes in via the waves. In "A Journal for the Year of the Ox" Wright, still in Italy, encounters the shade of Dante, which admonishes him, "*Concentrate, listen hard, / Look to the nature of all things.*" Wright's response is characteristic: "Hmmm... Not exactly transplendent." The result of his listening hard is as follows: "A motor scooter whines up the hill road, toward the Madonna." Rather than provide "transplendent" counsel, the shade of Dante says "concentrate, listen, look"; when the poet does so, he hears not a choir of angels but the whine of a motor scooter. The motor scooter, though, is ascending a hill "toward the Madonna," not unlike Dante himself once. Listening to and looking at "the nature of all things" sets us on a path *toward* the transplendent, a path the end of which

Wright does not wish to reach: *he* is not whining his way up the hill but sitting quietly in the "night garden." That the world offers enough of what is not itself for us to be sufficiently aware of it while yet remaining anchored firmly in the world, is for Wright the optimal (not ideal) condition. It is not surprising, then, that he turns as often to Li Po and Tu Fu for council as he does to St. Augustine and Dante.

Wright is noticeably influenced by Chinese verse (one of many things he has in common with Pound), especially that of the High T'ang period (A.D. 712-760). Li Po and Tu Fu make appearances throughout his poetry. These appearances provide us with another way of understanding Wright's purpose in constantly binding the mystical to the mundane while insisting on the separation between them. David Hinton notes that Li Po and Tu Fu (who were contemporaries and friends, having met in a country wine shop) are often said, in their verse styles, "to represent the two poles of Chinese sensibility: Li Po being the Taoist . . . and Tu Fu the Confucian" (xx). The Taoist in this case represents the intuitive and the mystical, while the Confucian represents practicality and social awareness. Hinton notes that this is, of course, a drastic oversimplification, that both poets incorporate each of these fundamental aspects of Chinese sensibility into their verse. Similarly, Wright, in so often coupling "Taoist" transparency with "Confucian" concern, does his own part to show that these two aspects of existence are not so much "poles" between which one must make an either/or distinction as layers of existence, like snow on a fence (an image of which adorns the cover of *High Lonesome*, Adam Gianelli's anthology of reviews and essays on Wright).

Often Wright titles his poems in the "occasional" sense of his Chinese predecessors, as in the case of "Looking Outside the Cabin Window, I Remember a Line by Li Po" (*Chickamauga* 21). This method of naming a poem for the occasion that prompts it aligns both the poet and the poem with *tzu-jan*, the unfolding of the self or the self being so. Hinton, in his introduction to Li Po, calls particular attention to this process of letting something come into being as itself, a process which, as far as much poetry is concerned (and not only "Western" poetry), is often forgone in favor of the deliberate machinations and self-consciousness of the ego in the act of composition, a poetics based more on forging than on allowing. This contrast, however, is another oversimplification, as one can see from Wright's poetry, where these two conceptions of how poems get written are combined and even fused together. While his body of verse is copious to the point of being careless (careless in the positive sense of *tzu-jan*, that is, a form of caring), his proclaimed trilogy of trilogies betrays meticulous, and perhaps even egotistical, construction over the course of decades, the forging of an edifice.

In "Looking Outside the Cabin Window" Wright is engaged in his usual task: not really doing much of anything. Few poets spend more time describing themselves just sitting about and looking around than Wright. In the Chinese tradition this is *wu-wei*, which Hinton translates as both "doing nothing" (a literal translation) and "spontaneity." It is an ethical/aesthetic ideal to be aspired to in both life and art, and it is fundamental to *tzu-jan* (xi-xii) insofar as spontaneity in the act of doing nothing allows for the unfolding of the self in life, art, and nature (a precept with which Thoreau would have agreed). To conceptualize "doing nothing"

as a task does not necessarily imply irony: allowing for and being sensitive to "the organization of things in relation to each other" requires not only "maximum awareness" but also strenuous resistance to the temptation to yield to the formulation of a "fixed ideal" -- letting things unfold as they are in both life and art requires an effortless, and yet thereby supreme, effort. Wright's poem begins:

The river winds through the wilderness,

Li Po said

of another place and another time.

It does so here as well, sliding its cargo of dragon scales

To gutter under the snuff

of marsh willow and tamarack.

The first line (a quotation) demonstrates the principles of *tzu-jan* and *wu-wei*, both in nature (the river itself, doing nothing in its winding, as described by Li Po) and art (the recalled line acting as a natural wellspring for the stream of Wright's own poem). "Another place and another time" does not refer solely to the High T'ang period during which Li Po lived and wrote, but also to another place and another time being called to mind by Li Po himself, namely, the place and time (placeless and timeless) of the Star River which cradles the earth (Hinton xiv). This dual reference to a local river (most likely the Yangtze) and a galactic one makes the "here" of the fourth line resonate beyond wherever Wright happens to be (Montana, as it turns out). "It does so here as well" means not only that Wright is looking at a local river as Li Po once did, but that he has in mind the same river, also, the one which flows above him now and which at one time flowed above Li Po. The "cargo

of dragon scales" (the stars of the Star River, the ripples of the local one) combines the commercial with the mythological in a manner we have come to expect from Wright. It is not until the final line of the stanza, with the picturing of "marsh willow and tamarack," that we are firmly planted in the actual physical setting of the poem (although the "Cabin Window" of the title does, especially if we are familiar with Wright, indicate a specific scene). The second stanza is quintessential Wright description:

Mid-morning, Montana high country,
 Jack snipe poised on the scarred fence post,
 Pond water stilled and smoothed out,
 Swallows dog-fighting under the fast-moving storm clouds.

The first line functions in the manner of a stage-setting for a play: this is when and where the action is happening. In this sense one could call Wright's poetry dramatic, with the proviso that for Wright the setting *is* the drama. What follows is the unfolding of a landscape; the landscape, however, is both never merely itself and always only itself; the river at one's feet is also the river above one's head. Here, the natural Montana high country is determinedly militaristic: the jack snipe is poised like a sentry, the fence post is scarred like a veteran, the swallows dog-fight, and the "stilled and smoothed out" pond waer is a calm presence awaiting the deluge of the "fast-moving storm clouds." And yet the landscape seems, despite such violent goings-on, vastly peaceful, as though despite all of the activity, nothing was happening. In the third stanza, however, there is a definite sense of anticipation, an edge to the violent calm:

Expectantly empty, green as a pocket, the meadow waits

For the wind to rise and fill it,

first with a dark hand

Then with the rain's loose silver

A second time and a third

as the day doles out its hours.

The violent calm of the scene is about to give way, then, when the storm arrives, to a calm violence -- was the prospect of a rain storm ever so languid? To be expectantly empty seems to imply a contentment both with one's being empty and with one's being about to be filled. This decidedly "Taoist" image of the empty pocket of the meadow, though, also operates as a "Confucian" metaphor: the pocket is about to be occupied by loose change (the rain) deposited by a dark hand (the shadow of the rain storm) . The day doles out its hours like wages, and scattered, frequent thundershowers place the currency of rain into the meadow's pocket; part of everything's being as it is involves its being not entirely as or what it is. The final lines of the poem both echo earlier themes and introduce new ones:

Sunlight reloads and ricochets off the window glass.

Behind the cloud scuts,

inside the blue aorta of the sky

The River of Heaven flows

With its barge of stars,

waiting for darkness and a place to shine.

We who would see beyond seeing

see only language, that burning field.

The military language reappears in the first line: the sunlight "reloads" because the passing showers frequently eclipse it. Also present in the first line is a reminder of the poet's presence in the cabin, where he is safe behind the bullet-proof glass of the window, observing the scene unfolding itself. The blue aorta of the sky pumps the cosmic river along with its cargo-laden barge (a return to the mythic and commercial language of the poem's opening), "waiting for darkness and a place to shine," where again something being the case (the brightness of the coming night sky) depends on something quite other than, and yet integral to, itself (the darkness of night), in this case not a likeness but an oppositional complement.

The last sentence of the poem (a line with a low-rider) brings language into the landscape in a conspicuous manner. If we could see beyond seeing we would see, both logically and paradoxically, what is invisible. In attempting to do so, however, we see "only language." Both this strain on our part and its result, pertaining as they do to landscape and language, lie at the heart of Wright's poetry. The dynamic can be interpreted in two seemingly quite different ways: first, as a failure which consists of our not being able to see beyond seeing because we repeatedly come up against the obstacle of language; and second, as a success which consists of our actually being able to see beyond seeing, the result of which is not a revelation of the transplendent but instead an encounter with "only language." Both interpretations, of course, are inherent in the syntax of the sentence, and in a sense they are one and the same. The conditional imperative "we

who *would* see beyond seeing" is also very important; the phrasing implies that it is something we want to do but cannot, something we strive for but would be wise to resist, as well. To "see beyond seeing" might be akin, that is, to the "burst into brilliance" which Wright resists at the threshold of language.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says, "We find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough" (II.xi.212). He makes this remark in the midst of his discussion of "seeing aspects." To see aspects is to see something now as/like this, now as/like that. Someone perhaps shows me a picture of a creature which I am able to see now as a chipmunk, now as a dinosaur (perhaps I am able to see it first like this, then like that, on my own, or maybe I need assistance from the person providing the picture). The crucial role played by simile in this phenomenon of "seeing as" is obvious; our ability to see aspects depends on our ability to perform a sort of representational shift. Wittgenstein's argument concerning this phenomenon is that it cannot be adequately explained by referring to what happens neurologically and/or physiologically in the brain (or, worse yet, the mind) of the person who is performing, or perhaps just experiencing, it. He says, "I should like to say that what dawns here [seeing something like this, then like that] lasts only as long as I am occupied with the object in a particular way . . . Above all, don't wonder 'What can be going on in the eyes or brain?'" (II.xi.210-11). So what is the "particular way" he refers to here? He goes on, "The likeness makes a striking impression on me; then the impression fades . . . What happened here? . . . Is being struck looking plus thinking? No. Many of our concepts *cross* here" (II.xi.211). Both a neurological

explanation and the all too facile formulation, "looking plus thinking," tend too quickly towards a solution, a fixed answer to the quandary, when what Wittgenstein wants to call our attention to is the way in which our concepts cross one another, the way in which they are organized in relation to one another. His philosophy, then, much like Wright's poetry, is thus more cartographical than teleological (unless one understands by teleology the study of bounds, not ends), and in going about his business of indirection he often alights upon stunning new territory. Having veered away from several hypotheses which would explain seeing-as, he eventually comes to liken it to "experiencing the meaning of a word" (II.xi.214). He claims that a person with aspect-blindness would be like a person who was meaning-blind: both conditions would be founded upon the absence of the substratum of mastery of a technique, or facility with a language (II.xi.208). To say, "We who would see beyond seeing / see only language" is thus to say, "We see aspects," or, "We are capable of seeing aspects."

In "Looking Outside the Cabin Window" Wright sees the landscape now like this, now like that, and his vision is conditioned upon his mastery of a language. This marshalling of forces of sight and language is made in an attempt to see beyond seeing, to enter the invisible realm of the departed gods. But the tools we have at our disposal for accomplishing this mission are also obstacles we cannot overcome and which therefore prevent that very accomplishment. Even in being prevented, though, we acquire what Wittgenstein calls "imponderable evidence" concerning what cannot be formulated. That this phrase is a contradiction in terms (how can something serve as evidence if it cannot be pondered?) is of course

deliberate. It is meant to refer to but also to alter the idea of empirical, or scientific, evidence; there are types of cases where the search for and/or application of strictly empirical evidence would necessarily have the wrong effect. "Imponderable evidence," says Wittgenstein, "includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone" (II.xi.228). But he asks rather pressingly, "What does imponderable evidence *accomplish*?" The answer seems to be, not very much. In order for it to accomplish something, to answer a question, say, or solve a problem, it would have to be evidence in the scientific sense of the word. Imponderable evidence is likened, instead, to a man's having a nose for something (II.xi.228). It doesn't so much accomplish anything as it is in itself an accomplishment of sorts, a sixth sense (or rather an extension of the first five) we acquire via the mastery of the technique of language. The aim of Charles Wright's poetry is precisely to establish a courtroom's worth of such evidence (undoubtedly inadmissible because imponderable): "The world is a language we never quite understand," he says, "But think we catch the drift of" (*Chickamauga* 29). "Catching the drift of" here is akin to "having a nose for." "What is most difficult," says Wittgenstein, "is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words" (II.xi.227). It is not a question of our possessing an insufficient vocabulary but of the insufficiency of language itself, which, of course, is precisely what suffices for our attainment of such evidence in the first place.

IV.

Hinton, writing of Li Po, says that "in the end, *tzu-jan* is the form of loss" (xxiv). If *wu-wei* is the cultivation of *tzu-jan*, then the allowance of the unfolding of things that is the form of loss is best cultivated by spontaneously doing nothing. Hinton's claim for Li Po is that his poetry "enacts" this process (xi) as opposed to merely representing or explaining it. Thomas Gardner, in an interview with Wright, engages the poet on his notion of the lyric as a form of poem in which something is lost. Wright says that there is "something condensed and withheld and unknowable. You're working in an area that is psychically unavailable to you" (*A Door Ajar* 103). Wright's conception of the lyric, not unlike a religious or ethical pronouncement, is thus engaged in the endeavor of attempting to go beyond significant language, of straining towards areas to which we do not have direct access. One forges a simile behind which there is nothing: the goal here is to establish contact with what is "psychically unavailable," and while it may be an impossible goal by definition alone, it is precisely the impulse which impels us away from de-finition in the first place that sets us in motion toward the goal. Attainment of the goal is thus in a way possible despite the contradiction inherent in its formulation. This is not to say, of course, that it is possible in any direct sense, but rather that it is possible via indirect enaction. In Wright's poetry, says Christopher R. Miller, "philosophy is not to be confirmed or denied, but poetically enacted" (302). Such activity enables us to as it were keep what is beyond sight within sight without our converting it into something seen; we possess our dispossession via our ability to skirt the threshold of the Star River's main artery.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says, "In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by sideroads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed" (§426). What Wittgenstein means here by the "straight highway" is a form of expression that "seems to have been designed for a god, who knows what we cannot know" (§426). We ourselves have access to this form of expression, but only by way of indirect sideroads which, while they cover much of the same terrain, access neither the straight highway itself nor its ends. Wittgenstein relies on simile in this case as in many others to make his point clear: "For us, of course, these forms of expression are like pontificals which we may put on, but cannot do much with, since we lack the effective power that would give these vestments meaning and purpose" (§426). The idea in both this figurative expression and the image of the "straight highway" is the same: we can drive on the roads, we can don the garments, but ultimately there is nothing behind the simile for us, no on-ramp leading to the "blue aorta of the sky" and no increased powers of vision which the garments themselves will give us. It is perhaps rational to assume that if we must rely on the side-road of simile in, say, lyrical discourse in order to express a particular sensation that pertains to ethics and aesthetics, surely we must be able to drop the simile and at least describe the fact of the main highway. But it is not so: as soon as we attempt to do this, we see that "the gods and their names have disappeared" and "only the clouds remain."

In §356 of *Zettel*, amidst a series of remarks on color concepts, Wittgenstein asks whether a simile which posits *no* main road would be better than one which posits an inaccessible one when it comes to articulating the difficulties we often

encounter in our forms of expression. Western philosophy, from Plato's doctrine of Forms to Kant's thing-in-itself, has troubled itself interminably over precisely this issue of what lies beyond significant language (beyond the world) and, if anything, whether or not it is in any way accessible (the Forms, of course, being only remotely accessible via recollection, the thing-in-itself being as inaccessible as it is undoubtable). In Wittgenstein no less than in his predecessors, one finds the notion of something that is hidden or kept from us (or, as in Heidegger, of something that has departed). The employment of simile in language allows us to get at what this "something" is while at the same time remaining faithful to our inability to ever encounter it directly. We are able to look in its direction but unable to see it. It is not surprising, then, that Wright's favorite image for the unknowable is Emily Dickinson's "certain slant of light" (Gardner, *A Door Ajar* 97). We are able to come across what is "psychically unavailable" to us only at an angle, or indirectly ("Success," to quote another Dickinson poem, "in circuit lies"). "I am charged by the *absence* of God," says Wright (98), clearly specifying that the absence in question here is a presence and by no means a declaration of non-existence. Wittgenstein was similarly charged by what lies beyond the limits of language and the limits of the world, and, like Wright, felt that the best way to go about getting a sense of such things was by describing the things *of* this world, using the often clumsy and potentially misleading but nevertheless sometimes surprisingly effective tools we have at our disposal.

In the final poem of *Black Zodiac*, "Disjecta Membra," Wright asks the following question, where once again the syntax serves not only as the form of what is being conveyed but also as an image thereof:

Is *this* the life we long for,

to be at ease in the natural world,

Blue rise of Blue Ridge

Indented and absolute through the January oak limbs,

Turkey buzzard at work on road-kill opossum, up

And flapping each time

A car passes and coming back

huge and unfolded, a black bed sheet,

Crows fierce but out of focus high up in the ash tree,

Afternoon light from stage left

Low and listless, little birds

Darting soundlessly back and forth, hush, hush?

Well, yes, I think so. (83)

This is Wright at what he calls "the back yard business" (Gardner, *A Door Ajar* 103). He has described his back yard in Charlottesville, Virginia (as well as several other "yards," from Italy to Montana to Laguna Beach), innumerable times, and yet the descriptions are always different: one cannot step into the same back yard twice. The ethical question, "Is *this* the life we long for?" is answered tentatively, "Well, yes, I think so," because after dinner, or tomorrow, or next month, the back yard will look a little different and demand a new description. Many of the things in it

will be the same, but all of them will be different, as well, even the "absolute" mountains of the Blue Ridge. In 1916 Wittgenstein wrote, "As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant; as a world each one equally significant" (*Notebooks 1914-1916* 83). Wright's reliance on language and landscape as a means of getting at what's "condensed, withheld, and unknowable" is a reliance on an ability to describe this worldliness of things via the comparison of one thing with another. Thus in Wright's poetry there are not simply things among things, but things which are like other things, each of which, therefore, somehow contains a key to the world. If this sounds somewhat mystical, or perhaps, more specifically, Blakean, it's because it is: "If you don't have vision," says Wright, "you ain't got nothing. If your back yard is just your back yard, you may as well crack another Budweiser" (Gardner, *A Door Ajar* 99). That Wright should note, though, "Turkey buzzard at work on road-kill opossum," as a sort of mystical keyhole through which we can espy the world (a mundane version of the viewpoint from eternity), seems somewhat incongruous. It is no more incongruous, however, than the juxtaposition of religious and mundane discourses, which, as noted earlier, works so well for Wright. "Art," he says in *Halflife*, "tends toward the certainty of making connections. The artist's job is to keep it apart, thus giving it tension and keeping it alive, letting the synapse spark" (22). Wright here refuses the establishment of identity between two things and insists instead on keeping them separate as a means of emphasizing their connection. The artist, then, is not unlike the cars which periodically separate the turkey buzzard from the road-kill, forcing a temporary separation between two things which would otherwise remain conjoined until one

had consumed the other. Wittgenstein's insistence on "just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connexions'" (*PI* §122) serves a similar purpose: the elucidation of details unfollowed by the foreclosure of identity.

Mark Jarman says with regard to Wright's poetry: "It is important to understand that a metaphysics is possible without a transcendent or religious view of reality" (26). This is not to say, of course, that there are not elements of religion and/or transcendence in Wright's poetry, for Jarman continues: "The paradox of Charles Wright is that his is a religious poetry without a religion, but not without a metaphysics" (26). Jarman's assessment of Wright echoes Wittgenstein's statement to Maurice Drury: "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view" (quoted in Monk, *Duty of Genius* 464). Very similarly, Proust said in 1915, "If I have no religion . . . on the other hand a religious preoccupation has never been absent for a single day from my life" (quoted in White, 34-5). One need not be of a particular religious persuasion in order to be of a religious disposition or to see things from a religious point of view. Nor need one subscribe to a particular metaphysical system in order to sustain or cultivate one's metaphysical sensibilities.

V.

Paul Fussell, in his study of World War Two, *Wartime*, notes, as veterans of the First World War had done before him, that occasionally a soldier would feel overcome with peace and calm or utter confidence in the midst of battle. Fussell calls this both "optimistic imagination" (11) and a "happy delusion" (150).

Undoubtedly there must have been many soldiers who felt safe in the midst of battle only to be killed moments later. But for those who lived to describe their experience, the sentiment of safety was nonetheless real for all its being delusional.

It is perhaps fitting that Charles Wright was born in 1935 and was therefore much too young to serve in the Second World War as many American poets of the previous generation had done. Wright served in the army for two years as a young man and was stationed in Italy, where he discovered Pound, Montale, and the paintings of Giorgio Morandi, among other things. His military service was his liberal education; his major, presumably, Just Sitting There. And Wright has been in the demanding business of suspending activity and sense ever since. In his most recent volume, *Littlefoot*, he writes:

The winter leaves crumble between my hands,

December leaves.

How is it we can't accept this, that all trees were holy once,

That all light is altar light,

And floods us, day by day, and bids us, the air sheet lightning around us,

To sit still and say nothing,

here under the latches of Paradise? (13)

But perhaps the question isn't "How is it we can't accept this?" but "How is it we can?" where "How" could no longer be adequately replaced with "Why." That is, in what possible way can we accept that which only shows itself to us by way of its concealment, or conceals itself from us by its omnipresence? If we are at its

threshold, what is the wisest course of action: to invite it out, or to invite ourselves in? Wright says neither. We need only "sit still and say nothing."

Chapter Four

Bedrock, Erosion, and Form: Jorie Graham and Wittgenstein

On the floor of the empty carriage lay five or six kernels of oats which danced to the vibrations and formed the strangest patterns -- I fell to pondering over it.

-Søren Kierkegaard's Journal, 1841

Few phenomenon gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad.

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

I.

Jorie Graham's poetry, from the first poem of her first book (and the opening poem of her 1995 selection, *The Dream of the Unified Field*), has taken up the question of how meaning is simultaneously generated and frustrated, secured and set adrift, by language. In "The Way Things Work" (*The Dream of the Unified Field* 3) the word "things" would seem to include language itself, which functions "by admitting / or opening away," by "solution" (where both answer and mixture are implied), by our "finally believ[ing] / they are there, common and able / to illustrate themselves," where "they" means both "things" and the words which illustrate *them*. Graham goes on to admit her belief in several particular things: "ingots, levers and keys," cylinder locks and pulleys. Early in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein famously likens the function of words to "the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, nails and screws," where the point of the analogy is to illustrate the diversity of the "functions of these objects" (both

words and tools) (§11). Similarly, in Graham's poem things, including language and the words which constitute it, function by a variety of mechanisms, some of which fasten while others loosen: "The way things work / is that eventually / something catches." The evasiveness negatively implied in these lines (what things are doing when they aren't catching) is the very condition by means of which things eventually do catch; the possibility of intelligibility (of grasping or catching the drift of something) is ensured, more naturally than paradoxically, by unintelligibility, evasion. It is precisely this dynamic of meaning which Graham's entire body of work not only celebrates but also investigates, questions, laments, and, appropriately, lets go.

Wittgenstein's last writings, published as *On Certainty*, are similarly occupied with the question of the way things work, of what it is that enables things to eventually catch and hold for us. Many of the remarks collected in *On Certainty* are either direct or indirect responses to G. E. Moore's proclaimed refutations of skepticism in "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925) and "Proof of an External World" (1939). The remarks also show clearly that even in the late 1940s and early 1950s Wittgenstein was still concerned with a central proposition from the *Tractatus*: "Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked" (6.51). Moore mistakenly attempts to refute skepticism by proving the existence of an external world, but a proof cannot be given to refute a position which is "senseless." In doubting the existence of the world the skeptic has already tacitly acknowledged a number of things which have to be in place for the language-game of doubting to occur. That is, the skeptic, to

endorse groundlessness, needs a ground from which to elucidate his position, namely the mastery of a technique of language, a technique which we acquire from an early age and which is an integral component (even a determining factor) of the world the existence of which the skeptic would doubt, a fact which Kierkegaard noted in the *Postscript*: "The basic certainty that supports doubt cannot hypostatize itself as long as I doubt, because doubt consists precisely in departing from this certainty in order to doubt" (299). While Wittgenstein's "fundamental intellectual sympathy" is with Moore in this matter (McGuinness 98), he does not exactly take Moore's side in the argument but instead asks if Moore himself has "got the right ground for his conviction" (*On Certainty* §91). That is, why should Moore feel it imperative to provide an empirical proof of what the skeptic has already, albeit unknowingly, acknowledged, namely, the existence of a world?

Throughout *On Certainty* Wittgenstein frequently resorts to geological metaphors in order to clarify his thoughts concerning the relationship between forms of life, language, and knowledge. And while he says that at this point of his life (the last remark of *On Certainty* was written just days before his death) he does philosophy "like an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys" (*OC* §532), his frequent returns to geological language indicate less a mind that has continually to begin again than one which has hit upon an apt image and is attempting to explore its nuances. The question of "grounds," then, is raised throughout *On Certainty*, in relation, for example, to doubt (§122), to experience (§130), and to belief (§166). In addition to these frequent returns to notions of grounds, one also finds, throughout the work,

other geological metaphors, including references to "matter-of-course foundations" (§167) and the "rock bottom" of convictions (§248); a lack of sharp boundary lines (§52, §318, §454), gradual alterations (§63, §473), and things merging into one another (§309); the threat of judgment toppling or going to pieces (§419, §420); and the subsequent need for footholds (§356) and the desire to be able to just take hold of something (§510) so as to avoid a plunge into chaos (§613). Elsewhere, in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, he says, "The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination" (v).

Attempts to dictate, direct, or strenuously order his thought, that is, have a necessarily negative, or damming, effect. To force a channel against the natural inclinations of a thought cripples the thought by restricting its freedom of movement. Wittgenstein goes on in the preface to say that the "very nature" of his investigations "compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction" (v). By such topological ranging, though, we do not entirely abandon the inclination to order so much as we secure it by refusing to cripple either ourselves or our thoughts in the name of a false stability. The fact that when one is engaged in philosophical investigations boundary lines become unclear, things merge into one another, and footholds are less than wholly adequate, the fact that we must proceed rather haphazardly, turns out to be less attributable to any shortcomings of the investigator and/or his equipment than to the very nature of the work.

Wittgenstein's redirection of the problem of skepticism from the domain of empiricism to the field of language, then, gives rise to the question of how meaning

is guaranteed (and to what extent it is guaranteed) both through and despite the disintegrative forces of language. The grounds of our convictions, it turns out, are predicated upon processes of erosion.

Jorie Graham's critics often use geological, and often river-based, metaphors to describe her poetry. Bonnie Costello sees in Graham's poetry an equation between "conditions of consciousness" and the "conditions of erosion in which we live and think" (15) and notes that often in the poems "an apparent narrowing into limits allows for a sense of expansion" (23), just as a river carving a narrow channel through rock forms the expanse of a canyon. Willard Spiegelman says that Graham's poems, like a river, "branch easily, luminously" ("Nineties" 234); her "syntactic volume and heavy verbal impasto sweep ever onward" (235), and by means of such "torrents of syntax," Graham "everywhere scoops up large bucketfuls of physical-metaphysical overlappings" (236). According to Susan McCabe, "Identity loses its banks" in Graham's poetry (188); Graham offers us "poems of subtraction -- the radical removal of stable moorings" (188). And as Forrest Gander has it, Graham's volumes of poems constitute "a kind of echo chamber of Western literary culture" (75), a canyon from whose walls voices boom and resound, their origins wayward and difficult to determine. The title of Graham's second volume alone (1983's *Erosion*) might not entirely justify these sorts of configurations, but geological concerns and metaphors (in addition to topological and environmental ones) underlie all of Graham's poetry, from "The Way Things Work" to her most recent volume, *Sea Change*, thus making the configurations apt.

In all of her poetry Graham wonders at the manifestations and breakdowns of the phenomena surrounding her, a wonder which often leads her to attempt to break things down herself and, on the occasions when this act fails, to break down herself, both in the sense of ceasing to function (breaking down) and in the sense of turning the critical eye inward (breaking down *herself*). "Always / I am trying to feel / the erosion," writes Graham in the title poem of her second volume (56-57). The poem begins by resisting something presumably better: "I would not want, I think, a higher intelligence, one / simultaneous, cut clean / of sequence." While there is some hesitation in this assertion (the "I think"), it is precisely that hesitation, that ability to pause and think, which is being affirmed as preferable to a form of consciousness cut clean from it. "No," Graham continues, "it is our slowness I love, growing slower," our trying to feel "daily / the erosion / of the right word, what it shuts."

One might expect linguistic erosion, or the erosion of meaning and grounds, to be the result of the accumulation of "wrong" words, words used inaccurately which thereby threaten to erode meaning, but the "right word" also erodes. Any word, whether right or wrong, by its very utterance partakes of processes of erosion *and* sedimentation, errancy *and* stability, processes which enable the word to reach a destination, or to be destined at all. Erosion, then, far from posing a threat to all grounds, is in fact essential to them. Conceptual erosion does indeed threaten to undermine clarity and understanding, but at the same time it secures them, or at least allows for their possibility. That matter and matters are capable of being broken down (or that they do break down) is what ensures their intelligibility, even

if it prevents their being wholly understood, or understood wholly. Too often we lament the fact of erosion without seeing what it enables. At the entrance to Walden Pond, for instance, there is a trail sign which reads, "Help fight erosion, please stay on path." Such efforts to regulate human traffic in nature are, of course, useful and effective, and yet there are two mistaken assumptions embedded in the directive to "help fight erosion": first, that erosion is a wholly negative phenomenon, and second, that it can be fought and, presumably, defeated. Erosion is less an insidious force than, plainly but not insignificantly, what happens; attempts to prevent it can only prove futile, for if one attempts to prevent erosion by having everyone walk along the same path, that traffic, over a long enough period of time, will itself do the very work of erosion. Even the placement of the sign in the ground, despite its practical effectiveness, is accomplishing some portion of the work it is intended to prevent.

One of Wittgenstein's primary concerns is semantic erosion, the wearing away or obscuring of a word's meaning as the result of too much inept philosophical handling (often including his own) in the form of propositions which, like trail signs intended to prevent erosion, participate in the process they are intended to curtail even as they perform their function. Again, this is not necessarily a fault that lies entirely with the philosopher as it is the nature of working, as it were, on a fault. Wittgenstein says, for example, of his early joint sessions with Russell, "(We felt that language could always make new, and impossible demands; and that this made all explanation futile)" (*Culture and Value* 30). Not only, then, does the philosopher's often misguided plying erode the banks of language, but language

itself proves capable of dis-mantling philosophical confidence. While the remark just quoted refers to Wittgenstein's early ventures in philosophy, it pertains to his last writings as well, in which we see him still trying to accommodate himself as best he can to the new and impossible demands of language. "Where others go on ahead," he wrote in 1948, "I stay in one place" (66). This remark may imply that he is somehow inept, unable to go along with the others in their advance, and so must stay in one place out of ignorance and/or inability, but it also seems to mean that he stays in one place because he is aware of something of which others are heedless, the fact that it might be just as important, if not moreso, to track processes of movement as it is to engage in them. As Brian McGuinness notes, just when others were ready to "advance" to the next stage of a particular problem, Wittgenstein would often attempt to delay them with pressing questions that sought not progress but "clarification" (163). Wittgenstein, too, thus might say, "It is our slowness I love."

Graham's own fixation with semantic erosion, with the fact that language constantly makes new and impossible demands despite one's persistent attempts to regulate it and move on, runs throughout her poetry and is, it seems, a primary cause of the sometimes drastic stylistic (or tectonic) shifts that mark her volumes. The new and impossible demands of language are both mirrored in and met by the new and, if not impossible, at least difficult demands of her poetry. Throughout her work she does not so much wonder (and tremble) at the fact of there being something rather than nothing as at the fact that the something that is is like this, works in this particular way, reveals itself thus, and changes in accordance with

both known and unknown laws. That “something” might be now the myths we inherit (as in *The End of Beauty*), now our memories of adolescence (as in *Region of Unlikeness*), now a tree with birds in it during a snowstorm (as in the masterful poem “The Dream of the Unified Field”), and so on. Graham is enthralled both by the fact of erosion and by the particular ways in which certain things erode or have eroded over the course of history, including but not limited to religion, poetic tradition, western philosophy, and history itself. That these phenomena have taken the particular courses they've traced, that they are entangled with one another in the ways that they are, is a matter of endless fascination (and sometimes terror) for Graham. And she does not necessarily readily distinguish between the erosion of institutions or concepts and actual geological erosion, where one might be inclined to say that the former is artificial, or man-made, the latter mostly, if not entirely, natural. As one well-versed in later Heideggerian philosophy, Graham seems aware of the fact that the destinies of human institutions and concepts are not necessarily governed by human beings, that erosion largely takes care of itself and does not necessarily require any specific human agency (an often overlooked point regarding deconstruction, which similarly happens of its own accord), which is not to say, of course, that human agency is entirely uninvolved.

One finds an apt picture of how this conceptual erosion works in the sustained metaphor of §§96-99 in *On Certainty*, one of the finest passages in all of Wittgenstein's writings. "It might be imagined," he begins, "that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation

altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid" (§96). The hardened propositions in this picture constitute what is given; our activity is grounded in our acknowledgement of them. They are "[what] is there -- like our life" (§559). Wittgenstein's wariness concerning Moore's "proof" of an external world via his "knowing" his hands are before him is thus due to the inappropriateness of offering such a proof. Propositions such as "These are my hands" (where one is clearly holding up one's hands) form the bedrock upon which such less solidified language-games as proving and doubting can be played. To either prove or doubt *them* is thus nonsensical; one cannot doubt the grounds which enable one to doubt. And yet these grounds, or rather this bedrock, like the bedrock of an actual river, is itself always changing, shifting, for the most part gradually and slowly and in ways which go undetected but occasionally also quite violently. Recognition of this for the most part imperceptible movement is what keeps Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life" from hardening permanently into the sort of philosophical absolute he found misleading.

The metaphor of the river and its bed posits (or deposits) the fact that language-games operate on two different plains, a fluid plain and a hardened plain, but the difference between the two is not always clear: "I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other" (§97). In our daily lives we make constant use of both hardened propositions, propositions which we take for granted ("My name is Ludwig," for example) and fluid propositions, propositions which are much more susceptible to doubt and debate (for instance, "That was a good

movie"). Obviously, we generally do not acknowledge this difference in status (as if we were pulling now from this supply of propositions, now from that), for the distinction between "hardened" and "fluid" is an oversimplification of a gradual alteration or process of erosion which is constantly taking place in language, and one might easily imagine cases in which the first example given above is more fluid in nature, the second more hardened. In this regard it is illustrative that Wittgenstein, writing in the mid-20th Century, stipulates that we would regard someone who said, "I don't know if I have ever been on the moon" (§332) as radically different from us, perhaps insane. Now, however, since humans have developed the technology to get to the moon, such a proposition (or family of propositions) must be considered differently. If someone says, "I don't know if I've ever been on the moon," we can at least now indulge the possibility that he has been on the moon, whatever else we might still wonder about him.

The post-structural dilemma of whether the world gives rise to language which describes it or language gives rise to the structure of the world it describes is not an issue for Wittgenstein. The shift from the former perspective to the latter marks a shift in the bedrock of our world-picture mythology (§95, §97). What we are now capable of doubting we had formerly been quite certain of, that language describes the world. "The same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing" (§98). Wittgenstein is attempting less to establish a truth about the relationship between language and the world than to show how such truths are formed, altered, and dissolved over time. In other words, it is not so much a question of settling the matter one way or

the other via argument and proof as it is of understanding both the manner in which things have shifted, eroded, and caught over time and our relationship to these processes (whether or not we had a hand in them, whether we act immediately in accordance with a shift or against it, what means we develop for accommodating the changes which arise in the wake of certain violent shifts, and so on). It is precisely these processes and our relationship to them that Graham is at pains to explore and formulate in her poetry, a difficult business where one's footing is never entirely sure (a prosodic vindication for Graham's particular brand, or brands, of free verse) and where one is constantly beset by the new and impossible demands which language makes on us.

II.

Part of Wittgenstein's argument in *On Certainty* is that Moore cannot *prove* he has two hands by holding up his hands and saying, "These are my hands," where the proposition would agree with the fact of his two hands being in front of him and form an empirical proof thereby. But where the skeptic's rejoinder to Moore's assertion would be something along the lines of, "But you can't be *certain* of that," Wittgenstein's counter, or rather redirection of the whole dilemma, takes the form, "Here we see that the idea of 'agreement with reality' does not have any clear application" (§215). It is not so much that propositions agree with reality or do not agree with reality (and that this can be proven one way or the other), nor that they themselves constitute or construct reality, but that a network of propositions which we are taught as a foundation holds true for us and enables us to engage in debates

concerning things like "agreement with reality," the idea of which is thus firmly reinstated in the language-game (brought back from the metaphysical exile in which it had no clear application). In a review essay of several studies of *On Certainty*, John H. Whittaker characterizes the issue of whether or not a proposition agrees with reality as part of "the difficult relation between experience and its incorporation into our conceptual grammar" (297). It is just this "difficult relation" that Graham interrogates and explores in her poetry, a fact which, not surprisingly, leads to her poetry often being labeled as difficult, where "difficult" means given to dense and unorthodox -- and often difficult to interpret -- methods of formulation. In Graham's case, though, this difficulty is not so much a residue of certain High Modern or New Critical aesthetic values (many of which Graham, who came of age poetically in the 1980s, openly eschews) as it is a philosophical difficulty which respects precisely that "difficult relation between experience and its incorporation into our conceptual grammar" and which therefore persists in a concentrated unwillingness to allow for either tidy solutions or tidy methods of composition. "It is very difficult," writes Wittgenstein, "to describe paths of thought where there are already many lines of thought laid down, -- your own or other people's -- and not to get into one of the grooves. It is difficult to deviate from an old line of thought *just a little*" (*Zettel* §349). In order to do so, one must think "even more crazily than philosophers do" (*Culture and Value* 75), and for Graham, poetry affords a space in which it is possible to do so without being entirely discredited as, say, "irrational" (though one may indeed be dismissed as "difficult").

Materialism (1993), Graham's fifth volume and one of her finest, is concerned largely with the ways in which things do and do not, or can and cannot be said to, agree with reality. At stake in the volume, says Elisabeth Frost, "is the whole body of Western thought. The 'materialism' of her title refers not to American middle-class values . . . but to the physical world -- to matter and life" (34). Graham's feelings towards this materialism, or towards the material world, or towards the world conceived of as material, however, are not solely critical. Throughout the volume materialism is not only questioned and criticized but also wondered at, marveled over, and praised. There is even acknowledgment, on the poet's part, of complicity with the forces which captivate her, the material reality of the book itself being an undeniable instance of this.

Interspersed throughout *Materialism* are excerpts from works of Western thought which address the issue of the constitution of reality and the ways in which human actions and assertions correspond to that constitution. Among the works quoted are Sir Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (the eighteen motions of reality), Plato's *Phaedo* (on the nature of the soul), Jonathan Edwards's *Doctrine of Original Sin* (on God's creation of every material effect from nothing), and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (excerpts from the subsets of the second proposition, "What is the case, the fact, is the existence of atomic facts"). These and other works are quoted copiously not for the sole purpose of critically exposing certain world-views which endorse specific brands of materialism, but also, I believe, for the purpose of lauding their exquisiteness and noting their strange meticulousness. Graham's complex appreciation for various manifestations of

materialism, then, is equivalent to her earlier position (or positions) on erosion. A concept such as "materialism" is capable of making too many new and impossible demands to be appraised in a manner which is not itself multi-faceted or incapable of accommodating apparently contradictory viewpoints. "That," says Wittgenstein, "is the difficulty Socrates gets into in trying to give the definition of a concept. Again and again a use of the word emerges that seems not to be compatible with the concept that other uses have led us to form" (*Culture and Value* 30). The more uses one comes up with, the more complex one's appreciation, or understanding, of the concept becomes. The poems of *Materialism*, says Calvin Bedient, are thus in "the constant rhythm of moving forward and peeling back, applying a new phrase like a trowel or a scraper or both at once" (40). It is not entirely contradictory to thus move in opposite directions at the same time; rivers teach us otherwise.

Materialism begins and ends with poems which describe rivers. The opening poem, "Notes on the Reality of the Self" (3-4), is one of five poems in the volume so titled, none of which prominently feature the self as we customarily conceive of it. Why title them "Notes on the Reality of the Self," then, if not to suggest that the self might entail more than we traditionally attribute to it, something quite other, say, than the combinations and interactions of mind/body/soul or id/ego/superego. Are we meant to take what the poems describe (rivers, bakeries, gate posts) as models for the self, or are the objects of description actually being proffered as themselves constitutive of the self? As in Stevens's long poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," only "notes" are presented, notes from which one might not be able to draw substantial conclusions regarding the subject.

The first poem of the volume begins, "Watching the river, each handful of it closing over the next, / brown and swollen." The first word of the poem indicates a person, a human self, present (observing, taking notes), but the reality of the self of the poem's title seems to rest more securely (or more insecurely) in the "handfuls" of the river (not quite a personification, though not quite not one, either) closing over themselves. In this the river resembles the poem, each line (or even foot) closing over the next, often to the point of beguiling the reader so that she has to look away and then come back, attempt to follow and register certain movements once again, try to accommodate the demands of the poem, not unlike Wittgenstein in his investigations (where there is often a "lack of sharp boundary lines").

Consider the next several lines of the poem:

Oaklimbs,

gnawed at by waterfilm, lifted, relifted, lapped-at all day in
 this dance of non-discovery. All things are
 possible. Last year's leaves, coming unstuck from shore,
 rippling suddenly again with the illusion,
 and carried, twirling, shiny again and fat,
 towards the quick throes of another tentative
 conclusion, bobbing, circling in little suction their stiff
 presence
 on the surface compels.

"Oaklimbs" is another near-personification, and the fact that the waterfilm is gnawing at the limbs turns the river, if not into a person, at least into something

with teeth. Subject to the whims of the river, the oaklimbs participate in its dance of "non-discovery." Graham's "Notes on the Reality of the Self" (all five of them) are themselves dances of "non-discovery," in which the revelation, "All things are," is, like a riverbank, undercut by virtue of the motion of enjambment: "All things are / possible," and hence not manifestly present or even discoverable. One handful of material closes over the next: "possible" supplants "are," and syntax swirls back on itself as in the final lines of the passage quoted above (where the placement of the verb "compels" at the end of the sentence creates an eddy-like effect). In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein describes the banks of *his* river as consisting "partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited" (§99). He again has in mind here certain propositions which are hardened, others which are susceptible to gradual, sudden, and even violent alteration, and all of the rocky, pebbly, silty, sandy stages in between. Propositions on the nature of reality from the works of Bacon, Plato, Edwards, and Wittgenstein himself, among others, might take up residence at any one point (or series of points) along this spectrum; having once formed part of the bedrock of our "world-picture mythology," they may subsequently, through a complex process, be set adrift, rendered indeterminate. Graham's poetry (and Graham herself seems to be very aware of this) is not only a part of that process but also itself subject to it.

The poem, its leaves "coming unstuck from shore," moves onwards "towards the quick throes of another tentative / conclusion," where "conclusion" would seem to contradict "tentative," and where "towards" brings up the question of

whether these throes are ever reached at all. It is as if an uttered word or proposition manifested itself as a leaf on the surface of a river of language, a leaf which could get stuck to the bank for a while and so remain a permanent fixture but which is also subject to becoming dislodged, something which in its "stiff presence on the surface" as an utterance would bob and circle and dance on the river's surface in an assertion of both its likeness and its unlikeness to that by which it is carried:

The long brown throat of it sucking up from some faraway melt.

Expression pouring forth, all content no meaning.

The force of it and the thingness of it identical.

Spit forth, licked up, snapped where the force

exceeds the weight, clickings, pockets.

A long sigh through the land, an exhalation.

That five of these six lines are end-stopped would seem to indicate a degree of permanence in the river's structure, which indeed it has: its banks, even though susceptible to alteration and collapse, are relatively stable, at least to the observer's eye. This sense of permanence, though, is ultimately an illusion: the sense of sureness, of definiteness, created by the end-stopped lines is undercut by the fact that each line is trying to describe the same thing and in some measure failing, thereby necessitating the next line. In this way the lines themselves, like the river, are reduced to "all content no meaning." From the run-over of enjambment to the containment of end-stopped lines, the lines of the poem are the various long sighs, clickings, and pockets of the speaker's (or self's) stream of consciousness, itself reflected in and by the actual river, "the force of it and the thingness of it identical."

In the next line the poem itself (along with both the river and the poet) exhales: "I let the dog loose in this stretch." The sudden recall of the person "watching," the person taking notes (if only mentally), who we now learn is walking her dog along the river, brings us back from the hypnotic and potentially malevolently enchanting river. Whereas in a poem like A. R. Ammons's "Corsons Inlet" (which also describes processes of erosion) the person observing is always present and distinct, in Graham's poem the river subsumes the observer. Graham's river, that is, in addition to already possessing "handfuls" and "limbs," now acquires a "brown throat" (echoing the riverine "brown god" of Eliot's "The Dry Salvages"), and thus the capacity for "expression." It is becoming, if not the speaker, at least a speaker. That its speech is "all content no meaning" can be read in at least two distinct ways: as "all content, no meaning," or perhaps as "all content" (as in satisfied) "[that there is] no meaning." Each of these readings, though, requires that something be added in order to validate it; therefore each is equally invalid. Something, in some important sense, remains concealed. This is the dance of non-discovery that, for Graham and others (including Ammons and Eliot), is poetry. It should hardly come as a surprise, then, that just after describing the throat of the river and its enigmatic exhalation ("all content no meaning"), the poet focuses on her own respiratory capacities and potential poetic productions: "I put my / breath back out / onto the scented immaterial. How the invisible / roils." The invisible air roils just as the river does, and the poet's own breath is part of this air. Thus the poet is linked to the river in a Whitmanesque moment of identification. Hence, "Notes on the Reality of the Self," where the self is embodied in a river.

Towards the end of the poem Graham makes clear this connection between the poem and the river it describes, though perhaps "clear" is not the optimal word:

Is this body the one

I know as me? How private these words? And these? Can you
smell it, brown with little froths at the rot's lips,
meanwhiles and meanwhiles thawing then growing soggy then
the filaments where leaf-matter accrued round a
pattern, a law, slipping off, precariously, bit by bit,
and flicks, and swiftnesses suddenly more water than not.

The opening lines of this passage are perhaps the sort of lines we had expected when first encountering a poem titled "Notes on the Reality of the Self," although the body Graham is asking about turns out, it seems, to be at least as much the river's body, which has been coming into being throughout the poem (it now has "lips" to go with its other bodily attributes), as the poet's own body. The words uttered by either (or both) seem private in their concealment and confidentiality, and yet they are shared, and capable, it seems, of being shared further. Is it possible for words to be utterly private, sealed, whether they be the words of the poet or the river (or again, both)? Eventually even what seemed sealed and solidified ("a law") thaws, grows soggy, and is washed away in the river's current, "suddenly more water than not." The lips the poet notes belong to "rot," and thus have as much to do with decomposition as with composition. Nothing is hermetically sealed to the point of being beyond the reach of erosion, errancy, even decay. Even the laws which seemed absolute, even the absolute formulations concerning the nature of

reality which Graham quotes throughout *Materialism*, are subject to these processes. Indeed, as has already been argued, their placement throughout her volume, or rather the placement of bits and pieces of them throughout her volume (note the word "volume"), exemplifies, and perhaps contributes to, just this process.

Having finished the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein felt that he had solved all of the problems of philosophy. He later came to realize that he hadn't, that language was still capable of making new and impossible demands, demands which we must be alert and responsive to if we are to meet them on anything resembling equal footing, if we would avoid being imprisoned by and within our own language. For example, in *Zettel* Wittgenstein writes of the experience (one crucial to Graham's poetry) of being multilingual: "Being acquainted with many languages prevents us from taking quite seriously a philosophy which is laid down in the forms of any one" (§323). But we must be on guard, as well, he says, against allowing our multilinguism itself to form strong prejudices within us, to cast the spell of a particular picture upon us. In this instance as in the case of the *Tractatus*, responsiveness to the demands and potential traps of language means offering a steadfast resistance to tendencies which would pull us in the direction of absolutism. Graham, alert to such dangers, resists the absolute formulations of Western philosophy while at the same time integrating them into her poetry, acknowledging her involvement in and complicity with them and thus refusing to be charmed one way or the other (that is, by those formulations themselves or by the idea that she could possibly escape them). The poem currently under discussion concludes:

The nature of goodness the mind exhales.

I see myself. I am a widening angle of

and *nevertheless* and *this performance has rapidly--*

nailing each point and then each next right point, inter-

locking, correct, correct again, each rightness snapping loose,

floating, hook in the air, swirling, seed-down,

quick -- *the evidence of the visual henceforth* -- and henceforth, loosening --

These exhalations of the mind mimic the activity of the river: they jar things loose from their banks, sending them forth, bobbing and errant, while at the same time making possible continuous sedimentation. Whereas in *Erosion* Graham was mesmerized by what the erosion of the right word shuts, throughout *Materialism* she is enthralled by how each right word, each right and meticulous formulation, snaps loose. Despite the sure difference between shutting and loosening, the two responses seem similar, as if features of the same thing, the river's simultaneously stable and dynamic nature. In an environment characterized primarily by motion, eventually some things, that "hook in the air," perhaps, catch, and then snap loose again.

One might ordinarily think of thought as the product of generations of intellectual inheritance, as a process by means of which things are snapped into place, ordered and systematized, not as a means by which things are snapped loose, set adrift. And yet thought, like the river, performs both operations, and both operations are vital to its constitution. The snapping loose of words, concepts, and propositions, that is, is not the work of a force antithetical to thought, but the work

of thought itself. The italicized fragments of the poem's final lines are snippets of philosophical argument dislodged from their moorings and gnawed, swallowed, and digested by the river's ceaseless motion. As the speaker of the poem walks along the river, gathering phrases and taking notes, it seems, for a philosophical poem, each point nailed is also a snapping loose (each shutting an opening); this is the restless content-ment of both the river and human language.

The final poem of *Materialism*, "The Surface" (143), eddies back to the volume's first poem, again describing the river's "re- / arrangements, chill enlightenments, tight-knotted / quickenings / and loosening." The first 21 of its 23 lines constitute a single meandering sentence which likens the surface of the river to the surface of the poet's attention, with the premise that underneath these surfaces there lies "the slowed-down drifting / permanences / of the cold / bed." The similarity of this phrase to the language of Wittgenstein's metaphor is striking, for the most significant point of that metaphor is perhaps that the ground which we formerly thought immovable consists instead of just such "slowed-down drifting / permanences." In the words of the philosophically inclined poet William Bronk, "Earth and rocks of the earth used to be / our metaphor for unchanging -- little we knew" (58).

III.

Willard Spiegelman has claimed that Graham, in all of her volumes, has proved capable of achieving superb poetic refinement. He makes one exception, though, saying of *Swarm* that it "continues to baffle or elude [him]" ("Talking" 183).

Swarm is, undoubtedly, Graham's most difficult book. What, after all, are we to make of poems that, in their arrangement on the page, often look like ruins, or as if they'd been bombed? A good place to begin making a case for *Swarm* is, not ironically, Spiegelman's excellent criticism itself. He once wrote of Graham's penchant for "gaps, blanks, lacunae, dismembered sentences, [and] occasionally hallucinated fragments" ("Nineties" 233) in contradistinction to her peers' preferences for other modes of poetic conveyance. This little catalogue is *Swarm* all over, only that where in earlier volumes Graham employed these devices here and there and even quite frequently, *Swarm* seems to be composed of them entirely.

Avrum Stroll refers to Wittgenstein's later writings as a "broken text," by which he means "a style of writing that is non-systematic, rambling, digressive, discontinuous, interrupted thematically and marked by rapid transitions from one subject to another" (93). While I would hesitate to call the *Investigations* "rambling" or even completely "non-systematic," Stroll's concept of the "broken text" has merit in that it distinguishes Wittgenstein's method from "more standard, discursive forms of writing in which ideas are coherently organized and disseminated in larger units" (93), forms of writing, that is, which display a certain architectonic confidence, a surety of design. Wittgenstein renounces any such claim to mastery in the preface to the *Investigations* when he refers to "all the defects of a weak draughtsman" which characterize his book (v). He could not transpose the confidence of his architectural design for his sister's house to his later philosophical writings. This is not to say, however, that those writings are any less precise than the details of that design. Part of the precision of the *Investigations* is,

in fact, its own propensity for various and at times seemingly haphazard movements. "It often strikes us," says Wittgenstein in *Zettel*, "as if in grasping meaning the mind made small rudimentary movements, like someone irresolute who does not know which way to go -- i.e. it tentatively reviews the field of possible applications" (§33). These small, rudimentary movements of the mind, though, while irresolute, are neither arbitrary nor chaotic; as Stroll phrases it, "The use of the broken text is generally not accidental but purposive" (94). These sorts of movements, of course, in addition to the "discontinuous" propulsion of the broken text, direct us back to Graham, to her use of sentence fragments, gaps, and brief numbered sections in her poetry, as if the poems had caught the dis-ease of the mind and could now only themselves proceed via small, rudimentary movements and tentative reviews.

One might think that such procedures as those described above, procedures characterized as broken, in which units are assembled in bits and pieces and not according to readily recognizable patterns, would be insufficient, if not entirely doomed to failure, for the purposes of philosophical and poetic composition. But history, of course, has proven otherwise on numerous occasions. Just as Graham's own form of "broken text" has precedents in such distinct precursors as Pound and Dickinson, so Wittgenstein's *Investigations* was preceded by Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* and Nietzsche's aphoristic assemblages. In the cases of Pound and Dickinson, the words often look like more or less dense clusters on the page, simultaneously held together and breaking apart, expressing in a poetic gesture both the strength and fragility of human thought and language. In the cases

of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, ideas and concepts teeter and veer, refusing to congeal into a system while at the same time (or by virtue thereof) attaining a coherence which makes up in maneuverability for what it lacks in stability. Both Graham and Wittgenstein, then, in inheriting these specific traditions, came to appreciate the benefits of employing styles which, while they appear to be broken and/or chaotic, nevertheless possess both order and purpose.

In a 2007 *National Geographic* article titled "Swarm Theory," Peter Miller writes of his astonishment upon learning that ants are not, in fact, intelligent, individual worker-creatures, but in fact depend on a scattered collective intelligence. Miller asks, "How do the simple actions of individuals add up to the complex behavior of a group? How do hundreds of honeybees make a critical decision about their hive if many of them disagree? What enables a school of herring to coordinate its movements so precisely it can change direction in a flash, like a single, silvery organism?" (130). In addition to ants, honeybees, and herring, he also speaks, throughout the article, of starlings, wildebeests, locusts, fireflies, and, referring to recent attempts by humans to mimic this organizational intelligence, new methods in truck routing. Could he also have added language to this list, as something that functions as a swarm, where this word does not mean an anarchic chaos but a complex organizational pattern? Wittgenstein's later philosophy is built largely on the notion that the meaning of a word is its use, that one word alone, isolated in a vacuum, means nothing, or is not even a word. There has to be a language-game (or a multitude of language-games) in place in order for language to function as such. In order to understand the meanings of words one

must master the technique of a language, and the technique of a language is a highly complex pattern that, like a river, is always shifting and changing its shape, breaking, shutting, and snapping loose, and yet for all that remaining relatively stable. According to Miller, swarm intelligence works by "simple creatures following simple rules, each one acting on local information. No ant sees the big picture" (132). The emphasis here on local information corresponds to Wittgenstein's insistence that ordinary usage will suffice in rendering the meaning of a word, that philosophical questing after a "big picture," or essential meaning, is not only unnecessary but actually harmful because of the confusion it brings about; words put under such strain experience difficulty bearing and recovering from it. "It is as if 'I know' did not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis," says Wittgenstein (*On Certainty* §482).

"When a predator strikes a school of fish," writes Miller, "the group is capable of scattering in patterns that make it almost impossible to track any individual. [The school] might explode in a flash, create a kind of moving bubble around the predator, or fracture into multiple blobs, before coming back together and swimming away" (141). In the swarm, then, the ability to break is a virtue. Substitute "language" for "school of fish" and "philosopher" for "predator," and this account sounds a lot like Wittgenstein's recollection of his and Russell's agonizing over the tendency of language to repeatedly make new and impossible demands, frustrating logical analysis again and again. Of course, in the end, the predator often enough does come away with something nourishing to show for its efforts, but the school itself survives the attack.

This idea of language itself as a swarm is offered neither as a solution to a problem nor as an explanation, but rather simply as a picture of the bit by bit formation of our systems of knowledge, along with Wittgenstein's and Graham's versions of such formations, versions which, while they may differ in aim, rationale, and other respects, share at least the crucial affirmation of errancy's role in the generation of meaning. With precisely this affirmation in mind, to offer an interpretation of language as a swarm is only to say, "Language can, or might be, viewed like this," and never to say, in an explanatory tone, "Language *is* really this." To boil a person at 200° Centegrade, says Wittgenstein, and to say of the ashes that remain, as though offering an irrefutable scientific explanation, "This is all [he] really is," would be, at the least, misleading (*Lectures and Conversations* 24).

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein maintains that what holds fast for us is a set of "hinge" propositions (§343), the hardened bedrock of the river which, while it no doubt shifts and changes, does so at an almost always imperceptible rate. Frederick Stoutland describes these "certainties" as "a motley collection, defined by no principles" (208). That is, this bedrock of language is not subject to the sort of analysis which Wittgenstein attempted in the *Tractatus*, where it was presupposed that the underlying structure of language could be logically explicated and the nature of the proposition completely delimited, once and for all. In his later philosophy Wittgenstein attempts no such feat but instead investigates the nature of the swarm, as it were, the motley collection of "truths" which we live by and the various language-games which they both make up and enable. Regarding

Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life," John H. Whittaker writes that it is "not clear from Wittgenstein's remarks that we participate in *one* form of life or in *many* forms of life" (292). This ambiguity, however, is less a problem than perhaps the most crucial aspect of the concept; that is, "forms of life" is, in a way, simultaneously singular and plural. It resists reduction both to the status of a formulated absolute and to the status of a derived or contingent concept. Forms of life are that very "motley collection" defined by no principle: "Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it" (*On Certainty* §144). Formulations concerning the nature of reality which seek absolute explanations thus give way to a very different form of "materialism," that of the roiling swarm, by way of which we seek not so much to comprehend the ultimate form of life as to understand the ways in which our forms of life continuously elude just such an endeavor, not only to our frustration but to our benefit, as well.

The contents of Graham's *Swarm* invite us to consider possible variations on its title: war and storm, for instance, as the poems often look as though one or the other had blown through them; shore, perhaps, as the poems seem to exist on a threshold where language disintegrates in the unknown; and form, of course, as a literary property to which the poems seem dedicated even as they are undeniable instances of its erosion. All of these words make up a sort of swarm themselves, as do the poems within the volume, poems in which I find Graham tracing, exposing, and attempting to manipulate (though just as often being manipulated by) those

fault-lines of language which enable it to shift and, occasionally, quake, often disorienting us in the process. "What isn't true but must be believed?" she asks in a poem dated and titled "5/3/98" (32). We could answer her question by drawing from Wittgenstein, saying that "what holds fast" must be (or at any rate, is) believed even though it is by no means arguably "true" (where it could be said to definitively agree with reality). Graham herself, though, "answers" the question thus: "What isn't but must be." The period would seem to imply that this is indeed an answer to the question just asked, but it is also simply the question itself rewritten with two words left out and a gap inserted. The gap is where the truth formerly resided, and the space for belief at the end of the formulation has been lopped off by the period's assertion. It is not so much an answer, then, as a mutilation or partial dissolving of the question. If we try to interpret it, to explain it, we will eventually run up against the lacuna, which stares back at us as persistently as Nietzsche's abyss. *It* is something that by its very nature isn't there, but must be.

The poem continues: "How strange. A mind made up." As Wittgenstein notes, a system of beliefs, a mind, is made up bit by bit, constructed piecemeal. His wonder at this phenomenon is no less than Graham's, and both of them alertly resist any explanation of or solution to the matter under the aegis of behavioralism or constructivism. While such theories certainly account accurately for a number of social and psychological phenomena, it is possible that in discarding the strangeness of the matter by explaining it away they discard a sizable portion of the matter itself. How strange that a mind should be made up, constructed bit by bit, but also how strange that a mind should be made up in the

way that a face is made up aesthetically, that is, deliberately and with the intent to both enhance and conceal; and also how strange that a mind should be made up, ethically or existentially resolved, as in the phrase "make up your mind." How strange, even, that a mind should be made up, fictionalized like a story.

There are sixteen poems titled "Underneath" scattered throughout *Swarm* in an order that seems random. Some of the poems have specific titles attached to them, others just numbers. The series, then, is another instance of a swarm; it *is* a series, and thus implies organization, and yet it also seems arbitrarily assembled, even chaotic. As we have seen, though, a swarm is a form of order agile and flexible enough to incorporate chaos without thereby threatening itself. In fact, the incorporation of chaos (that ability to break randomly, for instance) perhaps gives the swarm its greatest strength. "Underneath (13)" begins, "needed explanation." As this line occurs on the 102nd page of the volume (out of 110), it seems to cast a backwards glance on the volume as a whole; no doubt Spiegelman would agree with the formulation: "needed explanation." Throughout *Swarm* the various speakers of the poems ask for explanations of several things, from lines of Emily Dickinson poems to fundamental philosophical and mathematical concepts: "Explain door ajar" (55), "explain accident" (64), "Explain two are // Explain not one" (10), and so on. These demands, in some respect, are asking for explanations of things which form our "collective belief" and are therefore less subject to explanation than they are the very ground which allows for it. As Wittgenstein says, significantly, in the first remark of the *Investigations*: "Explanations come to an end somewhere," where "somewhere" is the bedrock of

our activity. Similarly, in *On Certainty* he says, "At some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description" (§189). The voices which demand explanations throughout *Swarm* are variously stubborn, ironic, innocent, and heartbroken. Wittgenstein maintains that "my *life* consists in my being content to accept many things" (§344), but the voices of *Swarm* seem to have lost, or to be on the brink of losing, just such contentment; their "judgment" therefore threatens to "go all to pieces" (§420). By the end of the volume, then, they are understandably exhausted, so that "needed explanation" is as much a sigh as it is a demand, is, in fact, a weary exhalation that results from pertinaciously making demands that cannot be met. The many gaps in the rest of the poem, then, can be read as the necessary pauses between breaths of someone who is fatigued from despair. It would, however, be limiting to assign Graham's gaps just this particular function without recognizing the possibilities of other functions which they may perform or, perhaps more importantly, prove incapable of performing.

The speaker of "Underneath (13)" declares, "I could not visualize the end // the tools that paved the way broke." These tools might be likened either to Hegelian concepts or to certain poetic techniques, in which case the fact of their being broken seems at first glance lamentable. Graham herself says in an interview with Thomas Gardner, "I feel like I'm writing as part of a group of poets -- historically -- who are potentially looking at the end of the medium itself as a vital part of their culture" (*Regions of Unlikeness* 215). This end, she maintains, is to be ascribed just as much to poets shunning "mystery and power" as to the transformations which our culture has undergone. The combined result of the two,

it seems, is a broken-down set of tools. But Graham does not merely lament this fact without seeing in it a possibility. She acknowledges, as perhaps we should have expected her to, her own complicity in the process of breakdown (she, after all, *is* one of those poets) but then asserts that that process must be viewed as not only inevitable but ultimately desirable, for in seeming contradistinction to the "broken tools" of the fifth line of the poem, in the fifteenth line the speaker flatly declares, "there is nothing wrong with the instrument." We might read this as a preemptive response to inevitable criticisms of *Swarm's* broken form. The tools of poetic language are indeed broken, but the instrument of the voice, of poetry, is not so much negatively affected by this state of affairs as it is now simply conditioned by it; that is, the broken tool becomes, or is, the instrument. To break is a virtue of the swarm no less than it is of both poetry itself and poetic tradition. Poetry does not require that language be entirely a utility. In fact, in this stage of its development poetry might necessarily presuppose that language always already is (and was) broken, that its being broken is what enables poetry in the first place, not so much as an eventual means of fixing or repairing language but instead as a means of giving voice to and affirming the conditions of language, conditions which resemble our own in both their limitedness and variability and which seem in constant, even desperate, need of explanations which are either shut off or snapped loose from them.

errant, or "slippery" and "delinquent," like the cries of the gulls. The sounds in the opening lines of the poem include artificial sounds, the sounds of animals, and the sounds of the sea, those "subaqueous pasturings" which are, in turn, likened to handwriting, and so linked back to the artificial. The handwriting of the sea continuously stirs up a froth that both erases the handwriting itself and is the condition upon which the handwriting is predicated. The broken text of Graham's poem (its beginning with a continuation, the bit by bit assemblage of its syntax, its frequent employment of ellipses and dashes, and the period-less "sentence" of its final 56 lines) affirms the errancy of language over against the thought of "some utopia" which would necessarily have to abolish it, or be cut clean from it, in order to secure its existence, though "existence," surely, is not the right word here.

"A context," says Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship*, "is never absolutely closed, constraining, determined, completely filled" (217). That is to say, a context (or any text) is never in any sense private and cannot be so: "A structural opening allows it to transform itself or to give way to another context" (217). This structural opening can be labeled in a variety of ways (freedom, perhaps, or intertextuality), but it seems to me that the important thing to note is that this opening does not so much threaten meaning as guarantee it, provide a way on or current in which it can travel. Whereas the common charge against post-structuralism (or something called post-structuralism, or something aligned with it) is that it threatens the stability of meaning, nothing could be further from the truth: "Every mark has a force of detachment which not only can free it from such and such a determined context, but ensures its principle of intelligibility and its mark structure" (217). If the mark did

not possess this particular force, it would not be free to go forth in the world; it would be closed, sealed, and, as a result, not a mark. And while this "force of detachment" no doubt enables the mark to go astray, it simultaneously and by virtue of the same principle ensures its intelligibility. Derrida's positing of such a force in terms of the mark is thus akin to Heidegger's assertion that we are always already thrown into the world. Language and human beings thus share a similar fundamental characteristic, or condition, that of being, at the same time, both destined and errant, a dual characteristic which Derrida calls our "destinerrancy" (218), or the destinerrancy of the mark. Wittgenstein's assertion at the outset of the *Investigations* that the meaning of a word is its use presupposes just this understanding of the structure of a mark. His assertion, far from being one regarding "utility," concerns the very nature of language as something which is always capable of making new and impossible demands and, as such, is always henceforth loosening. That Pascal had his proof of God's existence sewn into the lining of the coat in which he was buried (an image of which is featured on the cover of *The Errancy*) is thus entirely appropriate; such a proof could not be otherwise than sealed, private, and virtually non-existent, since to exist is to be delivered over to contingency. In fact, one might say that the proof being sewn into the lining of the coat *was* the proof, or at least a crucial component of it.

Chapter 5

Part One: Prosody, Syntax, Metaphysics: Carl Phillips

The balance, the struggle, between [line and sentence] in the style of any strong poet probably provides the swiftest access to their metaphysics...
-Jorie Graham, in an interview with Thomas Gardner

I.

Wittgenstein maintains that in speaking of ethics and aesthetics we are attempting to go beyond the limits of language and thus to inhabit, via language, the metaphysical. Such attempts, he says, are both fruitless (our running up against the bars of our cage) and (yet) inherently respectable, indicative of a profound human urge ("Lecture on Ethics" 12). Carl Phillips's poetry, in my estimation, has turned this urge into a craft; where others may get headaches from incessant rough encounters with the limits of language, Phillips, in stretching the limits of prosody and syntax, doesn't so much run up against the bars of the cage as stretch *them*, as well, enabling the poem, as a sort of projectile sent off into the realm of the metaphysical, to generate images for our contemplation.

Phillips himself has two apt analogies for this process of poetic composition and deployment. In a 2001 interview, when Nick Flynn asks Phillips about the way in which his simultaneously taut and meandering syntax "pushes" language, Phillips responds: "It's the language itself that does the pushing. It's like dogsledding, the language being the dogs who aren't so much driven as they are given the direction; the force is entirely their own, though. The poet, of course, being the sled-driver"

(*Coin of the Realm* 134). Of note here is the volition which Phillips accords to language itself. That is, the human urge to go beyond the limits of language is also an urge of language itself to extend its own boundaries. The dogs are raring to go, to roam the wilderness; the sled-driver tames them only to *some* extent, harnesses them and provides them with a direction. Earlier in the interview Flynn asks Phillips how it is that syntax can lead us into alien landscapes, to the "precipice" of the unknowable, to which Phillips responds, echoing the remark quoted above: "By our willingness to take the risks that I think language sometimes wants to take" (133). There is an optimal and imperative cooperation between language and the poet, then, or between the dogs and the sled-driver, that enables profitable excursions into the wilderness of metaphysics, where the dogs are always one step ahead of their master. Such ventures imply a great risk and are to be undertaken both in the very spirit of risk and yet with great care, as well, where care doesn't necessarily imply caution so much as attentiveness. When the party sets out, it leaves the ordinary behind, but the ordinary of course remains the base from which the party departs and to which it must sooner rather than later return. The syntax of Phillips's poems is the visible trail left in the snow or, sometimes, the trail which breaks off, buried by the advent of more snow, foretelling a probability of doom. While Phillips may avoid running his head up against the limits of language, then, there is nevertheless a violence, or always the threat of violence, inherent in his enterprise.

The second analogy Phillips employs for the generation of his poems comes from his own Wittgenstein-like collection of remarks titled "*Another and Another*

Before That: Some Thoughts on Reading" (for Wittgenstein's own "thoughts on reading," see *Investigations* §§156-171). There, Phillips says, "In many ways, the sentence -- the poetic line, as well -- is for me a bow astrain; the poem is the arrow whose flight depends so heavily on the bow -- and on the fletcher's hand behind it" (*Coin of the Realm* 187). Again Phillips posits a necessary cooperation between the poet and language, where each possesses its own dynamic force. The poet may be the force behind the arrow and the bow in the sense of providing the arrow's direction and the bow's strain (he may even make the arrows, as Phillips's analogy implies), but the poet is also behind, in the sense of shielded by, the force of both bow and arrow. They provide, in a measure, his defense. While the poem, then, is the arrow, itself no doubt dependent upon the poet, it is also what ultimately leaves the poet behind, dependent upon it. As for the target which the arrow may or may not hit, that remains something of a mystery -- *not* out of any shortcoming on the part of the fletcher or the bow or the arrow, but necessarily, as an integral component of the entire process. If the target is, say, the reader, then it is a necessarily unknown variable, in which case the poet becomes a sort of blind Cupid shooting his arrows both expertly and aimlessly, where the craft inherent in expertise is simultaneously confounded and confirmed by the violence inherent in shooting arrows blindly. As in the simile of the dog-sled, something is always on the verge of going wrong, of straying, an ominous possibility upon which any success, any reaching of a destination, is predicated.

At the end of the interview with Flynn, Phillips says, "I'd say that sentence-making is the attempt to give the images an order that makes sense enough for us to

use them as a departure point for the kind of thinking that leaves the literal (and the figurative) behind. Maybe sentence-making is, increasingly, consciousness caught in the act of completing the trajectory that can only lead to the dissolution of consciousness itself" (142). To go beyond significant language thus requires significant language itself as a base. The tappable store of literal and figurative expressions from which we draw is what makes excursions into the wilderness possible. The language of both dogsledding and archery is implicit in the above quotation, in its vocabulary of "departure points" and "trajectories." But the goal of departure or flight is not to hit a pre-determined (even possibly pre-arranged) target, but "the dissolution of consciousness itself," of the very idea of the necessity of hitting a target to begin with. The paradox of completing a trajectory by way of dissolution lies at the heart of Phillips's poetry, where the arc of syntax is often buried under the snow of the page, as at the end of "The Truth" (*Quiver of Arrows* 95-8), in which the speaker likens himself to one venturing into the sea on horseback:

And I -- who do not ride, and
do not swim

And would that I had never climbed
its back

And love you too

The syntax of this passage *is* coherent, but by the final line it also seems as though it is beginning to dissolve, or to be submerged. The absence of a period at the end of the poem confirms this, as does the fact that Phillips buries the ends of lines underneath the lines themselves (taken as a single line, "And I -- who do not ride, and / do not swim" is written in perfect iambic pentameter, as are the two lines which follow it). As in the two analogies recounted above, there is here a venture into the unknown, a venture in which transcendence and violence and fear and love merge in the dissolution of the poem. Such trespass on the part of language into and across the realm of metaphysics is, one might say, a province of the lyric.

In "White Dog" (*Quiver of Arrows* 172) Phillips combines the analogies of dogsledding and archery outlined above. The speaker of the poem recounts how he lets a dog go, out into the "first snow," knowing "she won't come back." The dog, not unlike the arrow, is something released with little to no hope of its being retrieved. The speaker is careful to note that "This is different from letting what, // already, we count as lost go." Additionally, "it is not like wanting to learn what // losing a thing we love feels like." "White Dog" is thus something other than, though not unrelated to, the traditional lament over releasing a work of art into a potentially hostile world. The speaker of the poem acknowledges that he does indeed love the dog ("She seems a part of me"), but goes on: "and then she seems entirely like what she is: / a white dog / less white suddenly, against the snow." The dog both belongs to/in the snow and is distinct from it, where the snow implies not so much a form of public reception as a metaphysical element in which the poem has its place and against which it is able to stand out, almost as a diluted, "less

white" strain of that element, one which we can both identify and identify with. The poet releases the dog "*because*" he knows she won't come back; however, having been released into the snow, and having in a sense become one with it, the dog, as a poem or as an image generated in a poem, is likely to find itself at *our* doors, where we may or may not take it in, a choice that depends on our own receptivity to various strains of language.

Wittgenstein's aim was to dissolve (not solve) philosophical problems via a method (not explanation) which brought words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary, everyday uses, as if they were lost dogs. Phillips's aim (the archer in him again), conversely, might be described as sending words out into the metaphysical, engaging in precisely the sort of trespass which Wittgenstein so lamented in philosophy. But herein, perhaps, lies an important distinction between the philosopher and the poet: where the philosopher might laboriously construct an explanation by which the unknown is anthropomorphized and thus made knowable, the poet seeks less an extension of his consciousness into the realm of the unknown than the dissolution of consciousness itself, its surrender to the unknown. That Wittgenstein maintained that philosophy ought to be written as poetic composition implies that flights into metaphysics should be undertaken in the spirit of the poet's intent to dissolve consciousness, not with the philosopher's headlong intent (which perhaps too often neglects the volition of language itself) to extend and confirm it. If the irresponsibilities of much of Western philosophy led Wittgenstein to see himself as a sort of retriever of recklessly spent arrows and fatigued dogs, dogs mused to the point of exhaustion in an insane quest for a predetermined goal,

Phillips's poetry, via the cooperation inherent in it between the drive of the poet and the drive of language, is indicative of a different sort of archer (one who shoots blindly but expertly instead of expertly but blindly), of a sled-driver more concerned with the nature of his dogs than with the achievement of a goal at their expense: "That much, still, / is true, isn't it? -- the horse // comes first? then you do?" (*The Rest of Love* 20).

"For me," says Phillips in the interview with Flynn, "the truth -- as one has come to understand it after careful wrangling and consideration -- is one of the best authorities . . . I think that my syntax is probably indicative of how carefully, how respectfully one has to approach authority. Mystery, by the way, is also a truth for me -- I grant it a lot of authority" (140). The dissolution of consciousness, then, is a respectful, careful manner in which one might approach the authority of truth in its concealment as mystery. Mystery is thus not antithetical to truth but a guise of truth itself. Phillips, therefore, in speaking of returning from the realm of dreams to everyday reality, writes: "Here comes the word for mystery. / Here is the word for true" (*Quiver of Arrows* 169), where the two words seem to be acknowledging, at least in part, the same thing, namely, the world coming back into focus. Truth is a mystery, mystery, a truth; together they constitute an authority which will not, to echo a remark from *On Certainty* (§482), tolerate a metaphysical explanation (and thereby reduction) of itself and which must therefore be approached "carefully," "respectfully," by way of a poetic syntax which has less the target of explanation in mind than the generation of images of truth which the truth itself will tolerate, images which preserve its mystery. Phillips maintains that he thinks "of the image

as that against which it becomes possible to begin to understand how much is not available to us, is not knowable. I also think there's an impulse to generate an image for the unknowable to inhabit" (*Coin of the Realm* 141). This impulse is not unlike the human tendency which Wittgenstein both laments and lauds at the end of the "Lecture on Ethics," the tendency to go beyond significant language. Where a philosopher, however, might want to render the unknowable knowable (the cause of Wittgenstein's lament), Phillips's conception of the poet is of one whose impulse is "to generate an image for the unknowable to inhabit," *as* the unknowable. As Wittgenstein wrote to his friend Paul Engelmann during the First World War: "If only [in poetry] you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be -- unutterably -- *contained* in what has been uttered" (McGuinness 251).

II.

The title of Phillips's volume of selected poems, *Quiver of Arrows*, obviously refers to his "Thoughts on Reading" and is meant to imply both a supply and a tremulousness, a sure store and a wavering. It refers to both the hold of the arrows (the volume of poems) and to the poems' own precariousness. Many of the poems in the volume, by virtue of their short lines and irregular or minimalist stanza structures, have the appearance almost of ruins, as though they had disintegrated somewhat and left only relics of themselves behind. And yet they are for all that entirely whole and surefooted, as if impervious to ruin via their resemblance to it. Despite often being long and narrow and thus perhaps inclined to wobble; despite

frequently being comprised of stanzas that are stanzas barely if at all, the poems move less with the awkwardness of something crippled than with the assurance of a river's irregularities. It is as if the syntax, breaking across one line after another and giving thereby the impression of breakdown or collapse, is in fact the strength of the poetry, the break of a wave more than a break in structure. That lines break, or that language is apparently always breaking, is the strength of the line, the urge or push of language itself.

"Fray" (*Quiver of Arrows* 183-4) begins:

There it lay, before me, as they had

said it would: a distance

I'd wish to cross,

then try to, then leave

off wishing. Words like *arc*,

and *trajectory*. And *push*.

The poem is composed of twelve such tercets, but the accents per line vary from one to five, and so the stanzas vary in length while at the same time remaining constant, the result of which is a shimmering effect that makes the stanzas themselves seem like mirages. The title of the poem, of course, is relevant in this regard: among other possible applications, we can say that it refers to the poem itself, to its frayed stanzas and syntax; but it also refers to the poem as a fray, a skirmish of language spilling down the page like the film of a waterfall. At the end of the second stanza we encounter words we've already become familiar with

through Phillips's prose: the *arc* of the arrow, the *trajectory* of the dogsled, the *push* of syntax (on both the part of the poet and the part of language itself). In the poem, these words are applied, somewhat indirectly, to "a distance" which the poet has been forewarned of: "they" have told him about it, where "they" is a variable for some form of authority, whether it be the authority of tradition or, say, the authority of parents and teachers. It is not quite clear whether "they" have said simply that the distance would be there or that it would be there and that the poet would wish to try to cross it and eventually "leave / off wishing" (which does not necessarily preclude trying). That is, it is not clear whether the poet has actually wished, tried, and left off wishing or merely been told that this is what he would do upon encountering the distance. This ambiguity, a result of the poem's syntax, creates its own kind of distance, one between language and meaning, where the two are simultaneously separated and yet inseparable. However (and this amounts to the same thing, really), the distance recounted also refers to the distance between two people, where the simultaneous ability and inability of syntax to push language beyond itself becomes the simultaneous ability and inability of people (and in particular, lovers) to know each other, to span the distance between each other (they, too, are separate and yet inseparable). In this respect the tension of syntax and the tension of sex are closely related, as Phillips notes in the interview with Flynn (136-7). "Fray" is thus as much a love poem as a meditation on the unknowable; the lines "There it lay, before me . . . a distance / I'd wish to cross" imply both the presence of the reclining body of a lover and the desire to become one with that body, and the words *arc*, *trajectory*, and *push* take on an erotic

overtone. The desire to go beyond significant language, then, or to explore the infinite possibilities of syntax as opposed to "the few to which everyone easily agrees," as Phillips has it in the interview (137), is intimately connected to the distances between other minds and bodies, whether and how they might be crossed.

By the seventh stanza of "Fray," despite the poem's having traversed the length of a page, the gap remains unspanned, "The distance as uncrossed / as it had been." The poem, as a bridge, has failed, and yet something has been achieved by the manner in which it fails; by virtue of its various breaks the poem comes upon a sort of clearing: "but now a clarity -- like that / of vision. A kind of crossing." This development in the action may not be what we initially had in mind, but it is perhaps no less sufficient for that. Where we might have expected or yearned for an actual, physical crossing of the distance, we instead get the "kind of crossing" related to vision, where "kind of" implies less an approximation than a type. We ourselves may remain physically behind, in our cages, but the poem by virtue of its rushings and withholdings acts as a sort of fog-disperser and makes vision possible.

Phillips writes elsewhere of "Things invisible, // and the visible effects by which / we know them" (*Quiver of Arrows* 171). The kind of crossing accomplished by vision delineates images, or, to use the language of Wittgenstein, perspicuous representations, of what cannot be seen, a feat which reinforces as much as it counters both meanings of "fray." Phillips's use of the word "cross" here (where it refers not only to traversing but also to the manner in which vision functions via the inversion of perception) recalls the poem that opens *Quiver of*

Arrows (and was the first poem in Phillips's first book, 1992's *In The Blood*), "X"

(3-4), in which Phillips writes:

X,
 as in variable,

 anyone's body, any set
 of conditions, your

 body scaling whatever
 fence of chain-metal Xs

 desire throws up, what
 your spreadeagled limbs

 suggest, falling, and
 now, after, X . . .

This sentence continues to unfold for five more "stanzas," the poet already here, in his first volume, mashing the syntax on, deploying it across the snow of the page.

That the lines just quoted share the concerns of "Fray" is clear: again the likening of a human body to a "set / of conditions" expressed in the form of unknown variables; again the attempt to solve for those variables, to cross over to another body via the Xs of a chain-metal fence which represents both desire itself and desire's obstacle; and again the simultaneous success and failure (or one by virtue of the other) of this

attempt: the scaling body falls to the other side of the fence, where falling suggests failure despite the fact that the obstacle has been overcome, and where "spreadingeagled" implies both a lack of control in the fall and the ability to soar. The "X" of the poem also indicates, in addition to the unknown, "where in my / life you've landed," where the fact of each partner representing a mysterious "set of conditions" to the other (both, thus, must climb the fence) is succeeded by the disclosure of a treasure where "X" marks the spot. The poem's final lines express, via a pulsating ambiguity, the mutuality between the unknown variable and the definiteness of the treasure's location: "X is all I keep // meaning to cross out." The line/stanza break here indicates that the first half of the sentence, "X is all I keep," is partially self-sufficient. As such, it takes the form of a contradiction: the possession of an unknown, or the possession of *the* unknown insofar as it can be possessed. When we add the second half of the sentence, though, the meaning changes significantly, though the general form of contradiction remains: "X is all I keep // meaning to cross out," where possession is replaced by the intent to eliminate or get rid of, and where the contradiction now takes the form of crossing out an "X." If we consider the consequences of this latter action, however, its status as a contradiction can be seen to return us to possession, for to cross out the unknown variable is to solve for it, to get rid of the unknown in order to yield an identity. That *Quiver of Arrows* begins with this poem indicates that its themes are central to the contents of the volume. In fact, "X," as in variable, by virtue of its title, seems to stand in, in some way, for all of the poems in the book.

"Fray" concludes with the assertion that it is "a human need, / to give to shapelessness / a form," to solve for x . Phillips, though, wants this form not wholly to eliminate shapelessness but rather to insist on its presence as integral *to* form. If the final stanza were written as one line, it would be a line of perfect iambic hexameter, but Phillips opts rather to break it not into even segments of trimeter but into unequal segments of dimeter, trimeter, and monometer, thus allowing the poem to retain enough of shapelessness while nonetheless asserting its form. In other words, the truth gets to keep its status as a mystery, and hex stands for both a definite number and a magical charm.

For Wittgenstein as for Phillips, the experience of the meaning of a word is intimately and strangely connected to the human body, both one's own body and the bodies of others. Words acquire and change their meanings in circulation between bodies -- it is perhaps just as impossible to locate the essence of the latter as it is to locate the essence of the former, for both have their meanings in their uses, in how they are deployed rather than in what they are. This impossibility of tying down what is by its nature elusive, however, invites the attempt the very success of which it precludes. But to sustain a temptation via an acknowledgement of the impossibility of that which it promises, as opposed to yielding to and so prematurely foreclosing on the temptation (an action which is always premature), might in fact turn out to be the very essence we sought in the first place, one which, rather than shunning errancy, permits it via a maintenance of distance and therefore resists any facile or direct identification. If the human need is "to give to shapelessness / a form," shapelessness and the allowance of form themselves must

both be constantly renewable. The second "to" in the formulation seems to indicate this, for if the lines read "to give shapelessness / a form," they would assert something much more definitive and permanent, I think. "To give *to*," on the other hand, implies not so much an ultimate transformation from shapelessness to form as an exchange, a giving of one to the other, the implication being that they are and will remain two distinct entities. This renewable need "to give to" manifests itself in the writing of poetry, no doubt, but also in the use of language in general, in our very forms of life, the countless ex-changes of each day.

III.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein writes,

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other . . . In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions.

(Understanding a poem.) (§531)

We can speak of people in a similar way. On one hand, there are many people in our lives who perform functions that could be performed by many other people -- the replacement of one person by another in such cases is unlikely to affect the function. On the other hand, there are people in our lives who clearly cannot be replaced; their functions are unique to themselves (or *are* themselves). In this sense the connection between poetry and love (the connection between words and the

body) is once again established, where the justification of poetry as a vehicle for the expression of love consists in poetry's embodying via language the irreplaceability of the loved one. "Only these words in these positions" means "only this person as he/she is." Where Wittgenstein's conception of understanding a poem can be likened to understanding a person, Phillips's conception of the advanced deployment of syntax can be, is, likened to sexual experience: "So much of what resonates with meaning has to do less with the actual content of a sentence than with the relationship of how that content is deployed to how the content has been deployed earlier and will be deployed later. Can't the same be said about sex?" (*Coin of the Realm* 137). Of course, much of Wittgenstein's effort in *Philosophical Investigations* is exerted to show precisely how a word's or sentence's content alone, independent of the context in which it is written or uttered, is insufficient for the determination of its meaning (or rather, that content without context is an illusion). The "substratum" for any experience of meaning is "mastery of a technique" (*PI* II.xi 208), or knowing how to *use* language, possessing an intimate knowledge of the workings of a particular language and of the "field of force of a [given] word" from that language in a number of possible contexts, including, for instance, a poem (II.xi 219). Again, Phillips might ask, can't the same be said about sex?

The eroticism of Phillips's poetry (where logos and eros go hand-in-hand) is not absent from Wittgenstein's philosophy. Often when attempting to illustrate ways in which meaning is generated, Wittgenstein uses examples which are decidedly *not* innocently chosen sentences deployed for the mere purpose of clarifying a remark about language. Instead, the examples are often charged with

desire, suffused with an eroticism which is perhaps inseparable from the point they are meant to illustrate. Consider §§544-6 of the *Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein uses the expressions "Oh, if only he would come!," "I *hope* he'll come," and "Oh, *let* him come!" in an attempt to illustrate the elusiveness of meaning; that is, does it reside in the words themselves? in the ring one gives them in their utterance? in the feeling with which one utters them? We are told to "see how the concepts [of truth and feeling] merge here" (§544), and indeed we can certainly see logos and eros intertwining themselves in these examples. Such utterances provided for Wittgenstein a means of indirectly expressing his affections for young men like Francis Skinner and Ben Richards at a time when a direct expression of such feelings was still punishable by law. The affirmation of the elusiveness of meaning, then, and the insistence on keeping direct, definitive explanation at bay in favor of a more indirect method, might function as a counterforce to the political reality of the body's subjugation to a ruthless law. The indirectness of Phillips's poetry (and especially his treatment of sexuality within the poetry) performs a similar function and illustrates thereby that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it, "a writer who appeals too directly to the redemptive potential of simply upping the cognitive wattage on any question of power seems, now, naïve" (7).

Phillips's "Brocade" (*Quiver of Arrows* 190-2) is a single sentence stretching across sixteen tercets. The verse is free (one to four accents per line) and the syntax elaborately deployed across the page, giving the poem the density and texture of a brocade itself. The poem begins, though, with a different image:

As when the vine, climbing,

twisting --

as if would strangle --

doesn't, instead

ends each time in proof

of how to end is -- or can be --

to be transformed:

The vine provides another image for the poem's own form. The opening phrase, though, "As when the vine," should lead us back to the poem's title, in which case the brocade is likened to a vine. The way in which these three entities (poem, vine, brocade) "twist" around each other, then, enacts the transformative, as opposed to strangling, nature of the vine's climbing. The object of the poem, for Phillips, isn't the stranglehold of a truth or definition, isn't a proof as such. Instead, the object of the poem is to function as a proof of how "to end" (to define or delimit or prove) is itself transformative and thus both self-negating (insofar as "proof" and "end" are superseded by transformation) and self-affirming (as the transformation allows the poem not only to go on but eventually to flourish). That this is what endings not necessarily are but (optimally, one feels) "can be," provided the right circumstances, gives the poem a political dimension. That is, the notion of transformative, as opposed to strangling, ends is applicable not only to poetry but to the body politic and, of course, to the body itself. The syntax of the poem (the brocade, the

ascending vine) in this case functions as a model for how to live: not in a definition-obsessed demand for metaphysical security and certainty (Wittgenstein's lament over the assiduous and yet domineering trajectory of Western philosophy); not in such a way that the limitations of our own syntax eventually strangle us; but in a relaxed though no less assiduous (in fact, more assiduous) acknowledgement of the variety of ways in which things can be and are combined and transformed, eventually producing a "blue flower, / and then a bugle," an image which suggests depression ("blue") and violence (the bugle) as much as it suggests beauty.

"A main cause of philosophical disease," says Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, is "a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example" (§593). He has in mind, among other things, the practice of isolating a word or sentence in order to ascertain its meaning, where meaning is thought to be accessible only when all extraneous matter, or context, is removed from the picture. By feeding oneself exclusively on such a sparse diet, one becomes philosophically malnourished. The same dire result can be achieved by other means as well, such as not having the ability to see connections between things, where the muscle for simile becomes atrophied due to lack of use. By giving a variety of examples, however, of the ways in which words and phrases are used, by seeing their contexts as integral to their meaning, and by always attempting to foster "that understanding which consists in seeing connexions" (*PI* §122), one can prevent such philosophical malnourishment and atrophy and instead acquire greater health and greater freedom of movement, or mastery of technique, what Phillips calls an "athleticism" latent in both language itself and its users (*Coin of the Realm* 95, 187).

Seeing things in a variety of lights is thus integral to both Wittgenstein's and Phillips's method of composition. Wittgenstein not only obsessively rearranged and reassembled his later writings, never satisfied with the result, but he also constantly revised those writings themselves, as it were from within. That is, the ability to continuously look and see and refrain from settling formed, paradoxically, the bedrock of his investigations. Revision, as a process of transformation by way of seeing again, is an athletic ability, one which keeps things in motion and thus safe from stagnation. In his poem "Revision" (*Quiver of Arrows* 127-9), Phillips writes of

when
 the leaves have but to angle

 in direct proportion to the wind's
 force, times its direction,

 and the mind, whose
 instinct is to resist any

 namelessness, calls
 all of it -- leaves, leaves,

 and the wind's force --
trust, at first, then disregard

until, suspecting the truer name is

neither of these, it must

stop naming.

The human need to give to shapelessness a form is here recast as the mind's resistance to any namelessness, its need to give the form of a name to the shapeless entity of wind-in-leaves. The first name given to "all of it" is "leaves, leaves," where the repetition seems to both confirm the correctness of the designation and to indicate its insufficiency. To say "leaves, leaves," is not fulfilling enough; it leaves one rather malnourished, especially in the context of a poem. And so Phillips revises the name, this time designating only the force of the wind, first as "trust," then as "disregard." Here we have a new kind of example, not an ordinary utterance such as "leaves, leaves," but a poetic construct by way of which a natural force is assigned human traits. Of course, "leaves, leaves" is no less a poetic construct (if for no other reason than by virtue of its inclusion in the poem), and "trust" and "disregard" are essentially no less ordinary than "leaves, leaves." With this flexibility of language in mind, it seems as though we must mimic the wind itself in both its trust and disregard as we assimilate the images of the poem. The revisions which the mind has gone through in regard to the scene at hand (wind-in-leaves) all possess an aspect of truth, or a "field of force" by which we make sense of them. Still, the mind suspects that there must be "a truer name" out there, though not "a *true* name," the difference between the two being paramount. It is not the case that

the efforts on the part of the mind eventually ring "false" in the face of the mind's ultimate inability to grasp the "true" names of things, but that there is a gradation along which the mind's ability to name accurately can only travel so far before it dissolves along with consciousness. It seems that with each revision the imperative to name evaporates somewhat, or that any understanding of the "truer name" for things necessarily consists in our leaving off naming (perhaps in the way a tree "leaves"), in the fact of our eventually allowing naming to come to an end, where the end itself is a transformation. Naming to begin with is thus in no way inadequate or lacking, for it is only by the deployment of names (and by extension, language) that we can reach the various endings where we cease naming and, to quote Phillips, "Well, we'll see if we get there" (*Coin of the Realm* 142).

Part Two: Violence and Metaphysics: Frank Bidart

I.

Violence is frequently evoked in Phillips's poetry, whether it be the implied violence of a bugle, the threat of violence in the form of a stray arrow, or, as in the poem "Singing," the indirect violence inherent in God's mercy, "a complicated arrangement / of holes and // hooks, buckles" (*Quiver of Arrows* 164). Much of this violence is beyond us, or beyond our understanding; we cannot fathom the complications involved in God's simultaneous dispensing of violence and mercy, or, if we can, we can do so only indirectly, in seeing, perhaps, the same behavior in a lover. While Phillips frequently returns to this dilemma of violence and metaphysics, exploring it throughout his poetry in a variety of ways, some subtle, some direct, it seems to be the constant theme of Frank Bidart's work, always present, always announcing itself in connection with the human capacity for love. And for Bidart, there seems to exist a fundamental connection (or set of fundamental connections) between metaphysical violence (violence which originates beyond our understanding, in the form of, say, divine punishment) and the violence of metaphysics.

Any metaphysics which does not recognize its own status as mere thought-experiment but instead regards its project as the deduction of truth (an accusation Kierkegaard made against Hegel's *Logic* (*Journals* 217)) and thereby fancies itself to possess "*KNOWLEDGE OF THE CAUSES OF THINGS*," to quote Bidart's "The First Hour of the Night," inevitably even if unintentionally leads to the

reconstitution of "*the ancient hegemony of POWER and PRIESTHOOD*" (*In the Western Night* 212). This assessment of a major flaw in most metaphysics might be said to encapsulate various branches of postmodern thought, from feminism to post-colonialism to deconstruction. And yet Bidart, like many of the practitioners of these forms of thought (Derrida, for instance), is hardly, as a result, strictly opposed to metaphysics, or opposed outright to the tradition of Western philosophy. After all, one cannot deny that such forms of thought as, say, post-colonialism and deconstruction are both in debt to and entangled with the likes of Hegel. When asked in a 1999 interview about his favorite philosophers, Bidart responded, "They vary depending on who and when I'm reading. Certainly Schopenhauer. Plato. Hegel. Nietzsche. Freud, and also Jung. Philosophers who are wonderful writers" (*On Frank Bidart* 86). Bidart's answer itself is "postmodern" both in its stipulation that quality is somewhat dependent on mood and in his inclusion of two psychologists in a list of philosophers. The further emphasis on style over content is also somewhat postmodern, though this, of course, does not mean we are to ignore content. Certainly, given a knowledge of the tussle with the will at the heart of Bidart's own poetry, his preference for Schopenhauer should come as no surprise here. And yet Schopenhauer himself was a thinker who fancied himself to possess "*KNOWLEDGE OF THE CAUSES OF THINGS*" in his concept of the will as world and idea/representation and who therefore, despite the unpopularity of his classes in Berlin (where Hegel was the main draw), participated in the reconstitution of the power and priesthood which much of his philosophy, in both its atheism and its advocacy of the attainment of willlessness, purported to renounce. His system of

thought, or rather his insistence on its truth or absolute agreement with reality, thus enacted violence not only directly in relation to the thought of his forebears and contemporaries (Kant and Hegel, respectively, for example) but also indirectly in relation to the entire world outside of the German tradition, for "confidence in the possession of truth" (*In the Western Night* 214) on the part of one person or group of people necessarily leads to crusades and holocausts, frenzies of "RIGHTEOUS ANGER and REVENGE" and vows of "RECOMPENSE" (213) that can conceivably ripple throughout the world, both spatially and temporally. Whether or not those who are confident in their possession of truth (Schopenhauer, in this case) would personally and directly endorse a particular act of violence is immaterial -- they have already endorsed it indirectly via their insistence on not only "*where power resides, but [on where it] SHOULD, MUST reside*" (212). As Walter Benjamin notes in his "Critique of Violence," any contract, "however peacefully it may have been entered into by the parties, leads finally to possible violence" (288); and later: "ends that for one situation are just, universally acceptable, and valid, are so for no other situation, no matter how similar it may be in other respects" (294). Keith Jenkins, in his "Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin," extends this logic even further: "To make (to realize) a meaning, to bring a meaning into the world is ultimately an act of violence" (192). Schopenhauer is thus one in a long line of thinkers (Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche among them) the very form of whose thought is explicitly and/or implicitly violent simply by virtue of its seeking to ascertain and assert what is the case. And yet for all this Schopenhauer is, as Bidart maintains, a "wonderful writer." In fact, one feels that his being a wonderful writer is not

unconnected with the violence inherent in his writing, in the very "SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS and FANATICISM" (214) of its deductions.

Bidart's simultaneous critique of and appreciation for the Western philosophical tradition is not unlike Wittgenstein's, who frequently had damning things to say against metaphysics (including his own philosophy as it was set forth in the *Tractatus*) despite the fact that he accorded the great works of metaphysics the highest respect. On the one hand he could refer to Schopenhauer's as "quite a *crude* mind" (CV 36), and yet on the other hand he surely had Schopenhauer (among others) in mind when he commented to Maurice Drury: "Don't think that I despise metaphysics or ridicule it. On the contrary, I regard the great metaphysical writings of the past as among the noblest productions of the human mind" (Rhees 93).

II.

From roughly 1850 to 1950, a significant effort was made on the part of several philosophers to renounce the possibility of certainty in "*KNOWLEDGE OF THE CAUSES OF THINGS*," an effort which goes generally under the heading of existentialism. Kierkegaard's attacks on Hegel's method and system, Nietzsche's renunciation of Kant and Schopenhauer, and Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche, were all attempts to "*punish* / confidence in the possession of truth" (*In the Western Night* 214). But as Nietzsche's role here as both punisher and punished makes clear, it is not so easy to engage in a critique of metaphysics without engaging in metaphysics itself and thereby rendering oneself vulnerable to one's own charges.

Of course, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger were variously aware of this and therefore often accorded, not unlike Wittgenstein, a significant measure of respect to those whose works they were most intent on dismantling. For instance, Nietzsche says of Kant's concept of the categorical imperative that it renders him "like a fox who loses his way and goes astray back into his cage. Yet it had been *his* strength and cleverness that had *broken open* the cage!" (*The Gay Science* §335). Kant is thus guilty in the *Critique of Practical Reason* of indulging in ways of thinking that the *Critique of Pure Reason* ought to have freed him from.

Heidegger regarded Nietzsche himself in much the same way, as a thinker who successfully abjured certain metaphysical tendencies only to indulge in others, the ascription of value to Being, for instance (Safranski 303). And here is Kierkegaard on Hegel: "Let admirers of Hegel keep to themselves the privilege of making him out to be a bungler; an opponent will always know how to hold him in honor, as one who has willed something great, though without having achieved it" (*Postscript* 196). It seems perfectly plausible, then, as Derrida postulates, that philosophy has "always lived knowing itself to be dying" (*Writing and Difference* 79), and not only that, but knowing itself to be dying at its own hand. The critique of metaphysics and the enactment of metaphysics are thus rendered equiprimordial and have likely "always" been so. In order to practice metaphysics, one must be capable of refuting it, and as soon as one has refuted it, one has engaged in its practice. In this way philosophical texts dismantle (or deconstruct) themselves. Heidegger was acutely aware of this vicious circle and sought not so much to annul it as to enter it properly, to "leap" into it "primordially and completely," thereby acknowledging

the particular "hermeneutical situation" of Da-sein (*Being and Time* 291).

Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, then, all engaged in the act of dismantling or resisting the systems of previous philosophers (systems which themselves were imbricated in violence towards *their* predecessors) and thereby perpetuated the very tradition they were so forcibly attempting to dismantle or resist. Or rather, the perpetuation lies precisely in the resistance. The history of metaphysics is thus the history not only of its lamentable implication in world-wide violence but also of its more admirable, though by no means innocent, self-directed violence, where the latter is often undertaken to counter the former.

The paradox of perpetuation via resistance should not be unfamiliar to readers of contemporary poetry. If Ashbery's insistence in "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" that "to be ambling on's / The tradition more than the safekeeping of it" (*Houseboat Days* 34) sounds more casual than the violent dynamic of metaphysics outlined above, one must remember that it is the very casualness of Ashbery's poem that performs the work of effective resistance; that is, its reckless allowance of everything from cans of baking powder to the Princesse de Clèves to inhabit the space of the poem, along with its insistence on inattentively, nonchalantly "ambling" on, accomplishes a perpetuation of tradition the basis of which is a highly self-conscious casual disregard of tradition. The implication of erosion inherent in this picture of tradition as something that ambles on away from itself squarely places anyone participating in that tradition in the midst of violence (a violence perpetrated both by and against that participant). In this sense the contemporary poet shares the dilemma of the modern existentialist philosopher: he

is "not free not to choose," to borrow a phrase from Bidart's "The Second Hour of the Night" (*Desire* 46). That is, the ineluctable pattern of perpetuation/resistance excludes any possibility of an either/or or a neither/nor, leaving one instead in a position of, "*Four steps forward then / one back, then three / back, then four forward*" (40). Both the poet and the philosopher, like Myrrha in the "Second Hour," are thus entranced by the "foreign object" of "*what if you do NOT resist it CANNOT be reached*" (47), whether it be a secure tradition or an erotic desire. "*Man needs a metaphysics; / he cannot have one,*" says Bidart at the end of "Confessional" (*In the Western Night* 74). This formulation expresses the very condition for metaphysics: if metaphysics as "foreign object" is not resisted, not kept at bay (its foreignness not maintained), it turns into what Derrida calls "an assurance or a programme" (*Politics of Friendship* 218). In order for metaphysics to remain itself (and thus remain our need) we cannot have it or reach it or possess it but must instead resist it, not "so as to deny, exclude, or oppose [it]," to quote Derrida again, "but precisely [so as] to keep the temptation in sight of its chance" (218). In this way metaphysics thrives on its own impossibility, philosophy lives via its own dying.

There is a need for resistance both within and to poetry, as James Longenbach has pointed out in *The Resistance to Poetry*, where he characterizes poetry as "a medium that succeeds by exploiting rather than suppressing the inevitable tendency of language to resist its own utility" (4). Poetry, in order to sustain itself, is thus dependent on the undermining of its own project. When James Merrill begins (and ends) his trilogy with the lines "Admittedly I err in undertaking

/ This in its present form," (3) at least two things are happening: first, the poet is acknowledging the insufficiency of poetry for the tackling of his subject; and second (and without implying a contradiction), he is affirming that very insufficiency, affirming the susceptibility to error of poetry as necessary to the tackling of his subject. The rubric of "Yes & No" under which the third installment of the trilogy is written is thus present in its opening lines, which by way of their resisting what they offer and offering what they resist are taking "*Four steps forward then / one back, then three / back, then four forward.*"

"Philosophy hasn't made any progress?" asks Wittgenstein. "If somebody scratches the spot where he has an itch, do we have to see some progress? Isn't it genuine scratching otherwise, or genuine itching?" (CV 86-7). Of course, one will not find Wittgenstein side by side with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in anthologies of existential philosophy, but this by no means implies that he was immune to the metaphysical itch, where one scratches it to relieve oneself of it and in so doing perpetuates it. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein writes:

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand (§118).

What is "great and important" here are the "great metaphysical writings" of the past, the elaborate systems, or buildings, of Kant and Hegel, for instance (or of the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). For Wittgenstein to liken himself to a sort

of demolition man in this tradition, destroying what had been meticulously built up before him, places him squarely, at least in this respect, in the tradition of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* were intended as a counter to Hegel's system, Nietzsche's lively aphorisms sought the destruction of petrified values, and Heidegger's unfinished opus, *Being and Time*, was concerned with nothing if not with the "clearing up" of "grounds."

Wittgenstein's own philosophical fragments take up residence quite comfortably in this particular tradition, and Wittgenstein, too, was quick to note that he himself was often no less guilty of constructing houses out of cards and thus rendering his own efforts susceptible to future demolition. Such had been the case with the *Tractatus*, which was supposed to have solved all of the problems of philosophy, to cure the itch once and for all. The effort gave Wittgenstein some measure of peace, or at least relief from philosophy, for several years, but eventually he came back to it and dismantled the *Tractatus* himself, thus earning the honor, as Walter Kaufmann puts it, of having been the only philosopher to have changed the direction of philosophy twice (9). Later, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote, "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to" (§133), a discovery, one feels, that he never really made, or rather that can't be made save here and there, for a time, before the itch flares up again. What differentiated Wittgenstein in his later years from the author of the *Tractatus* was that he no longer sought, during his second stint at Cambridge, a permanent cure for the problems of philosophy but only a therapeutic method that would enable those problems to disappear for a while. He ceased, that is, deluding himself

into thinking that the edifices which he was capable of erecting via philosophy were in any way permanent, that they could provide a stable structure for the residence of truth. That none of his later writings (not even the *Investigations*) were finished or published during his lifetime testifies to this. And even the *Investigations*, the assemblage of which was near complete at the time of Wittgenstein's death, was likened in its preface to "an album" (v) and thus kept clear from approaching the status of "an assurance or a programme." One might posit that Wittgenstein transferred his desire to erect permanent edifices to the design and construction of his sister Margarete's house, but given the fate of the house itself, from its use as a barracks for Russian soldiers in 1945 to its current status as residence for the Cultural Department of the Bulgarian Embassy in Vienna, it is likely, as Ray Monk points out, that Wittgenstein "would have preferred it to have been demolished," as well (*Duty of Genius* 238).

In an article on connections between Kant and Wittgenstein, S. Morris Engel writes that "indifference to . . . metaphysical questions was not, [Kant] felt, compatible with being human" (502). Wittgenstein, similarly, felt that metaphysical speculation was indicative of a profound human urge, despite its propensity to lead us into confusion or, worse, righteousness. As Engel has it, "Wittgenstein's argument is not simply that philosophers have been led into confusion 'by means of language'; it is that (language being what it is) they have been irresistably and forcibly led into it" (509). That is, the limits of language, along with its bewitching and capricious features, function not only as barriers and obstacles to understanding but also as conditions of understanding; they exert a sort

of gravitational pull on the understanding which leads it into realms where it is no longer at home. But, crucially, this homelessness is not antithetical but integral to its natural condition. In other words, the susceptibility of language to various forms of errancy is in part what constitutes its status as language and keeps it from evaporating into the oblivion of utter privacy or utter publicity. The errors of philosophers both past and present are thus natural even as they are to be guarded against, which is to say that metaphysics itself is natural, even, or rather insofar as, it is to be guarded against. Metaphysical speculation is thus neither an anti-language-game of sorts nor an activity located outside of our forms of life; it is integral to them even as it seeks to exceed them.

III.

The alignment of the poem, the body, and the unknown, where all three are likened to an x , a variable surface which both promises and guards, by way of its inscrutability, a treasure, is as prevalent in Frank Bidart's poetry as it is in Carl Phillips's. This alignment is made most clear in Bidart's three "Hours of the Night" poems, in the third of which he asks, encapsulating the project up to this point, "After sex & metaphysics,-- / ...what? // What you have made" (*Star Dust* 78). The collapse of metaphysics constitutes the subject of the First Hour, the lineaments of desire the subject of the Second, and the human need to make (along with its attendant frustrations) the subject of the Third. Bidart has explicitly stated that the three subjects are necessarily bound up with each other: "The way we have an erotic life is not wholly separate from how we make things, or how we conceptualize a

metaphysics" (*On Frank Bidart* 80). The forms of Bidart's poetry, like our forms of life, consist of these intertwinings and connections, which sometimes take the form of violent enmeshments and collisions, collisions which occur as often on the grand scale of world history as they do in the ordinariness of our personal existences.

The title of Bidart's second volume, *The Book of the Body* (1977), establishes a connection between what we make and what we are, a connection which Bidart will return to in *Star Dust* (2005), where he writes, "*being* is making: not only large things, a family, a book, a business: but the shape we give this afternoon, a conversation between two friends, a meal" (10). We also give shape to our own bodies through various forms of tending and neglecting them; we both write and read/interpret the Book of the Body. If we think of the body as a book, though, we must think of it as one written not only by ourselves but by the world, as well, an agent which we might call chance, or accident, or fate, or *x* -- something which is beyond our knowing. "The Arc" (*In the Western Night* 85-93), from *The Book of the Body*, is a dramatic monologue spoken by an amputee. It begins:

When I wake up,

I try to convince myself that my arm

isn't there--

to retain my sanity.

Then I try to convince myself it is.

The act of trying to convince oneself of the reality of one's body, or of the reality of its non-existence (or of the non-reality of its existence) is, of course, part of the

Cartesian experiment in doubting. And one of the things that undermines Descartes's faith in his senses is what he hears "from those who had had a leg or arm amputated, that they still seemed to feel pain in the part of their body that was missing" (61), a phenomenon known as phantom limb pain (which Wittgenstein's brother, Paul, who lost his right arm in World War One, surely experienced acutely). Descartes adds these tales to his pile of evidence concerning the untrustworthy nature of the senses, a procedure which of course leads to his favoring the mind over the body. The book of the body, of our bodies, is thus a fiction, but a fiction on which our conception of reality depends and which not even Descartes could abandon entirely, as he was constantly drawn away from his thought-experiments, "back to what is more habitual in my life" (22). What puts the speaker of "The Arc" in a bind is the fact that the habitual reality of his arm has been violently removed, and so, rather than being forced from a meditation back to what is habitual, he is forced from the habitual into the Cartesian meditation on the nature of bodies, a project which threatens his sanity just as it threatened Descartes's, who knew that in his experiment of doubt and denial he resembled "those mad people whose brains are so impaired by the strong vapour of black bile" (19).

The speaker of the poem tries to "convince" himself that his arm is not there, in order to retain his sanity, to keep at bay the obvious insanity of maintaining the recently abruptly punctured fiction of his arm's existence. But in doing so is he trying to convince himself of the reality of his body as it is presently constituted, or of the non-reality of that part of his body which is no longer there? And when he

shifts his effort and tries to convince himself that his arm *is* there, is he in effect denying the new reality in order to preserve his sanity by stubbornly maintaining the fiction of the reality of bodies in the first place? What is more real: the presence of the rest of his body or the absence of his arm? Alexander Waugh, discussing the case of Paul Wittgenstein, notes that there are competing explanations of phantom limb pain: "Some believe that the brain continues to operate from a blueprint of the whole body . . . Others that the brain, frustrated at receiving no response from the missing limb, bombards it with too many signals, thus aggravating the nerves that originally served it" (74). Each of these hypotheses would serve to explain why the speaker of Bidart's poem literally has to convince himself that his arm both is and isn't there.

"The Arc" has a precedent in Robert Frost's "Out, Out--," in which a boy's hand is cut off by the buzz saw he is attempting to handle. But in Frost's poem the boy dies shortly after the accident, the result of which is that everyone caught up in the event, "since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs" (131). That is, they went back to what was more habitual in their lives. But the speaker in Bidart's poem, of course, survives his accident; he cannot simply turn back to his affairs, because his affairs all involved a two-armed man. The framework of his reality has been significantly altered, leaving him in the uncomfortable position of having to dwell upon what constitutes reality while at the same time trying to get on in reality.

His arm was lost in a car accident, before which, the speaker recounts, "I used to vaguely perceive the necessity / of coming to terms with the stump-filled

material world," a world further characterized as a world of "things; bodies; / CRAP-- // a world of accident, and chance." This vague perception of a necessity for coming to terms with the nature of bodies on the part of the speaker is of course eventually countermanded by the dire imperative which the accident forces upon him: to retain his sanity by directly confronting (or directly not confronting) the nature of his altered body. His need to convince himself one way or the other that his arm is or isn't there (or is both there and not there) is simultaneously brought on by and precluded by the accident insofar as the accident and subsequent amputation shatters not only certain convictions but the very capacity for conviction. The poem then becomes in part a recitation of the various ways in which the speaker attempts to come to terms with the accident itself. The first thing that settles on him is that "I had to understand it // *not* as an accident." His own accident thus moves him away from a vague understanding of the world as a place driven by "accident and chance" to an interpretation of events as purposive. The idea that the violent alteration of his body was randomly scribbled out by chance is impossible to bear; instead, that alteration must have been purposefully written by a non-random agency. In this way the accident inculcates in the speaker the necessity of conceiving a world in which things happen for a reason, in which the agency that mutilates his body is deliberate. To insist on this view, though, proves to be just as maddening as the thought of complete arbitrariness. To insist on the universal application of a rule -- in this case, purposiveness -- within a metaphysical system is likely, if not guaranteed, to lead one into an insanity which distorts the world in order to make it fit the rule, the rule itself having been conceived, ironically, in order to preserve

sanity. Such a position places the speaker uncomfortably close to his insane mother, "locked in Mclean's, // [who] believed the painting of a snow-scene above her bed / had been placed there by the doctor to make her feel cold."

Contemplation of this way of thinking brings the speaker to the conclusion that "Insanity is the insistence on meaning," a sentiment which Bidart will echo in "The First Hour of the Night," when he writes:

The '*moral law within*'

(for Kant, the ground

of the moral life itself, *CERTAIN, BEAUTIFUL, FIXED*

like the processional of stars above our heads,--)

is near to MADNESS-- (*In the Western Night* 213)

"Insistence on meaning" is designed to exclude errancy, to obviate "accident and chance." Its purpose is to erect and justify a hermetically sealed law or rule incapable of violation, to secure order (in Kant's case, this rule is the categorical imperative). One takes up such insistence to keep madness at bay, of course, but what often happens is that the law or rule itself (especially if it is rigorously adhered to) becomes the agent of violation itself and thus reopens the door to madness.

In "Out, Out--," Frost's speaker (a sort of reporter of the event) flirts with the idea of interpreting the accident as a purposive occurrence. The accident is brought on by the boy's sister calling out for supper; for a moment the boy pays more attention to the word "supper" than to the saw, and the result is the mutilation

of his hand. The speaker of the poem, though, says that the saw, "As if to prove
 saws knew what supper meant, / Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap-- /
 He must have given the hand." The temptation here is to ascribe purposiveness to
 the event, to see it written into the accident, either by the deliberately leaping saw or
 by the boy himself ("He must have given the hand"). The "As if," however, with
 which the lines just quoted begin, along with the "*seemed* to leap" and the
 tentativeness of the seemingly definitive "must," indicate that such ascription is
 problematic. The speaker, recognizing this, proceeds with a dismissive "However it
 was..." thus abandoning the insistence on an accessible meaning. Similarly, in
 Bidart's poem, long after the car accident has taken place, "The police still can't
 figure out exactly what happened." This has less to do with the ineptness of the
 police than with the fact that in the case of accidents there is nothing to figure out
 "exactly" to begin with.

Having eschewed the imposition of meaning on accident, the speaker of
 "The Arc" later attempts to circumvent accident by pretending that he never had
 two arms in the first place. In this manner he abandons (ad)ressing his wound
 retrospectively and instead (pre)tends it by acting as though it were a natural
 condition. "For a time," he says, "it worked." The new strategy frees him from his
 two-armed past and restores a sense of wholeness to his life: "*I am now one, not
 less than one...*" This act, however, in large measure erases his past and thus
 reduces the scope of his being even as it temporarily restores its fullness. Once the
 charm of the experiment wears off, "after about two weeks, imperceptibly /
 everything I saw became // cardboard..." This second attempt to deny accident its

right to write in the book of the body proves as untenable, as likely to lead to a form of madness, as the first. To pretend that things have always been as they are and that they are thus not subject to errancy and accident reduces the world to a two-dimensional cardboard cut-out in which all living beings are reduced to mere automata. Such a pretension, of course, seeks to counteract the violence of history by violating history itself, amputating *it*, as it were.

Both the speaker's decision to pretend that he has always had only one arm and his renunciation of that decision upon realizing that it turns things into cardboard occur while he is in Paris, and the poem ends with him thinking of the city itself, of "how Paris is still the city of Louis XVI and / Robespierre, how blood, amputation, and rubble // give her dimension, resonance, and grace." When people figuratively lose their heads by insisting on specific meanings (even if that insistence be on an erasure of the past and all of its meanings), or by asserting their confidence in the possession of truth, others are sure to lose their heads quite literally. Such insistence and confidence, while no doubt purposive and desirous of order, succeed nonetheless in accomplishing the very work of accident itself: "blood, amputation, and rubble." It is this same violent process, though, that paradoxically gives the world "dimension, resonance, and grace," that keeps the world from becoming cardboard. To insist, as Descartes did, on the absolute priority of mind over body, and thereby on the ultimate privacy of the mind, its status as a hermetic sanctuary, leads to the asphyxiation of meanings by way of insistence on meaning. Just as the limits and bewitching elements of language are its very conditions, so accident and errancy are the conditions of meaning, which

thus exists and must be affirmed at its own expense. And while "The Arc" does seem to end with just such an affirmation, in doing so it does not negate the "When I wake up" of its beginning; that is, the present of the speaker, despite his Parisian revelation, is still one of torment and impasse, of trying to convince himself first that his arm is not there and then that it is, in order to retain his sanity. The torment and impasse, though, are in keeping with the revelation.

IV.

Walter Jost, in his study of Frost, *Rhetorical Investigations*, acutely points out both Frost's insistence on the "significance of conventions, chiefly linguistic, taken by all as markers of, boundaries between, obstacles to, limits of, and bridges across lives and worlds" and his poetic inquiry into what happens when this "unquestionable framework of our forms of life with one another is shaken at ground zero" (244). He has in mind Frost's "Home Burial," but both of his points could easily be said to relate not only to many of Frost's other poems ("Out, Out--," for example) but also to the work of many other poets, including Bidart. In the title poem of *The Book of the Body* (*In the Western Night* 107), for instance, the speaker casts a backward glance over the markers, boundaries, obstacles, limits, and bridges of the past seven years of his life, the most recently closed chapter, perhaps, of the book of his body. Included in this sweeping glance are the deaths of both his parents, his "romance with orgasm," "--So many / infatuations guaranteed to fail before they started, // terror at [his] own homosexuality," that terror's evaporation, and so on. Both early on in the poem and at the poem's end the speaker encapsulates his retrospective

cast, and thus, in a sense, his life, as "the NO which is YES, the YES which is NO." His life is nothing and it is many things, it is many things and it is nothing. The steady accumulation of experience and the potential (and eventual) breakdown of the framework which would contain all of that experience go hand in hand. The transactions of a life might lead to grief, but grief itself is a part of life, a part of the book of the body. That is, grief does not lie beneath our forms of life, somehow independent of them where it would confront us when they fail; rather, grief is an integral part of the framework itself, a part which performs its function when other components of the framework are temporarily toppled by accident. Jost rightly points out "how natural it is," not only in Frost's poetry but in general, "that ordinary language is brought to grief" (251). Stanley Cavell phrases the same insight thus: "The philosophically pertinent griefs to which language comes are not disorders, if that means they hinder its working; but are essential to what we know as the learning or sharing of language, to our attachment to our language; they are functions of its *order*" (54). Griefs are thus both "a NO which is YES" insofar as they threaten language *as* a part of its order and "a YES which is NO" insofar as they are a part of language which is also its end.

Of course, Frost himself has spoken famously, in his "Introduction to E. A. Robinson's 'King Jasper,'" of what griefs are as opposed to grievances, expressing his own preference for the profundity of griefs but admitting that "grievances are probably more useful" (742). Grievances take place squarely in and are concerned solely with matters of ordinary life and language; their function is to get things accomplished on a day-to-day basis. Whereas grievances are "a form of

impatience," an impatience for the sake of accomplishment, griefs, on the other hand, are "a form of patience" (743). Griefs occur at depths and impasses where political and propagandistic actions are of no avail, where logic itself is rendered largely, if not entirely, impotent, and where one must confront "the NO which is YES, the YES which is NO."

Behind Jost's and Cavell's remarks on grief (though not, of course, behind Frost's) lie Wittgenstein's own comments on the subject, most notably the following passage from the *Investigations*: "Grief" describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life. If a man's bodily expression of sorrow and of joy alternated, say with the ticking of a clock, here we should not have the characteristic formation of the pattern of sorrow or of the pattern of joy" (II.i 174). Inherent in grief, then, is errancy, an irregularity which keeps us from becoming cardboard but which also leaves us prone to accident. That is, "Dimension, resonance, and grace," those facets of existence which give it depth, co-exist with "blood, amputation, and rubble," and are perhaps equiprimordial with them, just as God's mercy may be equiprimordial with his violence.

Bidart's most recent volume of poems, *Watching the Spring Festival*, includes a sestina, "If See No End In Is," in which the six words of the title function as the end-words. The poem takes up the same theme as "The Book of the Body," that of the retrospective glance over one's life. That the sestina consists only of the six sestets and lacks the usual final tercet implies that the poem, like the life being reviewed, is not yet complete; however, the fact that the poem ends with the same

sentence with which it begins (though lineated in a different fashion) would seem to indicate at least a degree of finality. The poem begins:

What none knows is when, not if.
 Now that your life nears its end
 when you turn back what you see
 is ruin. You think, It is a prison. No,
 it is a vast resonating chamber in
 which each thing you say or do is

 new, but the same.

Bidart is working both in free verse and in a pre-arranged form here. The same may be said for our forms of life: that they are both free and pre-arranged, errant and destined, "new, but the same" like the end-words of the sestina itself. We are inclined to think of our lives as prisons beyond the ruins of which lies what we cannot fathom, but our lives, not unlike poems, are also, or perhaps rather, "vast resonating chamber[s]" in which language and action are infinitely renewable. The limits of language are thus both restrictive and yet liberating. The poem continues:

What none knows is
how to change. Each plateau you reach, if
 single, limited, only itself, in-
 cludes traces of all the others, so that in the end
 limitation frees you, there is no
 end, if you once see what is there to see.

Given that one sees what is there to see, one realizes that "in the end . . . there is no end," where "end" must be read, especially in the second instance, as both stopping point and destiny (*telos*, with its implication of bounds, incorporates both meanings). That such a reading involves a good deal of hermeneutic uncertainty shows precisely how the limitations put to the understanding via the medium of language free us from the torment of a definite end and thus enable us to change. Not surprisingly, however (given that this is a Bidart poem), the next line of the poem (the first line of the third stanza) reads, "You cannot see what is there to see." This inability on our part prevents us from changing insofar as it necessitates in the form of a postulation of ends a sort of inverse breach of the limitations which would otherwise free us. The inability which necessitates this breach, however, is (in the end) just such a limitation, a "NO which is YES, [a] YES which is NO." This phrase, from "The Book of the Body," is directly echoed in the fourth sestet of "If See No End In Is":

*Familiar spirit, within whose care I grew, within
whose disappointment I twist, may we at last see
by what necessity the double-bind is in the end
the figure for human life, why what we love is
precluded always by something else we love, as if
each no we speak is yes, each yes no.*

The poet's plea is to see -- not to know -- "by what necessity the double-bind is in the end / the figure for human life." This, however, is precisely what we cannot see despite its being there to see, for we see by way of the double-bind and thus cannot

see *it*. It seems likely, that is, that the necessity by which the "double-bind" is the "figure for human life" is the necessity of the double-bind itself. We cannot see what it is "in the end," because in the end there is no end -- so the double-bind functions, as a sort of double helix or ampersand that goes by contraries. Recalling "The Book of the Body," Bidart formulates the double-bind as a position in which "*each no we speak is yes, each yes no*" (we love finitude, which is precluded by infinity, and we love infinity, which is precluded by finitude). Bidart has said in an interview that this sort of formulation "is characteristic of the language of mysticism," that it is "a way of talking about a kind of complexity that ordinary language does not acknowledge" (*On Frank Bidart* 84), or, if it does acknowledge it, does so by consigning it to the allegedly superficial realm of "mysticism" in the first place.

"I think there is a structure beneath things that one can fight," says Bidart (*On Frank Bidart* 69), a structure, to quote the title poem of *Watching the Spring Festival*, "displayed beneath glass, sealed beneath / glass as if to make earth envy earth" (44). This structure might be the necessity of the double-bind, but it can be characterized in a hundred other ways via language, as well. In fact, the very act of characterizing it now like this, now like that, might very well be the poet's way of fighting it. "Warring priests of transformation, each / animated by an ecstatic secret, insist // they will teach me how to smash the glass," but Bidart, the poet, is not taken in by such insistence. If the "artful // cunning of glass" is what separates us from the world (earth from earth), what separates us from other people (including the dead), then it is also, by virtue of the conjoinment of metaphysics,

sex, and what we have made, that which allows for, in addition to the "*great abundance*" of spring and love, the great abundance of poetry, "*which is the source of fury.*" Bidart, then, may eschew the efforts of "warring priests" who would insist on being able to break the glass (through promise of an afterlife, for instance), but he recognizes that he does not by any means therefore eschew violence itself. To have wrought an image upon the glass (that mirror of poetry) is to have carved a meaning into the world via an act which preserves the limits of language even as it violates them. In a poem titled "Winter Spring Summer Fall" Bidart writes:

Though the body is its
genesis, a poem is the vision of a process

Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space

Carved in space, vision your poor eye's single
armor against winter spring summer fall (*Spring Festival 25*)

In this conception of creation, the poem is generated by the body, by "whatever muck makes words in / lines leap into being." The poem's character, however, as a "vision" is what defends us in our fight against the structure of things, here characterized as "winter spring summer fall," the perpetuation/annihilation cycle of "*the invisible seasons.*" Vision's response to this threat is to marshal its forces, to attempt "to see what is there to see" and carve out a finite formulation, or poem, in the glass, an image which both upholds and holds back the infinity of "*ceaseless motion in edgeless space.*"

Postscripts

I.

The penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus* is almost as famous as the demand for silence which succeeds it. Wittgenstein writes:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. (108)

While I would by no means claim that what I have written in these pages might somehow enable one to "see the world rightly," or even to read the poets in question rightly, I would like to acknowledge the senselessness of these pages as being somewhat akin to the senselessness of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, at least insofar as what I have written, it seems to me, could have a positive effect on the reader only upon being discarded, only upon the reader's return to poetry, a return which must be empty-handed if the reader would refrain from abusing either herself or the poetry to which she returns. This project, then, is like an exercise book for a jazz musician: regardless of how useful (or perhaps useless) the musician may find its contents when he is in the practice room, he must discard those contents whenever he steps onto a stage, for that is the only way in which he can effectively employ them.

II.

Late in Part One of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein, imagining that he is listening to music, writes,

((I should like to say: "These notes say something glorious, but I do not know what." These notes are a powerful gesture, but I cannot put anything side by side with it that will serve as an explanation. A grave nod. James: "Our vocabulary is inadequate." Then why don't we introduce a new one? What would have to be the case for us to be able to?)) (§610)

The "grave nod" midway through this passage comes, it seems, from William James himself. Wittgenstein imagines James identifying with the experience of listening to music and not being able to explain precisely what it is about a certain group of notes that makes it so moving. James's response, though, presupposes the need for an explanation, addressing as it does what he suspects to be the cause of the problem, our limited vocabulary. In a similar way, one could find the grammar of our language (as opposed to its vocabulary) inadequate to a specific purpose and seek by way of augmenting (or perhaps annihilating) it to introduce new conditions of explanation that will address the perceived inadequacy. But what if the problem lies in our urge to always find something that will "serve as an explanation"? It is not so much the case that our vocabulary and grammar are insufficient to our need for explanation as that our need for explanation has threatened to override, or even usurp, our vocabulary and grammar. Regardless of "what would have to be the case" for us to introduce a new vocabulary, such a vocabulary, precisely by virtue of its being a vocabulary (whatever words it might feature), would not solve the

problem of our not being able to explain what it is in a specific passage of music that moves us. The real problem lies in our conception of this phenomenon as a problem, as something that demands an explanation. As Proust has more than adequately shown in *Swann's Way*, in recounting Swann's reaction to the "little phrase" in the Vinteuil sonata, the "old" vocabulary is perfectly capable of perpetually rejuvenating itself for the purposes of describing in great detail, without ever explaining them, certain elusive experiences that pertain to being human. In fact, the acknowledgement of inexplicability, insofar as it sustains our wonder, may be a crucial part of those descriptions. And poetry is the music become the description.

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