A Cloud of Philosophy

Can it be that Ludwig Wittgenstein's ***Philosophical Investigations*** is not a book, but a restless musical album? Michal Sapir outlines a path for reading and interpreting the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein that meanders through music, literature, wooly clouds, crossroads, sea horses and ethics.

Essay / Michal Sapir December 13, 2017

11._With_Eccles_at_the_Kite-Flying_Station_in_Glossop.jpg



[1]Ludwig Wittgenstein and William Eccles at the kite station in Glossop, England, 1908
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They say that in 1927, when Ludwig Wittgenstein renewed his contact with the members of the Vienna Circle, after his long period of silence following the publication of his first book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he refused at first to discuss technical philosophical issues with them. Instead,

he chose to read them poetry. I even read somewhere that he did it with his back turned. Since I am not a philosopher, and have long been out of academia, and am in fact involved with music and literature, I thought I might do the same. That is, not speak with my back turned, but speak unphilosophically. Poetically, perhaps.1

I'd like to talk about the years 1929-1930. This is a period I've been interested in for a long time. I became attached to it while working on the biography of my grandfather, Pinchas Sapir, who, exactly at that time – late 1929-early 1930 – left his native Poland and arrived in Palestine, where he settled and where he later did one or two things. Along the way I discovered that the writer David Vogel also arrived in Palestine at the same time – but unlike grandpa Pinchas, Vogel hated the weather, the insects and the people, and soon fled back to Europe. These two stories felt somehow significant to me. And the year in which they had taken place became associated in my mind with turning points: with questions of home, temperament and travel; and that touched a chord within me. Things slowly developed and in the end I found myself with a manuscript, a kind of novel, which revolved around Tel Aviv and the European metropolis in 1929-1930, viewing the period as an intersection of issues concerning modernity and Modernism, the city, movement, body, and language.

35._Portrait_of_Wittgenstein.jpg **[2]**



[3]Wittgenstein while receiving a scholarship from Trinity College, 1929
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And then I was invited to speak at an event in honor of a book on Wittgenstein and on Modernism, edited by Anat Matar. I saw that also for Wittgenstein, who so seldom felt at home anywhere,[2] the same point in time marked a change, a significant shift, a transition. For in 1929 he returned to philosophy, accepted a position at Cambridge, and began formulating the ideas that would appear years later in *Philosophical Investigations*, ideas that we know as the other thoughts of the "later Wittgenstein."

Here's what Wittgenstein wrote in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*:

"I have written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, sometimes in longer chains about the same subject, sometimes jumping, in a sudden change, from one area to another."[3] So allow me to break the chain for a moment, and argue that *Philosophical Investigations* is a not a book but an album.

2aed98cae2059742fbdffd10021b33d8.jpg **[4]**



[5]Wittgenstein playing the banjo

From fusionmagazine.org [6]

For we know that in Wittgenstein, quite often, what he doesn't write is more important than what he does write. Here is a comment he made in a moment of doubt while working on *Philosophical Investigations*:

"It's impossible for me to say in my book one word about all that music has meant to me in my life. How, then, can I hope to be understood?"[4]
And in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations* he argues that since the book travels over a wide field of thought, criss-cross and in every direction, and its philosophical remarks are merely a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of long and meandering journeys, it is not a book but simply an album:

“My thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. – And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought. – The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and meandering journeys. The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made. … [These] had to be arranged and often cut down, in order to give the viewer an idea of the landscape. So this book is really just an album.”[5]

Ok, so if *Philosophical Investigations* is not a philosophy book but an album, and moreover, a restless one that keeps travelling back and forth and expanding in all kinds of directions, then perhaps I do have something to say about it after all. How did this agitated book he describes come about?
I would like to try to define this turning point of Wittgenstein's in terms of body and movement. Let's go back and take a look at the *Tractatus*, which was written in 1918-1919.

wittgenstein-teacher-03.jpg **[7]**



[8]Wittgenstein in 1920
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When Wittgenstein first tried to publish the *Tractatus*, he titled it *Der Satz*, which in German means a proposition, a sentence, and also a leap. Through his propositions Wittgenstein tries to leap, that is, to use logic to bridge the chasm between language and the world. But he never reaches the other side; he falls: “Here I am conscious that I have fallen far short of the possible," he writes in the preface.6 And reading the text, we can glean the circumstances under which things fall in it: they fall “under the concept,” or “under the description.”7

In other words, the attempt to leap (over-ambitiously?) begets a parenthetical (logical-philosophical) phrase, where the body stands upright, and falls, and obstructs the Other: "(The proposition, the picture, the model, are in a negative sense like a solid body, which restricts the free movement of another: in a positive sense, like the space limited by solid substance, in which a body may be placed.)"8

This, Wittgenstein writes, is the general form of that proposition, picture, or model, of that *Satz*:

[p; ξ; N(ξ)]

Here we see W standing on its side, in the shape of the Greek letter Xi, ξ, deriving from the Phoenician letter *samech*its on standing ;variable random a ,cipher a ,zero maybe or ,Hebrew in ɒ , last leg in slanted type inside its parenthesis, within the restricted space, standing and teetering. Caving in:

5.502 [N(ξ)] is the negation of all the values of the propositional variable ξ.

6.001 … every proposition is a result of successive applications of the operation [N(ξ)] to the elementary propositions

As Yuval Lurie writes in the volume that occasioned this text, the *Tractatus* shows that language can never be anchored *logically* to the world.9 Or that the leap from language to the world cannot be made through logic. Wittgenstein explains further that as a result, the linguistic universe the *Tractatus* paints is like a solipsistic circle floating inside the ethical sphere, marking its inner boundaries: "My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were,"10 he writes in a letter to Ludwig Ficker. And in the book itself he uses the lovely simile of language as a pulsating moon, a circle that can only wax and wane in its entirety because it is always enclosed within its limits as it floats in the infinite space of ethics:

6.43 If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language. In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must, so to speak, wax or wane as a whole.11

This W, the whole that waxes and wanes, or the stumbling, crumbling upside-down M, reminds me of the figures of early Modernism, some of whom Michal Peleg writes about in her beautiful book, *The Subversives.*12 One of the book's central themes is the relation between "the modern sensibility to the syntax and grammar of the novel," or what might be described as the Wittgenstein-iness of the modern novel, and the "essential linkage between modern artistic creation and movement." Peleg calls these Modernist figures "the travelers," though in some way or another they can all be said to be bed-ridden.

I'm thinking of Akaky, in Gogol's *The Cloak*, walking on tiptoe on the cobblestones of St. Petersburg. Of Proust, lying in bed in the twilight of memory, his writing tracing a spiral movement into infinity that stems from the fog under the cover. Of Rilke, fluttering and unwinding with the wind on the edge of the far-off. Of Robert Walser, whose yearning presses him inside, causing him to feel pain and all its sudden tremors. Of Kafka, bent over and withdrawn, who "has only as much ground as his two feet take up…" and who "understands his body as the means while in bed to cross thresholds."13

This last quote is taken from *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in which the authors describe the position of stationary flight,14 of being in constant movement while staying in one place. Deleuze and Guattari seek to show how in literature, in poetic language, you can avoid being stuck in the proposition, in the parenthetical logical-philosophical clause, and in spite of all speak of that which cannot be said clearly, and regarding which the *Tractatus* therefore urges logical language to be silent. They describe Kafka's minor language and existence, which for them perform this stationary flight, as a quivering intensity, a standing over thresholds while rubbing up against all the segments without settling down in any of them, as a deterritorialized experience that traverses the border between the inside and the outside.

130903_WittgensteinHaus_Ext01.jpg **[9]**



[10]Wittgenstein House
Public domain image

From bnr.bg [11]

In 1926-1928 Wittgenstein was busy designing a house for his sister Margaret. During the meticulous, exacting design process he focused mainly on the windows, doors, and radiators, that is, on the thresholds that connect and negotiate between the interior and the exterior. The result was a minimalist, clean-lined and refined Modernist house, of which Wittgenstein said:

"...the house I built for Gretl is the product of a decidedly sensitive ear and good manners and expression of great understanding... But primordial life, wild life striving to erupt into the open – that is lacking."

We might say that this house is also a sort of W stuffed within parentheses, aspiring to break out from the infinitesimal vibrations that Michal Peleg identifies in the early 20th-century Travelers, from the intensive minor molecular dance described by Deleuze and Guattari, into a wilder, more open space.

[The austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein rowing the boat on the Eidsvatn in Skjolden, going to his cabin and the solitude up in the mountainside.jpg] **[12]**



[13]The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein rows a boat on the Eidsvatn lake in Skjolden, on his way to his cabin and solitude up in the mountain

“In the body in repose, there are a thousand hidden directions, an entire system of lines that incline it toward dance,” wrote Jacques Rivière, the French man of letters in 1913. By 1929, after the Great War, the stationary W's refined inclination towards dance had become the jittery movements of the restless-leg syndrome.

In *The Blue Book*, a volume of texts from 1933-1934, which laid the foundation for *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein talks about a mental cramp, a cramp of philosophical puzzlement that stems from the misguided urge to search for the exact definition of a certain word in the language. Harvey Cormier, in *Understanding Wittgenstein*, similarly discusses "itchy moments" that, to be scratched, require the help of Wittgensteinian philosophers. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes them as moments of profound disquiet: "The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language… are deep disquietudes."15 This disquiet emerges inside the very parentheses which W and his fellow travelers have previously occupied:

“(and the feeling of being ill at ease, if it relates to language, is a profound one)”16

“In the first person: expression. ((Not quite right.))”17

As David Schalkwyk writes in *Understanding Wittgenstein*, “the inexpressible against which whatever one says gets its meaning [is revealed] at the heart of the ‘place [we] must already be at now.'”18

So where does W stand now?

The later W is unwilling to stand on one leg for too long: “I find it important in philosophizing to keep changing my posture, not to stand for too long on one leg, so as not to get stiff,” Wittgenstein writes in *Culture and Value*.19 And in *The Blue Book* he explains: "Our ordinary language, which of all possible notations is the one which pervades all our life, holds our mind rigidly in one position, as it were, and in this position sometimes it feels cramped, having a desire for other positions as well … Our mental cramp is loosened when we are shown the notations which fulfil these needs. These needs can be of the greatest variety."20
"A great variety of games is played with the sentences of our language."21

"Stand roughly here!" Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, remark 88.

N(ξ) §88

(ξ) §

We have gone here from a random variable in the general form of a proposition, to a sign denoting a specific segment in a book. From a wobbly one-leg stance (ξ) in parentheses, back turned to negation (N), to an approximate, anchored, wriggling and open-armed stance (§), next to infinities.

Paul Engelmann writes about Wittgenstein: "When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant [i.e., the scope and limits of ordinary language], it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean."

The sign used to denote the remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* reminds me of a sea horse.

1280px-Hippocampus_histrix,_Timor_Oriental.jpg **[14]**



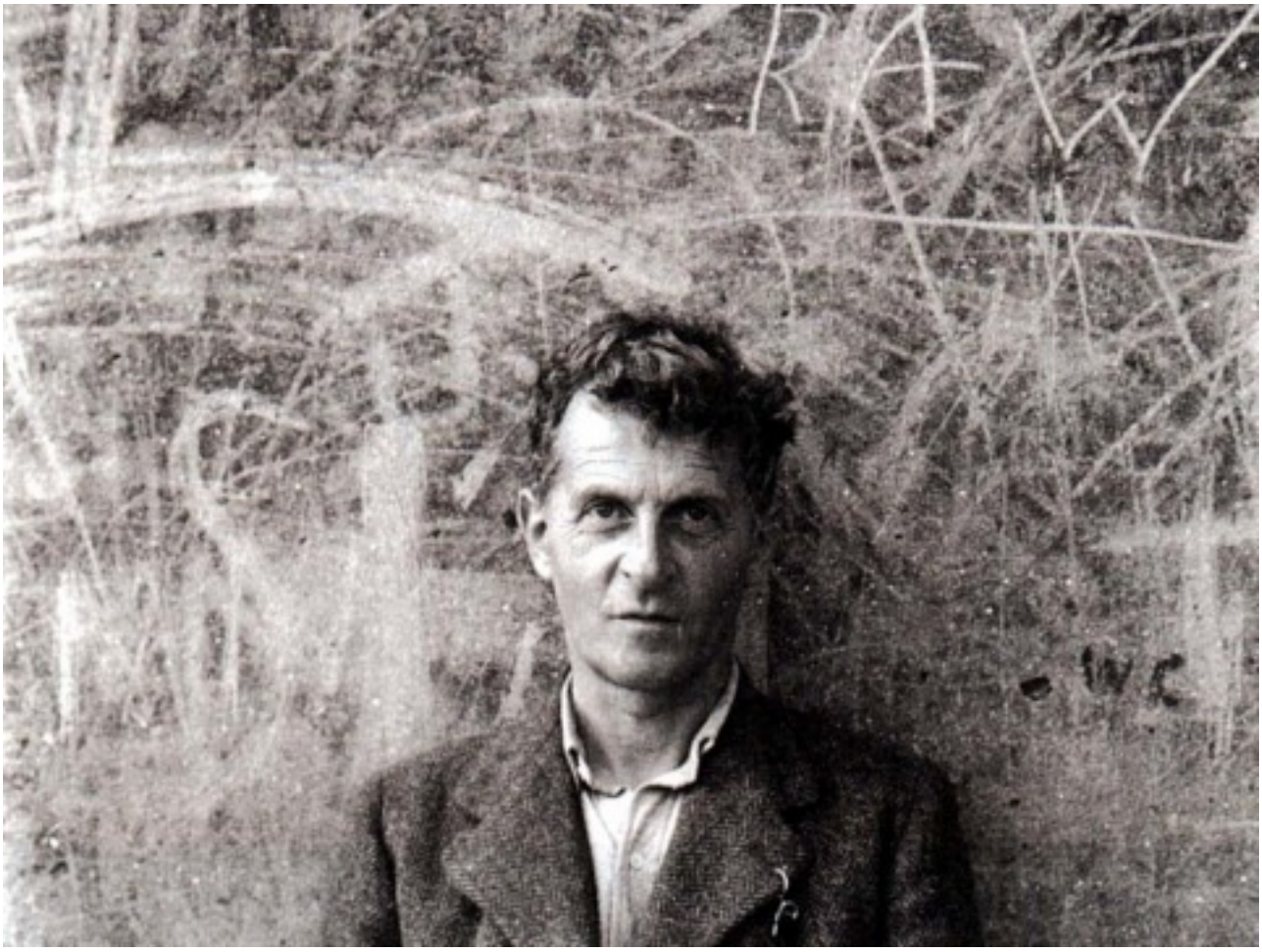
[15]Sea horse
Public domain image

Sea horses are known as a species in which the male can also conceive. Their bodies are covered with bony plates, and their tails lack fins and are used for anchoring rather than swimming – this is a fish with poor swimming skills, which most of the time holds on to marine plants to avoid being swept by currents. The sea horse does not have a stomach, and food passes through its body very quickly.

Perhaps we can talk here about a passage from the bed, to which early Modernist travelers such as Kafka, Proust and their ilk were confined, to embeddedness. Because the later W, a waterlogged sea horse – tentatively planted in the environment, letting it flow through it and impregnate it – is no longer a beetle in a box[22] or a lonely orbiting moon. Wittgenstein writes that while determining the orbit of the stars does not require their consent, "one can only determine the grammar of a language with the consent of a speaker."[23]

And in *The Blue Book* he argues against solipsism, which says something like "Here is here," that "The sentence 'I am here', to make sense, must attract attention to a place in common space."[24] Language acquires meaning only within a context, in a community of speakers. The philosopher, W, must be attentive to these communities and integrate in them, but he never settles in any of them: "(The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him a philosopher.)"[25]

3-ludwig-wittgenstein-1-dreizehn.jpg **[16]**



[17]Ludwig Wittgenstein
Public domain image

In her essay in *Understanding Wittgenstein*, Antonia Soulez suggests that we understand Wittgenstein's thinking in 1930 as thinking “in resonance." She suggests we understand Modernism in music, in Wittgenstein's philosophy, and in general, as the creation of wooly clouds of overtones that extend and disperse the given system far beyond its original, familiar, close and unequivocal root note or nucleus:

“An aspect of modernism is a distance from the centre of organization of chords as given-in-nature… Atonality is achieved by constructing logical series of dissonant chords as far and as remotely as the composer is able to extend the harmonics beyond the conventional limits of the tonal system. Similarly, drawing new analogies by creating… family-resemblance predicates extends the possibilities of meaning far from a Fregean sort of referential nucleus of conceptual content.”26

"Many words… don’t have a strict meaning," Wittgenstein writes in *The Blue Book*. “But this is not a defect. To think it would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no boundary."27 He reiterates a similar idea in *Philosophical Investigations*: "One can say that the concept of a game is a concept with blurred edges… Is it even always an advantage to replace a picture that is not sharp by one that is? Isn't one that isn’t sharp often just what we

need?"28 Indeed, for the later W, philosophy becomes a cloud that dissolves the rigid parentheses and transforms them into a liquid drop of grammar: "(a whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar),"29 or in the words of Stéphane Mallarmé, as quoted in the penultimate page of the closing essay in *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*: "something all music, essence, and softness."30

tumblr_mn60pr9CQK1qbm479o1_500.gif **[18]**



[19]

Slowdive, from the video clip for the song "Morningrise"

What sort of philosophical investigation is performed by restless albums that unfurl a dissonant cloud in parentheses, records that overdance their borders with a poetics of essence and softness and blurred edges? Perhaps Wittgenstein is able, after all, to say here one word about all that music has meant to him in his life. In an essay on Heidegger from 1929 he writes: “This running-up against the limits of language is ethics.”31

- 1. Although this distinction itself, of course, is not very Wittgensteinian, since according to Wittgenstein philosophy should be written in the form of poetic composition: "I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written as a form of poetic composition." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1937), trans. Peter Winch (University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 24
- 2. Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 170
- 3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte, revised 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 3e
- 4. Rush Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 160
- 5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 3e
- 6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), p. 23. German source: "Hier bin ich mir bewusst, weit hinter dem Möglichen zurückgeblieben zu sein"
- 7. *Ibid*. 4.126, 4.5
- 8. *Ibid*. 4.463
- 9. In Anat Matar, ed., *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 242
- 10. *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, p. 192
- 11. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.43
- 12. Michal Peleg, *The Subversives* (Keter, 2017)
- 13. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 71, 30
- 14. *Ibid*. p. 13
- 15. *Philosophical Investigations*, §111
- 16. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Friedrich Waismann, "On the Character of Disquiet," in *The Voices of Wittgenstein: The Vienna Circle*, (Psychology Press, 2003), p. 73
- 17. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (University of California Press, 1967), §472
- 18. *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, pp. 197, 195
- 19. *Culture and Value*, p. 27
- 20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 59
- 21. *Ibid*. p. 68
- 22. *Philosophical Investigations*, §293
- 23. *Voices of Wittgenstein*, p. 105, quoted in *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, p. 227
- 24. *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 72
- 25. *Zettel*, §455
- 26. *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, p. 177
- 27. *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 27
- 28. *Philosophical Investigations*, §71
- 29. *Ibid*. §315
- 30. *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, p. 200
- 31. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "On Heidegger on Being and Dread", in B. F. McGuinness, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by F. Waismann* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), p. 68

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