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Trying to Say the Whole Thing: Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Ethics of Autobiography

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Abstract

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This study assesses the implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy for autobiographical writing, putting him in conversation with texts (fiction and nonfiction) that actively resist the act of writing about one's life. Chapter One traces the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy, from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*' limits of rational language (and the mystical silence beyond) to the ground-level "album" of ordinary language games in *Philosophical Investigations*. Can Wittgenstein's professed inability to bring order to the latter—arguably an inevitable consequence of language games' endless proliferation—also be applied to writing about life, especially given the conspicuous autobiographical silence of Wittgenstein, whose planned autobiography never materialized? Chapter Two outlines how in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, traditional narratives of journey and procreation find their undoing through what Beckett calls "efficient misuse" of language—a strategy that mimics his own oeuvre's autographical

mode. The third chapter takes up Meša Selimović's *Death and the Dervish*, where a first-person account meant to untangle devolves into an amorphous narrative in which tangles, hallucinations, and fragments all become part of the search for a "human" language. Whereas the two novels enact an inexorable unraveling, the two nonfiction works examined in the last chapter, Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* and Irena Vrkljan's *Marina; or, About Biography*, foreground the issue of language and memory, offering alternatives to the limitations imposed by habit and inherited hierarchical traditions. Mayer explores what Wittgenstein might call memory experiences, exposing the many ways that memory works as a language event, while Vrkljan uses memory as a space to bring together lives in a collective "biography of words," where Wittgenstein's aspect-seeing serves a crucial function. Finally, this dissertation argues for an acknowledgement—much like Wittgenstein's in the prefaces to his two major works—of certain language problems as essential aspects of the autobiographical task. At the same time, there should be a Wittgensteinian striving towards some impossible whole, complete understanding. Only then can the work function honestly and therapeutically, that is, to clarify and liberate.

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Dedication

For my mother and stepfather, Marcia and Jack Glode, with love.

In memory of Herbert Blau, who taught me, among many things, about the exhilaration
(and chastening self-distrust) at the perceptual limit.

Introduction

Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one.

—Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

The evolution of this thesis began with the idea to write about silence. In my reading connected to that broad and vaguely defined topic, one of the scenes I could not forget was from Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, when Josef K., obsessed by the case against him and at a loss for any concrete steps to take on his own behalf, decides that it may be a good idea to submit a written defense to the court. In this defense, "he would offer a brief overview of his life, and for each event of any particular importance, explain why he had acted as he did, whether in his present judgment this course of action deserved approval or censure, and what reasons he could advance for the one or the other" (111–112). He scarcely knows where to begin, however, and the more the petition grows in importance in his mind, the more it seems "an endless task . . . because without knowing the nature of the charge and all its possible ramifications, his entire life, down to the smallest actions and events, would have to be called to mind, described, and examined from all sides. And what a sad job that was" (127). In the end, Josef K. never writes a single word in his defense. Though the following chapters here do not take up Kafka's book, it is the image of Josef K. slumped over his desk and the blank pages before him that have stayed with me indelibly and that I recognized in the works selected for this thesis. Josef K.'s silence seemed to be of the same pitch as Ludwig Wittgenstein's declaration, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (*TLP* 7). Aside from the possibility that poor Josef K. may have been depressed at the thought of recounting the banal events of his rather unremarkable life, there is the more far-reaching question of why such a task is so difficult and sad.

Autobiography really is an endless task, in more than one sense. First, if you take it upon yourself to create an overview of your life, you are by default acting as your own judge: selecting events, ordering them in one way or another (and where is the compass for that?), and then *doing* something with them: offering explanations, dispensing approval or censure where appropriate, or simply attempting to find some sense in the larger picture that results. While on the one hand these acts of judgment could themselves be broken down ad infinitum, on the other hand the overall task has no end because as long as you are writing, you are alive: your life continues as you narrate it—a tricky situation. Unsurprisingly, Wittgenstein himself made plans for an autobiography more than once but never wrote one; he did, however, prepare a confession of sorts that he then revealed to those close to him in an attempt to clear the air and start anew. These details seem to align with his views of philosophical work, which if nothing else demands a complete personal involvement; he even jotted down philosophical notes on the same pages as his personal diary entries (the latter kept in a simple code). Marjorie Perloff's excellent study *Wittgenstein's Ladder* inspired me to turn to his writings—both the ideas they contain and their aesthetic qualities—as a way of exploring the questions I had about autobiography. Her argument about Wittgenstein's experience during World War I impacting the shift in his philosophy also helped link him with two texts I had already selected, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* and Meša Selimović's *Death and the Dervish*, since their respective authors' war experiences (in World War II) had immeasurable impact that can be felt in more than one way in their pseudo-autobiographical novels.

This study pairs Wittgenstein's writings with four literary works: the two novels mentioned above (fictional first-person accounts, both with biographical overtones), and two nonfiction experimental pieces (Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* and Irena Vrkljan's *Marina; or,*

About Biography). By focusing on the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, always with an eye to what goes unsaid, I hope to show how much he has to tell us about why autobiography—and, perhaps, resistance to it—is so difficult and important. In addition, I will draw attention to certain crucial Wittgensteinian concepts that seem vital to bear in mind if one is to avoid (1) falling silent, or (2) falling into the traps of traditional autobiographical approaches (that is, “traps” as perceived by Wittgenstein or other authors discussed here). Surrounded as we are with an ever-increasing supply of autobiographical information (from blogs and best-selling autobiographies like Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*, to university courses and books on how to pen your own memoirs, such as poet Mary Karr's 2015 *The Art of Memoir*), Josef K.'s silence—and Wittgenstein's, and many others'—seems to deserve some reflection. Why might one choose *not* to write about one's life? And if one does venture to do so, what linguistic and ethical (or aesthetic—one and the same for Wittgenstein) issues must be considered? The books examined here, grouped from a diverse pool of cultures and contexts, share a very important and rare quality of exposing their struggles without exploiting them: that is, they do not romanticize their failures, nor do they turn them into a compositional choice the way, for example, a highly fragmented postmodern novel might.

Wittgenstein's Ladder has been a guiding light throughout my work on this project, both in Perloff's engaging and insightful close readings of Wittgenstein, Beckett, Gertrude Stein (who enters the discussion here in Chapter Four), and others, and the way she pairs Wittgenstein and these writers in conversation. It is not a matter of proving Wittgenstein as an influence; in fact, in some cases it is doubtful as to the extent the writers were familiar with his philosophy. Instead, Perloff invites us to consider Wittgenstein in the fullest way, looking at his ideas, his biography, and the literary qualities of his texts. Her overall argument deals with the ways in which the

philosopher anticipated (and, for later generations, influenced) the avant-garde, particularly with respect to the “strangeness of the ordinary.”

Also extremely helpful were two other books pairing Wittgenstein with literary works: Martin Klebes’ *Wittgenstein’s Novels* and Gary Hagberg’s *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness*. Klebes’ first chapter provides an excellent discussion of the autobiographical implications of the development from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*, including the shifting concept of memory and the incompatibility of writing and thought. Hagberg’s book walks through the ways in which Wittgenstein challenges conventional modes of autobiography rooted in the Cartesian tradition of an inviolable inner self. Along the way, Hagberg draws several autobiographical works into the discussion and provides many elucidating glosses of the most salient points in Wittgenstein’s philosophical works. Ray Monk’s biography *Wittgenstein, the Duty of Genius* was a tremendous resource, and books by Hans Sluga (*Wittgenstein*) and David Pears (*Wittgenstein and Paradox and Platitude in Wittgenstein’s Philosophy*) made some very elusive material more accessible. Bela Szabados’ essay “Autobiography and Philosophy: Variations on a Theme of Wittgenstein” lays out a clear, persuasive argument for the ways in which Wittgenstein urges us to consider the two disciplines in tandem.

In terms of the other authors here, three out of the four have very little in the way of criticism relevant to the topic at hand. The obvious exception is Beckett, around whom an entire industry has been thriving for decades. Aside from Perloff’s discussion of Beckett in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*, H. Porter Abbott’s concept of autographic writing in *Beckett Writing* proved pivotal to my chapter on *Molloy*. Likewise, Jean-Michel Rabaté’s “‘Think, Pig!’: Beckett’s Animal Philosophies” and Shane Weller’s “Forms of Weakness: Animalisation in

Kafka and Beckett” (both from the collection *Beckett and Animals*) helped me articulate what I found so troubling in the presence of all those animals, how even *they* have to do with writing. For the chapter on Meša Selimović, Gordana Crnković provides crucial insight in both her introduction to *Post-Yugoslav Literature and Film* and “The Poetry of Prose, The Unyielding of Sound” (in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*), pointing out the poetic aspects in the Serbo-Croatian original of *Death and the Dervish* and contextualizing the language issues with respect to questions of order as well as Selimović’s Muslim heritage. Crnković’s discussion in *Imagined Dialogues of Marina; or, About Biography* was formative in my first contact with Vrkljan’s book, and Crnković’s constant attunement to the many dynamic ways language makes meaning—and likewise the personal and social needs for open-ended listening—have strongly informed my critical practice.

This study is more of an extended meditation on language than of the genre of autobiography or the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. At times I am reading Wittgenstein through the other texts, at times the texts through Wittgenstein—I do not always find perfect parallels, nor am I looking for them. The Wittgensteinian issues that come up related to the “problem” of autobiography include: (1) why traditional narrative structures (histories, chronologies, demonstrations of cause and effect) may be unsatisfying; (2) how one then solves the problem of creating an overview of autobiographical events in an order that makes sense; (3) the roles language plays in our lives, in writing, and in relation to memory; and (4) how we can find a language that precisely and adequately conveys very personal material. In general, I rely on Wittgenstein’s philosophical ideas as a theoretical framework and close readings of the other texts. In the case of Bernadette Mayer, I was lucky enough to be able to interview her about *Memory*, and have used some of that material in the fourth chapter. The study starts with a look

at Wittgenstein's philosophy in Chapter One, with an emphasis on the connection between his ideas and the problems of autobiography; moves on to Beckett's *Molloy* in Chapter Two; continues with the second novel, *Death and the Dervish*, in Chapter Three; and ends by discussing Mayer's and Vrkljan's work in the final chapter (with a guest appearance by Gertrude Stein).

Chapter One, "Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Autobiography, and the Curse of Prose," traces the connections between the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy and his thoughts about memory, order, and writing. In spite of the fact that he never wrote his own autobiography, Wittgenstein considered doing so at multiple points. An avid diarist, Wittgenstein recorded personal material side by side with notes for his philosophical work. The practice is telling of his entire approach to philosophy, which he insisted be connected with the personal—thus opposing a traditional view of the philosopher's position as removed from life and the world. That said, not all personal material is fit for philosophical writing: it must have some relevance for others, some larger, shared significance. The distinctive blend of frankness and reticence in Wittgenstein's work also raises the possibility of reading his philosophical writings themselves as a form of self-writing.

The first of his two major works, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* characterizes "early" Wittgenstein with a peculiar juxtaposition of highly technical logical propositions and mystical statements—the latter of which are very likely inspired by events in Wittgenstein's own life. Preoccupied with the problems in philosophy that, in his view, arise as a result of misunderstandings surrounding logical propositions, Wittgenstein sets out to establish the limits of logical expression through analysis into their smallest parts. He puts forth a theory of

knowledge in which every logical statement has a clearly circumscribed, eternal meaning. The so-called picture theory of language—perhaps the most significant part of the *Tractatus*' argument—posits a commonality of structure between a factual statement and the state of affairs it describes, thus connecting logical propositions with the world.

And yet, Wittgenstein's own experience of that world changed radically as a result of his service in the Austrian army during World War I—which happened in the midst of his work on the *Tractatus* and arguably altered the work in a dramatic way. Face to face with death and destruction, Wittgenstein abruptly interrupted his logical work and turned to much more spiritual meditations in his diary. Incorporating many of these entries into the last two sections of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein concludes that, though we may be able to define the world of facts, there is no meaning or value in them. Ethics lies beyond the realm of logical propositions; it cannot be expressed in a way that makes sense, and therefore is inappropriate for philosophical work. Thus the work meant to delineate the realm of logical meaning closes with the now-famous statement, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (7). Indeed, Wittgenstein regarded the most important part of his book as the *unwritten* part—that is, the ethical part, “delimited within” (qtd. in Monk 189).

The *Tractatus*' mystical turn did not yet mark the full shift in Wittgenstein's philosophy. That was to begin in 1929, when he began work on what would eventually become the *Philosophical Investigations*, which he regarded as a major correction to the mistakes of his first book. Having realized the error of the picture theory of language, whereby the logical form of a proposition comes from the structure it shares with the world, Wittgenstein from then on insisted that language gets its meaning from the “stream of life” in which it occurs and in which it must be investigated (qtd. in Monk 270). Still, his overall project remains the same: to rid philosophy

of its deep misunderstandings that arise from language problems. This time, though, it is “the bewitchment of language” that he is trying to clear up. The problem stems from our very idea of language: language is not, in fact, one “super-concept”—that is, a major philosophical concept that has a circumscribed, eternal meaning—but rather refers to an apparently limitless set of cases where we use words in various ways. These “language games” resemble one another in the way that, for example, different sports resemble one another. In the “family” set of sports, there are all different kinds of shared characteristics between individual members, yet each has its particular set of rules that does not match up completely with another’s. The point is that philosophy tends to treat language in isolation from its daily, ordinary use in language games, resulting in confused, unclear concepts.

Language can only be understood, then, by means of a sweeping overview of human grammar. In particular, philosophy would need to detail different cases to see how commonly misused words like “meaning,” “know,” and “intention,” are actually used in ordinary life. But since creating a comprehensive overview of linguistic practices is an impossibly large task, one option is to try to create smaller, more manageable “surveyable representations” whereby we can reach an “understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’” (*PI* §122). The task of how to approach the description of linguistic practices remained a troubling one for Wittgenstein, leading him to write in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* that he had hoped to write “a good book” but failed to do so (4e). What exactly a “good book” would have been is uncertain; perhaps it is the “whole” into which Wittgenstein admits having attempted to “weld my results together.” But the very nature of the investigations seemed to determine a different motion, and the resulting work is an “album” of “sketches of landscapes which were made in the

course of these long and meandering journeys,” arranged so as to give the reader “an idea of the landscape” (3e-4e).

The honesty and humility of Wittgenstein’s preface is in keeping with his insistence that philosophy is above all “work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)” (*CV* 24). In this regard, nothing stands in between personal and philosophical work for Wittgenstein. The greatest problems challenge the will, not the intellect; thus, if ethics is off-limits for philosophical discussion, it still forms the background of his life and work. Interestingly, the very idea of an “overview” in his philosophical approach may have come to Wittgenstein during his considerations of autobiography, inspired by his friend Paul Engelmann. Engelmann suggested writing down an account of the series of events in his life; Engelmann had made a digest version himself and commented: “By means of such a general over-view [*Übersicht*] the confused picture was much simplified” (qtd. in Monk 197). In light of this, the barrier between autobiography and Wittgenstein’s philosophical writings seems even more permeable, and his frustrations with the *Investigations*’ form of still greater consequence.

With its curious blend of wandering and repetition, the “album” form of the *Philosophical Investigations* has interesting implications for meaning-making. Wittgenstein at times devotes sustained sections to a certain subject, and at times jumps “in a sudden change, from one area to another.” As a counterpoint to this uneven, unpredictable motion, we encounter the “same or almost the same points . . . always . . . approached afresh from different directions.” His preface refers to the “natural inclination” of his thoughts, suggesting that this form, such as it is, gives freest range to that nature (*PI* 3e). Moving more deeply into the actual content of the *Investigations*, David Pears characterizes Wittgenstein’s method (insofar as we can speak of a

method) as one of oscillation between an illusory objectivism and an anthropological view that looks at language in its natural habitat of human communication. The “whole truth” of the anthropological view can only be perceived, however, in contrast to the objective outer point (Witt 170). To take an example particularly relevant for autobiography: though the philosophical talk of an inner self is based on faulty reasoning (that there is an inner object we can observe), the problem nevertheless casts a light that gives dimension and meaning to ways we use words like “observe,” “I,” and “self.” Martin Klebes suggests we can read the *Philosophical Investigations* autobiographically: “The reason that the contemplated autobiography remains as fictional as a fully perspicuous version of the *Investigations* may also be that, ultimately, both projects are about the limits of understanding” (46). Still, at both the level of content and structure, motifs of distance and proximity work together to create meaning.

Wittgenstein’s later philosophy also deals with other ideas pertinent to autobiography, including memory, morphological histories, self-representation, and the adequacy of language (or language games). Memory itself is not the recollection of a frozen image, but rather something that happens in the present, often in language. In a sense, we cannot write about the past; we can only write our recollections. When it comes to deriving some understanding from these events, Wittgenstein urges us to look beyond traditional causal narratives, towards the morphological study of the inner relations between different events. Perhaps most significantly—especially given that Wittgenstein did *not* write an autobiography—the writer of an autobiography must face the question of why she is writing. What is it to represent oneself, when “I” is “a word like any other” (qtd. in Perloff 72)? Why attempt an overview if the project is impossible? And is writing really the adequate medium for attempting such a thing? These are

problems that have no solution; and yet, as Wittgenstein might say, the problems shed light, perhaps, on our (imperfect) attempts.

Chapter Two, “Animal Thinking: *Molloy* and Autography,” picks up threads from the *Tractatus* and *Investigations*, including the placement of meaning outside the world, questions of order and cohesion, and a rebelliousness that ultimately searches for more attentive and inclusive listening. Samuel Beckett’s postwar novel presents the problems of self-writing in two dynamic, devastating narratives that reflect many of the issues Wittgenstein points to. In addition to Beckett’s use of biographical elements (many war-related) in *Molloy*, the work fits into what H. Porter Abbot calls Beckett’s *autography*: a self-writing project that extends across his oeuvre, where repetitions and reiterations between individual works connect up into a larger whole, which is all the while countered by a constant sense of incompleteness, erosion, and destruction.

On both macro and micro levels, *Molloy* expresses the difficulty of finding meaning. Structurally, both parts work against any narrative progression. Part One is overburdened by an accumulation of “particulars,” though they never seem to add up to anything larger; Molloy’s complaint that “for the whole there seems to be no spell” (TN 23) suggests an ontological problem similar to the lack of a cohesive overview of human grammar in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Conversely, inspector Jacques Moran begins his report in Part Two with cool, clinical control, yet the narrative progressively unravels, ending in a flat-out negation of writing’s suitability to make a truthful account: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (170). The narrated events in these journeys also get derailed: Molloy does not find his mother, and Moran does not find Molloy. This, Abbot might point out, contributes to Beckett’s larger project of dismantling narrative conventions. And yet, in another characteristically Beckettian move, both

stories have “strange loops” suggestive of a different kind of narrative, where repetitions seem like echoes in the textual caverns and crevasses.

Accompanying the thwarted narratives is the problem of language, explicitly expressed by the narrators in their frustration at retelling events and pointedly exhibited in some of the stories’ key moments. Molloy finds meaning in the indistinct buzzing of the world but claims that he can barely grasp human language on any meaningful level. As for Moran, the conclusion of his report coincides with his withdrawal from worldly affairs and their language, choosing instead to live in his yard and learn the language of the wild birds surrounding him. Such a sensibility seems in keeping with the final propositions of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which acknowledge an ethical (and aesthetic) meaning beyond the realm of logical discourse. It also reflects Beckett’s own aesthetic preference for words as “fundamental sounds” rather than something to be rigorously interpreted (*D* 109)—a sensibility informed by his own ethical-aesthetic search for “a form that accommodates the mess” of the world (*TCH* 219), particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Likewise, the tension between order and that seemingly chaotic world runs throughout *Molloy*, where eloquence at times stands in close proximity to violence. The process of accounting also enacts a kind of violence, as Moran tells us: “images of this kind the will cannot revive without doing them violence. Much of what they had it takes away, much they never had it foists upon them” (*TN* 109). The trouble Moran expresses seems one of the central problems of autobiography, something that Martin Klebes calls the “curse of prose”: Wittgenstein’s conviction that writing is unfit to record anything other than “what occurs to us in writing” (qtd. in Klebes 43). Of course, Moran’s claim that the revival of images distorts them also harkens back to Wittgenstein’s preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which he confesses that the

shape of his thoughts did not lend themselves to a linear, ordered whole. Life, like human grammar, appears “inenarrable” (*TN* 109).

Another pressing matter pertaining to the question of what can and cannot be said surfaces in both Wittgenstein’s and Beckett’s works, what we might call “animal thinking”: a “thinking-dreaming from the outside, which is another name for writing” (Rabaté 123). The novel’s veritable bestiary of strikingly present creatures carries a certain intensity rooted in the animals’ alterity, often involving a vulnerability, endangerment, or complexity beyond human understanding. The implicit warning about an over-reliance on human order to interpret everything around us, as well as the tendency to prioritize that order’s apotheoses of progress and speed, certainly strikes a chord in Wittgenstein. The philosopher puts himself in opposition to so-called progress (*Philosophical Investigations* begins with an epigraph from Viennese playwright Johann Nestroy, “The trouble about progress is that it always looks much greater than it really is” [2]), insisting that his work is really a reaching for the same stone over and over, rather than constructing endless buildings. From his outside position vis-à-vis the mainstream of science and technology, Wittgenstein also reminds us to be attentive to the unbridgeable gaps where language games seem to end, or you do not know how to go on. Moreover, Wittgenstein’s later insistence on approaching language in its native context extends to any attempt to approach other orders: they must be considered in their own habitat. Autobiography, too, must attempt to find a form that accommodates the very stream of life from which it emerges, rather than fit into a readymade narrative.

In the end, human language is a mere penum: something we learn to repeat (as in the passage from Saint Augustine in *Philosophical Investigations* §1), yet which is never fully ours. To break up the penum can mean to open up a genuine, dynamic perception of the world.

Molloy shows us various ways this can happen: through “efficient misuse” of language, through the undoing of conventions (without apology or explanation), and by expressing in spite (or because) of the fact that there is nothing to express.

Chapter Three, “In Search of an Earthly Language,” continues to explore issues of order, cohesion, and language, but in the context of a very different novel. As *Molloy* bears many marks of Beckett’s experience during World War II, the 1966 Yugoslav novel *Death and the Dervish* likewise traces its origins to events in author Meša Selimović’s life during the war and its immediate aftermath. The novel’s tormented narrator, Sheikh Ahmed Nuruddin, has lost his brother under tragic and senseless circumstances, much as Selimović did. Nuruddin’s own struggle to write—to find a language pliable enough to account for and deal with his grief and guilt—parallels the novelist’s central (autobiographical) question of what one becomes when the order (and language) one believes in reveals itself as corrupt. To reestablish a sense of place in the world demands that one ask (again) whether there is an a priori order to it at all. And so, from the very outset, the novel echoes Wittgenstein’s question from his notebooks of 1915, “Is there an order in the world *a priori*, and if so what does it consist in?” (NB 53).

Sheikh Nuruddin opens each chapter of his confession with an epigraph “from the Koran” (DS 1); in fact, these passages are actually paraphrases or montages from various chapters (suras) of the holy text. This controversial gesture reflects Nuruddin’s journey away from seeking truth in the eternal, direct word from God, towards his search for a human language, as embodied in his own writing. And that human story is far from sacred perfection; it is heavy, digressive, and at times hallucinatory. Although Nuruddin tells us he is writing in order to untangle things, the fevered, tangled text reveals the Sisyphean task of writing to see oneself and—to bring Wittgenstein in—the impossibility of an overview of human life. Condemned no

matter what, Nuruddin takes up a particularly interesting working method based on a distinction between *honesty* and *sincerity*: instead of the false sense of truth sincerity might yield, he aims for “honesties,” which have the potential to be mutually contradictory. This concept of honesties echoes Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics*, where he acknowledges the “senseless” statements connected to ethics: his point is that we must not make a science out of ethics, nor should we dismiss these senseless statements as valueless. They are “document[s] of a tendency in the human mind” (8)—something Selimović himself hoped to accomplish with the “zizagging” of this novel, conspicuously absent of any unifying theme (*PMR* 295). Whereas Wittgenstein in 1931 desired an orderly autobiography, Nuruddin already anticipates the crisscrossings of the *Philosophical Investigations*. And yet, he remains ambivalent to the very end about the value of his words.

Attempting to reconcile himself with the world, which has become so alien to him, in both the writing and the story Nuruddin desperately needs a less circumscribed form of communication: one that can breathe and move, allow for mistakes and misunderstandings, but also for discovery and intimacy. Such a language is embodied by his friend and counterpoint, Hassan, whose easy friendship and decisive actions cause Nuruddin to rethink man’s place in the world. Above all, it is Hassan’s natural eloquence that inspires him and draws him. This becomes especially true after the dervish witnesses the law and language of the Koran manipulated to serve corrupt political powers, revealing that the unquestionable truth of the holy text still becomes a language game in earthly matters. Hassan’s human language, by contrast, is like a tree, with its roots grounded in earthly life—or simply the need to speak for no reason at all—and branches that reach high above the ordinary with their beauty and wisdom. In Wittgenstein, we see the emphasis on everyday language games as a way of warding off the “bewitchment” of

language—the illusion of fixed and eternal meaning, for example. At the same time, what becomes clear is how extraordinary things can come from ordinary language use.

Because human language is precisely what is missing, and tacitly forbidden, in the dervish's environs, Nuruddin's poetic, personal tone in writing takes on an element of rebellion. Though his speech rarely deviates from careful articulations, the inevitable force of the personal tone propels his prose into many twists and turns. Several surreal scenes challenge the reader's expectations of a clear division between the factual and the imagined (albeit on the plane of a fictional account). Perhaps this is the flip side of Wittgenstein's argument that there cannot be a private language: that which has no clear verifiable referent is always cropping up in language anyway. Of course, running parallel to (or underneath) Nuruddin's search for an adequate human language is the question of order. When the order of the Koran crumbles for him, Nuruddin cannot establish another. The period following his own release from prison is a precious time of solitude, awash with pieces of memories and a sense of fragmented self—all recounted in long, lyrical passages as he writes about his childhood and youth. And yet, probably because of his own inability to withstand the world's lack of order, Ahmed finally imposes his own based on a logic of hatred. Suddenly things have meaning again for him, but it is a cold, hopeless meaning whose only end is revenge. Though Nuruddin remains embittered, the intensely lyrical final pages suggest he still possesses a sensibility for that which lies beyond strictly imposed orders.

Death and the Dervish does not shy away from the difficulties of finding meaning when established structures fail us. Hassan—himself a complex and at times ambivalent character—seems the most salubrious example of what Wittgenstein might call a happy life. For Hassan, everything hinges on a combination of movement and fixity. He travels widely but comes home always. This relationship makes both the home and the wandering meaningful: without one or

the other, we would be lost. Unfortunately, this idea of fixity and freedom does not appeal to Nuruddin, who fantasizes about escaping but instead only sinks deeper into his troubles. Still, his writing actually enacts the return home he was unable to realize himself. The tender prose he devotes to his lost love at the end of his written account suggests that, as in *Philosophical Investigations*, wandering (in writing) is what allows him to finally arrive at the object of his longings.

In Chapter Four, “Case by Case: Bernadette Mayer’s *Memory* and Irena Vrkljan’s *Marina; or, About Biography*,” I move from novels with autographical elements to two nonfiction works, both explicitly dealing with the complex relationship between memory and writing. While they exhibit many of the difficulties encountered in *Molloy* and *Death and the Dervish* (issues of order and disorder, judgment, and the pain of writing), Mayer’s and Vrkljan’s works offer proposals of how to deal with these problems. Though very different in character, the two texts share a common rejection of the traditional (and *Tractarian*) view of memory as description of a frozen mental image, instead engaging “memory” as encompassing a much more dynamic array of situations—quite in the spirit of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

In *Memory* Mayer experiments with recording all of her thoughts during the course of a day for an entire month, spurred on in part by Gertrude Stein’s claim that you cannot remember and write at the same time. Outlined in Stein’s 1936 lecture “What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them” the argument is based on the idea that a masterpiece is meant to reveal entity, the thing in itself, whereas remembering is connected to the more superficial yet practical identity, the recognition of ourselves, others, things, etc., that we use to function in our daily lives. Remembering prevents access to entity, which requires a kind of attention wholly focused on the present, unencumbered with preconceived ideas or associations. As for language,

we can imagine that the masterpiece would be outside the identifying language outlined by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*—the starting point for Wittgenstein’s own investigations into the many *other* ways we can understand “language.” Like Wittgenstein, Stein was after clarity: a masterpiece makes something clear that has always been in front of us.

Stein and Wittgenstein alike were attuned to language’s potential to create confusion rather than clarity, but also championed the sense of what might at first seem like senseless language. For Stein, the language we use on a daily basis in human affairs has a terrible way of making a thing “[go] dead once it has been said” (361), and in her own work she tries to create a “word relationship” with an object rather than a description or representation (qtd. in Perloff 92). Wittgenstein for his part warns us that viewing language strictly as a system of sign and signifier is highly misleading. For him, the problem went deep into his own diary practices, where he sought a form that was on the level of life rather than distanced from it. Bernadette Mayer’s own work seems more interested in created Steinian word relationships with her thoughts and memories rather than giving an orderly account in referential language. In a sense, Mayer *is* remembering, but differently, through diverse compositional procedures that move the picture of memory away from the traditional view of a retrieval of a mental image, towards a more open, dynamic concept of what it is to remember.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein emphasizes that memory is not a uniform concept, contrary to prevailing ideas. We do not, for example, always see a picture before we speak about something we remember. Memory experiences—things we usually associate with remembering (a mental image, emotions, etc.)—may accompany remembering, but they are not essential to it. For the writer, of particular concern is the question of language’s status in memory. Whereas the traditional view holds that language describes an inner image,

Wittgenstein's work suggests that language may precede the image; in fact, in some cases language may be the very content of remembering. With that in mind, language's materiality also becomes part of the memory; thus, in *Memory*, sound and synesthesia—or what Wittgenstein calls “secondary meanings” of words (*PPF* §278)¹—play a major role in meaning-making. In this way, Mayer's writing in *Memory*, unordered and at times disorienting, is in a very full sense grounded in a reality unmediated by the constraints of time and identity that Stein wanted to do away with (in a masterpiece, anyhow). Encouraging her reader to reconsider the way memory and language interrelate, Mayer's book revivifies rather than “going dead.”

Both Stein and Mayer criticize autobiography: Stein on the grounds that it tells us what we already know (an exercise in identity par excellence), and Mayer because it privileges one person's life over others'. While these are both valid positions, Irena Vrkljan's 1986 work *Marina; or, About Biography* offers an alternative. In this combination of biography (of Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, among others) and autobiography, Vrkljan forcefully resists the traditional idea that one's life is an accumulation of chronological events of greater and lesser importance. Instead, she works with what she calls a “biography of words,” where words serve as pathways to an individual's experience and understanding of the world (as opposed to mere identifiers). In her very Wittgensteinian sensibility, Vrkljan explains how words gather meaning for each of us through the accumulation of contexts, adding layer upon layer to the word's “primary meaning” (Wittgenstein, *PPF* §275–278), and perhaps overshadowing it entirely. The biography of words Vrkljan proposes replaces traditional cause-and-effect historical accounts,

¹ *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment (PPF)* refers to what was once called the “second half” of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In earlier editions of the *Investigations* this part appears as Part Two; however, in the fourth edition used here the editors note that these remarks appear separate from those Wittgenstein intended for the *Investigations* (Hacker and Schulte xiix-xxiii). I therefore distinguish between the two works in my in-text citations, although both are found in the same fourth edition of *Philosophical Investigations* in the bibliography.

bearing more similarity to Wittgenstein's morphology of language use. Such a biography reserves a space for the fluidity of our individual lives, but also shows how language, because it is shared, has the power to reverse the sentence of lonely solipsism. For Vrkljan, memory is the dynamic space where individual lives cross and connect in meaningful, expansive ways, freed from the limitations of time and space.

Vrkljan also brings a considerable element of responsibility to the autobiographical act, and part of her project involves undoing imprecise pictures that she has of people and situations. It is not enough simply to accept the pictures we see; we must ask if they are accurate, if we are missing anything, if perhaps they can be looked at otherwise. Here again Vrkljan's concern comes into contact with a very interesting point in Wittgenstein's later philosophy that he calls "aspect seeing": the moment when we see something differently than we had seen it before, with an awareness of the difference. In autobiography, seeing aspects—and asking which seeing is the genuine seeing—involves placing a picture in its broader context(s) and looking at it with a "capacious grasp" of the life of which that event is a part (Hagberg 209). For Vrkljan, it is less a question of which seeing is genuine, and more a matter of acknowledging the intrinsic potential in all pictures for a new aspect to dawn.

In their raw directness, the works of Mayer and Vrkljan also include a significant emotional element concomitant to the writing process, confirming what *Molloy* and *Death and the Dervish* fictionalized: frustration, fear, and at times bewilderment when the coordinates of meaning seem to slip away. Their rigorousness and unflinching commitment distinguish them as they attempt to find an alternative to the unnatural imposition of hierarchies, chronologies, and causal explanations. As with Wittgenstein's philosophy, they wear their flaws on their sleeve but

do not boast of them or attempt to transform them into a formal, accidental aspect. Perhaps it is here that autobiography touches the boundary where ethics begins.

The particular treatments of “raw material” that Vrkljan and Mayer employ return us to Wittgenstein’s concept of philosophy as a kind of therapy,² where certain incurable philosophical problems are nevertheless lessened by presenting them as apparently unresolvable raw material. The works included in this study all struggle with the autobiographical process, and in the end it appears that a complete overview of a life is impossible—as is a text that lies on the same plane as existence. Still, these philosophical autobiographical pieces yield invaluable insights into how we understand language, writing, meaning, and memory.

In a sense, much of the concern here is closer to the things that are unwritten than written. This is—I would say with Wittgenstein—an ethical concern. But what I have also been trying to understand better is what makes these texts so enduringly compelling to me; that is an aesthetic question. In the end, Wittgenstein would point out that neither set of answers could be articulated in any sensible way, since these are things that lie beyond the discourse of logic. And so, while silence and beauty get little airplay in the pages that follow, they are probably the distant idealized objects that, though perhaps unreal, give this inquiry its meaning.

² Which indeed hearkens back to Plato’s *pharmakon*—writing as poison and cure.

Chapter 1. Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Autobiography, and the Curse of Prose

(See how high the seas of language run here!)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Autobiography, perhaps more than any other form of writing, demands an ethic.

Whatever one's motives in turning one's life out onto a page—for clarity and understanding, to memorialize others, or to leave something of oneself for future generations—creating a truthful, productive, meaningful account can only be done, it seems, through a very select approach. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, himself contemplating writing an autobiography, noted that there are “decent” (*anständigsten*) and “indecent” ways to write “the truth about oneself” (qtd. in Monk 290). Such a distinction reveals one way that ethical judgment extended into the far reaches of his writings, in spite of Wittgenstein's famous reticence about ethics. Having declared the subject unsuitable for philosophy, Wittgenstein would nevertheless go on to refer frequently to ethics as a kind of silent partner in his work. In 1931 he comments: “The inexpressible (what I find enigmatic & cannot express) perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I was able to express acquires meaning” (*CV* 23). As we shall see in this and subsequent chapters, meaning for Wittgenstein is often linked with something outside: an unarticulated background, for example, or a light cast from ineradicable problems. This is a trope that seems to endure in his philosophy, despite the dramatic shift in between his early and later work. Meaning comes when revealed distance gives a sense of depth. With autobiography, meaning may just lie in the distance we travel between the desires for the written work and the actual text itself.

Consider the issues outlined by Wittgenstein in his preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he admits that the cohesive, linear form he had hoped his work would take did not come to fruition; rather, he writes, “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 “ (3e). This compact set of comments comprises a whole host of issues for autobiography as for philosophy, where one begins with an aspiration for creating an integral whole, but in the process of writing the work starts to swerve and resist, as it were. However, lest we read this as a universal apology for all formal flaws and shortcomings in any writing, we must bear in mind Wittgenstein’s note that such a procedure was connected with the nature of the investigation. This was, in large part, an investigation of language in its ordinary, everyday use, material that truly seems to unfold infinitely in all directions. Aside from the disarmingly candid tone of this preface, it also points to something that Wittgenstein elsewhere connected with his projected autobiography: the character of one’s subject (be it language or oneself) must not appear accidental, but fully exposed and as integral to the work.

Surely this must be part of what constitutes a “decent” approach to autobiography. Although Wittgenstein never did write an autobiography, he spent much time considering worthwhile ways of going about it, spurred on by a desire to “spread out my life clearly, in order to have it clearly in front of me, and for others too. Not so much to put it on trial as to produce, in any case, clarity and truth” (qtd. in Monk 290-291). He considered St. Augustine’s *Confessions* to be possibly “the most serious book ever written” (qtd. in Monk 291), and his own concept of autobiography, and indeed philosophy, involves a kind of confession: “A confession has to be part of one’s new life” (*CV* 16). And so, on the one hand we have a desire for a clear view, which characterizes his later philosophical work, and on the other, we have a desire to clear the air, as it were, to make way for a new beginning. Once, when Wittgenstein was in the midst of a suicidal depression, his friend Paul Engelmann suggested the therapeutic effects of a confessional sketch: “I took down a kind of ‘confession,’ in which I tried to recall the series of events in my life, in as

much detail as is possible in the space of an hour. With each event I tried to make clear to myself how I should have behaved. By means of such a general over-view [*Übersicht*] the confused picture was much simplified” (qtd. in Monk 197). Although Wittgenstein did not immediately follow Englemann’s advice, he would go on to use confession as a clarifying device later in life.

Interestingly, in Englemann’s words we can also identify a concise summary of the direction Wittgenstein’s philosophical writings would take, namely the assembly of details in an attempt to create a general overview, and the clarifying of a confused picture with an eye towards simplicity. Although he was not writing his autobiography, he was applying the same technique in his philosophical work. And, indeed, this work has much to say about the particular challenge of assembling a collection of one’s memories in language, especially since Wittgenstein insisted that philosophy contain a strong personal element. It is no surprise, then, that his own work bears some striking autobiographical elements, and also yields a number of fruitful insights that can be read in dialogue with both autobiographical works and fictional pieces that dramatize the autobiographical writing process.

1.1 Ethics: The Book Not Written

The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is one of two works Wittgenstein published in his lifetime. It is the fruits of a long labor that began at Cambridge in 1911 during his work with analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell, and continued through the duration of Wittgenstein’s service in the Austrian army during World War I (including periods where he was clerk, engineer, soldier on the front, and, finally, prisoner in Italy). In this virtuosic, baffling work, Wittgenstein had set himself the task of establishing the limits of logical language, or “a limit to

the expression of thoughts” (*TLP* 400). In doing so, he was attempting to rid philosophy of confusion brought about by misunderstandings of the logic of language. And yet, the work is perhaps better known for its marked ambivalence. Consider the penultimate proposition, which comes on the heels of a dense set of logical formulae: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright” (6.54). As he claims in his preface, his book has a twofold effect: first, he has outlined a solution to the problems of philosophy; and second, he has shown “how little is achieved when these problems are solved” (*TLP* 401-402). Such an introduction, as David Pears comments,

carries a heavy load of meaning. The second claim alludes to the greater importance of religion and morality. . . . His first claim is that these philosophical problems are solved by a critique of language which fixes the limits of factual discourse. . . . The Preface suggests that philosophy is finished, but it must be observed that, whatever has happened to the body of traditional philosophy, its spirit has certainly migrated into Wittgenstein’s critique of language. The question, what the status of this critique is, is not raised in the Preface, and it is not until the end of the book that we are told that it too tries to say in a factual way things which cannot be said in a factual way, and so after its other work has been done it must turn round and eliminate itself. (*Witt* 55-56)

Thus, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein establishes a paradoxical need for the very nonsense he is trying to do away with. The treatise does indeed take a dramatic turn towards the end,

culminating in the famous final proposition, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (7). As we shall see, it could be argued that this about-face was precipitated by events in Wittgenstein’s own life—but the *Tractatus* was not begun with such an end in mind.

What was originally at stake for Wittgenstein was to discover the meaning of logical necessity, that is, why logical truths are necessary and could not be otherwise. His theory of knowledge stemmed from a belief that “language disguises thought, and that the real forms of our thoughts would become apparent only when the language in which they are expressed had been analysed and broken down into its ultimate components” (Pears, *Witt* 58). Therefore, Wittgenstein’s inquiry focuses on how logical propositions get their senses, with the aim of finally achieving “an exact account of what they mean” (60). His analysis of factual propositions was carried out according to two axioms. The first states that each factual proposition “communicates a *new* sense” (*TLP* 4.027) by using “old expressions” (*TLP* 4.03). The sense consists in the connection between the proposition and the situation it communicates, and the connection is established because the proposition is precisely a logical picture of the situation. “Precisely” means that one should be able to “draw a sharp line around everything that is necessarily the case if it is true” (Pears, *Witt* 61). The second axiom is that while objects have their representation in signs, logic itself has no representation; rather, it is through logic that we get a “picture of the situation” (*TLP* 4.0312-4.032). Logic, then, tells us something about the world, the way it hangs together.

Eventually every logical proposition can be analyzed into its smallest parts, elementary propositions, which Wittgenstein defines as being “logically independent of one another: the truth or falsity of one elementary proposition never implies the truth or falsity of any other elementary proposition” (Pears, *Witt* 59). With elementary propositions (of which Wittgenstein

gives not a single example)³ we encounter a few significant snags in the *Tractatus*' argumentation. First is the problem of logical independence: an elementary proposition cannot be analyzed further, and "no elementary proposition can contradict it" (*TLP* 4.211). However, the issue of logical independence breaks down in cases of such incompatible pairs as "This thing is blue" and "This thing is yellow." While neither statement can be further broken down, they are not independent of one another: if something is blue, it cannot be yellow (Pears, *Witt* 63).

Another issue has to do with the question of "precise sense"—that the set of necessary truths contained in a logical proposition can be clearly circumscribed. Wittgenstein asserts that the non-elementary propositions within a factual proposition contain complex words representing complex things. And yet, when one analyzes these words, new propositions emerge that are beyond the termination of the original's analysis. For example, if we focus on the complex town name in the proposition, "This town is Dartmouth," it is necessarily true that "there is a town at the mouth of the river Dart" (Pears, *Witt* 65). This second proposition, however, lies beyond the scope of the first proposition. The problem is that Wittgenstein had claimed that further propositions could follow only when the analysis of the original proposition was complete. Here we see that the very process of analysis can push out the limits of analysis, and this "aggrandizement," as David Pears calls it, challenges the idea that analysis has a clear, precise, circumscribed sense. The implication here is that the exact meaning, to which analysis of a logical proposition is supposed to lead, is not so exact or final, after all: "A country, whose frontier was always a little further out than at any moment it was deemed to be, would not really have a frontier, and so would not be a territorial unit at all" (66).

³ Pears notes this is because Wittgenstein thought that no one, himself included, had yet penetrated to the level of these "ultimate components of factual propositions" (*Witt* 59).

The final issue with the *Tractatus*' theory of meaning is that Wittgenstein was quite vague on just what elementary propositions were. Though he describes them as a "concatenation of names" (*TLP* 4.22) for objects, the nature of these objects remains unclear (in some examples he refers to them as material particles and sense-data). Elementary propositions are the center and inner limit of factual discourse ("All propositions are results of truth-operations on elementary propositions" [*TLP* 5.3]), yet we are left with a rather unspecific notion of what counts as an elementary proposition (Pears, *Witt* 67-68). Still, the very existence of logic seems to confirm their existence and tell us about their role. Logic shows us that the world is made up of atomic objects, and also of atomic facts—the facts are how the objects stand in relation to one another. The symbols of a factual proposition show this relationship by way of a picture; thus, logic suggests that there is an a priori order to the world (Monk 140).

Throughout the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein occupies himself with factual propositions and the ways in which they have a precise sense. Indeed, much of the book's composition took place while he was concerned with the logical research of Russell and German philosopher and mathematician Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob Frege. His work was still in progress, however, when World War I broke out. Wittgenstein, hoping the test of war would help him fulfill his desire to "turn into a different person" (qtd. in Monk 123), enlisted in the Austrian army in 1914. He felt that the brush with death, if survived, could improve him—an attitude Bertrand Russell attributed to the influence of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which James writes: "No matter what a man's frailties otherwise may be, if he be willing to risk death, and still more if he suffer it heroically, in the service he has chosen, the fact consecrates him forever" (qtd. in Monk 123-124). In the notebooks he kept during the war years, Wittgenstein indicates that he desired such a transformation: "Now I have the chance to be a decent human being, for

I'm standing eye to eye with death" (qtd. in Monk 124). And, indeed, the war proved pivotal for both him and his philosophy.

As the stakes around him grew higher and higher, one chance encounter helped bolster Wittgenstein's sense of courage by placing a firm divide between him and the world. During the first few months of service, he happened to find Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* in a bookstore in Galicia. He had been feeling particularly isolated among the crew on the ship where he was currently serving (as nighttime searchlight operator), and out of touch with the friends and colleagues in England who had helped him through difficulties in the past. The strength derived from Tolstoy's book transformed his spirit and "kept him alive" (Monk 127). Specifically, it confirmed, for a time, his sense that external events cannot touch one's inner being. He focused himself on the preservation of that inner being and sought to sever his dependence on the external world, to which the mortal, physical body belonged (Monk 127-128). As we shall see, Tolstoy's text may very well have influenced the *Tractatus*' mystical turn. This spiritual buttress and distancing from the outside world revitalized Wittgenstein sufficiently to return to his work on the *Tractatus*, and in a matter of weeks he came to a breakthrough that, oddly enough, concerned the structure of that very same external world in relation to the structure of language. His so-called picture theory of language holds that propositions tell us something about the world by the way they make a picture of the connections between objects: "there is—and must be—a logical structure in common between a proposition ('The grass is green') and a state of affairs (the grass being green), and it is this commonality of structure which enables language to represent reality" (Monk 129-130). This axiom added an important dimension to his analysis of logical necessity by connecting propositions with the world.

Wittgenstein's longstanding request to be assigned to the frontlines was finally granted in 1916. Up until then, he had experienced periods of both productivity and stagnation in his philosophical work, but it was his move to the front that brought about a dramatic shift in his work on the *Tractatus*. There, he undoubtedly realized Schopenhauer's⁴ claim that "it is the knowledge of death, and therewith the consideration of the suffering and misery of life, that give the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection and explanations of the world" (qtd. in Monk 149). The daily confrontation of the enormous casualties, as well as the endangerment to his own life, complicated his efforts to achieve a spiritual separation from the external world, and forced him to reconsider his thoughts about the world, God, and meaning. In his diary entry from June 11, 1916, he interrupts his notes on logic with the following meditation:

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?

I know that this world exists.

That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.

That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.

That this meaning alone does not lie in but outside it.

That life is the world.

That my will penetrates the world.

That my will is good or evil.

Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.

The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.

And connect with this the comparison of God to a father.

⁴ Schopenhauer was very formative on Wittgenstein's early philosophy, and would remain influential, on and off, for the remainder of Wittgenstein's life. (Cf. Monk 30-31)

To pray is to think about the meaning of life.

I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.

I can only make myself independent of the world—and so in a certain sense master it—by renouncing any influence on happenings. (*NB 72-73*)

These deeply personal, mystical statements mark an abrupt change in the tone of his notebook entries: the previous day he had been asking, “Is $(\exists x)$ etc. really an operation?” (*NB 72*). And yet, unlike the personal entries that Wittgenstein wrote in code, these remarks are uncoded, suggesting that they are meant as a continuation of the notes on logic (Monk 153). Indeed, one summary of these remarks from a July 5 entry went on to appear verbatim in the *Tractatus*: “The world is independent of my will” (*TLP 6.373; NB 73*). A number of subsequent diary entries elaborate on these themes: God (“To believe in God is to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. / To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning,” “God would simply be fate, or, what is the same thing: The world” [*NB 74*]); the will (“The world is *given* me; i.e. my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there” [*NB 74*]); and happiness (“There are two godheads: the world and my independent I. / I am either happy or unhappy, that is all. It can be said: good or evil do not exist,” “Only the man who lives not in time but in the present is happy” [*NB 74*]). The culmination of these reflections locating meaning outside the world leads to the conclusion that there are no values in the world of facts. “Hence,” Wittgenstein writes in 6.42 of the *Tractatus*, “there can be no ethical propositions” (Perloff 29-30).

The turn the *Tractatus* takes towards the end assails the modern illusion that science—including, presumably, the science of logic—has explained everything (6.372), stating that the “riddle of life” lay decidedly beyond the domain of research and reason:

6.52 We feel that even when *all possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.

6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.

(Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?)

Because the inexpressible makes itself manifest but cannot be said (6.522), philosophy should confine itself to saying “nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy,” and to demonstrate that any attempt at a metaphysical claim has “certain signs” that lack meaning (6.53). These remarks do a great deal to show the inexpressible—or, at least, how it functions—both in general and for Wittgenstein personally. Perhaps most significantly for our subject of autobiography, the sense and clarity of life seem to appear on their own (possibly together with the disappearance of “the problem of life”). Indeed, the entire *Tractatus*, in its “demarcation of the limit of factual discourse” (Pears, *Witt* 88), helps us contemplate the world from outside, as it were, *sub specie aeterni*⁵ (from the perspective of eternity). Such a perspective gives us the “feeling that world is a limited whole,” which Wittgenstein calls “the mystical feeling” (6.45).

⁵ A term borrowed from Spinoza (Monk 155).

The *Tractatus*' odd hybridity of crystalline logic and mysticism leads Marjorie Perloff to argue that it could be read as a war book (25). She also points out its elegiac tone (41), which is presumably informed by the bloodshed Wittgenstein witnessed on the front, as well as events in his personal life. Wittgenstein completed the *Tractatus* at his uncle Paul's house in 1919, after his uncle chanced to find him at a train station in an utterly distraught state and convinced him to return home with him to Hallein. Ray Monk speculates that the cause of his despair was likely the news of the accidental death of his dear (and "only") friend, David Pinset (166). Wittgenstein dedicates the book to Pinset, and perhaps the weight of this loss further tipped the scales for a final version of the *Tractatus* in which "the 'logical' core . . . was subordinated to a larger scheme that is both poetic and at least subliminally elegiac" (Perloff 41).

Perloff also comments on the unusually aesthetic suggestion in the preface that a reader might "read [the book] with understanding" and be "afforded pleasure" by it (41). Once we grasp how little is accomplished when the problems of philosophy have been solved, our pleasure derives from the view of the world *sub specie aeterni*. We can kick away the ladder, cut loose from philosophy and now enjoy a mystical (and indeed aesthetic) feeling. In a notebook entry from October 7, 1916, Wittgenstein connects the *sub specie aeterni* view with aesthetics:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics.

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside.

In such a way that they have the whole world as background. . . .

The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space. (NB 83)

Seeing things from outside of time and the world places one in the realm of meaning, albeit inexpressible in the language of logical propositions. With the whole world as background, things take on a clear, aesthetic form. One might be tempted to say here that autobiography affords such a perspective, making “the good life” possible. The problem is that, as Wittgenstein will come to understand, *language* is not outside of time, but rather very much in it.

Writing to a potential publisher in 1919, Wittgenstein elaborates on what he considered the significance of the *Tractatus*. Given the above discussion, it is probably unsurprising that this has more to do with what is not in the book than what is:

[T]he point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they may be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything else which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For 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. (qtd. in Monk 189)

Thus, by mapping out the limits of logical propositions, which are connected with and tell us about the world, we can imply something that gets its meaning from beyond the world. Though Wittgenstein's philosophy was to undergo a major shift in the coming years, the dynamics between inside and outside, problems and meaning, and the spoken and unspoken remained

tropes. Later, Wittgenstein was to say that “really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem*” (CV 28). Perhaps philosophy’s only hope to touch on ethics, aesthetics, and meaning is through a poetic acknowledgement of the unsayable.

What is more, Wittgenstein must have also acknowledged to himself the degree to which his personal experiences informed his thinking, for the personal and philosophical remained inextricably bound in his later work, as we shall further discuss in the next section.

1.2 Confession

After a long hiatus from philosophy, during which time he worked as a schoolteacher, a gardener, and an architect, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in 1929. Soon after, he began work on what we now know as the *Philosophical Investigations*, conceived partly as a tremendous correction to what Wittgenstein later came to see as errors in the *Tractatus*.⁶ One of the axioms of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was the claim that every word represents an object (whose own nature was left undefined), and this representation is the word’s meaning. *Philosophical Investigations* begins at the root of this issue, which Wittgenstein now presents as the source of philosophical confusion. Wittgenstein opens the book with a section from St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which Augustine describes how he acquired language as a child. First, he learned that certain words signified objects when adults would say a word and point to a corresponding object. Gradually, he writes, “I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes” (PI §1). This idea that a word has

⁶ He even planned to have the two works published together in a single volume so readers could better see his line of thinking.

a correlated meaning in the object for which it stands is “a picture of the essence of human language” that, according to Wittgenstein, leads to a great number of misunderstandings. While it does describe one system of communication, it does not cover everything that “we call language” (*PI* §1-3). Wittgenstein proposes an alternative picture in which “language” actually comprises a broad array of “language games”—that is, occasions when we use language, each with its own rules and ways of meaning. While these language games share various affinities from one to the next, they have no single, universal thing in common (*PI* §65); therefore, it is impossible to reduce all language to a strict definition or expect it to behave in predictable ways across the spectra of occasions.

Wittgenstein works with an assiduous avoidance of speculation about inner processes. In assessing concepts like thought, memory, understanding and intention, we must actually look at the behavior that accompanies situations when we use these terms. This is not out of a behaviorist denial of the existence of inner processes, but rather because they are beyond the scope of grammar: “‘Aren’t you nevertheless a behaviourist in disguise? Aren’t you nevertheless basically saying that everything except human behaviour is a fiction?’” his interlocutor asks, to which Wittgenstein replies, “If I speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction” (*PI* §307). This, in fact, marks a line of continuity from the *Tractatus*’ final proposition about remaining silent concerning that of which we cannot speak. Deep problems—such as the impossible quest to define “thinking”—arise from philosophy-speak’s tacit attribution of behavior to mental processes and states in spite of the fact that we do not know much about them and, for the time being, “leave their nature undecided. . . . (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that seemed to us quite innocent.)—And now the analogy which was to make us understand our thoughts falls to pieces” (*PI* §308). Instead of relying on this

misleading analogy, he wants to set aside the “yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium” and deal with what lies within our powers of perception: namely, how we use language games in ordinary, intuitive ways.

Instead of directing the investigation towards phenomena themselves, Wittgenstein talks about the “‘*possibility*’ of phenomena. What that means is that we call to mind the kinds of statement that we make about phenomena. . . . Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one,” which involves clearing away “misunderstandings” about words (*PI* §90).⁷ And yet, such philosophical problems are not merely silly errors; on the contrary, Wittgenstein concedes that problems arising from misunderstanding language are “deep disquietudes” (*PI* §111). From them the “description” of language use “gets its light.” The problems are solved precisely through the avoidance of explanation or analysis—by the survey of what is in front of us:

All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light—that is to say, its purpose—from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; but they are solved through an insight into the workings of our language, and that in such a way that these workings are recognized—*despite* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling

⁷ Here he again calls on St. Augustine, this time taking inspiration from Augustine’s method. He cites *Confessions* Book XI.14, “quid est ergo tempus? si nemo ex me quaerat scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio” (“What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled”), noting, “Something that one knows when nobody asks one, but no longer knows when one is asked to explain it, is something that has to be *called to mind*” (*PI* §89). Augustine’s approach then “calls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration of events, about their being past, present or future. (These are, of course, not philosophical statements about time, the past, the present and the future.)” (*PI* §90). The translation of Augustine cited here is from *Confessions*, Bk. XI, §14, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

what we have long been familiar with. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language. (§109)

Language, with its infinite array of family resemblances, sets the trap, making it easy for us to conflate meanings across the boundaries of different language games. What becomes clear here is that Wittgenstein is not proposing a new theory of language and meaning, but rather a method to avoid misunderstanding. This happens through an assembly of the familiar—that which is under our nose and therefore often goes unseen—into a surveyable synopsis or an overview. More specifically, Wittgenstein presents a “continuous series of transitional cases” (*PI* §161) where the “seas of language” “run high” (*PI* §194) and confusion is likely to occur. As Henry Staten comments, this survey of “family resemblances” replaces the traditional explanation through category and essence, letting us see the “spread of particulars varying from each other in an accidental way along a continuum until at last there has been ‘essential’ change without a boundary of essence ever having been crossed” (96). Wittgenstein likens language to a thread, through which no single fiber runs continuously; rather, we spin it by twisting fiber on fiber, and from this overlapping the thread derives its strength (*PI* §67).

For all the ostensible elegance of the method, the actual task of assembling such an overview is immense and unwieldy. It does not involve breaking down our expressions into their smallest analyzable parts (à la *Tractatus*), nor is it with the aim (or even the possibility) of bringing expressions to a “state of complete exactness” (*PI* §91). In his preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein addresses the issue of the work’s resulting form:

Originally it was my intention to bring all this together in a book whose form I thought of differently at different times. But it seemed to me essential that in the

book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence.

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. (3e)

The nature of the investigations, he continues, was not conducive to a linear structure. Rather, “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.” Over the course of the two decades (or longer) that he worked on the *Investigations*,⁸ these remarks underwent many revisions. Sometimes the same points needed to be “approached afresh from different directions,” and others needed to be omitted altogether. Finally, having “arranged” and “cut down” what was left, Wittgenstein can only “give the viewer an idea of the landscape. So this book is really just an album” (*PI* 3-4e). In spite of the preface’s tone of apology and even defeat, Marjorie Perloff notes there is also something quite radical here in his rejection of “any totalizing scheme” (66), particularly after the methodical, crystalline structure of the *Tractatus*. As Wittgenstein notes, the nature of the investigations, and of language games themselves, seem to require such a “criss-cross” method.

The idea of an overview had long preoccupied Wittgenstein, who writes as early as 1914 in his notebooks about his own lack of “clarity of vision” (*NB* 24). With his return to Cambridge in 1929, he considered philosophy’s task as one of clearing up “particular errors or ‘troubles in

⁸ Earliest manuscripts date from 1929 (*PI* xviii), and Wittgenstein continued to compile his remarks through 1949 (xxii), although the extant preface is dated January 1945.

our thought' . . . due to false analogies suggested by our actual use of expression" (qtd. in Sluga 95-96). These errors arise precisely because "we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words," and our grammar itself lacks "surveyability" (*PI* §122). Hans Sluga explains that "grammar" here should not be understood as a set of grammatical rules, but rather "more generally [as] the organized pattern of our linguistic practices. It is this actual structure or order of our language game that proves to be unsurveyable" (98). And because language is "central to the entire human form of life," the issue extends to include "our society, our culture, our history—each has its grammar and of each such grammar we must say that it lacks surveyability" (98). Philosophy's task is to help us by setting out a "surveyable representation," through describing our language games. We may thereby gain an "understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'" (*PI* §122). This does not mean that one should expect to see all of grammar use at a glance, but rather, the fact that one is "entangled in one's own rules" should become "intuitively evident" (Sluga 100). However, the paradoxical task of creating a surveyable representation of something inherently unsurveyable has plenty of fault lines, since "there is always the danger that the model does not capture the significant characteristics of the unsurveyable totality" (Sluga 101). In fact, Hans Sluga argues that Wittgenstein himself may have eventually come to hold the idea of a surveyable representation as suspect, albeit fundamental to the world-view of modern Western civilization. And so, we could find in the *Investigations* a "critique of the idea that there could be a comprehensive surveyable representation of our grammar or of anything else" (102).

If his attitude towards surveyable representation was ambivalent, his feelings about modern civilization were not. Returning once again to the preface of the *Investigations*—dated June, 1945—we find Wittgenstein alluding to "the darkness of this time," and the unlikelihood

that his work should “bring light into one brain or another” (4e). Wittgenstein had already taken issue with European and American civilization before World War II (Sluga 132). In *Culture and Value* we find passages like the following, dating from 1930:

Our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress. Typically it constructs. Its activity is to construct a more and more complicated structure. And even clarity is only a means to this end & not an end in itself.

For me on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself[.]

I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible buildings transparently before me.

So I am aiming at something different than are the scientists & my thoughts move differently than do theirs. (9)

After the decline of culture (a concept he picked up from Oswald Spengler), what remains is civilization, whose sole purpose is industry. Wittgenstein found such an environment “alien and uncongenial” (*CV* 8), and positioned himself and his work outside of it, writing only “for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe” (9). His need for “clarity and transparency” only increased with time, and the *Philosophical Investigations* was certainly part of his effort to set out “the foundations of possible buildings.” Hence the work’s epigraph from Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy: “The trouble about progress is that it always looks much greater than it really is.”

Wittgenstein’s later philosophy took “literally the idea of the *Tractatus* that the philosopher has nothing to *say*, but only something to *show*” (Monk 311). If essence is there on the surface, rather than something hidden from us, “understanding . . . consists in seeing

connections” (qtd. in Monk 317). Instead of developing philosophical theory to the beat of civilization’s forward march, Wittgenstein proposed to his students the technique of repetition as a “means of surveying the connections” (qtd. in Sluga 96):

Each sentence that I write is trying to say the whole thing, that is, the same thing over and over again & it is as though they were views of one object seen from different angles.

I might say: if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already.

Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me.

One movement orders one thought to the others in a series, the other keeps aiming at the same place.

One movement constructs & takes (in hand) one stone after another, the other keeps reaching for the same one. (*CV* 9-10)

There is something in this description that seems quite personal⁹—and how could it be otherwise when the object of examination is where one “must actually be at already”? The ironic rejection of the *Tractatus*’ ladder is also revealing of the shift in his philosophical approach: why climb a ladder only to throw it away, when you have yet to reckon with the stone at your feet?

Wittgenstein’s proposed method does indeed require a firm grounding in the ordinary, a clearing away of “unobvious nonsense” in order to see “obvious nonsense” (*PI* §464), and his

⁹ As mentioned above, Wittgenstein drew his philosophical remarks from his diaries, in which personal and philosophical notes often occur on the same page (Klebes 38).

approach is deeply informed by his personal ethical sensibility. Wittgenstein's later philosophy involves a large investment of introspection and self-examination: "Work on philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)" (*CV* 24).¹⁰ Ray Monk notes that for Wittgenstein

the problem of writing good philosophy and of thinking well about philosophical problems was one of the will rather than the intellect—the will to resist the temptation to misunderstand, the will to resist superficiality. What gets in the way of genuine understanding is often not one's lack of intelligence, but the presence of one's pride. Thus: "The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that is terribly hard work." (375)

Restraint and courage were necessary for facing things as clearly and truthfully as possible. In order to set the foundation for this, "[a] confession has to be part of one's new life" (*CV* 16). Although he did not discuss moral issues in his philosophy, it is as though his entire philosophy—and indeed his life—were a struggle to be decent, which above all meant, according to Monk, "overcoming the temptations by his pride and vanity to be dishonest" (286-287). Indeed, one could say Wittgenstein began his philosophical work at the age of eight or nine, when, pausing in a doorway, he considered the question, "Why should one tell the truth if it's to one's advantage to tell a lie?" (qtd. in Monk 15).

In 1936, as Wittgenstein was finalizing the formulation of the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations* (what is now roughly remarks 1-188), he was also preparing a

¹⁰ Here we see the influence of Otto Weininger, whose book *Sex and Character* had a large impact on Wittgenstein in his youth. Although he eventually grew to reject Weininger's ideas about women, etc., injunctives such as "Logic and ethics are fundamentally the same, they are no more than duty to oneself" (qtd. in Monk 11) remained central to Wittgenstein's thought.

confession that he planned to read to close friends and family members. In it, he enumerated moments of weakness and dishonesty. While records of the actual contents of the confession are scarce, a few friends recall some of the “sins,” mostly sins of omission: acting disingenuously upon hearing news of a friend’s death (because he had in fact already learned of the death); an initial feeling of fear when, during his experience in World War I, he was ordered to carry bombs across a stream along an unsteady plank (which he ultimately did); having had sexual relations with a woman when he was a young man, although people thought he was a virgin; and letting people believe that he was one-quarter Jewish, when in fact he was three-quarters. The more painful admission came at the end, where he recounted an incident that occurred when he worked as a teacher in an Austrian village. He hit a little girl, and later denied having done so. In fact, he often resorted to physical violence with his pupils during his days at the school, and in 1936 he returned to the village to confess and beg forgiveness of some of his former students (Monk 378-379). Ray Monk suggests that Wittgenstein’s confessions were not meant as a type of self-flagellation, but rather as an effort to dismantle his pride, which “stood in the way of honest and decent thought” (380). This could only be achieved by putting his beliefs into practice with uncompromising consistency.

That philosophy begins with a confession, and is, at least in part, “work on oneself,” corresponds with the almost confessional tones of the prefaces to both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, as well as sections of each work that seem strikingly direct, even personal. Take, for example, the frankness of later propositions in the *Tractatus*, such as when he tells his readers to throw away the ladder (of his own propositions) (6.54). The *Investigations* are full of remarks that, obliquely or directly, implicate their author, as discussed in more detail below. Indeed, the work’s attempt at creating an overview recalls Englemann’s advice to Wittgenstein vis-à-vis

writing an autobiographical sketch for therapeutic purposes: “By means of such a general overview [*Übersicht*] the confused picture was much simplified” (qtd. in Monk 197). Does trying to obtain an overview of one’s life carry the same problems as doing so for grammar? How does grammar inform what constitutes a “decent” account (or investigation) of a life, or part of a life?

1.3 Wandering

As we have seen, Wittgenstein felt that much confusion was generated by the fact that our grammar, and therefore the very form of human life, lacks surveyability. Perhaps Engelmann’s autobiographical sketch of the series of events in his life, written in the course of an hour (Monk 197), is one way to create a very condensed representation, but certainly not anything approaching an exhaustive synopsis. In fact, one would have to question whether an autobiography that proceeds in a serial manner would satisfy Wittgenstein, who, as we have already seen, associated “movement that orders one thought to the others in a series” with the science and technology of progress-oriented civilization, for whom clarity is merely a means to an end. By contrast, the movement of his later philosophy “keeps aiming at the same place” (*CV* 10), while at the same time traveling in “every direction over a wide field of thought” (*PI* 3e).

Of course, in his preface, Wittgenstein expresses dissatisfaction with the *Investigations* such as they are. The set of remarks was written and revised multiple times over two decades, and finally published posthumously. It is difficult to speculate just how much more “surveyable” a text he would have produced had he lived long enough to continue revisions, but we do know that as late as 1949 he considered mimeographing the extant version and distributing it to his friends (Hacker and Schulte, xxii). There is, however, plenty of evidence within the work itself

to confirm his claim that a linear text was inimical to the nature of the investigations. There is no end to the description of language games, and only a provisional beginning, with such “primitive” examples as a man in a shop who understands the phrase “five red apples” (*PI* §1), or a complete language that consists of only four words, “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” and “beam” (*PI* §2). The crux of the investigations remains the philosophical problem whose form is “I don’t know my way about” (*PI* §123). In the search for clarity, philosopher and reader must do a good deal of wandering.

David Pears characterizes Wittgenstein’s method in the *Philosophical Investigations* as one of oscillation between objectivism and anthropocentrism (*Witt* 170). The anthropological point of view, one of the major distinguishing features of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, came to Wittgenstein through discussions with his friend and colleague at Cambridge, the Italian economist Piero Sraffa. In one such discussion, when Wittgenstein argued (per the *Tractatus*’ picture theory of language) that a proposition must have the same logical form as that which it describes, Sraffa “made the Neapolitan gesture of brushing his chin with his fingertips, asking: ‘What is the logical form of *that*?’” (Monk 269). According to Wittgenstein, this was the moment that he understood the picture theory was incorrect, and that language must not be looked at in isolation, but rather in “the ‘stream of life’ which gives linguistic practices their meaning: a ‘language-game’ cannot be described without mentioning their activities and the way of life of the ‘tribe’ that plays it” (Monk 270). Still, Pears emphasizes that Wittgenstein’s anthropocentrism did not replace or negate objectivism (which posits an external, objective basis for all discourse); rather, it has something of a symbiotic relationship with objectivism.

He believed that the correct method was to fix the limit of language by oscillation between two points. In this case the outer point was the kind of objectivism which

tries to offer an independent support for our linguistic practices, and the inner point is a description of the linguistic practices themselves, a description which would be completely flat if it were not given against the background of that kind of objectivism. His idea is that the outer point is an illusion, and that the inner point is the whole truth, which must, however, be apprehended through its contrast with the outer point. (*Witt* 170)

If objectivism is a philosophical illusion, it nevertheless sheds light on that which cannot otherwise be seen, and therefore has an essential role in the creation of an overview and the search for clarity. Wittgenstein elaborates on the relationship between these conceptual models and actual language use:

A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense unambiguously.¹¹ The actual use, compared with that traced out by the picture, seems like something muddied. Here again, what is going on is the same as in set theory: the form of expression seems to have been tailored for a god, who knows what we cannot know; he sees all of those infinite series, and he sees into the consciousness of human beings. For us, however, these forms of expression are like vestments, which we may put on, but cannot do much with, since we lack the effective power that would give them point and purpose.

¹¹ It is important to note the shift in how Wittgenstein uses the term “picture”: here, it no longer refers to the connection between a logical proposition and the structure of the world, but rather “a conceptual model of which we may be unaware, or if we are aware of it, one that we erroneously take as unproblematically given (often when this is the result of misleading grammatical appearance) and that shapes or determines our subsequent thought on any philosophical matter pertaining to the picture” (Hagberg 47).

In the actual use of these expressions we, as it were, make detours, go by side roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course cannot use it, because it is permanently closed. (*PI* §426)

The human mind seems unequipped to deal with the philosophical “super-expressions” it dreams up—the rigid pictures, the sense that “we could grasp the whole use of the word at a stroke” (*PI* §191)—but we still *use* them. Without the vision of the straight highway before us, we would be nowhere at all.

This brings us back to Pears’ claim that, without objectivism, the anthropological view would appear quite flat. The distance between the two creates depth, and meaning, which Wittgenstein sometimes describes in terms of a foreground and background:

The inexpressible (that which I find enigmatic and cannot express) perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I was able to express acquires meaning. (*CV* 23)

What do I believe in when I believe that man has a soul? What do I believe in when I believe that this substance contains two carbon rings? In both cases, there is a picture in the foreground, but the sense lies far in the background; that is, the application of the picture is not easy to survey. (*PI* §422)

Note that in the second example, the distance (and depth) is attributed to the difficulty in surveying the use of the picture or concept (in the sense St. Augustine means, discussed above). The dynamic suggested here is reminiscent of the end of the *Tractatus*, where the “unwritten” part of the book suddenly becomes more important than the written, but, in a sense, cannot exist without it. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein takes to an extreme the idea that we

cannot give external accounts of internal processes, yet without our inner, psychic life, linguistic practices (and any description of them) would be empty.

There is a debate among Wittgenstein's interpreters as to whether the fragmented forms of his later philosophy were actually necessitated by philosophical problems, marking a deliberate stylistic shift that rejected the ordered theory of the *Tractatus* (and openly dealing with that work's problems), or whether Wittgenstein genuinely viewed the fragmentation as a shortcoming (Klebes 39-40). The desire for a synoptic view, expressed not only in the *Philosophical Investigations*, but also in Wittgenstein's plans for his autobiography ("to spread out my life clearly"), does suggest a yearning for some kind of order. If we are to take Wittgenstein at his word in the preface, he had initially *hoped* for a more cohesive whole. The essence of language may indeed lie open to view and be surveyable through the process of ordering (*PI* §92),¹² but meaning seems to require depth, the space between the surface and the inexpressible or intangible.

The issue of a material's *suitability* for a clear overview certainly complicates the construction of an autobiography, in which both external and internal experiences would presumably be recounted in order to gain some kind of overall understanding. Martin Klebes notes how in Wittgenstein's writings about autobiography he insists on a faithful representation of his own nature: "In my autobiography I would have to try to represent and to *understand* my life completely truthfully. Thus, my unheroic *nature* shall not appear as a lamentable accident but rather as an essential feature (not a virtue)" (qtd. in Klebes 46). A decent autobiography should not impose a super-narrative where things take on false significance—just as in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which, in spite of Wittgenstein's desire that "thoughts should

¹² As opposed to being hidden below the surface and in need of unearthing (as in the *Tractatus*' analysis).

proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence” (*PI* 3e), turned out not to be the “whole” he had at first envisioned. Klebes observes: “The reason that the contemplated autobiography remains as fictional as a fully perspicuous version of the *Investigations* may also be that, ultimately, both projects are about the limits of understanding” (46). This truthfulness seems to leave no room for the heroism of the post-epic novel, in which, according to Georg Lukács, the “loss of external totality” is compensated by the “comprehensive psychological account of the hero” (Klebes 46). If an account of “psychic continuity” is impossible, then what remains is for a true representation to detail just how it does *not* satisfy the Lukácsian hero. In other words, autobiography, and philosophy, must leave things as they are. Klebes argues that

[i]f his unheroic nature is an essential aspect of Wittgenstein’s own character, and if the fragmented form of the remarks is likewise essential to the nature of the investigations this anti-hero undertakes, then we can—in a radically *formal* sense—indeed regard the *Investigations* as an autobiography. It is one, however, that does not satisfy Wittgenstein’s . . . yearning for that which was also Lukács’s ultimate consolation: the notion that “life,” in all its futility, could still be *understood*. (46)

If the elusive cohesive whole is itself a dream among other super-concepts, we could still say that the expressed desire for an order, a whole, shines a light on the remarks and gives the work a particular dimension and meaning. Indeed, what becomes clear from the chronicle of a journey through philosophical problems is that “the odyssey is ongoing” (46). It is as though this odyssey forms the background of the *Investigations*, replacing the “whole world” seen *sub specie aeterni*, along with its function as an aesthetic and ethical aspect to the work.

1.4 Writing

In the language game of autobiography, what does it mean to write decently, to represent things truthfully in a description that imposes no explanation? How does one write about one's life in order to understand it? If Wittgenstein regards philosophy as “marshalling recollections for a particular purpose” (*PI* §127),¹³ is the practice of autobiographical writing as full of linguistic traps as philosophizing? Instead of looking at conclusions, let us examine some of the problems identified in the *Philosophical Investigations* that are relevant to the task of writing about the past.

One of the major problems is the question of sense-data and inner sensations. Wittgenstein opposes the idea, which had prevailed since Descartes, that a person is capable of describing sense-data—or any inner experience, for that matter—without reference to the physical world (Pears, *PPPW* 38). His reasoning was that any linguistic record of the contents of the mind, if isolated from the physical world, would prove empty. We cannot treat sensations as physical objects with their own criteria of identity. David Pears summarizes the so-called private language argument as follows: “the language in which we report sensations owes its meaning to their connections with the physical world and cannot survive separation from it” (*PPPW* 41). Or, as we read in remark §580 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, when we are dealing with language, “[a]n ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria.”

¹³ An earlier version of the *Investigations* contains a clarifying remark about his choice of the word *Erinnerungen*, which can mean both “reminder” and “something one has learnt and knows well”: “Learning philosophy is really recollecting. We remember that we really used words in this way” (*PI* 252, note 127).

Wittgenstein cautions us not to make the same mistake he did in the *Tractatus*, which is to regard memory as a static, inner image that we compare with a proposition to decide whether it is true or not (Klebes 32). Memory happens in time; it is often a linguistic event:

“I no longer remember the words I used, but I remember my intention precisely; I wanted my words to calm him down.” What does my memory show me; what does it bring before my mind? Suppose it did nothing but suggest those words to me!—and perhaps others which fill out the picture still more exactly.—(“I don’t remember my words any more, but I certainly remember their spirit.”) (*PI* §648)

Remembering is itself a language game, “not mere threadbare representations of the real experiences” (*PI* §649). In many cases, the activity of remembering happens through language; a memory consists of the words we use when we remember. Indeed, Wittgenstein suggests that there may be *nothing but* the words we use to remember—nothing to remember, and nothing to forget. In a sense, one cannot write about the past; one can only write one’s recollections.

In the search for clarity, this shifts a tremendous deal of importance onto the way we say things, for the language game reveals more about ourselves than about any past event or experience:

Why do I want to tell him about an intention too, over and above telling him what I did?—Not because the intention too was something going on at that time. But because I want to tell him something about myself, which goes beyond what happened at that time.

I reveal to him something of myself when I tell him what I was going to do.—Not, however, on grounds of self-observation, but by way of a reaction (it might also be called an intuition). (*PI* §659)

We cannot observe ourselves; we perform these language games instinctually: “The words with which I express my memory are my memory reaction” (*PI* §343). But even more significantly, this issue touches on the question of the meaning of autobiography. The things that we may be tempted to call the images or objects of our memory do not exist independently of our remembering them, and so they vanish (for us), if we forget them (*PI* §55-57). Ideas such as “indestructability” and “timelessness” are metaphysical concepts; “red exists” is a statement about the use of the word “red,” that “the word ‘red’ has a meaning” (whereas philosophers might argue that such a statement cannot make sense, since “red exists ‘in and of itself’”) (*PI* §58). Here we encounter the idea, discussed above, that these philosophical confusions nevertheless add depth to our investigations. How many autobiographies are written under the sign of a yearning for timelessness and indestructability, with an awareness of that desire’s futility?

If understanding consists in seeing connections, the writer must take care how she presents the events in her life. In this regard, Wittgenstein’s view owes a great deal to Oswald Spengler, whose “physiognomic concept” of history opposed the pseudo-scientific practice of relating events in a causal scheme. Spengler “argued for a conception of history that saw the historian’s job, not as the gathering of facts and providing explanations, but as perceiving the significance of events by seeing the morphological (or, as Spengler preferred to say, physiognomic) relations between them” (Monk 311). Spengler had been influenced by Goethe, who, disgusted with what he perceived as the dead, mechanical study of Newtonian science, sought something that “recognized living forms *as such*, to see in context their visible and tangible parts, to perceive them as *manifestations* of something within” (Erich Heller, qtd. in Monk 312). The idea of a living discipline for living forms very much appealed to Wittgenstein,

who carried on the tradition: “What I give is the morphology of the use of an expression” (qtd. in Monk 312). Henry Staten elaborates on this approach:

The “overall role” of a word is thus not to be thought of as its place as defined within an abstract, synchronic system but as the qualitative or “physiognomic” character of the sensuous-appearing word as it emerges from the panoply of its syntactic settings. The value or meaning of each appearance of a sign arises in part from this “physiognomy” of the sign as gathered from its past appearance, and for the rest, from the circumstances (*Umstände*) of a given appearance—that is, from what happens “before and after” . . . This means that in a particular case the meaning of a sign is always dispersed across the sequence of elements that constitute the sign situation. (80)

The language of autobiography would then somehow need to embrace this “living discipline” in its approach. Spengler’s idea of the physiognomic or morphological meaning of events frees—or exhorts—the autobiographer to seek alternatives to the traditional chronological, historical presentation of life events.

And yet, the achievement of a lively (in the sense of being close to life) autobiographical form remains nearly impossible, if we apply Wittgenstein’s comments on diary writing to the general practice of writing about oneself: “If it is to be in order, I have to be able to step outside of my diary as though *casually* stepping into the open—into life—and not have to either climb up into the light as though from a hole in the ground, or be jumping down to earth as though from a higher plane” (qtd. in Klebes 42). If our aim is for a merging between self-writing and life, the writing would be at the level of life, not under, not over. But memory and writing happen at the present, so there is no way to step out of that and obtain an overview (or underview) without

a degree of removal from the very things one wants to write about. One cannot make connections or show morphological meanings without distance—and this, perhaps, is one of the great dissatisfactions of autobiographical writing. If there is any alternative, it may rest in the abandonment of being “in order.”

Another potential pitfall in autobiographical writing is self-representation. In an early draft of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes, “Solipsism could be refuted by the fact that the word ‘I’ does not have a central place in grammar, but is a word like any other” (qtd. in Perloff 72). Although this statement (and other analogous ones) would seem to refute “the entire romantic and postromantic faith in inwardness, the unique, individual consciousness, whose desire for expression is thwarted by an impersonal, uncomprehending society,” writes Marjorie Perloff, it does not mean that Wittgenstein finds the “ordinariness of the ‘I’” unimportant—rather, it points to “the contexts and constructs that create ‘ordinary’ selves” (Perloff 73). Even our innermost, secret feelings, then, are articulated in the language games that have been passed down to us by our society and culture. A “decent” representation of the self would have to somehow take this into account. Perloff draws our attention to the subtle ways in which Wittgenstein presents himself in his work, citing the following passage:¹⁴

324. If I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause, I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me.

325. We also say of a person that he is transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards our considerations that one human being can be a complete enigma to

¹⁴ In the edition Perloff cites, this passage is from Part II of the *Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. In the edition of the *Investigations* cited here, the set of remarks is titled *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*, with revised translations of the Anscombe version. For more information on the textual history of *Philosophical Investigations*, see *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edition, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (London: Blackwell, 2009), pp. viii-xvii.

another. One learns this when one comes into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even though one has mastered the country's language. One does not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We can't find our feet with them.

326. "I can't know what is going on in him" is, above all, a *picture*. It is the convincing expression of a conviction. It does not give the reasons for the conviction. *They* are not obvious.

327. If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it. (*PPF*)

Perloff first draws our attention to the irony that, for all Wittgenstein's insistence on the way we use "ordinary" language, the English translation of his German contains some odd, "stilted" phrases not in the original. For example, "*Eim fremdes Land*," (in §325) refers to a "foreign" country, but has been translated as "strange"; and from the same section, "*Wir können uns nicht in sie finden*" ("We can't find ourselves in them"), has been transformed into a different idiom, "We can't find our feet with them" (Perloff 75). When we consider the original versions of these phrases, in tandem with others like "one human being can be a complete enigma to another," and "One does not *understand* the people," this passage seems strikingly personal, resonating with Wittgenstein's abiding feelings of isolation in Cambridge, the experience of a foreigner in exile, and possibly even his own unique background of wealth and Viennese cultural superiority ("One does not *understand* the people," where "*Man*" is opposed to "*die Menschen*") (76).

And so, although "I" is a word like any other, it "begins to lose its invisibility when we begin really to look at it" (78). Wittgenstein does not use "I" as a "vehicle for confession," because

language can never relate “what is hidden.” In keeping with such “hiding,” “I” is deemed unnecessary because clearly the “pain” I am talking about (perhaps accompanying my statement with frowning or weeping) is *mine*. But the paradox is that, looked at from the reader’s angle, every proposition, every formulation in the *Investigations* is the embodiment of this author’s “I.” (Perloff 78)

Perloff points to certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s self that may have informed his locutions: authority, leisure time, solitude, money. But while Perloff finds “the confessional element” to be “so insistently missing” (78), there are in fact sections of the *Investigations* that *do* employ an “I” in evocative scenarios of waiting, longing, hope, expectations, and memory. Take, for example, one of the last propositions:

When I make myself a sketch of N.’s face from memory, I can surely be said to mean him by my drawing. But which of the processes taking place while I draw (or before or afterwards) could I say is meaning him?

For one would, of course, like to say: when he meant him, he aimed at him. But how does someone do that, when he calls the other person’s face to mind?

I mean, how does he call him to mind?

How does he call him? (§691)

Wittgenstein uses such scenes, with an “I” never announced as fictive or non-fictive, as the basis for investigation precisely because they are both ordinary and potentially full of meaning. But also, maybe inadvertently, he sketches them in just a few short strokes, from which the reader can imagine a number of storylines. Some even seem as though they were informed by Wittgenstein’s love of hard-boiled mystery novels: “I stop short, look at the object or man

questioningly or suspiciously, and say ‘I find it all strange’” (*PI* §591). Indeed, there is something strange about these sections, with their simple, striking silhouettes, which run throughout the *Investigations*. Perhaps they also reveal something about “the one attribute of ‘I’ that cannot be talked about—namely, the author’s sexual (which is to say homosexual) life” (Perloff 76).

Finally, there is the problem of language’s adequacy in communicating meaningfully. Remark §327 of *Philosophy of Psychology*, cited above, “If a lion could talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it,” is somehow emblematic of the entire work. Marjorie Perloff notes three remarkable aspects of the proposition. First is its childlike simplicity (of course we would not understand “lion-speak”), which epitomizes the kind of non-obvious common sense that we find throughout the *Investigations*. Second, the very plainness of the proposition’s grammar—its language game, if you like—is characteristically Wittgenstein, who differed from his *fin-de-siècle* Viennese milieu in that his early training was in mechanics, and whose emphasis was always on practice. Lastly, there is the sadness of the sentence, particularly coming as it does in a passage that discusses the difficulty in understanding other people. However sufficient our language is in letting us understand what another is saying, it very often cannot help us understand one another. Even if “I” is a just an ordinary word, there is a kind of “solipsism central to human life,” and “language remains the greatest mystery, the contact with others that is not really a contact at all” (Perloff 77-78).

In this chapter we have examined the development of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, from his attempt in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to demarcate the limits of logical expression, through its mystical turn towards the unspeakable, and finally ending in the endless odyssey of

the *Philosophical Investigations*' survey of the infinitely varied grammar of human language.

Along the way, we have traced the autobiographical events that informed the development of his ideas, as well as Wittgenstein's thoughts about autobiography itself—including the precept that philosophy is nothing if not work on oneself.

In subsequent chapters, we will turn to four books in which Wittgenstein's ideas about language, particularly in relation to autobiography, seem to play out. The selection can be divided into distinct groups: two are bone fide non-fiction works that represent later 20th-century experiments in the autobiographical form, while the other two are postwar novels that dramatize the act of autobiographical writing in what could also be considered acts of self-writing, or "autography," as we discuss in the next chapter. While at first it may seem suspect to analyze novels in a discussion of issues of autobiography, let us recall that Wittgenstein himself was a proponent of imagining situations that may help clarify things by providing an advantageous outsider's view (particularly limit situations that bring problems to the fore). Bela Szabados' observations about Wittgenstein's own approach in philosophy of imagining examples and counterexamples proves germane to our undertaking here:

Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand "the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones." And this is because we want to understand how they are used, what the criteria for their ascriptions are, what they presuppose. Unless we highlight them, contrast them, put them in relief, the uses of our concepts blend into the everyday. So we need fictitious examples to make them stand out, so that we can inspect them side by side, as it were, with the everyday ones. The construction of fictitious examples is a device for taking a look at our concepts and ourselves, to get an "external view" insofar as this is possible. This

“external view” is not that of an *outsider looking down*, but one of us imagining himself to be an outsider, looking around, left and right, forward and backward too. It is not the old philosophical stance [of a disengaged spectator]—that’s impossible for us. (78)

Thus, the fact that these novels are works of fiction does not preemptively disqualify them from our own inquiry here. Rather, in their imaginative portrayal of autobiographical writing—in both cases strongly informed by actual autobiographical events—the novels yield condensed, heightened texts that articulate some of the problems Wittgenstein pinpointed. We shall also see how, as with Wittgenstein, the linguistic sensibilities of both of authors in question, Samuel Beckett and Meša Selimović, are influenced by defining experiences in war.

In his book *Wittgenstein’s Novels* Martin Klebes claims that Wittgenstein’s philosophical inquiries and novelistic form is one of family resemblance—and to this we could clearly add autobiographical form. The resemblance is “predicated upon the structure . . . as a collection of recollections,” in which the selection of memories and the attempt to arrange them into form comprise integral aspects of the work (48). The purpose of such a practice is not determinate, and indeed may never reach completion. Moreover, it is independent of whether the work finally does attain its intended form or “show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (*PI* §309). In their struggles and moments of lucidity, the four texts we examine bear witness to the problems articulated in Wittgenstein’s philosophical work and carry out their own investigations, in an attempt to find their way about.

We begin in the next chapter with Samuel Beckett’s novel *Molloy*, where we encounter the dramatic breakdown of dual attempts at creating an ordered autobiographical narrative,

concomitant with an aesthetically and ethically motivated distancing from rarefied literary language.

Chapter 2. Animal Thinking: *Molloy* and Autography

I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

The first book in Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels, *Molloy* dramatizes—twice—the act of autobiographical writing. In it, we see the expression of many of the same problems of language that preoccupied and plagued Wittgenstein. These problems appear both in the narrative itself, as well as the formalization of the narration; the latter is frequently accompanied by the narrators' explicit commentary on their awareness of the problem. In the formidable body of Beckett criticism, there is a tendency to push the marker back and forth in search of pivotal “turning-point” texts in Beckett's oeuvre. Studies linking him with Wittgenstein have understandably tended to focus on *Watt*, with several passages of the novel containing alleged allusions to the *Tractatus* and a protagonist that witnesses the failure of the Cartesian mind-body dualism, or on *The Unnamable* and later writings, where the speaking subject is highly problematized. But where autobiographical writing is concerned, Beckett's novel *Molloy* presents a particularly interesting case. Over the course of its two-part structure, it brings to the fore issues of estrangement from language and a questioning of its relationship to the world, as the form of a quest novel devolves into a written search for meaning through language. At times, the narrators' ruminations on language and the autobiographical process bear striking resemblance to points in the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy, from his late *Tractatus* mystical placement of meaning outside the world, to the question of cohesion in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Of particular note is the novel's resonance with a certain rebellious

element in Wittgenstein's writings, which question established and fiercely defended orders and implicitly call for closer listening and inclusion.

As bookends to this chapter, we will examine Beckett's own autobiographical relationship to *Molloy*. We begin by looking at how Beckett's wartime experience influenced his linguistic displacement and the period of personal crisis that led up to the novel's composition. With our foundation laid through close readings, we look at how *Molloy*'s specific modes of undoing can be read as an example of what H. Porter Abbott calls Beckett's autographical writing—and the implicit ethical and aesthetic need for such an undertaking.

2.1 Wartime Experience and Linguistic Displacement

In her book *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Marjorie Perloff draws a parallel between the effects of wartime experience on both Wittgenstein's and Beckett's views of language. As we have seen in Chapter One, the horrors Wittgenstein witnessed on the front during the First World War seem to have brought about a radical shift in his philosophical thinking: an acknowledgement of what lies outside of logical discourse, including ethics, aesthetics, and meaning itself, about which philosophy must remain silent. For Beckett, the experience of war (this time World War II) was also a tremendous personal ordeal that altered, among many things, his relationship to language. To better grasp the nature and significance of this change, we should begin by looking at his attitude to language before the war. In an oft-cited letter to a German friend Axel Kaun, dated 1937, Beckett writes:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write in official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil

that must be torn apart in order to get at things (or the Nothingness) behind it.

Grammar and style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. (*D* 171-172)

Perloff interprets the “veil” as a reference to the literary “cliché mongering” that surrounded Beckett at the time, the destruction of which should be brought about not through a (Joycean) worship of “the Word in all its figural and aural properties,” but rather through something like a (Steinian) efficient misuse, in which “the ‘unword’ (the unpoetic, ungainly, ordinary, everyday word, phrase, and sentence, as well as the unanticipated pause, the odd silence) is allowed to intrude on the text, to disrupt the sound surface” (121). Although by 1937 Beckett had not yet found his own “literature of the unword,” his experience during the war would deal a decisive blow to the “materiality of the word surface” (*D* 171-172).

Beckett joined the French Resistance in October 1940 as a member of a group called “Gloria,” headed by Jeannine Picabia. Gloria was a *réseau de renseignement*, or information-gathering cell, whose main purpose was to communicate details about German troop and supply movements to the British. During the height of his activity, Beckett’s role included trips to Brittany, Normandy, and the unoccupied zone at Châlons, passing and receiving information. At home in his Paris apartment, he would process the raw information, deciding on the important points and translating it into concise English, and then type and transfer it to microfilm, which couriers would conceal in the bottom of matchboxes (Bair 309-311). By the end of 1941, Beckett had reduced his role in Gloria, sensing danger ahead. Indeed, the group was infiltrated, and in the

end there were only a handful of survivors, including Beckett and his companion, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil. The pair narrowly escaped the Gestapo in August 1942, and over the course of two months slowly made their way south to the unoccupied zone, hiding in attics and trees, walking at night, and lying low by day (a tactic his protagonist Molloy would also use) (Bair 321). They remained in the village of Roussillon another two and a half years before returning to Paris.

Of course, Gloria and other resistance cells used coded language to transmit information, and in order to reduce the risk of damage should any member be arrested, “[v]erbal messages between Informant and Organizer through couriers were always given in veiled language which couriers could not understand” (Foot, qtd. in Perloff 124). They also used a system in which a “cut-out” or third (non-member) party would pass information from one agent to another, so that agents had minimal contact and knowledge of each other (Perloff 123). In the language games employed by this *réseau*, meaning and interpretation had life-or-death importance; and yet, in spite of these incredibly high stakes, what it comes down to is still the type of communication we use in everyday life: “the thread of what X tells Y, who in turn tells Z” (127). And, as in everyday life, “how Y and Z *understand* X’s words is a perennial problem” (127); the difference, of course, is that in this case the stakes are life and death. Moreover, it raises the possibility that *any* ordinary utterance may have a code underneath it—an uncertainty that rather disturbs the surface of words no matter what language game is at hand. Perloff’s compelling study focuses on *Watt*, the novel Beckett was working on during wartime occupation, resistance and exile,¹⁵ and which she reads as “a book about the problematic of language use in the ordinary transmission of

¹⁵ The manuscript comprises five notebooks dated from November 11, 1941 through February 18, 1945. Perloff notes these dates nearly exactly coincide with the five-year period beginning with Beckett’s joining the Resistance and ending with his return to Paris roughly eight months after the May 1945 Armistice (122-123).

information” (127). Its eponymous protagonist suffers from what Wittgenstein calls a lack of a clear overview of words (128).¹⁶ Watt’s inability to see the connections (in other words, to understand) leads Perloff to pinpoint the “darkness” in *Watt*, as well as the Trilogy, as “a crisis of *language*, a crisis that occurs when the very possibility of making connections between public and private discourse breaks down, as it did in the years leading up to and during the Second World War” (117).¹⁷ And while some critics read the language crisis in *Watt* as a refutation of the Cartesian mind-body dualism, Perloff also takes exception here. Although Watt constantly attempts to understand events in his midst through dogged rationalism, “to talk of Watt’s interpretation as a failure is to imply that there is a correct or at least a better way to behave, and it is not clear that the novel poses such an alternative” (Perloff 130). Jennie Skerl, for example, argues, “Watt’s problem is that his language is totally unrelated to reality and neither says nor shows anything true” (485), but in the world of the novel there is nothing to suggest a reality beyond “the fragility of the outer meaning”: “what the conversations and incidents in *Watt* reveal is that the exchange of information (which is continuous, intense, and seemingly fraught with

¹⁶ The question of how much Wittgenstein actually influenced Beckett has been subject to debate. Although some Beckett scholars are quick to point to the *Tractatus* as the philosophical basis for *Watt*, it is more likely that the dominant influence was Fritz Mauthner, whose *Beiträge zu Einer Kritik der Sprache* was one of the books James Joyce asked Beckett to read aloud to him in the days of their friendship (Bair 90). The elements in the novel that seem to bear a Wittgensteinian influence could equally be attributed to Mauthner (who was also an influence on Wittgenstein), and we know with certainty that Beckett had read Mauthner by the time of *Watt*’s composition (Skerl 485). In fact, if *Watt* does reference the *Tractatus*, it must be at least partly ironically, since the protagonist’s inability to form meaningful statements about logical facts refutes the picture theory of language—one part of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy that did not overlap with Mauthner’s (485). For more on this issue, see Jennie Skerl, “Fritz Mauthner’s ‘Critique of Language’ in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*,” *Contemporary Literature*, 15.4 (Autumn 1974): 474-487.

¹⁷ Perloff claims this assessment is more specific than the rather general current of Beckett commentary, which tends to point to cultural alienation, the human condition, and existential anguish as sources of a perceived “darkness” in Beckett’s works (116-117).

important consequences) does not ensure the transmission of any sort of knowledge” (Perloff 132-133). In Perloff’s reading, then, the linguistic crisis is all the more severe.

Watt may bear the most concentrated influence of Beckett’s wartime experience, and understandably so. Still, the veil of language had been torn away, so to speak, and in the years that followed, Beckett was to take the “unword” further and further. The linguistic disorientation and displacement experienced by Watt is also evident in *Molloy*, written two years later in a burst of creative energy between May and November 1947. Himself literally and figuratively displaced in the period after the war, Beckett first visited his mother in Dublin, then worked at an Irish Red Cross hospital in St. Lô. Unable to return to his Paris home as an Irish national, he went back to Ireland in 1946. It was there that he had what he described to Charles Juliet as a sudden revelation in a moment of extreme distress—a culmination of failures, uncertainty, and, no doubt, loss: “Until that moment I used to think I could trust knowledge, that I needed to be intellectually equipped. Then everything collapsed. . . . It was only when I understood my error that I wrote *Molloy* and what came after. I began to write things I felt” (Juliet 25). On the first page of the manuscript of *Molloy*, Beckett wrote: “As a last resort” (Juliet 26).¹⁸ The real-life background of these doubts about language and knowledge, which, as in Wittgenstein’s case, emerged from war, destruction, and personal duress, ties into what H. Porter Abbott calls

¹⁸ Any commentary on *Molloy* would be remiss not to mention the fact that Beckett wrote it in French. He had started writing French verse in 1937 (Bair 288), and a large portion of his post-war output was written originally in French, with Beckett himself translating into English—although the Trilogy was translated by Patrick Bowles in collaboration with Beckett. While this aspect of the novel is certainly connected to the areas explored here, it is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study. For more on Beckett writing in French, see, for example: Sinéad Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine: Beckett and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford English Monographs, 2011); chapters on Beckett’s French works in Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001); Brian Fitch, *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988); and Juliet Taylor-Batty, “Imperfect Mastery: The Failure of Grammar in Beckett’s *L’Innommable*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.2 (Winter, 2007): 163-179.

Beckett's autographical mode—that is, a form of self-writing whose boundaries are much wider than traditional autobiography.¹⁹ As we shall discuss further on, Abbott argues that a key feature of Beckett's writing is the undoing of traditional narrative forms. In terms of narrative decomposition, *Molloy* arguably ranks among the most pointed examples in Beckett's oeuvre.

Molloy is ostensibly a quest novel in two parts, each a first-person account of a journey: in Part One, Molloy narrates a trip to his mother, and in Part Two, Moran gives a report of his mission to find Molloy. However, both narrated quests appear to fail, and the narrative atmosphere itself is one of disintegration, directly tied to the narrators' language use. In a passage somewhat reminiscent of Wittgenstein, Georges Bataille summarizes the novel's linguistic situation:

Language is what determines this regulated world, whose significations provide the foundation for our cultures, our activities and our relations, but it does so in so far as it is reduced to a means of these cultures, activities and relations; freed from these servitudes, it is nothing more than a deserted castle whose gaping cracks let in the wind and rain: it is no longer the signifying word, but the defenseless expression death wears as a disguise. (57)

Both of the narrator-protagonists are at the limits of isolation from the culture that determines the language games they had learned to use. Ironically, each finds himself forced (by some outside authority) to write an account of what he has been through, and stranded with a language (and literary form) whose meaning and value seem questionable at best. It should be noted that Bataille is also rehearsing a critique of the very institution of literature, whose culturally

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of the very real presence of Beckett's wartime experience in his postwar oeuvre (beyond the effect on his aesthetic sensibility, which is our focus here) see Marjorie Perloff's essay "In Love with Hiding': Samuel Beckett's War," in *Iowa Review* 35.2 (2005): 76–103.

determined compulsions (“characteristic of every road that leads to a summit” [57]) are revealed to be nothing but a façade once the context is taken away. Bataille charges literature itself with having led to “the fathomless misery of *Molloy*” (57), but this does not seem to be a full assessment. Aside from the fact that Molloy finds the “toughness and impermeability” of the *Times Literary Supplement* perfect as a layer of insulation under his greatcoat (*TN* 26), Bataille’s bold claim seems rather inflated when one considers the very real “fathomless misery” of the war that had just concluded. Still, as we have seen, the problems in war are also partly problems of a complete breakdown of language—perhaps that language so rigorously upheld and against which Beckett rails in his letter to Axel Kaun. What we encounter in *Molloy* are two writers struggling to cope with a collapsing language in a collapsing world.

2.2 No Spell for the Whole

One of Wittgenstein’s recurring preoccupations is where things begin and end: sentences, number sets, games of chess, pieces of music, etc. The way we experience transitions and boundaries is vital to our understanding, to the meaning something has for us: “If I hear someone say ‘it’s raining,’ but do not know whether I have heard the beginning and end of the period, then so far this sentence fails to convey anything to me” (*PI* §22). And yet, his inquiries into such experiences are themselves often open-ended: “What happens when we learn to feel the ending of a church mode [in music] as an ending?” (*PI* §535). Indeed, the open-ended “album” form of the *Philosophical Investigations* seems to suggest that the work of philosophy has no beginning or end. It is an irony of the *Philosophical Investigations* that, while it argues for meaning as a function of context or the scene of language—including the importance of recognizing

beginnings and endings—its own diffuse scene occasionally makes it difficult for the reader to learn the language game in time to catch the meaning of isolated passages. Does this somehow contradict or question the function of ordinary language?

Interestingly, we see the same drama play out in *Molloy*, where the narrators all but refuse to begin or end their accounts decisively, resulting in a beginning-less and endless first novel that extends into an arguably endless trilogy. In the opening paragraph, a narrator, who we later learn is called Molloy, writes: “I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now. I don’t know how I got there. . . . There’s this man who comes every week. Perhaps I got here thanks to him. He says not. He gives me money and takes away the pages” (TN 3). From the very start, there is a rupture in the narrative, since the narrator does not know how he “got” where he is. He is writing for money, but without any apparent understanding of the reason why he is exhorted to write. What he would like is “to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying,” but “[t]hey don’t want that” (whoever “they” are) (3). Nor were they satisfied with his first attempt at a beginning, and so he has evidently added this paragraph, the one we are currently reading: “Here’s my beginning. Because they’re keeping it apparently. I took a lot of trouble with it. Here it is. It gave me a lot of trouble. It was the beginning, do you understand? Whereas now it’s nearly the end. Is what I do now any better? I don’t know. That’s beside the point. Here’s my beginning. It must mean something, or they wouldn’t keep it. Here it is” (4). The problem of finding an acceptable beginning results in an apologetic introduction whose chronological place among the rest of the text appears to be the end, or near it (so it hints, anyway). It also forefronts the problem of the time of writing, which cannot keep pace with lived time: “Here it *is*. . . . It *was* the beginning, do you understand?” (4, emphasis added). Of course, we could read the shift in verb tense two ways: as pointing to the current paragraph, which is

now concluding, or to the paragraph that follows, which *had been* the beginning before “they” disapproved and the current one was tacked on.

In fact, the “old” beginning is not much of a beginning, either. It starts with what seems like an effort to imagine death:

This time, then once more I think, then perhaps one last time, then I think it’ll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one. All grows dim. A little more and you’ll go blind. It’s in the head. It doesn’t work any more, it says, I don’t work any more. You go dumb as well and sounds fade. The threshold scarcely crossed that’s how it is. It’s the head. It must have had enough. So that you say, I’ll manage this time, then perhaps one more, then perhaps a last time, then nothing more. You are hard set to formulate this thought, for it is one, in a sense. (4)

I say “effort,” because what seems most apparent here is a laboriousness, both in the writing, and in the process described. Indeed, the sentences to follow acknowledge this labor: “Then you try to pay attention, to consider with attention all those dim things, saying to yourself, laboriously, It’s my fault. Fault? That was the word” (4). The reader, too, labors through these sentences, without a clear sense of what kind of thought is formulated here, nor why blame should be assigned in relation to these “dim things” or the attention given them. But “fault” does seem to trigger a response, with the narrator reassuring himself that it is not yet time to say goodbye, “and what magic in those dim things to which it will be time enough, when next they pass, to say goodbye.” There is some lingering regret in anticipation of these goodbyes, in spite of the painless memory of “the forms and light of other days” (4). Miraculously, these murmurings suddenly give way to a story-within-the-story: the chance meeting of two men, A and C, whom

Molloy observes from a distance, “flattened” against a rock (6). Just when we begin to wonder where this tenderly rendered, yet highly digressive, story is leading, the narrative once again shifts, and Molloy matter-of-factly informs us that, after a brief morning nap in the shelter of the rock, and “having waked between eleven o’clock and midday[,] . . . I resolved to go and see my mother” (11). At last, Molloy’s journey has begun—but the narrative that ensues (in one breathless, unbroken paragraph) is hardly more structured than the opening.

Highly conscious of the process of narration, Molloy frequently comments on its difficulties and pitfalls with a good dose of ironic humor: “I looked for my clothes. I found a light switch and switched it on. No result. What a story!” (33). Particularly revealing are the ontological problems that also relate to writing: “My reasons? I had forgotten them. But I knew them, I must have known them, I only had to find them again . . . Yes, it’s all easy when you know why, a mere matter of magic. . . . For the particulars, if you are interested in particulars, there is no need to despair . . . It’s for the whole there seems to be no spell” (23). It is precisely the unceasing onslaught of particulars that nearly destroys the narrative completely, as Molloy is well aware. Gerald Bruns observes that “Molloy’s discourse . . . is virtually without structure, not only in its eschewal of the paragraph, but because words accumulate without benefit of any structure of events, and so wander in a diversity of bald digressions” (276).

One way to better grasp the significance of this formal characteristic is to look back at how the major change in Wittgenstein’s ideas about language and memory influenced his views of what is possible in writing. While the propositions of the neatly organized *Tractatus* purport to be a complete description of logical propositions, and thus of the world (since “[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world” [TLP 5.6]), it is a world, as Martin Klebes notes, of frozen time, in which “all events (insofar as that term even applies)—past, present, and future—

are condensed into a moment without extension” (30). Fixing the sense of logical language does not allow for change; the meaning thus derived is eternal. In such a world, memory functions as the source of time and the verification of the propositions, each of which is meant as “a pictorial representation of reality” that projects the sentence’s meaning. However, when Wittgenstein’s concept of memory shifted away from the frozen image to something that happens in the present, *in language*, such a totalizing description became impossible. Language is temporal, and more suited to a different conception of time, the physical time of objects and events: “[M]emory as reference to the past is always already language, that is: physical language. Description of the past is a direct description of memory, not a description of a symbolic representation of memory contents, an image” (Klebes 33). Writing, then, cannot be cast as a record of past thought; such a conception, persistent as it may be, is based on a faulty impression that memory—and writing— involves describing something that has passed, an image that has remained in the mind:

It seems to us . . . as though to us a thought were like a landscape that we have seen and are supposed to describe, but we don’t remember it well enough to be able to describe it in all its complexity.

In the same way, we believe, we cannot characterize thinking after the fact because all the many weak/dim/fine events have been lost by then. (qtd. in Klebes 44)

The desire and illusion that we could somehow capture thought through writing, if only our memory were good enough, is part of what Klebes calls the “curse of prose.” Writing, Wittgenstein felt, is unfit to record anything but “what occurs to us in writing” (qtd. in Klebes 43). This problem is at the very crux of the transition between the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical*

Investigations regarding the status of memory: “By virtue of which warrant are we justified in assuming that there is *something* which may be remembered, *something* which may be written down? To what extent can these *somethings* [be] said to be independent of the processes of remembering and writing that are supposed to give them ontological fixity?” (Klebes 43). No matter how Molloy struggles to “formulate this thought,” or render his experiences in the landscape and time of physical objects, the losses are inevitable and irrecoverable. Is this where he finds his “fault”? Perhaps it is this unbridgeable divide that prevents him from “saying his goodbyes,” and forces him to keep writing, seizing on details as feverishly as possible at the expense of a linear, prosaic style.

The novel’s second part begins with more confidence in the hands of the fastidious, controlling Jacques Moran: “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I am calm. All is sleeping. Nevertheless I get up and go to my desk. I can’t sleep. My lamp sheds a soft and steady light” (TN 87). It displays regular features of prose, organized into paragraphs with a logical narrative flow. We learn that the text is in fact a report Moran is forced to write about his unsuccessful mission to find Molloy; he warns that it will be long, and expresses doubt as to whether he will finish it (87). Indeed, it is arguable that he does not complete the report, but rather ends where he begins: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (170). These closing lines, highlighting the discrepancy between writing and the temporal realm of objects and events, are a concise expression of the problem Molloy describes in Part One: “My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same

time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?” (31).²⁰ Both Molloy and Moran expect little from their lives once their narratives are through, though it is unclear whether this means death, or an infinite recession into an eventless, story-less being. In any case, as long as they are writing, they find themselves in the autobiographer’s strange position of writing of a life that seems both to have ended and to be ongoing. Moreover—and to end where we began this section—the lack of structured beginnings and endings opens up the question of meaning. Molloy’s and Moran’s refusal, or inability, to form a written whole from their experiences seems concomitant with their attitudes towards meaning. To delve into this, we need to look at the ways in which they perceive language and the world around them.

2.3 The Ear in Its Field

Molloy is a novel scored with sounds. For Molloy, who has “quite a sensitive ear” (45), the sonic environment is rife with cues, sometimes provoking flights of rapturous prose. He describes, for example, a “night of listening” he spends in a garden belonging to Lousse (a woman who has taken him in):

a night given to the faint soughing and sighing stirring at night in little pleasure gardens, the shy sabbath of leaves and petals and the air that eddies there as it does not in other places, where there is less constraint, and as it does not during the day, when there is more vigilance, and then something else that is not clear, being neither the air nor what it moves, perhaps the far unchanging noise the earth makes and which other noises cover, but not for long. For they do not account for

²⁰ He suggests at different points using the present tense as “mythological present” (22), or writing entirely in the pluperfect (12), but seems eventually to settle on the past tense.

that noise you hear when you really listen, when all seems hushed. And there was another noise, that of my life become the life of this garden as it rode the earth of deeps and wildernesses. (44)

Passages like this one reveal an enduring attention to the layers of soundscape that shift like clouds across the sky. It is also characteristic of Molloy's affection for such details, which, as I have suggested above, are of particular importance. Virtually everything seems imbued with sound, including the merging of his life with the garden's. This merging is perhaps the moment where Molloy crosses the limit of his solipsism into the world: "Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be" (44). As we will discuss below, such a merging is something that both Molloy and, ultimately, Moran long for. For Molloy, thinking is a matter of "listening harder" (56), yet he tends to resist "reading" these aural cues, and, as with Wittgenstein, sticks to description rather than explanation.

While Molloy enjoys all the indistinct murmuring, some distinct (i.e., identifiable) sounds jar and shock him. As he begins his narrative, he takes care to note the "awful cries of the corncrakes" (14), the memory of which confirms that he set off to his mother's room in the second or third week of June, when the birds run through the corn. At the other end of his journey, he hears a gong at intervals in the forest—a sound whose incongruity with the setting is "mortifying" (83). Once again making deliberate note, he writes: "But before I go on, a word about the forest murmurs. It was in vain I listened, I could hear nothing of the kind. But rather, with much good-will and a little imagination, at long intervals a distant gong. . . . It was mortifying, to have been looking forward to the celebrated murmurs if to nothing else, and to succeed only in hearing, at long intervals, in the far distance, a gong" (83). Nor did Molloy hear any birds during the length of his wandering in the forest; it was not until he lay in the ditch at

the edge of the woods, awaiting rescue, that the sound of birds returns, “skylarks perhaps” (85). Maybe it is fitting that this unidentifiable birdcall is linked to the “succor” that is on its way. Molloy seems to prefer the murmurs, whereas specific sounds are more troubling, as though the need to understand or interpret them in a precise way inspires a resistance. Still worse is language, as discussed below.

The corncrakes and gong overlap into Moran’s narrative, one of several hints that the two stories are in some way contiguous. Like Molloy, Moran privileges listening: he listens at keyholes rather than looking through them (118), and tries to teach his son to “hold aloof from those who pride themselves on their eagle gaze” (116). He writes that “[n]ot one person in a hundred knows how to be silent and listen, no nor even to conceive what such a thing means. Yet only then can you detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made” (116).²¹ When Moran needs to think, he removes himself from the world, drawing the curtains and retiring to his bed, from which he can “pierce the outer turmoil’s veil” and “pass judgment on [the world] and on those, like me, who are plunged in it beyond recall” (105). This is an exercise in control over the “spray of phenomena” that accosts him as soon as he stands: “the noise of things bursting, merging, avoiding one another,” in which his eyes “search in vain for two things alike” (106). In this masturbatory scene (something of a perversion of Marcel’s naive elation during his first masturbation—gazing at a cathedral—in Proust’s *Swann’s Way*), Moran conducts a mental search for Molloy, attempting to conjure him in preparation for his assignment. Yet he is still far from Molloy’s state of mind at this point: the world’s “veil” is something that needs to be pierced, the world to be judged, and the “fatuous clamour” to be silenced. By the end of his narrative, however, he has come much closer to Molloy, if only

²¹ Throughout the trilogy, this cosmic silence also seems replete with noise, or at least revealed through the layers of aural phenomena.

through his own physical and perceptual changes (and in narration style, which, as Bruns comments, also “becomes increasingly occluded by his excessive attention to detail” [276], in sprawling paragraphs punctuated with seemingly desultory lists of questions). The world is evident, if inscrutable, as he recalls in detail the intricate dance and hum of the bees he kept, which he had attempted to understand through measurement and classification:

And in spite of all my pains I had lavished on these problems, I was more than ever stupefied by the complexity of this innumerable dance, involving doubtless other determinants of which I had not the slightest idea. And I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand. And all during this long journey home, when I racked my mind for a little joy in store, the thought of my bees and their dance was the nearest thing to comfort. . . . And I admitted with good grace the possibility that this dance was after all no better than the dances of the people of the West, frivolous and meaningless. But for me, sitting near my sun-drenched hives, it would always be a noble thing to contemplate, too noble ever to be sullied by the cogitations of a man like me, exiled in his manhood. (*TN* 163)

As with Molloy, meaning is not something that comes from rational understanding; rather, it seems to be the problem that Wittgenstein articulates in his notebook entry of 1916:

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?

I know that the world exists.

I know that I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.

I know that something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning. (*NB* 72-73)

The problem of meaning is the border between solipsism and the world, and it is here that murmurs take on such significance. As Adrienne Janus notes, “Murmurs, in the first case, can be understood as the fundamental sound marking the rupture in the lines of communication between subject and object, self and world. Murmurs also form the basal resonance of that tympanum of auditory poetics, which, on the one hand, vibrates at the limit of silence, and on the other, produces babble at the limit of noise” (185).

While their ears are always open to murmurs and “sounds unencumbered with precise meaning” (*TN* 45), odd things happen to hearing in both Molloy’s and Moran’s communication with others. Molloy admits to having difficulty with spoken language:

A defect of the understanding perhaps, which only began to vibrate on repeated solicitations, or which did vibrate, if you like, but at a lower frequency, or a higher, than that of ratiocination, if such a thing is conceivable, and such a thing is conceivable, since I conceive it. Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning, and this is probably one of the reasons why conversation was unspeakably painful to me. And the words I uttered myself, and which must nearly always have gone with an effort of the intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect. (45)

Even when a basic understanding is established after a good deal of effort, it seems to come to nothing. No wonder Molloy has “been living so far from words for so long” (27). This preference for (physical) sounds over interpretation very clearly echoes Beckett’s own position regarding exegesis of his work: “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else” (*D* 109). In fact, there are

certain aesthetic implications in the way Molloy responds to language, just as he does to other “noises of nature” and “works of men”: “without desire for enlightenment” (*TN* 45). This, he claims, is because he sees the world as “inordinately formal, though I was far from being an aesthete, or an artist” (45). Again, it is possible to read Beckett’s own position here regarding art. In a 1961 interview with Tom Driver, he speaks of art’s tendency to withstand “the pressure of chaotic things”;²² however, the “mess” needs to be admitted, and this is the direction art must take, “to find a form that accommodates the mess” (*TCH* 219). Whereas a self-proclaimed “artist” or “aesthete” might try “to say that the chaos is really something else,” since it “appears to be the very opposite of [artistic] form and therefore destructive of the very thing that art holds itself to be” (219), for Molloy, the “indestructible chaos of timeless things” (*TN* 35) is itself overwhelmingly full of forms. Anything attempting to order it—human commerce, especially language—barely stands out against such a background, and when it does, hardly seems worthwhile.

Moran’s own sharp sense of hearing undergoes a change as he approaches (the inordinately formless) Molloy. He has arrived in “Molloy country,” yet his situation is quickly unraveling, exacerbated by the unexpected departure of his son. One evening as Moran sits alone in the woods, his colleague Gaber suddenly appears with a message from their superior, Youdi. The exchange between the two men is marked by confusion and lapses in recognition, though not in the way Moran expects. He is surprised Gaber should recognize him at all, unkempt as he is. Yet Gaber does not respond to or comment on his appearance; instead, the trouble seems to be in hearing Moran, and Moran for his part can hardly recognize Gaber’s “queer” “far-away voice”

²² This phrase is Driver’s paraphrase of Beckett’s words. The citations that follow it are given as direct quotes in the published interview.

(159, 158). But most frustrating to Moran is his inability to make himself understood, as though his words, even when heard, were not registered at all:

Do you recognize me? I cried. Do I recognize you? he asked. He reflected. I knew what he was doing, he was searching for the phrase most apt to wound me. Ah Moran, he said, what a man! . . . Is [Youdi] angry? I said. You wouldn't have a sup of beer by any chance? he said. I'm asking you if he is angry, I cried. Angry, said Gaber, don't make me laugh, he keeps rubbing his hands from morning to night, I can hear them in the outer room. That means nothing, I said. And chuckling to himself, said Gaber. He must be angry with me, I said. Has he changed? I cried. Changed, said Gaber, no he hasn't changed, why would he have changed, he's getting old, that's all, like the world. . . . What did he tell you? I said. I don't understand, said Gaber. You were saying a minute ago that he had told you something, I said, then I cut you short. Short? said Gaber. Do you know what he told me the other day, I said, those were your very words. (157-158)

Moran at this point is desperate to learn something more about his situation vis-à-vis Youdi, and of the nature of this assignment gone so terribly wrong. But Gaber, as part of the network of coded language, knows only the message he is sent to deliver, and in his “corpse fidelity to the letter of his messages” (110), probably does not know its decoded meaning. Nor can he break so easily from the strictures of his orders into spontaneous conversation. He ignores, repeats, or deflects Moran's questions as though incapable of recognizing their urgency. In one of the novel's most striking moments, Gaber leans over Moran (whom he has inadvertently pushed to the ground) and repeats Youdi's words with a smile: “He said to me, said Gaber, Gaber, he said, life is a thing of beauty, Gaber, and a joy for ever” (158). This appropriation of Keats' Romantic

vision²³ is so perversely out of place at this point in Moran's journey that it seems as though Gaber really does not see or hear Moran at all—or else the whole operation for which Moran works is utterly cruel and inhuman. Of course, the phrase may actually be the code Gaber is meant to pass along (in plain language, like Gloria's messages); but if it is, Moran does not catch on. Instead, he is left to wonder to himself, "Do you think he meant human life? . . . Perhaps he didn't mean human life" (159). Indeed, the distances in that human life are so great at times that one can scarcely hear or make oneself heard, and Gaber disappears without a sound.

2.4 Eloquence, Order, and Violence

After Moran's encounter with Gaber, he follows Youdi's order ("Moran, Jacques, home, *instanter*" [TN 157]) and begins the long journey back to his house. He has changed, he postulates, beyond recognition. Like Molloy, he feels himself a "prey to the malignancy of man and nature" (160), but it was not always so. Before he sets off in search of Molloy, he is closer to the type of people Molloy fears, "their tongues hanging out for order, beauty and justice" (61). Consider some of the things that give Moran peace and pleasure: "my desk which had only six drawers in all and for all, three on each side of the space where I put my legs"; "my slippers warming in front of the fire, the uppers turned to the flame"; and "scarves of fine red sheen . . . mounting in the sky" at sunset (113, 111). He is a conscientious Catholic, never missing a Sunday mass, and takes pride and comfort in rigorously upheld domestic order. His scrupulous prose style in the beginning of his report reflects this sensibility (although he is narrating from the other side of his journey), as does his speech: "Go and get the minute-thermometer, I said,

²³ "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever," John Keats, "Endymion" Book I, line 1. <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19377>, accessed 3/21/14.

out of the second right-hand drawer of my desk, counting from the top, take your temperature and bring me the thermometer. I let a few minutes go by and then, without being asked, repeated slowly, word for word, this rather long and difficult sentence, which contained no fewer than three or four imperatives” (112). Given that the desk has only three drawers on each side, the superfluity of his instruction to use the second drawer “counting from the top” is telling of the kind of (sadistic) pleasure he takes in giving orders. Not surprisingly, this penchant for order is coupled with intolerance towards any perceived show of weakness or imprecision from his son, Jacques, Jr. (“Vagueness I abhor” [94]), as well as episodes of harsh and violent disciplining. Moreover, the ambiguous nature of his profession suggests an even darker side to Moran, an agent in “a vast organization” whose operations are so secretive that at times he wonders whether it even exists (102). Accustomed to prowling at night, Moran is paid to find people for various and obscure reasons (in one case he took and destroyed a “client’s” tiepin [133]), but he gives no other indications as to the nature of these “operations,” except that he never again saw any of his “patients” once he “had finished with them” (132). Though we are unsure whether Moran is at times leading lambs to the slaughter, as it were, the insidiousness of his line of work particularly comes through when he refers to his superiors, and the anger and punishment he anticipates for not carrying out his duty (156). In the case of Molloy, he cannot remember what he is supposed to do when he finds him; but in his shooting suit and glittering boots (119), and with only the incisors (“the nippers” [99]) left in his mouth, he appears ready for the hunt.

Whatever the nature of his assignment, Moran finds Molloy a repugnant figure, an indistinct chimera whose physical and existential “misshapeness” (108) “haunted and possessed” him (109). Paradoxically, this looming indefiniteness seems to be the very assignment itself: if Molloy is so unimaginable, it is impossible to imagine “the end”—and

perhaps there can be no end to it (108). Still, there is a trajectory. When his son abandons him in the woods, “powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more,” Moran’s attitude towards Molloy seems to shift. He thinks that maybe he can wait for Molloy to come to him, “and grow to be a friend, and like a father” (155-156). When he finally returns home, Moran finds his orderly domestic peace destroyed. His son and servant are gone, the electricity has been cut off, the bees and hens have died, and all that remains are the wild birds. Once he finishes his report, he will set off again. “I am clearing out,” writes Moran, “Perhaps I shall meet Molloy” (169). Moran’s increasing similarity to Molloy has a correlative in Molloy’s narrative, in which he takes on some of Moran’s defining characteristics.

For the majority of Molloy’s story, we see him as an outsider whose language and existence is so “out of circulation,” as Wittgenstein puts it (*PI* §500), that interaction with other people borders on senseless. This is best illustrated in the comic scene of his arrest. At the beginning of his journey to his mother, Molloy is hailed by a police officer because he has been resting in a standing position on his bicycle, apparently in violation of the law: “What are you doing there? he said. I’m used to that question, I understood it immediately. Resting, I said. Resting, he said. Resting, I said. Will you answer my question? he cried. So it always is when I’m reduced to confabulation, I honestly believe I have answered the question I am asked and in reality I do nothing of the kind” (*TN* 16). As with the scene cited above between Gaber and Moran, the two characters cannot seem to agree on which language game they are playing. The officer proceeds to explain the law in detail. “He was eloquent,” comments Molloy, who only “ventured one or two noises” in explanation. When asked for his papers, Molloy produces the newspapers he keeps to wipe himself. Needless to say, the conversation with the law enforcement spirals downwards: taken to the station, Molloy cannot at first remember his name,

nor does he know his mother's address, other than that she lives "by the shambles" (18). He is told to sit down, which he is physically incapable of doing, so he obtains permission to lean (19). The law, limited by its language and procedure, appears to have excluded any possibility of a case like Molloy's: "To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter" (20). For the likes of him, law and order can only be enforced through violence: Molloy sleeps in the morning so as to hide from the "hale and hearty," who wake with a thirst for order (61). Night is much safer, though there is peril there, too, since "the night purge is in the hands of the technicians" (62). One immediately thinks of Moran, peering through his neighbors' windows during his nighttime prowls (118).

In a shift towards the end of his narrative, Molloy is the one to wield eloquence, power and, finally, violence. When he meets a "charcoal-burner" in the forest, he encounters someone whose weakness, awkwardness, and solitude seem to exceed his own—someone, moreover, whom Molloy imagines he "might have loved" (77). The charcoal-burner, he writes, "was all over me, begging me to share his hut, believe it or not. A total stranger. Sick with solitude, probably. . . . A long dialogue ensued, interspersed with groans" (78). Although Molloy cannot recall the name of his native town to ask the way, he still finds the "necessary words, and accents" to ask where the nearest town is. However, the charcoal-burner does not know, which Molloy assumes is because "[h]e was born in the forest and had spent his whole life there. I asked him to show me the nearest way out of the forest. I grew eloquent. His reply was exceedingly confused. Either I didn't understand a word he said, or he didn't understand a word I said, or he knew nothing, or he wanted to keep me near him" (78). In an odd turning of the tables, Molloy finds himself in command of language (as "eloquent" as the police officer had been), while his interlocutor is barely intelligible. The complete lack of direct quotes in Molloy's

narration renders the charcoal-burner even more obscure. When Molloy turns to go, the charcoal-burner holds him by the sleeve, a vague gesture that Molloy responds to by hitting him on the skull with his crutch. Seeing he was still breathing, Molloy continues to kick him to death, swinging from his crutches and launching himself forward for “the desired result” (79). The “eloquence” of Molloy’s language is matched by his methodical bludgeoning, and both are reminiscent of the other “technician,” Moran.

Indeed, Molloy notes that he “stopped being half-witted and became sly” whenever he “took the trouble” (79), a description that Moran echoes (“I so sly as a rule” [100]). However, Moran is the slyer when it comes to concealing his violent tendencies. Whereas Molloy openly describes his practice of knocking his mother on the head in order to communicate, Moran only vaguely alludes to scenes of violence with his son, even when they form an important part of the narrative, as on the night before his son finally leaves him alone in the woods: “That night I had a violent scene with my son. I do not remember about what. Wait, it may be important. / No, I don’t know. I have had so many scenes with my son. At the time it must have seemed a scene like any other, that’s all I know” (154). Granted, this omission may be less cunning than a kind of amnesia to which Moran is prone. The most striking example occurs when, like Molloy, he kills a man in the forest. One evening as he tends his fire (waiting for his son to return from an errand in the nearest town), Moran is taken by surprise with the sudden appearance of a “dim man,” who, like Molloy’s charcoal-burner, is virtually his own double: dressed in a comically awkward attire, including black boots and a hat, and with a face that “vaguely resembled” Moran’s. Just as Molloy tries to ask the charcoal-burner for directions, this man also wants information, yet at first it is unclear, and his voice “seemed to come . . . from afar”: “Can you tell me, he said. . . . Do you happen to know, he said” (144-145). These truncated quotations

foreshadow the faulty communication in the later scene with Gaber, cited above: “Do you hear me? he said. . . . Hey you! he said. . . . Do you hear me talking to you?” Granted, Moran’s lack of response is, he claims, a protective measure and an (unsuccessful) attempt to be rid of the man. Finally it comes out that the stranger “wanted to know if [Moran] had seen an old man with a stick pass by” (145). Although Moran denies it, he has in fact seen such a man, who, though Moran does not seem to register it, is possibly Molloy himself (140-141). Moran suspects the “dim man” might be another “technician” like himself: “Are you on night patrol?” Violence erupts when the man “thrust his hand” at Moran, but what happens next is a blank: “I do not know what happened then. But a little later, perhaps a long time later, I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp” (145). The scene is an asymmetrical reconfiguration of several elements from the charcoal-burner encounter, including double-ness, sexual suggestion (“What are you doing in this God-forsaken place, he said, you unexpected pleasure” [144]), vaguely perceived threats, and murder. Yet Moran’s narration more clearly demonstrates his own fear and a menace on the part of the other person. In their interaction, Moran is the non-speaker, while the other forcefully interrogates. Comparing these two scenes, we see Molloy and Moran take on characteristics more typical of the other, particularly where eloquence and control are concerned, and both scenes end in the killing of a kind of caricature of themselves.

Moran apologizes to his reader that he cannot “indicate more clearly how this result [the dead man] was obtained, it would have been something worth reading. But it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature” (145-146). Instead of a literary scene of violence, we get a clinical account of the disposal of the corpse. After he does so, he discovers that his prodigious collection of keys (he keeps everything locked) has disappeared; he hunts through the underbrush for them, but cannot recover them all. His resignation to this loss (“Hell

to it, I'll do with those I have" [*TN* 147]) marks another early step in his gradual lesson of the "valuelessness" of such "symbols of order" (Hayman 156).

The ironic connection Moran draws between violence and literature is one manifestation of his overall attitude to writing as a potentially destructive act. He never loses sight of the fact that he is writing on command, and, as though subconsciously, he repeats, "He asked for a report, he'll get his report" (*TN* 115, 116). The process is a kind of "penance," in which "I may not pass over what is over and straightaway come to the heart of the matter" (127). Rather, in writing he is forced, like Sisyphus, to relive the excruciating disintegration of his journey all over again:

that must again be unknown to me which is no longer so and that again fondly believed which then I fondly believed, at my setting out. . . . And in the silence of my room, and all over as far as I am concerned, I know scarcely any better where I am going and what awaits me than the night I clung to the wicket, beside my idiot of a son, in the lane. And it would not surprise me if I deviated, in the pages to follow, from the true and exact succession of events. But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places. (127-128)

Here we meet another manifestation of the paradox of autobiography: the potentially painful process of reliving, coupled with the license that retrospective distance (and forgetfulness) affords, to arrange things differently than they had been. Indeed, recollection itself is a kind of disturbance, as Moran notes when, before setting off on his journey, he tries to summon an image of Molloy: "But images of this kind the will cannot revive without doing them violence. Much of what they had it takes away, much they never had it foists upon them" (109). Moran

practically seems a mouthpiece for Wittgenstein's point (above) about writing only what comes to us as writing, and language's unsuitability as "an external mnemonic medium" (Klebes 44)—something that plagues Molloy throughout his own narration. Moran's attitude towards composing an orderly report of the "inenarrable contraption I called my life" (*TN* 109) also echoes Wittgenstein's preface to *Philosophical Investigations*: "After several attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. . . . [M]y thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination" (*PI* 3e). Is it the personal that proves so very inenarrable? The process of picking up the same stone again and again, like Sisyphus, and like Wittgenstein (*CV* 10)?²⁴

The implication throughout *Molloy* is that progress in autobiography is impossible, which is reflected in its employment of what H. Porter Abbot calls "strange loops": "time-defying loops of narrative and narration," which enact "a continuous override of the forward thrust of narrative, arresting it, turning it back on itself" (181). The sensibility here strongly resonates with Wittgenstein's emphasis on repetition and reiteration, rather than progress: "Each sentence that I write is trying to say the whole thing, that is, the same thing over and over again & it is as though they were views of one object seen from different angles" (*CV* 9). As we shall see below, these loops comprise one of the strategies linking the works in Beckett's opus, as Abbot argues, into his own ongoing, or endless, project of self-writing. Without ending, can only hope to "make an end" as Molloy and Moran do (168). The Moran that narrates (as opposed to the "narrated" Moran) has clearly learned a lesson from his journey. The report seems to be, in a sense, the death throes of his command of human language as he prepares to give way to another language, that of the wild birds. At the end of his narrative, he spends his time in the garden listening to

²⁴ See Chapter One: "One movement constructs & takes (in hand) one stone after another, the other keeps reaching for the same [stone]" (*CV* 9-10).

them, with as much rapture as Molloy felt in Louse's garden among the "faint sougning and sighing stirring" (44). In both parts of the novel, we see a connection between eloquence, order, and violence (including in the narrative act itself), and in Moran's trajectory we trace a clear movement from enforced order to its rejection and disintegration.

2.5 If a Lamb Could Talk

The language of the birds is part of a different kind of order that emerges in both narratives. The twin scenes of eloquence and murder have their most notable counterbalance in the twin scenes of mute docility when Molloy and Moran each encounter a shepherd and his flock. For Molloy, the event happens on the second day of his journey ("unless it was the third, or the fourth" [25]). He awakes from his morning sleep in a ditch to find a shepherd and his dog watching him, and muses as to whether the dog took him "for a black sheep entangled in the brambles and was he waiting for an order from his master to drag me out?" At this time of day Molloy is at his most lucid: "When I wake I see the first things quite clearly, the first things that offer, and I understand them, when they are not too difficult. . . . It is then too that the meaning of words is least obscure to me." This clarity gives him enough "tranquil assurance" to enquire about the fate of the sheep, whose "anxious bleating" he can hear: "Where are you taking them, to the fields, or to the shambles?" For Molloy, who has already admitted his potential resemblance to a sheep (although: "I don't smell like a sheep, I wish I smelt like a sheep"), and who is on his way to his mother's house near the shambles, this question carries special weight. However, it goes unanswered: "whether it was [the shepherd] didn't understand, or didn't want to reply, he didn't reply, but went on his way without a word, without a word for me, I mean, for

he spoke to his dog who listened attentively, cocking his ears” (24). For Moran, the meeting comes midway on his journey, just as he and his son close in on Molloy country, Ballyba. It is he who approaches the shepherd, whom he “liked the look of”; as he does so, the shepherd, his dog, and a “flock of black shorn sheep” watch him, unafraid (152). “The silence was absolute. Profound in any case. All things considered it was a solemn moment,” and indeed Moran seems unusually moved and reverent (152). Eventually he finds himself encircled by the sheep, their eyes “converged” on him:

Perhaps I was the butcher come to make his choice. I took off my hat. I saw the dog’s eyes following the movement of my hand. I looked about me again incapable of speech. I did not know how I would ever be able to break this silence. I was on the point of turning away without having spoken. Finally I said, Ballyba, hoping it sounded like a question. The shepherd drew the pipe from his mouth and pointed the stem at the ground. I longed to say, Take me with you, I will serve you faithfully, just for a place to lie and a little food. I had understood, but without seeming to I suppose, for he repeated this gesture, pointing the stem of his pipe at the ground, several times. Bally, I said. He raised one hand, it wavered an instant as if over a map, then stiffened. The pipe still smoked faintly, the smoke hung blue in the air for an instant, then vanished. I looked in the direction indicated. (153)

Moran’s desire to relinquish his role as “the butcher” overwhelms him to the point of speechlessness. His emotional response comes as a surprise from one who earlier professes not to like animals (100). By contrast, the shepherd has earned the faithful trust of animals: “His dog loved him, and his sheep did not fear him” (153). He communicates in a mute language of

laconic gestures (as though an actor in one of Beckett's later plays), which Moran does not quite know how to use. As he stands gazing at the faint lights of Bally in the distance, Moran has a presentiment of loneliness to come: "I knew I was all alone gazing at that distant glow . . . And I did not like the feeling of being alone, with my son perhaps, no, alone, spellbound. And I was wondering how to depart without self-loathing or sadness, or with as little as possible, when a kind of immense sigh all round me announced it was not I who was departing, but the flock" (153-154).

Like Molloy's desire to merge with Louse's garden, Moran's vulnerability here is a distress at the vanishing point of solipsism, where the subject glimpses the world, but cannot be a part of it, like Wittgenstein's "eye in its visual field." Ray Monk summarizes Wittgenstein's account of the world in the later propositions of the *Tractatus* as follows:

"The world is my world," "I am my world. (The microcosm.)," and yet I am not *in* my world: "The subject does not belong to the world; rather it is a limit of the world." Thus, solipsism, "when its implications are followed out strictly," coincides with pure realism [a view of the world as existing in time and space]: "The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it." (201)

As we have seen in Chapter One, the sadness of this position is strikingly revealed in remark §327 from *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*: "If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it." Wittgenstein's use of an animal illustrates the mystery of the world and the "solipsism central to human life" (Perloff 77); what makes this so poignant is that we can imagine a lion talking: like humans, animals are sentient beings, with communicative systems of their own. We think that we can read certain of their outward expressions, which may even

resemble ours, yet the lack of a “commonality of experience” required to understand language games (Monk 556) means we are forever unsure.

Molloy has its own menagerie of animals and insects, and both narrators are particularly sensitive to perceived communications from them, especially signs of distress. So, for example, Molloy notes: A or C’s dog (a Pomeranian or a stray) making slow circles in futile attempts to relieve constipation (*TN* 7-8); a team of donkeys, driven onward by “angry cries and dull blows. . . . My eyes caught a donkey’s eyes, they fell to his little feet, their brave fastidious tread” (22); and especially the shepherd’s flock, whose “bleating grew faint, because [they] were less anxious, or because they were farther away” (25). Molloy himself leads a rather animalistic existence: his mother recognizes him by smell (13); he eats grass like a sheep (22) and carob like a goat (79); and during his stay in the forest he is reduced to crawling on all fours, only to be reduced finally to slithering “like a reptile” (84).²⁵ No wonder Lousse finds him such a suitable substitute for her elderly dog, Teddy, whom Molloy accidentally runs over with his bicycle. Most notable, though, is his difficulty with human language, as previously discussed. Like the lion (or the sheep), he lacks the commonality of experience in human commerce that allows him to immediately grasp everyday communication. Words register as “pure sounds,” and his own attempts to speak are to him like the “buzzing of an insect” (45). In parodic contrast, Lousse has a pet parrot that *can* speak (or swear, more precisely, in English and French); in this case, we can understand the bird perfectly fine, but there is no meaning intended (35).

For Moran, the unusual behavior of his grey hen is a source of worry and puzzlement early in his narrative. He brings up the problem in conversation with the local priest, Father

²⁵ For a fuller discussion of the similarities between Molloy and Moran and dogs, see Philip Howard Solomon, “Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*: A Dog’s Life,” *The French Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Oct., 1967), pp. 84-91. For more on animals in Beckett’s work in general, see *Beckett and Animals*, ed. Mary Bryden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Ambrose: “I . . . told him how worried I was about my hens, particularly my grey hen, which would neither brood nor lay and for the past month and more had done nothing but sit with her arse in the dust, from morning to night. Like Job, haha, he said. I too said haha” (96). The silent plight of a sick animal—particularly one compared to Job suffering in the dust²⁶—hardly seems a laughing matter, and the forced “hahas” in Moran’s narration appear as mere imitations of laughs. Father Ambrose, however, seems genuinely amused: “What a joy it is to laugh, from time to time, he said. Is it not? I said. It is peculiar to man, he said. So I have noticed, I said. A brief silence ensued” (96). Although Moran’s verbatim transcript leaves the reader uncertain as to his tone, the “joy” Father Ambrose expresses is as out of place here as Youdi’s exaltation that “life is a thing of beauty and a joy forever.” Laughter may indeed be “peculiar” to man, though not in the positive sense: are there any other creatures on earth that find joy in another’s suffering? Granted, perhaps Father Ambrose has not yet grasped the extent of the hen’s problem. When he learns that she has also stopped eating, he suddenly appears to turn solemn: “I added that she ate nothing any more. Nothing! he cried. Next to nothing, I said. Animals never laugh, he said. It takes us to find that funny, I said. What? he said. It takes us to find that funny, I said loudly. He mused. Christ never laughed either, he said, so far as we know. He looked at me. Can you wonder? I said” (96). The comparisons to Job and Christ suggest that animals are closer than laughing man to the suffering of existence; on the other hand, they reveal another “peculiarly” human tendency, namely, to anthropomorphize. Anthropomorphisms often hide the state of

²⁶ “So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.” Job 2:7-2.8. *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. 2011, Biblica.
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+2&version=NIV>. 3/24/2014.

affairs with misleading pictures derived from our own human language games; the fact is, we cannot know what is going on inside this silent hen, who seems to have withdrawn from life.

The inability to “understand” animals can also serve as expedient proof of their inferiority, and an excuse for neglect and violence towards them and their environment. Molloy, who has “gone in fear” all his life (17), is painfully aware of the ends animals meet at the hands of man. As the shepherd and his flock recede from him, he is left “with persisting doubts, as to the destination of those sheep, among which there were lambs, and often wondering if they had safely reached some commonage or fallen, their skulls shattered, their thin legs crumpling, first to their knees, then over on their fleecy sides, under the pole-axe, though that is not the way they slaughter sheep, but with a knife, so that they bleed to death” (25). As though the first method were not cruel enough, there is another, the real way, crueler still. Shane Weller observes that “animals in [Beckett’s] texts are generally the victims of violence, or fear violence, rather than being its perpetrators” (20). Even Molloy accidentally runs over and kills old Teddy, and Moran’s hens and bees die because he “deserted” them (*TN* 168).

This gap in understanding seems especially precarious in the “alien and uncongenial” progress-driven Western civilization criticized by Wittgenstein, which propagates a definition of itself based on science and technology (*CV* 8-9), and as such has often tended to prioritize advancement above all else.²⁷ Wittgenstein writes that “[w]hen a sentence is called senseless, it is not, as it were, its sense that is senseless. Rather, a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation” (*PI* §500). It is possible to read here, especially in light of Beckett’s novel and today’s environmental crisis, a commentary on the price of

²⁷ Of course, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote in 1944 in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that it was precisely the supposedly liberating values of the Enlightenment that led to global disaster.

ignorance, and the stakes for our ability (or inability) to sense meaning. How many species excluded from the language of speed and development have been “withdrawn from circulation” permanently, through extinction? Research has suggested the devastating impacts globalization can have on animals: birds in the Amazon that are afraid to cross a newly built road and therefore stranded in inhospitable territory; tens of thousands of bats that had thrived for millennia in a certain cave in Vermont, suddenly decimated by a European fungus; and Panama’s golden frogs, also killed off by a fungus that migrated with other frogs used as pets, food, or research subjects (Strawn 414). In an article that, as it happens, takes its title from the last lines of *The Unnamable*, slightly modified, “I Can’t Go On, I Must Go On,” environmental writer Elizabeth Kolbert notes that these are the unforeseen impacts of rapid development on “things that are evolving very, very slowly” (qtd. in Strawn 414). As opposed to the world of human order and progress, which ignores and tramples that which is too slow, too silent, animals and insects in *Molloy* present other orders, other “senses,” whose circulation is complex and fragile.

As the shepherd’s flock moves away with an “immense sigh,” Moran tenderly describes the sheep, “huddled together, their heads sunk, jostling one another, breaking now and then into a little trot, snatching blindly without stopping a last mouthful from the earth, and last of all the dog, jauntily, waving his long black plummy tail . . . And so in perfect order, the shepherd silent and the dog unneeded, the little flock departed” (*TN* 154). As with his observation of the bees, this is an encounter with a world apart from and inaccessible to him, perfect in its order. Yet both Molloy and Moran are aware of its vulnerability. Just as Moran’s bees succumb to the winter, though they “had clustered together for a little warmth, to try and sleep” (168), so the sheep eventually go to the shambles.

If these orders are inaccessible, there is still some chance that they can be approached through the breakdown of more intransigent human orders. In both parts of the novel, as Shane Weller writes, the characters undergo a process of animalization: they take on “an ambiguous status, determined negatively and neither properly human nor nonhuman forms of animal life. . . . [T]his ‘un-’ness is reflected in the inabilities, difficulties, failings and weaknesses of these beings . . . and, in particular, [their bodies] in motion” (18-19). In Molloy’s case it is less pronounced, since, as discussed above, he begins in a state somewhere between human and animal existence (“the last of my foul brood, neither man nor beast” [15]); nevertheless, by the end he has decidedly “abandoned erect motion, that of man” (83) and adopted reptilian movement, until finally coming to a complete stop. Moran’s process of weakening, failure, and disintegration follows a similar but more dramatic trajectory. As he grows weaker and weaker, eating nothing for days (like his grey hen), he contemplates the existence of other beings, such as the brief life of a fly, and the time when one, “flying low above my ash-tray, raised a little ash, with the breath of its wings” (156). Although the breakdown of Moran’s ordered world and self changes him beyond recognition, he writes, “I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before, in spite of its deep lesions and the wounds with which it was covered” (164). It is as though this animalization, in its “movement towards greater suffering” (Weller 20), has a liberating and sensitizing force. Jean-Michel Rabaté writes that animals are both “objects of thoughts and subjects of a different thinking: their very being in its often mute opaqueness provides the space for a different thinking, a thinking tempted by empathy for radical otherness, reluctant to reduce it to known categories” (123). In the end, Moran has come to appreciate what animals reveal about the limits of his knowledge, and resists interpreting them anthropomorphically: “And I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I

had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body” (*TN* 163-164). Rabaté claims this to be “the critique of human anthropomorphism that underpins Beckett’s entire ethics and aesthetics” (123).

Concomitant with the process of weakening is the emergence of an internal voice that gives “orders, or rather advice” (*TN* 164). Molloy has long been hearing this voice, and it spurs him onwards in his journey to his mother. Moran hears it for the first time as he is on the way home from his failed mission (164). In the end, when he decides, “I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more,” the voice joins with the voices of the birds as the guiding languages of Moran’s new life in the garden:

My birds had not been killed. They were wild birds. And yet quite trusting. I recognized them and they seemed to recognize me. But one never knows. Some were missing and some were new. I tried to understand their language better. Without having recourse to mine. They were the longest, loveliest days of all the year. I lived in the garden. I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one. So that at first I did not know what it wanted. But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understand it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report. (169)

What does matter is that Moran has shifted his thinking away from an Aristotelian “human/animal distinction founded on the possession of speech . . . : ‘anthropos’ as ‘zoon logon ekhon’” (Weller 19), towards what Rabaté calls “animal thinking”: a “thinking-dreaming from the outside, which is another name for writing” (123). Whether or not one accepts such a

definition of writing in general, it is clear that in Moran's case, such animal thinking reflects his newfound ethic. It is one, moreover, that Beckett seemed to share. In conversation with his English translator Patrick Bowles in 1953, he said: "It is as if there were a little animal inside one's head, for which one tried to find a voice; to which one tries to give a voice. That is the *real* thing. The rest is a game" (qtd. in Weller 20). One of the many paradoxes of Beckett's novel is that animalization seems to be a prerequisite for writing, while writing is still an exercise somehow inimical to that state of existence, as we discuss in the next section.

2.6 The Handsome Little Sum

It is an intriguing parallel that Moran closes his narrative much as Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations*, with a scene of a child's first lessons in language, and the intention of showing something outside of that system. Moran, guided by an internal voice, turns his attention to the language of wild birds in a language-learning process totally unlike that of his childhood. Wittgenstein cites St. Augustine's account of learning a language in order to demonstrate the prevailing picture of language: "the words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (*PI* §1). While this is a description of one system of communication, there are yet countless others (§2). In *Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein focuses on what he calls "imponderable evidence": "subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone" (§360). These are vital external criteria that communicate what is "internal"—intention, meaning; the ability to judge such criteria does not come through "a course of study in it, but through *experience*" (§355). As

Ray Monk puts it, this involves “an alert and observant sensitivity to people’s faces, voices and situations” (556). In other words, through attention, observation, and experience, we may hope to learn some language games that were previously unknowable to us.

In *Molloy* we see a more damning view of Augustine’s account of language. It is true that Molloy’s trouble with human communication is partly due to his “living so far from words so long” (*TN* 27), but there is another side to this. From his outpost somewhere near the verge of extinction, the view of the world is of one “collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too” (35). This “world for you without arms” (8) is so separate from human life that it is impossible to square it with a language that names:

And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate, as we have just seen I think. And so on for all the other things which made merry with my senses. Yes, even then, when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. I say that now, but after all what do I know now about then, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it anyway. (27)

Molloy, out of circulation as he is, seems most comfortable with a clear separation between names and things. Now, in the act of writing, names do not give meaning, but rather make meaning impossible; the icy words are as cold and dead as the veil of conventional artistic forms. Moreover, in writing about “then,” any knowledge he may have once had is substituted by this “handsome little sum,” in which even original invention is illusory. And there is no escape from this, for we have learned our lesson too well.

The tenacity of habit and its dulling effect on our ability to perceive the world is a theme in Beckett’s 1930 critical study of Marcel Proust. Habit protects us from the uncertainties of existence (and the certainty of death), yet “paralyses our attention,” whereas the “suffering of being” is “the free play of every faculty” (“Proust” 516). Beckett closes his text with a discussion of music as an “intimate and ineffable” art, “perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable” (554). As such, it “runs parallel” to the moments when habit is broken and “the real” suddenly appears to us in full force. For the narrator of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, the music of Vinteuil expresses “the ‘invisible reality’ that damns the life of the body on earth as a pensum and reveals the meaning of the word: ‘defunctus’” (554). Here, language is little more than the handmaiden of dreary, habitual existence. The “pensum”—with its pun on writing, in the English translation at least—is a motif throughout the Trilogy, particularly in the final book, *The Unnamable*, where the Unnamable is condemned to use “their language” though “[i]t’s of me I speak” (TN 318). The impossibility of a private language, as Wittgenstein outlines in the *Philosophical Investigations*, means we use language that is, in a sense, inherited. And yet, the farther one is removed from the circumstances giving rise to such language games—and the closer one comes, perhaps, to Wittgenstein’s unspeakable realm—the less relevant that language may become.

Still, when compelled to write, as Molloy and Moran are, there are ways in which one can attempt to undo the pensum, or go against its grain—the “efficient misuse” Beckett praises in his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, cited above. One of the main strategies employed in both narratives is the resistance to any “sum” at all. As discussed earlier, “a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase” are overturned in both narratives. This trend becomes more and more exacerbated through the course of the Trilogy, until, in *The Unnamable*, “stammer[ing] out your lesson,” obsessively, recursively, becomes the mode of undoing it. As Juliet Taylor-Batty argues, “‘to speak and yet say nothing’ (305) is not mere clichéd automatism, . . . but active resistance to the defining power of language” (171). Another strategy is one Beckett attributes to Proust: the absence of explanation. He describes Proust’s style as impressionistic: “his non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of events” (“Proust” 550). Although one might say that “Proust does little else but explain his characters,” these “explanations are experimental and not demonstrative. He explains them in order that they may appear as they are—inexplicable. He explains them away” (551). Beckett’s remarks are reminiscent of Wittgenstein, who drew from Spengler and Goethe the idea of morphological rather than causal connections between things (Monk 311). In his own method, Wittgenstein insists that “[a]ll *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place” (*PI* §109). And yet, he adds that “this description gets its light—that is to say, its purpose—from the philosophical problems” (§109), just as Proust’s explanations derive their depth from the characters’ inexplicability. In *Molloy*, events and characters are presented with scant explanation. Perhaps the most significant point left unaddressed (and there are many!) is the relationship between the two narratives, that is, between Molloy and Moran. As Juliet Taylor-Batty points out (her

reference is to *The Unnamable*, but could be applied throughout the Trilogy), the reader's search for meaning in the text mirrors that of the narrators' search, thus furthering "the representation, and the experience, of chaos" (176-177).

The hints of a relationship between Molloy and Moran (father-son, id-ego, hunter-hunted, twins, a single narrator, or simply characters [like A and C] inside a larger story) are sustained by the impossibility of a solution—a structural choice that exemplifies Abbot's narrative-defying strange loops, discussed above. Furthermore, this aesthetic choice has its roots deep in Beckett's own worldview and, as we shall see, connects with his autographic strategy. The operation stands in opposition to what Beckett calls "the feasible" in a dialogue with George Duthuit:

B—The only thing disturbed by the revolutionaries Matisse and Tal Coat is a certain order on the plane of the feasible.

D—What other plane can there be for the maker?

B—Logically none. Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.

D—And preferring what?

B—The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. ("Three Dialogues" 556)

For Beckett, the "obligation to express" is tied to an effort to go past (or refuse) "the feasible," "the field of the possible" (556). In his aiming for someplace off the map, Beckett echoes Wittgenstein's statement about the realm beyond expression: "The inexpressible (that which I find enigmatic and cannot express) perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I

was able to express acquires meaning” (*CV* 23). As we have seen, Beckett’s commitment to such an aesthetic arises no doubt from his view of the world (especially postwar), which seems to match the world of *Molloy*: blind, chaotic collapse where one can still, astonishingly, feel pleasure, beauty, and wonder. After all, as Beckett said to Tom Driver, “If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable” (Driver 220). If we add a Wittgensteinian extension to this, what is inexplicable or problematic is precisely where value and meaning lie.

Having nothing to express and an obligation to express reaches a fever pitch in *The Unnamable* (“you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” [*TN* 407]); but in *Molloy*—when we consider the novel’s two parts together, one overlaid on the other—the locus of the drama is the impossibility of narrative set against the obligation to narrate. H. Porter Abbott suggests that Beckett’s postwar oeuvre is largely an autographical project; Abbott distinguishes the term autography, which encompasses “the larger field of self-writing,” from autobiography, “a subset of autography comprehending narrative self-writing and more specifically that most common narrative, the story of one’s life” (2). If the “oldest narrative of identity, older than the quest, is the narrative of parents begetting children” (12), we see this procreation story undone across the spectrum of Beckett’s works. *Molloy*, for example, “would happily be rid of his balls, those ‘decaying circus clowns’” (14), and Moran is ultimately abandoned by Jacques Jr. The linear structure assumed by the story of procreation is also abandoned, as we have seen, in favor of a beginning-less, endless text whose “strange loops” undo a causal, chronological narrative. And yet, as though working against that undoing, Beckett’s texts accumulate repetitions of names, images, and motifs; these “‘finished’ works contain everywhere notes and questions for the

author” (20).²⁸ *Molloy*, with its two-part structure, represents a microcosm of this operation: as Moran comments, “As soon as two things are nearly identical I am lost” (*TN* 150). The effect is, again, paradoxical: while Beckett’s works continually undo the identity of author, narrator, and procreator, Beckett nevertheless builds, through the “constant sense of continuation” (Abbot 20), a presence as creator driven by the “obligation to express.” Beckett’s works “inveigh against the sin of generation,” but also “flaunt the mystery of it” (Abbott 183). As with Wittgenstein, meaning remains the problem—but it remains.

In *Molloy*, we see the writing of autobiography dramatized as a problem of language for its narrators, while the lack of solution to this problem reflects Beckett’s own strategy of autography, driven to express in spite of there being nothing to express. The problem happens at the level of the word, separate and alien as it is to both the world—the “night that tells no tales” (*TN* 125)—and to the writer. Thus the “curse” of writing, acutely felt by Wittgenstein as he departs from the *Tractatus*’ frozen images of memory, whose fixed meaning would lend itself readily to linguistic representation. Instead, we meet a new concept of memory that happens in time, in the world of physical objects; in a way, such a memory is too shape-shifting to accommodate any record of thoughts or events. Finally, Wittgenstein states that we can only write what comes to us as writing. For Molloy and Moran, writing, putting into words, is a penum that seems to deaden the world and exact a painful toll on the writer, who is forced as it were to relive events in spite of the endeavor’s futility. Organization into a linear narrative—in other words, literature—also seems to do violence to memory, forcing it into a mere façade

²⁸ In one very obvious example of these repetitions, Moran names some of his past “patients” as “Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others”—characters from Beckett’s earlier works. What on earth are they doing here, if not suggesting some puzzling connection between this novel and the others, this narrator and the author of the other works? Moreover, the reference indicates a failed narrative in all cases: “Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell them” (*TN* 132).

inimical to the experience of a chaotic world where there are no beginnings and endings, only endless collapse. Literary conventions (which Beckett had long been looking to undo) are thereby implicated with other, more heinous acts of aggression against that which lies outside of the realm of the feasible, or as Wittgenstein might say, outside of human grammar. But since they must write, Molloy and Moran (and Beckett himself) struggle painfully on, flouting narrative and fixed meaning, very much as Wittgenstein does in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Finally, the quest for meaning deteriorates into an animalized state, in which other languages and orders can be perceived just beyond the limit of solipsism. Given the obligation to express, a motif in the Trilogy and later Beckett works, this state may be the aesthetic and ethical precondition for doing so.

Chapter 3. In Search of an Earthly Language: *Death and the Dervish*

we speak about everything and nothing
 even about the weather
 we even speak of those things whereof we cannot speak
 “Whereof one
 cannot speak . . .”
 this fierce formula
 put forth by Wittgenstein
 was reversed by me
 at just the right moment:
 whereof one cannot speak thereof one must speak

something well known to
 women old men children and child poets

—Tadeusz Różewicz

As with Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Beckett’s prose style, Meša Selimović’s novel *Death and the Dervish* bears the marks of war, and even more so, life after war. Not only does it contain a fictionalized account of the tragic death of Selimović’s brother, but its form and thematic preoccupation with language can also be traced back to the author’s personal experiences in the Second World War and in the postwar transition from conflict to peace. Likewise, the novel has a narrative trajectory similar to Part Two of *Molloy* and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, in which a belief in order and an absolute language of truth breaks down, eventually giving way to other ideas about language and man’s place in the world. Although it is at first glance—and by the author’s own acknowledgement—a rather classically structured novel (certainly when compared with *Molloy*), *Death and the Dervish* nevertheless possesses a uniquely amorphous style whose “inner landscape does not conform to a rational understanding” (Selimović, *PMR* 332). This “inner landscape” is dominated by the protagonist’s inner state rather than externalized action (Crnković, *PPUS* 80), while at the same time questioning the existence and value of internal and external states, as well as the nature of a so-called “human language.”

The novel takes place in 18th-century Bosnia, in the far reaches of the Ottoman Empire. Its narrator, Ahmed Nuruddin, is a dervish of the Mevlevi order, which he describes as “the most widespread and purest of orders” (*DD* 6). Founded by the followers of celebrated Turkish poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi-Rumi after his death in the 13th century, the Mevlevi order (perhaps most famously known as the whirling dervishes) represents “the most powerful, most severe, most pure witness among the various Islamic holy orders” (Cooper xvii). As sheikh of his *tekke* (the complex of buildings housing the order of dervishes), Nuruddin stands as the most prominent religious figure in his community (the *kasaba*—a provincial Ottoman town) and a faithful servant of God. He records his first-person account in installments; the initial catalyst for writing is the shock, confusion and grief at his younger brother’s sudden, inexplicable arrest and execution. Unused to dealing with worldly affairs and conflicted as to how to approach the matter, Nuruddin hesitates to intervene on his brother’s behalf until it is too late. The trauma of loss—and the discovery of the corrupt powers behind it—inspire a rebellious streak in the dervish, encouraged and supported by a brave, charismatic new friend, Hassan. The reader follows Nuruddin through his own imprisonment and release, reflection and transformation, until a series of events brings him into the very world of political power he had despised. Unable to resolve his sense of injustice any other way, Nuruddin turns to a philosophy of hatred and ultimately finds himself ensnared in a plot that coerces him to betray his only friend, ultimately leading to his own demise.

Written between 1962 and 1966, and published in Sarajevo in 1966, *Death and the Dervish* met with a substantial critical and popular success that has endured through to the present day in the former-Yugoslav region. Gordana Crnković posits that the novel’s popularity “may itself be largely attributed to the specific intensity and force of [its] language”—that is, “a

language of a human, mortal individual that is both the language of prose and the language of poetry” (*PPUS* 80). Just as compelling as the “presence of sound” in the novel (80) is the dervish’s search itself—arguably a failed one—for an ordinary language in an ordinary world.

3.1 The Return of the Soldier from the Field

In a rough sketch of the structure of his novel, Meša Selimović writes: “the brother is at the foundation of all events in the novel, [and] that is the foundational element of composition” (*S* 181). This is probably as true for himself personally as it is for his text. In late 1944, Selimović’s oldest brother was tried and executed by the Communist Party—the charge was having taken furniture from a Communist warehouse. The Ustaše²⁹ had raided his apartment during the war and left him with nothing; he was expecting the arrival of his wife, who was returning from a concentration camp (*S* 170). For Selimović, the shock of this injustice was compounded by the fact that he himself had become an ardent Party member. He and his seven siblings had participated in the Yugoslav Partisan resistance against the Nazi occupation of Bosnia, and in the process he had become a firm believer in the socialist revolution.

Perhaps equally as haunting for Selimović is that a day after learning about his brother’s death (which had happened four or five days earlier), he gave a lecture for the Communist party. The lecture had been previously scheduled and advertised, and he did not cancel it. Although he cannot remember what he said, he writes that what he would like to forget is “that I *wanted* to speak, that I *was able* to speak, that I had the strength to speak, that I did not, as a man, as a brother, rebel against those unnatural obligations that I had imposed upon myself. That makes

²⁹ Members of the fascist Ustaša Croatian Revolutionary Movement, which collaborated with the German and Italian occupation forces in Yugoslavia during World War II.

my action more incomprehensible: if someone had demanded it of me, everything would have been simple, like a multiplication table. As it is, it is a nightmare” (*S* 171-172). The pain of his brother’s death and the guilt of his inability to rebel against “the revolution that eats its own children” (172) remained with Selimović for decades to come.

Had he not already had some contact with literature by that time, he continues, “such a tragedy would have led me to the idea of telling someone, in the form of a written confession, about my anguish. That kind of primitive and simplified motivation for writing is ultimately also the most natural.” With him, however, things were more complicated: the more he thought about his brother, the less he could find the strength to talk about him. In 1944 he left Bosnia for Belgrade, Serbia in an effort to create some physical and mental distance, and devoted himself to writing about partisan themes (such as sacrifice for others), “bitterly clinging to the broken remains of my earlier enthusiasm” (172). Realizing this was a form of self-delusion, he stopped writing. Other personal hardships followed, and he began writing again—this time about his brother—but it was too raw with emotion, and “everything turned out too private, too pamphlet-like, a wild lament relevant only to me” (173-174). Thus began a years-long preparation in which Selimović honed his skill at writing novels, sensing that the work about his brother would take that form. Besides mastering technical matters such as plot, structure, and character, he was in search of a language adequate “for my hand and my soul,” one that was fit for his story (175).

Selimović claims that the only similarity between his life and his novel is the question, “What am I after that sentence, a bereaved and embittered brother or an insecure, uncertain party member?” (176). Nuruddin’s dilemma after the unjust killing of his brother reflects Selimović’s own; it is a question, Selimović adds, of personal feeling and political belief (not a new theme, but specific in the dervish’s case where they are one and the same). We see many other aspects

of Selimović's long effort to write this book in the book itself: rebellion, natural and unnatural responsibilities, the need to confess, and the search for an adequate, personal language, one that is relevant and understandable to others (there is no such thing as a private language, Wittgenstein would remind us), yet pliant and subtle enough to convey a broad spectrum of emotions. Embedded in these questions is a problem that Wittgenstein felt was a language problem: one's relationship to the world. In *Death and the Dervish*, language use and world-views are intimately connected; the dervish, estranged from both the ordinary world and the otherworldliness of his faith, is often at a loss for words, regretting what he does and does not say. Related to this is another Wittgensteinian problem: is there an a priori order to the world? If there is none, or if it is unknowable to us, how are we to live?

Ahmed Nuruddin is not the only Selimović protagonist to face the problem of orderliness, on both existential and linguistic terms. Commenting on an earlier novel, *Silences*, critic Miroslav Egerić identifies Selimović's preoccupation with this issue as specific to the postwar period, when order is suddenly (re)introduced: "[P]eace is the removal of anxiety about life, the cessation of endangerment to being, the possibility for life to develop in senses (*smislovima*) that earlier had not been present" (13). While this sounds like a positive and welcome change, for those who had matured under the partisan resistance's collective enthusiasm and clarity of purpose, the transition to peace may not be so easy. After the war's passionate, irrational "concentration of meaning," the writer-narrator of *Silences* is left to face himself in a world with new values whose meaning is conferred and controlled by means of facts and documentation (14). Having fought in the war, he now struggles to adjust to this postwar world, resisting the new orderliness by writing in a lyrical, stream-of-conscious style: "I write, but I put nothing in order" (qtd. in Egerić 13). Likewise, *Death and the Dervish*'s Ahmed Nuruddin, as we learn in

the middle and at the end of his narrative, was also a soldier in his youth, and experienced all of war's dramatic intensity. Later, when he tells a young man about his days on the battlefield, his listener asks why Nuruddin describes that time as the "purest hour in one's life":

"Because a man forgets himself."

"What does he get from that? And what does anyone else get from it?"

He would never know anything of our enthusiasm. (*DD* 444)

This passage from the end of the novel (so strikingly reminiscent of Wittgenstein's own sentiments about serving on the front in World War I) throws retrospective light on Sheikh Nuruddin's character. Indeed, though he does not say it explicitly, his writing seems to be carrying on the same tradition of resistance as the *Silences* narrator, driven by a necessity to create a space where that intensity and enthusiasm can live again. If one gives in to the stream just enough, even writing about oneself can be a kind of self-forgetting.

3.2 The Trial of Faltering Shadows

One of the most arresting moments of the novel is the very opening, in which Nuruddin introduces himself and his reasons for writing. Like Wittgenstein's prefaces to the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, as well as Molloy's opening in Part One of Beckett's novel, it is a remarkable, ambivalent piece of apology. As he begins his "story," he has not yet reached the end of it: he has started writing after certain events occurred (his brother's execution, followed by his own arrest and liberation), but will continue to write afterwards, as more events unfold. The dervish's manuscript opens with an invocation:

Bismilâhir-rahmanir-rahim!

I call to witness the ink, the quill, and the script, which flows from the quill;

I call to witness the faltering shadows of the sinking evening, the night and all she
enlivens;

I call to witness the moon when she waxes, and the sunrise when it dawns.

I call to witness the Resurrection Day and the soul that accuses itself;

I call to witness time, the beginning and end of all things—to witness that every
man always suffers loss. (*DD* 3)

The verses are followed by an author's footnote explaining that they are "from the Koran"; more precisely, however, they are "a montage of sometimes substantially altered verses from various chapters of the Koran" (Crnković, *PPUS* 81). Moreover, the last line contains a crucial omission: in the Koran the passage continues, "man is [deep] in loss, except for those who believe, do good deeds, urge one another to the truth, and urge one another to steadfastness" (S. 103, 2-3). The use of the Koran, and the way in which it is used, establishes at the outset one of the major conflicts of Nuruddin's narrative: the conflict between sacred language and language as an individual uses it. On the one hand, as Gordana Crnković points out, "by starting the novel with the 'Basmala' phrase (meaning 'in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'), which starts all but one chapter (*sura*) of the Koran, the text calls for the reader's undivided supreme attention, the attention that is given a sacred text" (*PPUS* 81). And yet, what follows is far from sacred; rather, it is an individual's account of his personal struggle, in which, among other things, he calls his own faith into question. Selimović's "poetic" use of the sacred text is also potentially controversial, given that the Koran is considered the direct word of God (Haleem xv)—not to be

paraphrased, much less cut up and rearranged.³⁰ As if to confirm the transgression at work, Nuruddin's omission of the final line "excludes God as the highest truth and establishes man as the measure of existence" (Andrejević 152). However, this removal does nothing to liberate man in a positive sense. He "always suffers loss"—faith and truth not only cannot reverse this, but they have been removed from the picture entirely.

While the use of the sacred text subtly dismantles the idea of sacredness, these verses also prepare the reader, in their "supreme attention," to be alert to the form and sound of language. In this text, the physical elements of language are as relevant as semantic meaning (Crnković, *PPUS* 82).³¹ Indeed, Ahmed Nuruddin conceives his manuscript as a trial whose witnesses could give nothing but poetic testimony: ink, shadows, the natural world, the cosmos, the soul, time. And his own words often seem to have conjured, or even been written by, these elusive elements, as though they finally enact the merging with the world that he so desired but could not attain. This separation between the holy word's truth and the "judicious lie" of the literary has a long, illustrious history, which Hamid Dabashi, in reference to the Persian tradition, calls "humanism." Such a tradition, Dabashi argues, has existed "neither despite nor because of Islam," but rather represents "a literary manifestation of a cosmopolitan urbanism" that "spells out an entirely different universe of moral and ethical obligations" (2). As opposed to Islamic scholasticism, this humanism is marked by "the primacy of language and the fragility of the subjects (in plural) that have occasioned it" (10). It places the human at its center, celebrating the creative act and plying words in all possible ways: through sound, imagery, wit, irony, brevity, grace, and expansiveness

³⁰ Selimović, a secular Muslim, addresses these concerns, at least partly, when he states that the then-available Serbo-Croatian translation of the Koran was not "good," and thus he "freely stylized" the citations while still "preserving the Koranic spirit" (qtd. in Andrejević 160-161). He has elsewhere expressed his admiration for the Koran as a "poetic and wise text" (*S* 79).

³¹ For an excellent English-language discussion of the poetic elements of the text in the original Serbo-Croatian, see Gordana Crnković, "The Poetry of Prose, the Unyielding of Sound."

(7). Ahmed Nuruddin's staging of his own trial happens not within the world of Islamic jurisprudence, but rather in the dynamic, unpredictable, volatile moral universe of the human word.

We will further explore these ideas in the sections to follow, but for the moment let us return to Nuruddin as he introduces himself and his text in arabesques of contradictions:

I begin this story of mine, for nothing, without profit for myself or others, from a need stronger than profit and reason, that an inscription (*zapis*) by and about myself remain, the written torment of conversation with oneself, with the faraway hope that some solution will be found when the account has been settled, if it is, when I have left a trail of ink on this paper that waits like a challenge. I do not know what will be written, but in the hooks of the letters something will remain of that which was in me, no longer will it vanish into the eddies of mist, as if it had never been, or as if I did not know what had been. In this way I will be able to see myself as I become, that wonder I do not recognize, and it seems to me a wonder that I have not always been what I am now. I am aware that my writing is tangled, my hand trembles at the task of disentanglement before it, at the trial I am commencing, and I am everything at that trial, judge and witness and prosecutor. In everything I will be as honest as I can, as anyone can, because I am starting to doubt that earnestness and honesty are the same, earnestness is the certainty that we are speaking the truth (and who can be certain of that?), while there are many honesties, and they do not agree with one another. (*DS* 11)³²

³² Citations marked "DS" denote the original *Derviš i smrt* ("The Dervish and Death," in my own translation), while "DD" is for citations from the Rakić-Dickey translation. My translations rely heavily on the Rakić-Dickey translation, but with modifications particularly to syntax in

Although he initially claims that there is no profit or reason to his writing, through this dense, “tangled” passage a picture gradually emerges of Nuruddin’s dynamic, complex need to write. His intention is to leave an “inscription/write-up” (*zapis*) about himself, or more specifically of conversations with himself. He also wants to leave a trace of himself in the text: this may be partly from the very human desire that something of us remain after our death, but Nuruddin also specifies his hope that he will finally be able to recognize himself. He makes interesting use of the present tense at one point, suggesting that he is emerging along with the text itself: “to see myself as I *become*” (“*da vidim sebe kako postajem*”). Only when all is finished does he hope to find a solution—possibly to those unendurable conversations with himself. His project is an attempt at disentanglement (*otplitanje*), while the writing itself is tangled (*zapleteno*): this is one of the central paradoxes of the text, where form and intention seem to work against each other.

The paradox is reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian concept of *Übersicht*, an overview that should afford clarity of what is before one (*CV* 973). Clarity, Wittgenstein maintains, requires courage—hence the dervish’s shaking hand. And yet, there are things that cannot be surveyed, as Hans Sluga argues, including the form of human life (110). In such cases, whatever disentanglement can be hoped for must occur in pieces, rather than at the level of a totality. How small the pieces are depends on the part being surveyed, and if they are small enough, the contradictions between them may indeed lead to a tangled form. The act of writing in order to see oneself is a Sisyphean task: becoming happens along with the writing, and there is never a moment when the task is finished. In that sense, the story really is “for nothing, without profit”

order to more closely reflect the original. In the first sentence here I use most of Crknović’s suggestions in “The Poetry of Prose, the Unyielding of Sound” (306, n. 11). As Crknović observes, the Rakić-Dickey translation breaks down many of Selimović’s long run-on sentences, and the result is a translation that is more normative and easier to read than the original, bereft of an important aesthetic and thematic element. There are other issues such as prosody and word choice; my translations certainly fall short in one way or another.

for the writer or others. Be that as it may, Nuruddin harbors hope for some kind of outcome, however flawed. In fact, he seems to embrace paradox as he declares his writing to be a trial in which he must accuse, testify, and judge. But such an undertaking is enormous, reminiscent of the moment in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* where Josef K., accused of an unknown crime, decides to write a complete account of his life, including an assessment of whether each of the actions he took was right or wrong. Overwhelmed by the impossibility, he stares at the blank pages before him and never writes a word. In his inability to write, Josef K. might be said to have abided by Wittgenstein's proposition, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (*TLP* 7). Ethics, for Wittgenstein, remains beyond the realm of logical language. To render a true, complete account of one's life with the intention of disentangling, achieving clarity, and passing judgment is not possible.

Nuruddin, however, seems to have found a working approach for his autobiographical record that mirrors the eventual shift in Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy. By distinguishing between being honest (*pošteno*) and being earnest or sincere (*iskren*), he overcomes the impossible injunction to write, with certainty, the truth. Instead, he has set "honesties" as guideposts, however contradictory or confusing they may be. This approach resonates with the literary humanism discussed above, particularly with one of its most brilliant exponents, Sheykh Mosleh al-Din Sa'di Shirazi, better known simply as Sa'di. The 13th-century Persian poet and prose stylist famously put forth the idea that "a judicious lie is better than a seditious truth" (qtd. in Dabashi 1). As Dabashi explains, the tradition that sprung from Sa'di "is replete with gems of worldly wisdom, at the heart of which always dwells the twist of a verbal pun informing a moral paradox, where harmful truth-telling, for example, must yield to the wisdom of a white lie. Only in the literary space—with poetic license—thus crafted and made viable can a lie be celebrated

and privileged over truth” (2). In *Death and the Dervish*, Ahmed Nuruddin thus decides to reach for whatever worldly wisdom he possesses (in his case, generally tortuous and tortured experiences interspersed with moments of intense beauty), which often amounts to paradox and puzzles. Nonetheless, this seems to be the only way for him to go on.

As we shall see, the “testimony” of his text is far from any reasonable litigation; rather, it is much like the non-logical language that Wittgenstein describes in *A Lecture on Ethics*: nonsensical expressions “whose nonsensicality [is] their very essence” (8). That is to say, they cannot be rephrased as “a statement of fact” (2), and even amount to a “misuse” of language (8).³³ In Wittgenstein’s view, this is characteristic of statements connected to ethical and religious experiences (and we might add aesthetic experiences, given that he equated the aesthetic with the ethical³⁴). His point was not that such expressions had no value; rather, it was a warning against attempts to establish a logically founded “science” of ethics. Nevertheless, the use of these nonsensical expressions, such as “how extraordinary that the world should exist” (4), reveals the human tendency to want to go “beyond significant language” (8). Like Nuruddin, Wittgenstein sees this as “useless”: “This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense.” That is not to say that it has no value; on the

³³ Wittgenstein illustrates this “misuse,” with the following example: “If I say ‘I wonder at the existence of the world’ I am misusing language. . . . It has a perfectly good and clear sense to say that I wonder at something being the case, we all understand what it means to say that I wonder at the size of a dog which is bigger than any one I have ever seen before . . . In every such case I wonder at something being the case which I could conceive not to be the case. I wonder at the size of this dog because I could conceive of a dog of another, namely the ordinary size, at which I should not wonder. . . . But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing” (*LE* 5).

³⁴ Cf. “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics” (*NB* 83).

contrary, “it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (8). Indeed, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein often examines expressions that may have no logical sense, exploring what their use can tell us about human psychology. Likewise, Sheikh Nuruddin’s distinction between certainty and honesty offers a subtle distinction in terms of how one approaches such expressions. While speaking them with *certainty* might imply the confidence of a scientific statement of fact and an eye towards consistency, approaching with *honesty* suggests an awareness that what one is saying may seem nonsensical and contradictory. Indeed, though they are of “no benefit,” the dervish’s tangled lines have value as a testimony to the tendencies of the human mind. This, it seems, is precisely what Meša Selimović intended. In one interview, he talks about how his novel has no single, foundational idea—an unavoidable condition for a novel without a theme. Rather,

summarizing my life experience, I wanted to express the intensity of life in its many aspects, impressed by the inconsistency of human thought, the rapid and unexpected turns of emotions and moods. Following my own path, and at my own risk, of course, and wanting only *to say and not to prove*, I created characters who are quite inconsistent, who very often contradict themselves, who do not respect or remember a thought from yesterday or the moment before, whose actions do not lead to a crucial decisive step, so it looks as though I as a novelist lose time analyzing human zigzagging, but the final act happens unforeseen, like psychological unexpectedness. (*PMR* 295, emphasis added)

The zigzagging and the nonsense are crucial factors in composing this record of torment.

Comparing Selimović's remarks with Wittgenstein's 1931 plans for an autobiography yield some telling differences. Wittgenstein, with his longtime insistence on description over explanation, wanted to show himself without justification or defense (Monk 320). Instead, he aspires to more control and usefulness: "to spread out my life clearly, in order to have it clearly in front of me, and for others too. Not so much to put it on trial as to produce, in any case, clarity and truth" (qtd. in Monk 291). As I have argued above—and as Wittgenstein himself seems to have realized—such an overview is impossible. As for Sheikh Nuruddin, he makes no claims to truth, and is prepared to judge his actions. However, there appears to be no defendant in his "trial," only "judge and witness and prosecutor." In this defenseless trial with witnesses only, his confusion and apprehension are understandable: "The long rows of these lines will remain as a testimony, or an accusation. . . . Whose accusation is it? And against whom? Against me or against others? No matter, there is no longer any way out, this writing is as unavoidable as life or death. What must be will be, and my guilt lies in being what I am, if that can be guilt" (*DD* 5). He turns himself over to the text, be it testimony or accusation, as though the text were he himself, fate itself, the trace he is determined to leave. His writing seems just beyond his control, with a spirit of rebellion that may draw things from him against his will (5), and an organic quality that grows and changes along with the writer (6). In a way, he is one step ahead of the Wittgenstein of 1931, for Nuruddin already anticipates the "criss-cross" and "meandering" journey we find in *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* 4e): "I can feel how [things] are piled up in the stores of my brain, all connected, all pulling at one another. None of them exists independently, and still there is a sort of order in that turmoil, and one of them always leaps out from among the others, I do not know how" (*DD* 8).

The chaotic, unpredictable movement of these thoughts is echoed two paragraphs later in a passage describing the river that flows through the tekke: “The river is like me, turbulent and foamy at times, but more often calm, inaudible. I was sorry when they dammed it up below the tekke and diverted it into a trench to make it obedient and useful, so it would run through a trough and drive a mill wheel, and I was happy when it swelled, destroyed the dam, and flowed free. But I knew that only tamed waters milled wheat” (*DS* 15). The rest of his story is full of similar descriptions of the natural world, in which his attitude resembles that which he has towards language and himself. He admires above all wildness and freedom, yet acknowledges it must be reined in for the purposes of man. Still, his introduction closes with a statement of ambivalence, unsure whether the control man exercises can come to any good: “I look at these long rows of words, the tombstones of my thoughts, and I do not know whether I have killed them, or given them life” (*DD* 9).

3.3 The Great Silence Between Earth and Sky

As much as his testimony is “about me and no one else” (*DD* 8) and an effort to see how he becomes what he is, Nuruddin also writes in the hopes of a reconciliation with the world, from which he has become estranged: “The world has suddenly become a secret to me, and I to the world, we have come face to face, looking at each other in amazement, we do not recognize each other, do not understand each other anymore” (*DS* 15). This world is a kind of mirror of his self: “the world sways with me, because it cannot be in order if there is no order within me” (*DD* 5). His words strongly recall Wittgenstein’s remarks on solipsism in the *Tractatus*: “The world and life are one” (5.621), and yet “[t]he subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit

of the world” (5.632); “[t]he self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it” (5.64). Nuruddin seems to say with Wittgenstein, “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (5.6), and through language he hopes to reestablish that world for himself.

Questions about the nature of the world and man’s place in it preoccupy Nuruddin throughout his account. Danica Andrejević comments that the novel “shows man’s utopian attempt to establish an unrealizable connection between self and world. Everything in this novel has its source in the question of the relationship with the world” (144). Certainly Nuruddin’s situation is very specific: as a dervish, he is accustomed to the belief that “[w]orldly life is treacherous, eternity is better” (*DD* 11). However, he begins his narrative at the breaking point when, summoned to comfort a sick man, he suddenly doubts his ability to say the words he has spoken so many times: “How could I now tell the dying man: follow the path of your Lord obediently, when I shuddered at that hidden path, of which my minute knowledge did not have the slightest notion?” (13). The mysterious arrest of his brother ten days prior has shaken his certainty that death is merely “a change of state” (12), and he comes “to believe in the horror of death” (13). To make matters worse, it is Saint George’s Eve: an erstwhile pagan holiday marking the beginning of summer, the traditions of which were carried over after many Bosnians’ eventual conversion to Islam. The dervish observes the frenzied rites celebrating youth and sensuality, feeling completely alienated: “I felt separated from all of it. . . . I had not known that the world could become so disfigured in day” (31). Despite (or perhaps because of) his confusion, his belief in eternity prevails, and in the days to follow his reliance on eternal justice stymies his efforts to intervene on his brother’s behalf. Moreover, when he does take steps towards his brother’s release, his lack of knowledge and experience in the “ordinary” world of

the kasaba, including the political machinations that eventually lead to his brother's execution, make him a clumsy, ineffectual advocate.

In the midst of his frustrations, Nuruddin happens upon an elder dervish and his friend conversing about man's place in the world—whether he is a superior master or destructive inhabitant—and neither position satisfies the questions with which the dervish is wrestling. The old and ailing dervish, Hafiz-Muhammed, is known for his “blasphemous” ideas, but has “won the right to be irresponsible, one of the most beautiful and rarest rights in [the] order, and the things that he sometimes said were not considered too harmful” (*DD* 99). His idea is that “moisture and warmth were the sources of life,” and that creatures gradually changed and adapted, evolving over thousands of years. Man, too, “gradually became what he is, adapting to nature slowly, subduing it, the only creature with an intellect. For this reason nature was no longer a secret to him, the space around him no longer a mystery; he conquered and overcame it after his long ascent from worm to master of the earth” (101). This theory, which Nuruddin notes is a modification of ideas from Greek philosophy and the Arabic scholar Avicenna (Ibn Sina), also resembles modern theories of evolution and narratives of humanity's progress and primacy. God is conspicuously absent from this version, as Hafiz-Muhammed's interlocutor, Hassan, jokingly points out. The roguish, unconventional son of the tekke's benefactor also interjects that if man is in fact “master of the earth,” he is “[a] bad master.” For his own part, Hassan believes “man had set up the world badly, . . . although he was not angry that it was so” (101). Nuruddin feels that both men miss the point, which is that man is “nothing” in the world:

was it not naive to think that man was comfortably settled on earth and that this was his true home? . . . Space owns us. We only own it as much as our eyes can pass over it. We think that it sees us, but we don't matter to it; we say that we've

overcome it, but we only make use of its indifference. The earth isn't friendly to us; lightning and the waves of the sea aren't here for us; rather, we exist in them. Man has no true home, he can only wrest one away from those blind powers. . . . Nothing is ours but illusion, and therefore we hold onto it firmly. (102)

These disillusioned, shattering thoughts, previously “unfamiliar” to Nuruddin, have taken root since his brother’s arrest and left him at a loss: no longer comfortable in the familiarity of his faith, he finds no footing in an earthly dwelling, either. The only solution, he thinks, is either to be “irrational or invulnerable,” or to become “sheer strength” (102). His position strongly recalls Wittgenstein’s notebook entries from the trenches of World War I: “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless. I can only make myself independent of the world—and so in a certain sense master it—by renouncing any influence on happenings” (*NB* 73). Wittgenstein was trying to work out a solution to his own fears by barricading his inner being from external events (*Monk* 128). But the path of renunciation would not appeal to Hassan, who feels that we must find a way to live in the midst of the world such as it is: “Man shouldn’t become his opposite. Everything of value in him is vulnerable. Maybe it’s not easy to live in this world, but if we don’t think that we belong here, so much the worse for us. And to wish for strength and insensitivity is to take revenge for our disenchantment. Therefore, it’s not a way out; it’s giving up on everything that man might achieve” (*DD* 103). He is interested in life as it happens, and warns Nuruddin against using any perceived separation from the world as an excuse for the denial of responsibility.

Although here Nuruddin expresses a feeling of incompatibility between man and world, his modes of experiencing the world cover a broad range. He himself is no stranger to the powerful, mysterious forces of the natural world and his own nature, and he finds pleasure in

acknowledging and observing them as long as he is able to maintain control. When he is calm and contained, he has a habit of standing in the moonlight above the river in peaceful meditation, letting “vague desires and the quiet flickers of [his] memory overcome” him; however, whenever he senses inner “commotion,” he confines himself to his room and “the hard, familiar path of prayer” (34). In one moment of “weakness” he is almost completely overcome by the nebulous, undulating atmosphere of Saint George’s Eve: “Everything smelled of a life that is woven out of little voices and movements into something powerful, more powerful than anything I might have wished for. It was inseparable from me, the same as my very self, which was still undiscovered and yet desirous of discovery” (35). Fortunately, he writes, this particular meditation is interrupted and he succeeds in suppressing his own “unknown,” destructive desires.

In his distanced meditations, Nuruddin may be looking for what Wittgenstein calls “*The World as I found it*” (TLP 5.631): a completed compilation of facts about the world in which the so-called subject is never mentioned, for the subject does not exist in that world but rather constitutes its limit (5.632). In the following passage, which bears being quoted at length, the dervish has dismissed the person who interrupted the confused meditation just described, and he stands alone once again. The mood has shifted toward a singular experience of total receptivity to the world around him, coupled with the feeling that his self has dissolved:

I felt as if there were not a single thought inside me, as if my senses had been numbed with shock. But surprisingly, I was aware of everything, more responsive and receptive to everything around me than I had been a moment before. My ear caught the resonant noises of the night . . . I could hear each of them separately, and yet they all merged into a larger drone of water, birds, a light wind, voices lost from afar, the soft murmur of night swaying slowly under the beat of

unknown, invisible wings. And none of that bothers me, or disturbs me, I would like more of those voices, sounds, droning, wingbeats, I would like more of everything outside of me; maybe I heard it all with such clarity so I would not listen to myself.

That was probably the only time in my life that voices and noises, that light and shapes appeared as they really are, like sound, noise, smell, form, like a sign or a manifestation of things beyond me, because I listened and watched as one detached and uninvolved, without sorrow and without joy, neither damaging nor mending them, they had lives of their own without my involvement, unaltered by my feelings. They were thus independent, true, not recast into my concept of them, and they left a somewhat insipid impression, like something foreign and unrecognized, something that happens and exists despite everything, futile and useless. I had withdrawn and had been withdrawn, separated from everything around me, and the world seemed rather ghostlike, alive but indifferent. And I had become independent and impenetrable.

The sky was empty and deserted, it offered neither a threat nor consolation[.] (*DD* 40-41)³⁵

Nuruddin's words bear a striking similarity to those of Moran and Molloy, who write of voices and sounds, "the faint soughing and sighing stirring at night," "the far unchanging noise the earth makes," "the spray of phenomena," and "a faint untroubled sky" (*TN* 44, 35, 106). The world for

³⁵ This is the Rakić-Dickey translation, but with a few slight alterations to more closely match the original. The verbs in the last sentence of the first paragraph have been restored to the present simple and second conditional used in the original. In the second and third paragraphs, where the Rakić-Dickey translation divides into separate sentences some of the independent clauses separated by commas in the original, I have returned to the original punctuation to give a better sense of the rush of language in this effusive passage.

them is decidedly distant: as Wallace Stevens puts it, “without human meaning, / without human feeling” (“Of Mere Being” 5-6). Meaning is a border problem, the distant horizon dividing object and subject, the world and the metaphysical self. Released from this problem of trying to make meaning, Ahmed Nuruddin opens to the world outside of him, sensing its presence separate from him. He experiences the “time of separation” from thoughts, memories and desires as a liberation and a protection of his inner being (as we might imagine Wittgenstein did). However, such a separation is short-lived, and the dervish soon feels “the empty sponge” of his brain beginning “to soak itself full again” (*DD* 41). Only the distance and indifference of the world remain, and the painful awareness of his separation from it.

Enter Hassan: an erudite, worldly man of thirty who left a promising career in Istanbul for the transient life of a cattle driver. He drinks, gambles, and keeps questionable company, and his Dionysian behavior makes him the talk of the town. Yet he is highly intelligent, generous and honest, with a keen sensitivity to the minute pulses of the world around him; in many ways he embodies the harmoniousness and liberation that Nuruddin finds so impossible. The unexpected friendship that forms between them does much to help the dervish: he is gently exposed to the “ordinary” world, both its good and bad sides, and he begins to rethink not only the world, but also language.

3.4 Language Like a Tree

In his *Memoirs*, Meša Selimović recalls his cellmate, Mujo, in the World War II concentration camp of Jasenovac. Mujo spoke more beautifully than anyone Selimović had ever heard: “vivid, well-arranged (*skladno*), a little self-mocking, interesting, sweet,” Mujo’s stories

would always be about himself, particularly about when he appeared in the circus as the “king of iron and steel,” or about others he met, travels, women, friends, enemies, and the bad always lost and the good always won (*S* 111-112). As Selimović notes, it did not matter what he said, but the way he said it—and later attempts to capture Mujo’s style in prose always failed: “Perhaps the secret was in his voice, in the intonation and music of the flowing sentences, in the plasticity of the images, in the warmth with which he addressed me, or all of those things combined, but still much remains unexplained, unsaid when I want to say how it really was” (112). Mujo was not a political prisoner, and so was in a much less grave situation than Selimović. He insisted on sleeping on the concrete floor, leaving the wooden bench for Selimović. Returning from his days with the labor crews, he would bring morsels of bread, bacon, cake or fruit for his cellmate, insisting that he had “found” them (111). And then he would begin to speak, creating a protective zone around the horrors of imprisonment and death “that circles above us like a black bird . . . He led me, as an adult leads a child, protectively. If he had not been so skillful at destroying awareness and circumstances, maybe his weaving would have bothered me; like this, it was the most beautiful gift” (112).

Selimović’s preoccupation with ways of speaking carries over into *Death and the Dervish*, where Nuruddin’s search for grounding in the world happens primarily through language. One could say the novel is full of different languages: the narrator is extremely aware of his own shortcomings in language (particularly spoken), and constantly observes the ways others speak. As a dervish, he has most often sought refuge in the words of the Koran, whose familiarity soothes him and “gives its own meaning to everything in our lives. Those processions of beautiful words about things I knew always lulled me in a strange way. In this familiar circle . . . I felt secure, safe from any traps that men and the world might set for me” (*DD* 47).

And yet, as problems unfold among “men and the world,” Nuruddin begins to question whether his reliance on this familiar language is a mode of escapism. The first moment of realization comes when a fugitive steals into the tekke one evening, having apparently escaped pursuers, and Nuruddin neither gives the man away nor helps him to hide more securely. Flustered by this moral dilemma (whether it is worse to unwittingly help a criminal or condemn an innocent man—a question that starkly mirrors the situation with his brother), he retreats to his room, craving the safety of the holy book. Suddenly, however, it seems wrong to seek “the protection of familiar thoughts. What was I afraid of? What did I want to escape from?” (47). While the lulling comfort of old, familiar words has its place, it must not become a barrier against the world, nor a means of hiding or avoiding responsibility. (Note that the comfort derived here from the “hard path of prayer” differs from the protection that Mujo’s improvised, enlivening stories offered the imprisoned Selimović.)

As we have discussed above, *Death and the Dervish* presents a complex picture of the Koran: on the one hand there is the wisdom, passion, and beauty of its language, while on the other hand there is the wide range of dangers associated with any rigidly fixed system of absolutes. Selimović himself greatly admired the Koran for its poetry. As a child in Bosnia he had attended Islamic school, where they studied its verses, and he was proud of the fact that his novel was the first in European literature to extensively quote from and refer to the text (Andrejević 161). While *Death and the Dervish* in many ways celebrates the Koran, it also warns against certain dangers, particularly the misuse of the holy book by those in power. Nuruddin first encounters the iron wall of his beloved text when he is trapped in a vicious language game with the *kadi*, or municipal judge. He goes seeking help for his brother (whom the kadi himself

has wrongly imprisoned) and is horrified by what he finds. Under such dire circumstances, he is faced with a man who seems more dead than alive:

But maybe most troublesome of all was that he never once raised his voice, or changed the way he spoke. He did not get excited or angry, and did not laugh. Words fell slowly from him, yellow, waxen, foreign. Again and again I wondered at his ability to arrange them so well and put them in the right places, because it seemed that they were amassed somewhere in the cavity of his mouth, about to spill out of him and flow away in disorder. He spoke patiently, persistently, confidently; he never once doubted himself; he considered no other possibility, and the few times that I contradicted him he seemed truly surprised, as if his ears had deceived him, as if he had met a lunatic. (*DD* 144)

As the kadi incessantly “reel[s] off phrases from books,” the idea of a “human language” takes on a new significance for Nuruddin. He suspects that the kadi has “forgotten all ordinary words, and that was a terrible thought: not to know a single word of your own, not to have a single thought of your own, to be unable to say anything human, to speak without need or meaning, to speak in front of me as if I were not there, to be condemned to speak by rote” (144-145). For the first time, perhaps, he senses the value of those “honesties,” or even a judicious lie (such as Mujo’s fanciful stories, where veracity has no connection whatsoever to their value)—not as better than holy writ, but as separate and equally necessary. The course of the kadi and dervish’s conversation is reminiscent of the exchange in *Molloy* between Moran and Gabor in the woods, where one party seems to be reproducing a rote language or code, while the other futilely tries to engage him in a spontaneous communication about something of grave importance:

When I said why I had come, he answered with a passage from the Koran:

Those who believe in God and the Last Judgment do not associate with the enemies of Allah and His prophet, even if they are their fathers, or their brothers, or their kindred.

I cried out:

“What has he done? Will anyone tell me what he has done?”

You who are faithful, do not ask about that which might cast you into distress and despair if it were told to you openly.

“I’ll be indebted to you as long as live. I’ve come to have it told to me openly. And I’m already in distress and despair.”

They walked the earth proudly and plotted wicked intrigues.

“Whoever you’re talking about, I can’t believe he’s my brother. God says that of the infidels. My brother is one of the faithful.”

Woe to those who do not believe. (145)

In this exchange, what has been the dervish’s language of solace, light, and justice is turned against him, thwarting every effort to “draw [the kadi] into human conversation” and thus save his brother. It seems to be a battle between earth and sky, a man’s “ordinary words” versus the “words of the Creator.” “I tried to place my minute troubles on the scale of ordinary human justice,” writes Nuruddin, but “[h]e drove me to apply eternal measures to my case, if I were not to deprive it of any value at all. At that time I was not even aware that I had lost my brother in those dimensions of eternity” (146). When Nuruddin eventually acquiesces to the kadi’s language game, using the words of the Koran instead of his own, he no longer seems to speak of his brother, but rather to criticize the kadi. In their “duel of thousand-year-old words” they resemble “two broken fountains that spilled stagnant water”—an image starkly contrasting those

of rushing water and pulsing nature elsewhere in the book (145). At one point they even use the same words, but meaning “something completely different” (146). Worn out from desperation, Nuruddin retreats, dismayed that he has forgotten his brother, and concerned that he has said what he should not have, “[b]ecause even the Koran is dangerous if you use God’s words about sinners to refer to those who decide who the sinners are” (147).

The dervish’s behavior in this scene marks a significant change, no doubt brought on in part by a conversation with Hassan just prior to the meeting with the kadi. In that exchange, Nuruddin opens up to Hassan with unusual vulnerability, expressing his desire to help his brother, and his humiliation at having failed so far. As opposed to measuring his words carefully, here he speaks “to satisfy a need that was growing inside me, to fill myself with tenderness and warmth”; Hassan’s presence seems to draw from him “an unusual, inner truth” (127). However, this openness is quickly suppressed when Hassan responds with an enthusiastic offer to help Nuruddin’s brother escape prison. Dismayed by the way Hassan has misinterpreted his words, Nuruddin tersely rejects the offer, arguing that a prison break would not clear his brother’s name—it was better to defend “justice” and free his brother through legal avenues (unaware that such avenues did not exist). Hassan tries to persuade him to reconsider, warning that the dervish’s attempt to save justice and the world will only result in a senseless death, and nothing will change. But Nuruddin will not be swayed:

“Then that’s the will of God.”

“Can’t you find any other, more human words?”

“No. And I don’t need them.” (131)

The subsequent encounter with the kadi makes it clear that Ahmed Nuruddin *does* need “human words,” particularly when the language of justice cannot admit the reality of his very human

brother. Nuruddin's ongoing effort to access a "human language" becomes a major component of his narrative, and, I would argue, the very narrative itself.

But what is the nature of this human language? As we can gather from the anecdote about Mujo, Selimović deeply admired people who could speak beautifully and spontaneously.³⁶ And yet, we should be careful to distinguish this quality from "naturalness," whose value Selimović questions as both a personal and literary quality:

I am always shocked by the force of the way common people openly call (*otvorenog narodskog kazivanja*) things by their real name, even though I know there is a strength in that forthrightness. . . . I am not sure whether naturalness is a virtue or a vice. This much-desired and valued naturalness in behavior and etiquette, as in artistic expression, is only the illusion of naturalness; in fact, it is stylized, something achieved, practiced, and therefore unnatural behavior. (*S* 150)

Here Selimović is discussing language use both in life and in writing, and his own prose style, which he calls "stylized," reflects his ambivalence toward directness in speech.³⁷ In his suspicion about the cult of naturalness, he displays a line of thought similar to Wittgenstein's—that is, that even what we think of as naturalness is a game that has to be learned. No wonder then that he

³⁶ He did not count himself among them, however: "I have not been able to retell any event orally in a more or less organized way, and to this day, my whole life, I tangle (*zapletem*) that which I want to say so much that people look at each other in confusion" (*S* 151). Later he came to believe that speaking well and writing well are rarely gifts that go together.

³⁷ He devotes further attention to this issue in his study on Vuk Karadžić, the famed 19th-century reformer of the Serbian (Serbo-Croatian) language. Selimović praises Vuk's "democratization of the language" (*ZPV* 54) and his contributions to Serbian literature (including a standardized alphabet, a dictionary, compilations of oral poems, and a translation of the New Testament), but also notes that the language lost something in the "revolution," whose emphasis on linguistic practices of the peasant population suppressed contemporaneous efforts to develop a more abstract, intellectual, or spiritual capacity of expression (53).

values a certain aesthetic sensibility over directness, a sensibility that seems to spring from a goodness of intention (like Mujo's) that may not be explained but rather felt.

Selimović devotes a significant portion of *Death and the Dervish* to the value of speaking well, as epitomized in the figure of Hassan. Whereas Nuruddin often regrets the way he says or does not say things ("I wanted to say more, something more ceremonious . . . like in a song, but it all came out muddled" [DD 15]; "we should not have been talking like this" [109]; "If only I had begun to speak" [109]; "It should all have been said in a simple way, without mincing words" [135]), Hassan always seems to find the right thing to say and the right way to say it—although it is not a matter of being articulate or suave, but rather of being sensitive, patient, and honest. He is even able to calm an unbroken horse with his gentle, soothing speech, and Nuruddin's description of this event most vividly illustrates his friend's gift: he approached the animal "carefully, without haste, . . . without trying to trick it, right until the horse stopped, calmed by something, maybe by Hassan's steady movements, maybe by his soft, indistinct words, which gurgled constantly, like water in a stream, maybe by his concentrated gaze or his lack of fear or anger" (119). Here we see Hassan's uncanny ability to sense the needs of another (be it an animal or human); this keeps him closely connected to the world in both its wild and domestic forms.

Like Selimović, Hassan learned the importance of conversation while in prison, from a fellow prisoner whose skill at conversation "built a bridge of cobwebs between us, a bridge of words. They fluttered above us in an arch; they rose and dropped, like the waters of a river. He was the source; I was the mouth. A secret was woven between us, and the beautiful madness called conversation worked a miracle: two dead logs that lay side by side suddenly revived, and were not completely separated" (318). The natural imagery Hassan employs is a leitmotif in

Nuruddin's manuscript, where most positive changes include a movement from stasis to liveliness and natural freedom. This "incorrigible babbler" becomes the single source of joy in the dervish's life: "the roots of his words were deep in the ground, and their branches spread out into the sky, . . . I do not know what it was in them that filled me with joy. I barely remember some of his stories, but they intoxicated me with something unusual, bright and beautiful: stories about life, but more beautiful than life" (315). The striking metaphor of the tree is a repetition of the chapter's epigraph, taken from the Koran, sura 14.24: "A beautiful word is like a tree, its roots are deep in the ground, its branches rise up to the sky" (310). In the context of the novel, it is a potent summary of what Nuruddin so admires in Hassan and aspires to himself: language that is rooted in the earth—of human experience, of concern for others, of one's own inner need to speak (maybe for no reason)—and at the same time reaching beyond the ordinary, perhaps with beautiful sound, with intelligence or wisdom. Most importantly, a tree is something that lives and grows, that bends with the wind and changes with the seasons.

As we have noted elsewhere, the question of ordinary language grew to be of utmost importance for Wittgenstein, whose examination of language in its natural habitat (i.e., everyday use) forms the basis of "the struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language" (*PI* §109). But for all his insistence on looking at what is before us, he is also first to admit the murky roots hidden from the eye, and the leaves reaching up towards the sky's infinite expanse: in fact, one might say he was clearing the way for (by clearing philosophy of!) "imponderable evidence" (*PPF* §358-360) and mystical "nonsense" (*LE* 8). Indeed, much of human language is beyond the realm of reason, which brings us back to Hassan, for whom the language game is not about making a point, but rather a way to become closer to people. It may not happen with everyone, he says, but "one should always try. You'll ask: Why?

For no reason. So there'll be less silence and emptiness'" (DD 318). His view of conversation sharply contrasts the circumscribed forms of communication that Nuruddin is accustomed to at the tekke, where there is little room for the unpredictable or personal:

Although we lived together, we knew little about one another, since we never talked about ourselves, never openly. We only talked about what we had in common. And that was good. Personal matters were too subtle, murky, and vain; we were to keep them to ourselves if we could not suppress them entirely. Our conversations were reduced to general, familiar phrases that others had used before us, phrases that were tried and safe, because they protected us from surprises and misunderstandings. A personal tone is poetry, an opportunity for distortion, or arbitrariness, and to leave the realm of general thought is to doubt it. Therefore, we knew each other according to what was unimportant, or what was identical in each of us. In other words, we did not know each other at all; nor was it necessary. To know each other meant to know what we should not. (59)

This carefully controlled environment keeps its members at a safe distance from one another, assuring the smooth functioning of the community; should anyone attempt a more "personal tone," they would likely feel something like Wittgenstein's lion.³⁸ The fact is, language rooted in ordinary life can be quite extraordinary: hence the "poetry" of "a personal tone." Nuruddin's description of the tekke also underscores the significance—perhaps even rebellion—of his own act of writing, which, like Hassan's conversation, is "for no reason," "for nothing," yet "from a need stronger than profit or reason." To return to the opening paragraph of the text (discussed in detail above), Gordana Crnković comments that it can be read as "a poetic utterance that talks

³⁸ *Philosophy of Psychology*, §327: "If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it." (See also Chapter One for more discussion of this proposition).

about . . . why someone tells a story[,] . . . about telling that can neither be subsumed under the goals of profit or utility (narrative, psychological, social, political, historical, or any other) nor classified under reason (anything that we already know, understand and can recognize)[,] . . . that stems from a need that is physical and unstoppable” (*PPUS* 306, n. 12).

This very human need is what Selimović refers to when he questions how he was able to give a lecture one day after learning of his brother’s death. Like the dervishes of the tekke, he was trying to “separate those two spheres, the private and the general (as if that were possible!)” (*S* 172). Perhaps, he continues, he was clinging to the only continuity he knew, “afraid to break with myself as the revolution had made me,” or maybe he didn’t feel that “in the midst of so many deaths I had the right to take my loss as a reason to abandon the revolution that had become the meaning and essence of my existence” (172). But the fraternal bond is inborn, natural, while political and social obligations are man-made, imposed. As if rewriting his own history, Selimović gives Ahmed Nuruddin his most human moment in the hours after learning of his brother’s death, when he too delivers a speech. Unlike Selimović’s lecture, Nuruddin’s is completely extemporaneous; he addresses a crowd of men gathered in the mosque after prayer, speaking personally and vulnerably about the loss of his brother. He condemns the killing, as well as his own inability to save him, and openly grieves that he is left alone with his sorrow. His words, a “grievous brotherly prayer,” are unpremeditated, as is the act itself; like Hassan, he feels no fear, only a readiness and acceptance of action (*DD* 200). As if thinking of his own “mistake,” Selimović himself comments about this scene, “Then N. was truly a person” (*S* 185).

3.5 The Rebellion of the Personal Tone

Although there are few instances where Ahmed Nuruddin deviates from controlled, impersonal discourse in speech, his written text is inflected with many instances of “distortion” and “arbitrariness,” including a very striking pattern of realistic scenes that take on surreal characteristics, which are never explained but rather subtly folded into the narrative. The most salient example is the fugitive Is-haq (Nuruddin’s name for him), who one night appears in the tekke as he flees pursuers. The fugitive and the dervish have a strained conversation, in which Nuruddin explains why he cannot shelter the man inside (it would be scandalous), but suggests he hide in the tool shed. The man, in turn, immediately and uncannily perceives Nuruddin’s indecisive weakness and regret at having helped at all. His comments pierce the dervish, who is indeed tormented by these very problems in connection to his brother’s arrest. In the morning, Nuruddin confides in another dervish about the fugitive’s presence, and that dervish in turn calls the police—this, Nuruddin later surmises, is what he had on some level expected (and wanted) the other dervish to do (*DD* 66). But by the time the police arrive there is no trace of the man, other than a set of uneven footprints left by his one bare foot (65). While the tracks provide evidence that he had actually been there, Nuruddin’s description of the event grows hallucinatory at moments. At first, standing in the light, the man’s face was a “white blot,” and his outstretched arms and legs were like forks that blurred in Nuruddin’s vision (45). After moving out of the light, “[h]is face was featureless, blotted out by the half-shadows . . . He had turned into bushes, grown into branches, and would soon begin to sway in the night” (50). The repetition of these extended, highly poetic metaphors of the “man who had turned into branches” (53) confirms their symbolic potency for Nuruddin.

Indeed, this half-man, half-apparition becomes a central figure in Nuruddin's "rebellion," although arguably they meet only this once. He appears again and again, beginning with the very morning after their encounter:

But when I came to the place where we had parted before dawn, I saw the fugitive once more: an obscure smile and a mocking expression hovered before me in the heat that was taking over with the day.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked, watching me calmly.

"I'm satisfied. I don't want to think about you; I wanted to kill you."

"You can't kill me. No one can kill me."

"You overestimate your strength."

"It's you who overestimate it, not I."

"I know. You can't even speak. Maybe you don't even exist any more. I'm thinking and speaking instead of you."

"Then I exist. And so much worse for you."

I tried to smile to myself, feebly, almost defeated. Only moments before I had rejoiced at my victory over him, and over everything he could have meant, but he was already revived in my memory, more dangerous than before. (68)

The "danger" in fact turns into a kind of hope, as the dervish becomes increasingly attracted to ideas of freedom, self-knowledge, and rebellion. Later that same day, after a heartbreaking meeting with his father and the first of several failed attempts to free his brother through legal petition, he senses that the fugitive is standing in the crowd at the midday prayer. He then imagines in great detail a conversation with this man "whose ideas contradicted everything that I could believe," and yet whom he felt he could rely on: "Everything he did was mad, everything

he said unacceptable, but I could confide only in him, because he was unhappy yet honest” (92). He gives him the name Is-haq after a beloved uncle, and, reviving his face before his eyes, tells him at length about his life and the tragedy and uncertainty that have struck him (93-94). While the conversation is imagined, the actual presence of Is-haq remains unconfirmed, as Nuruddin does not actually “turn around to look at him” (94).

Throughout the rest of the narrative, the figure of Is-haq continues to appear unexpectedly—at the back of the mosque, on a crowded street—but the status of the fugitive seems to hover somewhere between reality and an ongoing fantasy of rebellion. In fact, the reality of his existence is a moot point, since phantasms and “real people” are equals before the act of writing. Is-haq’s power reaches its peak when, after Nuruddin’s speech about his brother, the dervish himself is imprisoned and discovers that Is-haq is his cellmate. As on that night in the tekke, Is-haq forcefully confronts Nuruddin’s lack of resolve, fear of his own thoughts, and reliance on “old ways.” Is-haq’s serpentine, even “arbitrary” reasoning “asked questions in order to pose riddles,” and “posed riddles in order to mock them” (235-236). Nuruddin, unused to such “impudent” thinking, criticizes its destructive path and justifies his own hesitation: “It is harder to defend something than to attack it, because everything that is made reality constantly wears down, constantly deviates from the initial idea” (237). This deviation of things “made reality” from the “initial idea” is central to Nuruddin’s struggle: for over half his life, he has been a defender of faith and ideas, against the slings and arrows of life. Is-haq agrees that there is a deviation, only it is not reality that is to blame, but rather the idea: ““The idea drags [life] down because it begins to contradict itself. And then a new idea is developed, an opposing one, and it is good until it begins to be turned into reality. What is, is not good; what is good is what is

desired. When people come across a pretty thought they should keep it under glass, so it won't get dirty'" (237).

The difference between reality and idea is inherent in Wittgenstein's concept of language games, which attempts to show that there is no "super-expression" of language (or there is only the "super-expression," a "philosophical superlative" [*PI* §192]), but rather different forms of communication that we call "languages" based on "family resemblances" (§67-77). He uses the example of a machine qua symbol of movement versus an actual machine, which bends, melts, and breaks down, to illustrate his point that a word's meaning is not predetermined but rather in its use in a specific language game (§193-195). In the dispute between Is-haq and Nuruddin, Wittgenstein's warning against the seduction of philosophical "super-truths" would support Is-haq's argument. Nuruddin himself is struck by Is-haq's words, which seem to deny any possibility of putting the world in order, and, giving in to the other extreme, he engages Is-haq in a "nonsensical" repartee in which the two prisoners joke about banishing their adversaries to earth and making the entire world above ground a prison. Is-haq has finally pushed Nuruddin past the controlled vacuum of ideas.

But the nonsense comes to an abrupt end, and Nuruddin suddenly finds himself alone in the dark cell. Someone has come for his release, and when he asks about Is-haq, the guard does not understand him. This does not lead Nuruddin to question whether he had imagined the entire thing (not even retrospectively, in his narration), but rather to wonder if Is-haq had escaped. Indeed, given the fugitive's mercurial, almost supernatural qualities in the world of the narrative, escape does not seem impossible—after all, we have already witnessed two of his "actual" escapes: first from the men who were chasing him initially, and then from the police who came to look for him in the tekke. In a sense, just as Is-haq challenges many of Nuruddin's

preconceptions, the way in which Nuruddin writes about Is-haq challenges his reader's expectations of a clear division between the factual and the imagined (within the frame of this fictive autobiography). Is-haq is a rebellion within a rebellion: the accounts of Is-haq give Nuruddin the opportunity to present "testimony" for and against ideas and eternity, as well as issues of guilt, hesitation, order, and rebellion. Meanwhile, the descriptions themselves enact their own rebellion, allowing the representation of reality to grow distorted, even nonsensical. Like the narrator of *Silences*, Nuruddin is not putting the world in order. What is crucial here is that he writes this way without metatextual commentary or reference: indeed, an acknowledgement would cancel out the rebellion and make it an exercise in literary style. For him, writing is the utopic space to "realize his full potential" as he cannot in "repressive reality" (Andrejević 140).

An even more intense blurring of outer events and inner fantasy occurs near the very end of the book, when a young man—probably Ahmed Nuruddin's illegitimate son—suddenly arrives at the tekke, having been sent by his mother in hopes that the dervish will take him in. Ironically, Nuruddin has just learnt that there is a death warrant issued for him, and he expects them to come for him at dawn. He does not tell the young man about his situation, nor that he is likely his father; instead, he talks about his days as a soldier, including a massacre that he barely survived. Then his narrative turns inward, it seems, to a young woman (the boy's mother) whom he was supposed to marry, but whose parents, thinking young Ahmed had died in battle, married her off to someone else just days before he returned home. Physically wounded and emotionally broken, Ahmed goes for a walk by the river outside of his village, where he "stood in the water up to my knees and imagined that I was sinking deeper and deeper, the water was up to my chin, to my lips, over my head. . . . small fish swam into my mouth and out of my ears . . . 'Hey!' I

cried, silently, and sat down in the grove between the path and the river, between life and death” (448). This fantasy of drowning leads into another fantasy as he begins to talk to the young woman, telling her that her existence made everything more painful. He summons her “shadow, her absent face, to say goodbye”; suddenly, she appears: “I succeeded in . . . creating her out of the green bushes, out of the water’s reflection, out of the sunlight. She stood, distant, entirely shadows. If a breath of wind came up, she would disappear” (449). This now-familiar trope of people emerging from or merging with natural elements suggests just how insubstantial Ahmed finds earthly human life, particularly at moments of deep anguish. As in the scenes with Is-haq, he continues to speak to this mute apparition, who then suddenly begins to talk, asking him if he is sad. Their dialogue continues, and she finally asks if he wants to “go out into the world together,” offering to leave behind everything and run away with him. If there were doubts as to the young woman’s actual presence, the simple, vulnerable quality of her questions colors in the sketch, as it were. Just when we are wondering whether the wind could in fact blow her away, at once she seems all too real as Ahmed seizes her and pins her to the ground:

The river became silent, the only sound was that of bells within me, unknown and unrung until then, all of my bells, as if they were sounding an alarm. People would gather around; they did not concern me; they did not exist. Oh, my dream, which has become a victim.

Then the bells stopped; the world returned, I regained my sight and saw her reborn, strangled, white on the grass, which was green, like bile; she was transformed into a white river pebble, grown into the ground, a bear’s foot bloomed from her armpit, snowdrop bloomed from between her thighs, catkins from a poplar drifted over her light skin, I did not know whether to leave her to be

buried in them, or to lay her into a deep whirlpool, or to carry her away and place her in the stone grave above the forest. Should I have lain down beside her and turned into spring grass and willow branches?

I left without turning around. I do not know whether she called to me, and I remembered her as strange, like that tombstone. (451)

The swift movement of imagery makes it difficult to parse where the reality ends and fantasy begins: is she there, but not really dead? if she is there, is this rape or love-making? is she not there at all? While the facts suggest that she is there and she does not actually die (we can assume a sexual encounter, since Nuruddin later suspects he has a son; we know she is still alive at the time he is writing), the sheer force of the prose casts everything into doubt, leaving us with a chaotic, poetic rendering of love, violence, grief, and estrangement. The dervish's lyrical narrative return to his war experience at the end of his life reflects the enduring potency of a time when the order of the world dissolved. Unable to realize his one desire and comfort, to be reunited with his sweetheart after returning from battle, Ahmed relinquished the personal and sought refuge in the neat, impersonal order of the tekke. At the end of his "write-up," however, when the world again seems to have lost all sense, he returns to this personal tone as the culmination of his painful, lyrical rebellion.

3.6 Order

On June 1, 1915, Ludwig Wittgenstein records in his notebook: "The great problem round which everything that I write turns is: Is there an order in the world *a priori*, and if so what does it consist in?" (NB 53). He was working out his theory of the form of logic for the *Tractatus*

Logico-Philosophicus; a proposition's logic, he thought, is what tells us about the world and the way it hangs together. By the time he writes *Philosophical Investigations*, however, the order of the world is not something that can be surveyed in its entirety; even language lacks surveyability. Understanding of the world, language, or anything else, consists in "seeing connections," and this is obtained through observing smaller, "surveyable representations" (like those in the *Investigations*) (*PI* §122). But it is not only philosophical work that matters: life also teaches us. As discussed in Chapter Two, we learn to judge what he calls "imponderable evidence" ("subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone" [*PI* §360]) through life experience. Such understanding may allow us to play language games hitherto unknowable to us. Thus, whether or not Wittgenstein abandoned his question of an a priori order, in his later work he turned to the nuances, the inordinate particulars at ground level, for clues to understanding.

In his preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein seems to express some regret that he could not "weld" his results into a "whole," yet acknowledges that the "criss-cross" traveling was "connected to the nature of the investigation" (*PI* 3e). In *Death and the Dervish*, as we have seen, one of the threads of the narrative is the gradual disintegration of Ahmed Nuruddin's belief in eternal order and justice. As the title of the novel suggests, the death of his brother makes the initial cut into his faith, as well as into his perceived connection between man and world. While Is-haq the rebel—half-real, half-imagined—presents the possibility of rebellion in the face of senselessness, the very real figure of Hassan offers a third option: life, which is "larger than any principle" (*DD* 123). The question of order comes up in conversation when Nuruddin visits Hassan and observes the mess of things lying around the house. Whereas Nuruddin relies on a dervish's strict order, in which "each thing must have its place," Hassan is

unable to exercise power over anything. In fact, he even feared order somewhat. Order is finality, a firm law, a reduction of the possible ways of life, the false conviction that we can keep life under control. But life keeps slipping away, and the more we try to keep hold of it, the more it eludes us. . . .

“But how should we live? Without order, without purpose, without any conscious goals that we try to accomplish?”

“I don’t know. It would be good if we could determine a purpose and goals for ourselves, if we could create rules for all of life’s circumstances, if we could establish our imaginary order. It’s easy to invent general principles, looking over men’s heads into the sky and eternity. But try to apply them to the lives of real people, whom you know and maybe love, without harming them. You’ll hardly succeed.” (121)

Here Hassan’s words resemble Is-haq’s from the prison scene: an idea drags life down. Crnković observes that “a simple deductive application of *any* system of ideas ‘onto life’ destroys or would destroy life and people because of the conflation of levels, so to speak, which takes lives to the level of prescriptions embodied in words, words that are by definition *ideas*” (*PYLF* 24). Wittgenstein might caution us against thinking words can represent ethical ideas or principles at all, and certainly warns us of prescriptive thinking that can result from the seduction of philosophical super-ideas. For him, this is a problem of language, the illusion that when we use a word we can “grasp the whole use of [the] word at a stroke.” Indeed, this is sometimes the way we feel and express ourselves, but we must not let that formulation deceive us into thinking we now have the whole future use of the word at our fingertips, as it were: “It becomes strange when

we are led to think that the future development [of the word] must in some way already be present in the act of grasping the use and yet isn't present" (*PI* §197).

Although the dervish understands Hassan's point about the dangers of upholding a strict order, to live like Hassan requires a flexible approach and a comfort with uncertainty, which Nuruddin usually lacks. There is, however, one period after his release from prison when he seems open and vulnerable, not seeking reasons or order: thus begins the second part of the novel. He spends days on end alone, steeped in memories, and writes long, poetic passages about his childhood and youth. Like his memories, he feels "fragmented, consisting entirely of pieces, reflections and shimmers. I consisted entirely of accidents, unknown reasons, of a purpose that had existed and been put aside. And now I no longer knew what I was in that chaos" (*DD* 252). Having surrendered to this sense of fragmentation, he relinquishes the search for structure and sense: "I was no longer looking for reasons, for a whole, for uninterrupted continuities. At the end of everything that I had been trying to determine, to link, and to give sense to, there was a long, black night, and waters that were constantly rising" (253). Like Hassan, he inhabits a state of unknowing, yet he cannot ultimately transform it into the life-giving approach that Hassan takes. Instead, the waters continue to rise, until the moment when he makes the fateful decision to let hatred guide him in his relation to the world; his purpose becomes to seek out and exact revenge upon those responsible for his brother's execution. So doing, he solves the problem of man's uncomfortable position in the world: under this new, "imaginary order," life "acquired meaning. . . . The dislocated world settled back into place, and I established a relationship with everything" (302). And yet, the disorienting movement of the prose ("a personal tone," poetry) to which he returns at the very end of the book (as discussed above) suggests that, in spite of the

hard logic of hatred he has been following, there remains something of the vulnerable, fragmented being from this period.

3.7 “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.”

The rigid fixity with which Nuruddin leads his life sharply contrasts Hassan, who describes himself as a “wanderer on wide roads where I meet good and bad people, who have the same worries and troubles as people do here, who have the same trivial joys as people do everywhere” (126). Hassan finds it healthy to exercise freedom, to travel, to be ready to accept the conditions of a new place, yet also recognizes this freedom as an illusion, since “we don’t have anywhere to go.” Actually, his wandering is a movement in circles (“I go away and come back”), and coming back is “the point of it all”:

“To long for someplace else, to leave and to arrive again at the place where you started. If it weren’t for the place that you’re tied to, you wouldn’t want it or any other world, either; you wouldn’t have anywhere to depart from, because you’d be nowhere. And you’re also nowhere if that’s the only place you have. Because then you don’t think about it, long for it, or love it. And that’s not good. You need to think, to long for something, to love.” (285-286)

It is the combination of being free and bound, readily accepted by Hassan, that proves so problematic for Nuruddin. Although he himself fantasizes about going “out into the world with my wooden dervish bowl in my hands, led only by the sun and any river” (132), this is, according to Selimović, “an avoidance of human obligations” (*S* 183). We should bear in mind that Hassan left home (for Istanbul), yet returned to his native town, whereas Nuruddin left his

village and never went back, as did his brother Harun (whose misfortune their father blames on this departure: if he had stayed home, it never would have happened). Muharem Pervić argues that Selimović himself was “to a certain extent ‘defeated’ by the fate of a being in between worlds, a being that was nowhere because it does not know where it is” (65). He initially left his native Bosnia to study in Belgrade, returned to Bosnia during the Second World War, then left for Belgrade after his brother’s death, only to return to Bosnia and once more back to Belgrade—both times, again, under unhappy circumstances (*S* 199-209). Pervić, in reflecting on Selimović’s peregrinations, recalls an observation by Kafka: “The old homeland is always new when one lives . . . with a clear awareness of one’s connections and debts to others. A person frees himself essentially only among his relations. And that is the highest thing in life” (qtd. in Pervić 65). In some cases, the course of events prevents such a return, but autobiographical writing offers the opportunity to enact return through recollection. Selimović, for example, devotes much space in his memoirs to those who have passed away, adding, “Let this be a *rahmet-dova* (prayer for dead souls) for them all” (*S* 90). Some he was able to thank in person, others he was not (as in the case of Mujo, who had already died [113]): “If this written account means more than my expressions of gratitude, I will be glad it has found its sense” (114). Nuruddin, too, returns to his past at the beginning and end of Part Two of the text: first when he has been released from prison, and second as he waits for re-arrest and execution. As Pervić comments, “Nevertheless, at the end of his ‘travels’ [Ahmed Nuruddin] dedicates his last night to the messenger of his one great love and his home, the boy” (64). He enacts Hassan’s departure and return in his manuscript; although in life it is not the reconciliation one might have hoped for (he finds he cannot display affection towards the boy, and concludes that he is “not capable of tenderness” [*DD* 453]), the story of his lost love is testimony to a very human longing thus far concealed in his narrative. Perhaps, as

with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, wandering is the best way to pay homage to the object of one's thoughts, longings, or love.

At one point, Nuruddin asks Hassan what would happen if everyone were to take the same wandering path, to which Hassan replies, "'The world would be happier. Maybe'" (126). With all of the novel's sad and bitter reminiscences, the question of happiness lies virtually hidden underneath the layers. Nuruddin closes his manuscript at the dawn of what he expects to be his last day in the world, and, though he has a desire for life, he bitterly concludes that it, like death, is meaningless. He closes his text with the exact same "Koranic" verses that open it, as though his trial has reached the verdict that indeed every man "always suffers loss." These are the dervish's last words, but it is Hassan who adds the final lines to the text: "I did not know he was so unhappy. Peace to his tormented soul!" (402). Hassan, who is completely "in life, in love, in passion" (Selimović, *S* 183) is the picture of happiness, and practices something of what Wittgenstein meditated on while stationed on the frontlines. On July 7, 1916, he writes about happiness, concluding that being happy means being "in agreement with the world." This involves living "not in time, but in the present," since "man lives eternally if he lives in the present," without fear. This places eternity not in the skies above our heads, but squarely in the midst of earthly life. "Live happy!" Wittgenstein exclaims (*NB* 74-75). Is such a proposition somehow more feasible in war, when all imposed orders are turned on their heads and necessity binds us to what Selimović might call our "natural" alliances? Ahmed, too, experienced the intensity of battle, yet his failed reassimilation upon returning home (and the heart-rending loss of his bride-to-be) led him to break off from the world rather than seek an eternity there.

“Live happy!” could be the implied ethics of *Death and the Dervish*, although the dervish, sadly, is too out of place in the world to be able to do so. While his belief in an absolute order and the truth of sacred words is again challenged both by personal tragedy and by “rebellious” individuals who have been freed “from established ways of thinking that bind us” (*DD* 92), his own opportunity to cultivate an eternity in the present moment is lost when he decides to bring his own order and meaning to things through hatred and revenge. And yet, for all his failure to live in the ordinary world and speak in a human language, writing remains the utopic space where he can use a poetic, personal tone. Wandering, fragmentation, and distortion are integral to the text, which is both the fictive author’s rebellion and the actual author’s response to “unnatural” orders that we impose upon ourselves. In the end, it is not the prescriptive super-language that gives an ethics to speaking and writing, but a language that comes from the need for connection and love between human beings, even if it is nonsense.

Chapter 4. Case by Case: Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* and Irena Vrkljan's *Marina; or, About Biography*

How words are understood is not told by words alone.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*

So far we have examined issues of language, order, and meaning as Ludwig Wittgenstein conceived them; in particular, we have looked at how they complicate the writing of an autobiographical account, as dramatized in the novels by Samuel Beckett and Meša Selimović. In this final chapter we move more deeply into the relationship between memory and writing, examining two nonfiction texts that address this in ways that echo Wittgenstein's philosophy: *Memory* by Bernadette Mayer and *Marina; or, About Biography* by Irena Vrkljan. We will see how the rejection of a traditional view of memory as the recollection or description of a frozen image of the past plays out in formal choices, the treatment of history, and the pathways by which we come to an understanding of ourselves and others. Though quite different from each other in many respects, *Memory* and *Marina* both openly struggle with the difficulties of the autobiographical form, exhibiting the very raw emotions of frustration and pain fictionalized in *Molloy* and *Death and the Dervish*. Acknowledging the bewitchment and the necessity of language, each book finds, if not a solution, then a working process that reveals much about the relation between writing and life.

4.1 How to Live on the Page: Stein, Wittgenstein, and Bernadette Mayer

Let us recall Wittgenstein's reason for writing autobiography (or anything, for that matter): clarity. In theory, an *Übersicht*, or perspicuous overview, of your life would afford a clear view of things, giving you the opportunity to see the connections between them—and, as

we have discussed, “seeing the connections” is tantamount to understanding (*PI* §122). In the previous chapters we looked at several problems involved in making such an overview of a life, in assembling the particulars (Wittgenstein himself never wrote an autobiography according to the model he imagined—“to spread out my life clearly, in order to have it clearly in front of me, and for others too. Not so much to put it on trial as to produce, in any case, clarity and truth” [qtd. in Monk 291]). In this section, we will turn to questions of memory and remembering as a vital aspect of this compositional conundrum. To help us do so, let us enlist the assistance one of Wittgenstein’s contemporaries, Gertrude Stein. Though the two never met and it remains unclear whether Stein had any contact with Wittgenstein’s work,³⁹ she shared his passion for exactitude and her ideas reflect a sensibility at times uncannily similar to his. Her writing was quite possibly as groundbreaking in the field of literature as Wittgenstein’s was in philosophy, and her body of critical work frequently treats the topic of composition itself.⁴⁰

Of particular interest for our purposes is Stein’s 1936 lecture, “What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them,” in which she claims that remembering is inimical to the composition of any creative work. She goes so far as to say that you cannot remember as you write—a statement that would seem to negate the entire enterprise of autobiography—and that the problem of clarity must be resolved with a different procedural approach: “If you do not remember while you are writing, it may seem confused to others but actually it is clear and eventually that clarity will be clear, that is what a master-piece is, but if you remember while you

³⁹ Marjorie Perloff notes that Stein may have been introduced to his work through a mutual acquaintance, Alfred North Whitehead. Stein stayed at his country house for six weeks in 1914, during which time the two took frequent walks and discussed philosophy. Wittgenstein had been a guest at Whitehead’s a year before; however, the two did not see eye to eye and were not admirers of each other’s work (Perloff 257, note 7).

⁴⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the affinities between Stein’s and Wittgenstein’s views of grammar, see chapter three of Marjorie Perloff’s *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*, “‘Grammar in Use’: Wittgenstein/Gertrude Stein/Marinetti.”

are writing it will seem clear at the time to any one but the clarity will go out of it that is what a master-piece is not” (359). Her argument is undoubtedly provocative, particularly to the autobiographer: how can I write without remembering? On the other hand, we have looked at cases (fictionalized and real) where it felt impossible to write about the past *at all*, at least in a form that we know and recognize. In light of that, we may want to consider Stein’s proposal as a possible way to, as Wittgenstein puts it, “show the fly out of the fly bottle” (*PI* §309).

The entry point to Stein’s lecture is a distinction that, admittedly, might seem objectionable to Wittgenstein at first (we will address this question a bit later); namely, her argument pivots on the difference between *entity* and *identity*. Entity, simply put, is the “thing in itself and not in relation”; this is what characterizes masterpieces (358). Anything has entity—the artist, the artwork, the object—yet it is hard to perceive because of our tendency towards identity. Identity, perhaps the fundamental aspect of “human nature,” is a matter of “recognition, you know who you are because you and others remember anything about yourself . . . I am I because my little dog knows me” (355). Here Stein confirms the essential connection between identity and remembering, which we use when we recognize things, people, and even ourselves. But in spite of its functional role in everyday life, this remembering has no place in the creative process: “one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything” (355). In fact, identity is inimical to the making of a masterpiece: “creatively speaking the little dog knowing you are you and your recognising that he knows, that is what destroys creation” (355). This is because the process of recognition and identifying actually takes us away from our human mind, or our entity, as well as the entity of other things—in other words, the essential sources of a masterpiece. As Stein puts it, “At any moment when you are you you are you without the memory of yourself because if you remember yourself while you are you you are not for the purposes of creating you”

(356). The true “you” is accessed only through not looking, not remembering, a release of the everyday, functional identity.⁴¹

While Stein’s dry wit and deceptively matter-of-fact style are yet another shared characteristic with Wittgenstein, she moves rather quickly through some concepts on which Wittgenstein, one could imagine, would dwell longer. And though our immediate reaction may be to point out that Wittgenstein would probably call into question this picture of “entity” on account of its essentializing, Cartesian-dualistic flavor, there is still a parallel to be made here that can give Stein’s entity–identity paradigm a bit more heft. Wittgenstein repeatedly warns against making faulty connections based on the bewitchment of language; we could, in fact, translate this into Steinian terms as a case of faulty recognition: we believe we recognize something that is actually not what we think it is—it only resembles it (a family resemblance, perhaps). Wittgenstein’s extensive effort in the *Philosophical Investigations* to undo the idea of an inner self that can be perceived and observed is part of what Gary Hagberg calls his “multi-front war with grammatically induced misconceptions” (51). The “grammar of the external world leads us astray when the internal world is modeled upon it,” and this false picture has led to an illustrious philosophical tradition based on a picture of the mind as “populated by mental objects” (51). The seduction of language consists in part of the temptation to confuse things that share a “family resemblance” for being one and the same; in other words, recognition (identity)

⁴¹ Though beyond the scope of our present theme, an interesting area for study would be a comparison between the artist’s position according to Stein and the philosopher’s as recommended by Wittgenstein. It is one of the very curious contrasts between the two that Stein seems to direct the artist away from the social and the ordinary (or, as we shall see, to remove oneself without actually doing so), whereas Wittgenstein steers philosophers back toward the ordinary use of language. And yet, neither position is completely outside or inside. See, for example, Stanley Cavell’s “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*,” pp. 269-270 for a discussion of Wittgenstein’s distrust of philosophy’s unsociability.

can mislead us and prevent us from having a clear picture of that which is actually in front of us (entity). So, to achieve a clear sense of the individual particularities, their truths or entities, we have to rely on pure observation, as it were, taking each case as it comes.

For Stein, the artist must approach her object (or what she refers to as “the subject the creator uses to create that thing” [356]) strictly as “a way the only way” that she is able to get the work of art to exist (357). In the end, the masterpiece, to which all of this is in service, should reveal something that is otherwise obscured by habitual identifying. For this reason, anything involving remembering during creation (of oneself or the object), including reporting, representing, and psychologizing, must be excluded. Everyone knows as much about human nature and psychology, claims Stein, as any artist does; therefore, knowledge of human nature has nothing to do with a masterpiece (356).⁴² Genuine “interest” from the artist is crucial, but easily crippled by being overly conscious of the object (such as a painter who is too aware of the “things he uses,” “the events the people the objects and the landscapes” [357]). The revelation of masterpiece-making is further complicated by the omnipresence of media that saturate our daily lives with a constant stream of information—“radios cinema newspapers biographies autobiographies” (357).⁴³ Naturally, autobiography (presumably of the traditionally narrative model) takes its place in the everyday world of information exchange, where everyone knows “what is happening.”⁴⁴ Here, what one sees or has to say holds little interest; the world has already “been photographed too much.” The artist must go beyond representation, which is, after

⁴² This is contrary to the prevailing critical opinion in Stein’s era and remains relevant today; one of the common praises bestowed upon a work is that it offers keen insight into psychology.

⁴³ Considering that Stein was writing prior to the advent of the television, not to mention the Internet, we can only conclude that the situation is exponentially more exaggerated today.

⁴⁴ Although a lengthier discussion of Stein’s work is beyond the scope of this chapter, it must be noted that she herself experimented with the biographical and autobiographical forms, most famously in her memoir *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

all, a product of memory, recognition, and identity. Because entity is “not in relation,” it cannot be identified per se—just as for Wittgenstein consciousness is not an object that can be perceived or observed (Hagberg 51–52).

Aside from identity’s withering effect on interest and the ability to bring forth a masterpiece via the object, it also prevents the artist from saying what she—and she alone—hears. As an artist’s identity creeps into the creative process, she ceases to hear what she hears and begins to hear what the audience hears her say. Interestingly, at this point Stein disavows one of her famous utterances from *The Making of Americans*, “I write for myself and strangers,” calling the statement mere “literary formalism” (357). “If I did [do that],” she continues, “I would not really be writing because already then identity would take the place of entity.” It follows that letters, oratories, and history (to which we will return later when looking at Irena Vrkljan’s writing) are not masterpieces, because they anticipate an audience’s ear and are, in a sense, written for them. Such works may be necessary and valuable in their direct, effective action, Stein concedes, but by that very token they are not masterpieces, since “anything that is necessary has to do with human nature and not with the human mind” (357). Masterpieces, by contrast, are never necessary. We might extrapolate that, in a way, a masterpiece has nothing to do with communication—at least not the kind we are most familiar with and that occurs at the level of human affairs. This picture of a masterpiece would preclude the kind of language use described in the passage by Saint Augustine that Wittgenstein famously uses as the starting point of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In it, Augustine recounts how as a toddler he came into awareness of language as the adults around him would name an object and point to it; gradually, he learns to pair the things and words together and use them “to express my wishes.” Wittgenstein observes that, according to the picture Augustine presents, “the words in language

name objects—sentences are combinations of such names . . . Every word has a meaning. The meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands” (*PI* §1). This is a system of communication, but, as Wittgenstein points out, “not everything that we call language is in this system” (§3).⁴⁵ Presumably, the making of a masterpiece would require an openness to language use beyond mere naming.

A masterpiece, therefore, does not communicate—it *reveals*: this is one of the few positive clues Stein gives us in her lecture. Much like Wittgenstein’s philosophy, Stein spends a lot of her energy defining what a masterpiece is *not*, probably because, like the concepts Wittgenstein was dealing with, masterpieces are themselves too multifarious to define and must be taken on a case by case basis. That said, she does deliver on her title’s promise with some suggestions as to what masterpieces *are* (and why there are so few of them). Stein claims that the enduring resonance of works from ancient, distant cultures is not due to anything connected to their historical moment or “identity, that is what any one remembering then remembered then.” On the contrary, they “exist because they came to be as something that is an end in itself and in that respect it is opposed to the business of living which is relation and necessity” (358). Paradoxically, a masterpiece may very well “talk about” this “business of living,” though it remain firmly outside that sphere. There is something about Stein’s relationship between the realm of creation and the realm of human affairs (if we can make a spatial picture of her discussion) that recalls one of Wittgenstein’s remarks in *Philosophical Investigations*:

⁴⁵ Perloff comments that, insofar as Stein also resisted the view of language as a correspondence between word and thing, she was “a thorough if unconscious Wittgensteinian: the substitution of the equal sign (=) for the world ‘is,’ she would have posited, cannot change the fact that ‘is’ sometimes means ‘equals’ but sometimes not” (98).

To say “This combination of words has no sense” excludes it from the sphere of language, and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary, it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players are supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one person ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary-line, that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for. (§499)

Boundaries demarcate and potentially enliven the relationship between what they circle and what lies beyond. Stein’s artist must clearly understand and observe the boundary between ordinary life and creation, but also be aware that making a masterpiece requires that the border remain alive and potentially the site of the most important creative movement.

Liveliness and movement are things that Stein often seems to pursue, and it is here that we encounter the question of remembering and its persistent connection to the problem of writing. Anyone who has ever put pen to paper has likely at some point experienced the troubling phenomenon that “when you write you try to remember what you are about to write and you will see immediately how lifeless the writing becomes” (Stein 359). What is the problem here? Stein would attribute it to time: “I once said that nothing could bother me more than the way a thing goes dead once it has been said. And if it does it it is because of there being this trouble about time” (361). (Ironically, Stein herself demonstrates this here by having to “revive” a few of the things she has said in the past.) In order to find a way to write and speak that does not “kill” the thing we wanted to say, we must overcome this “trouble” with time, and this is where relinquishing identity comes in. The problem with time is its connection to identity (or

perhaps vice-versa): we identify ourselves based on a continuum that consists of our memory of the past, and in some cases thoughts of our future. As we have seen, the awareness of oneself and time during the act of creation interferes with the process. Thus, Stein's solution is to write without remembering, for you can only create "if you exist but time and identity do not exist" (361). Nevertheless, the masterpiece "talks about" human existence (as we have already seen), so "time and identity is what you tell about as you create only while you create they do not exist" (361). This peculiar balancing act is achieved by going on "not as if there were no time and identity but as if there were and at the same time existing without time and identity" (362). Such a state is difficult for many to access because it is uncomfortable, even frightening "to know what one knows," whereas carrying on according to a flow of time and identifiable existence is "soothing"—which, Stein acknowledges, is what most people need. This does not mean that the artist is frightened or that masterpieces are frightening, since there is no fear if you are truly without time and identity (361-2). We can imagine Stein's artist living something like Wittgenstein's ideal (discussed in Chapter Three): outside of time, happy and free of fear in an eternal present.

Wittgenstein is no stranger to the feeling of something's going "dead once it has been said" (or written), though he takes a different tack with the sensation. Consider this excerpt from *Wiener Ausgabe* (which we looked at in Chapter Two):

It seems to us . . . as though to us a thought were like a landscape that we have seen and are supposed to describe, but we don't remember it well enough to be able to describe it in all its complexity.

In the same way, we believe, we cannot characterize thinking after the fact because all the many weak/dim/fine events have been lost by then. (qtd. in Klebes 44)

As Martin Klebes points out, the first thing to note about this passage is Wittgenstein's use of the phrase "It seems to us": this generally signals that he is referring to a common perception that is actually a misconception. Indeed Wittgenstein would dispute how we could ever confirm what we *wanted* to say. So, these formulations are based on the false, yet dominant, philosophical picture of thought as an inner object, thinking as an inner mental process that has duration. Still, the residual feeling Wittgenstein describes does reveal something: "The failure of memory observed here is not one of either insufficient 'encoding' or 'retrieval,' as it were, but rather of the ineradicable gap between thought and language as external mnemonic medium" (Klebes 44). Language, it would seem, is incompatible with memory. If we take the memory function away from written language (that is, as it has commonly been perceived as far back as Plato's "aid to memory" argument), what is left when writing about ourselves? How do you write autobiographically and not die on the page?

How do you write about the past without remembering? This was the question that a young American poet named Bernadette Mayer asked herself in 1971 as she planned a month-long project that would ultimately produce a multimedia gallery show and a book called *Memory*. Mayer's work takes up Stein's "Master-piece" challenge that you cannot remember and write at the same time, and in a Wittgensteinian way reveals that there is much more to memory than identity. "Leaving nothing out," Mayer records all different kinds of what Wittgenstein calls "memory experiences," which accompany but do not define remembering. Instead of

descriptions of fixed “memory content,” *Memory* offers us a kind of transcript of remembering as a present event in language—and more specifically, in writing.

Part of the impetus for the work was a dissatisfaction with memory’s weakness and selectivity: “I was kind of furious about how you remember things and *what* you remember . . . how you choose those things, because you obviously don’t remember everything” (Int). Mayer thus set out to keep a journal every day for the month of July, recording in it “every thought” she had had throughout the day.⁴⁶ The undertaking also included a major visual component: each day she shot one 36-exposure roll of color slide film, taking photos of “everything that occurred” (Int). After the month was finished, she projected the color slides on a wall and wrote a second, separate journal as she examined the pictures. For the gallery show on Greene Street in downtown Manhattan, Mayer combined the two journals together and recorded herself reading from the text, which lasted eight hours (and coincided with the gallery’s hours of operation). The 1,200 color slides were printed out in 3 x 5-inch pictures and arranged in rows on a 40-foot wall (Diggory 316) so that “above and below [they] would be randomly coinciding with the picture of the present . . . I thought the way it looked as a show was very much the way your memory works” (Int). Later, in 1975, the interwoven texts of both journals were published (without the photographs, since no publisher was willing to cover the sizeable cost of including them).

Familiar with the work of Gertrude Stein, Mayer was particularly struck by her argument about the incompatibility of remembering and writing. Mayer’s absorption of this injunction is juxtaposed to her keen interest in the nature and capacity of memory, drawing inspiration from books like Frances Yates’s *The Art of Memory* and Alexander R. Luria’s *The Mind of a Mnemonist*. Yates’ detailed study traces the development of mnemonic practices from ancient

⁴⁶ She did not do this continuously throughout the day (as opposed to the continuous writing in *Studying Hunger Journals*, for example), but rather during times set aside for writing.

rhetoricians to medieval mystics like Giordano Bruno, describing techniques such as imagining an elaborate space where the things one needs to remember are strategically placed throughout. Luria's book documents his lengthy observation of a man with a remarkable mnemonic capacity, who eventually became a professional mnemonist, performing feats of memory for audiences. For Mayer, these accounts of the many associative, irrational components of remembering provide some impetus for opening up the concept of memory, moving from the identifying function Stein pinpoints to something much more polyvalent. The result includes passages like the following:

list the years
 just an earthquake of violence coming right in my door they've found me
 out i've exploded some bomb or other
 a whole you won a whole a continuous river running down the
 street garbage & smells on the wheel of the tire flowing
 ed is on the fire escape looking down, same ones same machines
 you start it all over this has happened before list the years
 pretty picture of memory noise technicolor sometimes memory
 is noise (13)

This verse passage (most of the text is in prose) is couched in a longer section dating from the first day of the experiment, July 1. Within this short passage we already see the phrase "list the years" repeated. Indeed, immediately before and after the text cited here, whole lines are repeated with slight alterations in punctuation, wording, and line breaks. For example, two lines later we read "a whole, you won, a whole, a continuous river running down / the street garbage & smells on the wheel of the tire flowing," and then a bit further on, "sometimes memory is / just

noise” (here with the addition of “just”). Indeed, within the larger surrounding section nearly all the phrases recur, including, aptly, “this has happened before.” Perhaps the repetition is a transcript of the flow of her series of thoughts, a *déjà vu*, or a later reworking that attempts to get at the shape of the thought through the shading of theme and variation. As with most of the book, the text consists of small pieces that do not cohere into a typical narrative and stand in an often uncertain relation to each other. We can guess at a few potential referents, though verification is impossible: a dream (“they’ve found me / out I’ve exploded a bomb”); an event from the day (“the wheel of the tire”); a photograph she is looking at afterwards (“ed is on the fire escape looking down”); and metacommentary (“list the years,” “this has happened before”). In fact, verification is irrelevant, because this is not the language game of naming (that is, identification). Taken as a whole, this early passage starts to teach its reader not to “[expect] a rearrangement to suit not to suit” (81). We are clearly not reading an orderly account, and one might feel a little like Wittgenstein’s philosopher when encountering a problem: “I don’t know my way about” (*PI* §123).

David Rubinfine comments in his introduction to *Memory* that Mayer has accomplished a return to “archaic modes of representation of inner and outer sensory data, by reviving the quality of consciousness in which they occurred. Chronological ordering is replaced by shifts of consciousness, daytime logic by primary mechanism, and verbal thought by pictorial imagery” (5). His observation touches upon what Stein may have had in mind when referring to “remembering,” for, as Rubinfine—himself a psychoanalyst—comments, adult memory is governed by “present day ego structure, defenses, interests, needs and moral values” (5). In other words, representation of events in adult memories is formed by what Stein would call their identity. Perhaps we can use Rubinfine’s distinctions to reformulate Stein’s argument: it is not so

much that we should not (or cannot) remember as we write, but we must remember differently, so that “differentiation between internal and external perception, that is, between sensation, thought and feelings on the one hand, and perception of external reality on the other, is not fixed and rigid, but fluid and dynamic” (Rubinfine 5).

Mayer’s text is full of references to her process, giving us a better sense of how it is to “remember differently.” In the following passage she apparently alludes to Stein’s suggested method:

how I do memory: I make a design writing this & later I make something this time out of remembering but later out of not remembering or doing it backwards including hallucinations & all liquid clear distillations of what is it? ice as if you try to remember by will & a choice is here the instant you do: I’ll remember the instant, you dont have to you dont have to remember not memory but snap beyond the “past is so dead for me I have no way of checking on it” (70)

Even if we are to take Mayer at her word that she sometimes writes “out of remembering,” we can sense the dynamic of a different kind of remembering, where time and identity do not dominate. The process involves both diligence and patience, “[w]aiting toward something to come out of something. Placing something there. To think without thinking. Write without writing” (28). Mayer also raises the issue of will here, which seems implicitly to underpin Stein’s concept of remembering (and to which we will return below when discussing Luria’s mnemonist). The wording suggests, albeit ambivalently, that “to remember by will” is problematic: “as if you *try* to remember by will . . . *you dont have to you dont have to remember.*” It is the conscious effort to remember something during composition that Stein cautions us will render “very confused” “secondary writing”; she even identifies this in her own

lecture, composed while remembering (thoughts, meditations).⁴⁷ Mayer's emphasis here on "doing" memory, through diverse, perhaps purposefully experimental procedures, rather than "checking on" the past also shifts the picture of memory away from the traditional view that it is a retrieval of an image of a past thing or event (Glock 241), and points to a more open concept of what it is to remember, free from the notion of what Wittgenstein calls "experiential content" (*PPF* §369), "a uniform mental phenomenon that constitutes remembering" (Hagberg 231).

In the penultimate section of *Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein takes up this question of so-called memory experiences, which he carefully separates from the actual act of remembering, thus undoing preconceptions of what it is to remember. Section xiii begins, "When, on the basis of memory, I say: 'He was here half an hour ago'—this is not the description of a present experience. Memory *experiences* are accompaniments of remembering" (§368). Gary Hagberg provides a useful gloss of this dense, cryptic passage, in which Wittgenstein proposes that not only does memory not tell us about the past, but it also tells us nothing about the present.⁴⁸ The problem lies in the word "description," since it implies that there must always be something there first (prior to remembering, as it were) that we describe. As Hagberg explains:

⁴⁷ Stein notes that she had originally intended to "talk this lecture and not write it." We can presume that, prior to actually composing the lecture, she had done a good deal of thinking and writing, and that she is now "remembering" the fruits of those labors: "All this summer I meditated and wrote about this subject and it finally came to be a discussion of the relation of human nature and the human mind and identity" (355).

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein explicitly states this in *Zettel*: "But if memory shews us the past, how does it shew us that it is the past? . . . It does not shew us the past. Any more than our senses shew us the present" (663). Here, he rejects two prevailing views: first, the sense-data model, in which senses serve as data-collectors that form an inner picture of what we see before us (or as Ray Monk puts it, "the phenomenalist notion that the objects of our immediate experience are the private, shadowy entities that empiricists call sense-data" [517]); second, that "the memory-experience would be the inner sense that collects the raw material for the inner picture of what we remember" (Hagberg 231-2).

That is, the act of remembering that he was here as manifest in our saying someone was here half an hour ago is not a description of the present inner content, the present visual image. But of course it is difficult to suppress the powerful sense that there simply must be such an image that constitutes the inner content of the remembering. And one reason for this insistent picture is that we can have what Wittgenstein calls “accompaniments” to remembering—and these, to confuse the issue, may well be visual images. Thus, he continues the above discussion with: “Memory-*experiences* are accompaniments of remembering.” That is to say, a vivid memory image may well spring to mind when we find ourselves reminiscing about a person, say a beloved grandparent, now gone. But the image is not *itself*, here again, either a necessary or sufficient condition for remembering; it comes as an adjunct of, or as an accompaniment to, the remembering. (To particularize the point, if this were the case, we would, in response to a sibling saying “Remember how our grandfather always used to . . .,” find ourselves unable to remember the grandfather until we called to mind the attendant visual image.) (232)

Wittgenstein uses the idea of accompaniment frequently in his later philosophy, either to show that two processes thought separate are actually one and the same, or that something believed to be intrinsic to a process “may accompany [it] or go on by itself” (*PI* §330), much like a piano accompanies singing (Glock 359).⁴⁹ In the case of memory experiences, the latter is true: mental

⁴⁹ His use of accompaniment often focuses on concepts commonly perceived as inner processes that accompany actions: thinking, intending, etc. In contrast to the example cited above about memory experiences accompanying remembering, passages on these other concepts show that there is *no* accompaniment, but rather that the thinking, intending, etc., is part of the action. For example: “The intention with which one acts does not ‘accompany’ the action any more than a

images, feelings, a wistful sigh—all may accompany remembering, but they do not define it. As if to confirm this, the photographs that literally accompany *Memory*'s text in the gallery show contrast the elusive flow of language with their fixed imagery. In a passage of *Memory* where Mayer is examining some of the pictures, she herself remarks, “the thing i cant believe about all this is that nothing looks like what it looked like” (34). When talking about her composition process, Mayer recalls trying to write down “every thought I had and then backing it up with the photographs, which I used to remind me of the things that I didn't remember, because very often you see in photographs things that you never thought to record” (Int). To be sure, the fact that photographs are used as more concrete evidence of the past than memories further proves Wittgenstein's point about the mutability of memory images.⁵⁰

Unlike the pictures frozen in time, remembering need not take any one particular form, and we should be wary of “the impulse to unify, and to reduce all variations to a common essence” by setting a limit to what it means to remember (Hagberg 233). Wittgenstein makes this clear in his next remark: “Remembering has no experiential content.—Surely this can be seen by introspection! Doesn't *it* show precisely that there is nothing there, when I look out for a content?—But it could only show this from case to case. And even so, it cannot show me what the word 'remember' means, and hence *where* to look for a content!” (*PPF* §369). By rejecting his interlocutor's insistence on introspection, Wittgenstein makes the point that remembering,

thought 'accompanies' speech. Thought and intention are neither 'articulated' nor 'non-articulated'; to be compared neither to a single note which sounds during the acting or speaking, nor to a melody” (*PI* §280). “True, we sometimes call accompanying a sentence by a mental process 'thinking'; nonetheless, that accompaniment is not what we call a 'thought'.—Utter a sentence, and think it; utter it with understanding.—And now don't utter it, and just do what you accompanied it with when you uttered it with understanding!” (*PI* §332)

⁵⁰ “My memory image is not evidence of that past situation; as a photograph would be, which, having been taken then, now bears witness to me that this is how it was back then” (*Remarks on Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. I, 1131, qtd. in Hagberg 234).

like thinking, is not an inner process we can examine and define as though it were an object. We find a similar argument in *Philosophical Investigations*: “What we deny is that the picture of an inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word ‘remember’. Indeed, we’re saying that this picture, with its ramifications, stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is” (§305). Our concept of remembering, therefore, must come from a perspicuous presentation of the different ways in which the word is used; this must be done on a case-by-case basis, much as Mayer illustrates in her work.

If we dispense with the model of memory in which mental images always have primacy over language, the question arises as to the status of language in remembering—a question that, naturally, figures centrally when it comes to autobiography. Rather than serving as mere description of an inner picture, language has a role that is at least as integral: “The memory image and the memory words stand on the *same* level” (Z 650). Hagberg extrapolates this point, citing occasions when mental images are conjured as a result of a verbal mention of past events: “The striking and picture-unseating fact here is that language, in such cases, precedes the image” (234). In autobiographical writing, which often involves forming a narrative through “a continual process of reconsideration . . . of reflective restructuring, and of repositioning the actions, events, occurrences, interactions, efforts, aspirations, achievements, intentions—in short, our words, deeds, and everything in between that,” our memories themselves are likely to be changed through the process of writing.⁵¹ That is to say that they are not static, “inert visual images filed into storage by time and date” (236). In fact, as we puzzle our way through this narration, the language of this process,

⁵¹ Such a description does not necessarily apply to *Memory* (it is neither conceived as an autobiography nor does it attempt to make sense of memories), though I believe the following comments on language’s role are still germane. In later sections on Irena Vrkljan’s work we will have the opportunity to delve into a more reflective piece of autobiographical writing.

those verbal formulations [and] recontextualizing reformulations[,] just *are* the content of memory. And in turn, this language is not—as we also may well initially picture the matter—secondary to an inner process that allegedly precedes it. Again, memory need not be a matter of “reading off”, and thus an act of memory—if we should call it that, i.e. name it in a manner suggesting a uniform inner experience—is not, in the manner we initially construe it to be, looking into the past. (237, emphasis added)

This issue of “reading off” or “looking into the past” shares a point of contact with Stein’s concept of memory; indeed, this seems to be the kind of remembering one *cannot* do as one writes. If there is any place for memory in writing, as we are examining in this present chapter, it needs to be one in which language takes primacy and is allowed to do so in as many different and dynamic ways as the case demands.

Language goes far beyond description in *Memory*, where it seems fairly evident that the writing itself is the content of remembering. We might imagine Mayer at times writing in a way similar to a compositional process described by Stein in a 1946 interview with Robert Bartlett Hass: “I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create *a word relationship* between the word and the things seen” (qtd. in Perloff 92, emphasis added). It is this “word relationship,” rather than a verbal description or representation, which makes the difference. Mayer, unlike Stein, is not dealing with physical objects for the most part, but rather her own thoughts, and, as we have seen in the above-cited passage, she accesses them in different ways—in some of them, she may well be focusing on a mental image, but not all the time. The passage cited above (“how I do memory . . .”) also shows how the language of the writing in a sense expresses the thoughts, not

always or only through description, but through word relationships based in language's multiple aspects. Here, for example, we can observe sound patterns that seem to drive the thought: the ponderous diphthong /aɪ/ in "I . . . I . . . design writing . . . I . . . time" (an interesting micropoem in itself); the fluid /l/ consonance of "including hallucinations & all liquid clear distillations . . . will . . . I'll"; and the crisp snap of the /st/ in "instant . . . instant . . . past."

Mayer is keenly aware of the emotional and mnemonic force of sound in language; in a lecture on *Memory* she cites the case of the mnemonist S. in Luria's *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, in whom phonetic sounds excited very strong sensations. While he made use of these sounds to create a system for memorizing complicated series of words, he could not read poetry: the sounds would stimulate such a rush of psychic and physical responses that it was overwhelming, even unbearable (Naropa). At one point the subject of Luria's study describes how he would use all kinds of sensory and associative details connected to language in order to remember long lists of words:

I recognize a word not only by the images it evokes but by a whole complex of feelings that image arouses. It's hard to express . . . it's not a matter of vision or hearing but some over-all sense I get. Usually I experience a word's taste and weight, and I don't have to make an effort to remember it—the word seems to recall itself. But it's difficult to describe. What I sense is something oily slipping through my hand . . . or I'm aware of a slight tickling in my left hand caused by a mass of tiny, lightweight points. When that happens I simply remember, without having to make the attempt. (28)

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the passage suggests the surprisingly extensive range of experiences that may accompany remembering. Though this specific situation (someone

memorizing words as part of a memory test) differs from more “ordinary” instances of remembering, the fact that language is at issue draws our attention to the extent to which a word’s sense is bound up with much more than the object it represents, or the image it recalls. What is particularly striking is that these synesthetic aspects are so strong that S. does not have to *try* to remember—it simply happens. Considering that part of Mayer’s impetus for writing *Memory* was a dissatisfaction with the limitations of memory, we can speculate that by tapping into her own profoundly synesthetic sensibility⁵² she found one way to “remember, without having to make the attempt”—and to remember without involving identity-driven consciousness. A compositional process that attends to such word relationships with its object (here, perhaps, a memory image, a photograph, a feeling) contrasts the traditional “looking inward” picture of autobiography, in which the autobiographer turns her attention on some memory image with the intention of *describing* it.⁵³

In a discussion of what he calls “secondary meanings” of words (which we will return to further on), Wittgenstein uses synesthesia as an example to illustrate his point: “The secondary meaning is not a ‘metaphorical’ meaning. If I say, ‘For me the vowel *e* is yellow’, I do not mean: ‘yellow’ in a metaphorical meaning—for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the concept of yellow” (*PPF* §278). The sensory attributes and associative properties of words may have much more sway over thought and memory than the standard logical discourse would allow, and Mayer’s work, in this sense, shows us something new about

⁵² Elsewhere Mayer notes that she sees letters as colors (*SHJ* 1), and she saturates her work with different hues, figuratively and literally. Maybe the clearest example of this is the color-coding in *Studying Hunger Journals*, in which she uses differently colored markers for different modes of speech: personal, dialogue, and rhetoric (426). The colors of the text are not reproduced in publication.

⁵³ For more on the traditional “looking inward” picture and Wittgenstein’s rejection of it, see Chapter Two of Gary Hagberg’s *Describing Ourselves*.

remembering. Her word relationships, while perhaps initially unclear, are decidedly “grounded in actuality,” as Terry Castle has observed about Stein’s writing. Castle’s comments are instructive not only for Stein’s readers but also for Mayer’s: “the perplexing *non sequiturs* must all be read as revivifying gestures, as ways of forcing the reader to ‘begin again,’ to see the world in a new and more immediate way” (qtd. in Perloff 259). This grounding in a reality unmediated by constructions of time and identity has about it what Marjorie Perloff calls a kind of literalism; as we have just seen in Wittgenstein, secondary meanings of words (or the echo of these meanings) is *not* metaphor, and Stein herself considered her own such writings (like *Tender Buttons*) a form of realism (Perloff 96). While it may be perplexing to others in the beginning, “one in a curious way sooner or later does feel the reality of a master-piece” (Stein 358). Rubinfine might agree with Stein that that reality is the “thing in itself of which the human nature is only its clothing” (358). To be sure, if the reader persists in pressing forward through *Memory* (about which Mayer herself has laughingly commented, “It’s not readable” [Int.]), a certain reality does emerge, no doubt thanks to the word relationships rather than any narrative construction or rationally rendered description. Wittgenstein, too, champions the possibility of such a function:

“But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain behaviour with pain and pain-behaviour without pain.”—Admit it? What greater difference could there be?—“And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a Nothing.”—Not at all. It’s not a Something, but not a Nothing either! The conclusion was only that a Nothing would render the same service as a Something about which nothing could be said. We’ve only rejected the grammar which tends to force itself on us here.

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever. (*PI* §304)

Language's relationship to life and to the world cannot be reduced to one formula. As we shall see below, for Mayer, Stein, and Wittgenstein, it is that closeness to life that matters.

By prioritizing the transcription of what I will call a raw memory language of thoughts rather than shaping her text into a cohesive whole, Mayer is practicing something akin to Wittgenstein's "criss-cross" approach outlined in his preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, in the sense that she remains faithful to the shape determined by writing as it happens. Oddly enough, by ignoring conventions of narrative, grammar, and syntax, Mayer opens the work up for the possibility of a non-identifying form that is at once about memory and at the same time unrecognizable as such: other than the title, there is no announced theme or extended, explicit treatment of memory as a subject matter, except in the context of her own thoughts. Rather, the reader has a chance to witness remembering as it unfolds, unadulterated. *Memory* is, in fact, a very difficult text to remember. With little to follow in the way of structural or thematic patterns, the reader is hard-pressed to recall what has come before. Instead, one must simply keep moving through it, just as one must when reading Part One of Beckett's *Molloy*, as we have discussed in Chapter Two. Mayer's observation, "I saw it all at once tonight that words are leading me on" (81), seems to have the double meaning for the reader, too: are words leading us into a woods where we lose the path? Or are they our guides, our Virgils? The answer is probably both: Mayer is preoccupied with issues of order and disorder (not unlike the narrators we met in *Molloy* and *Death and the Dervish*), including the illusion of a continuum of time, which we use as our basis

for identity: “no the night’s not lost it was there & it followed these thoughts these words driven down an avenue a false front a false perspective like memory laughs at the intuition of time: . . . we think we see things in a continuous perspective, when we really see this way only a few of them & imagine that we see the rest” (117). Considering that Mayer wants to make a model of how memory works, it should come as no surprise that she lifts away this imposed structure of continuity, appealing instead to the simultaneity of memory (which we will encounter again when we come to Irena Vrkljan, below). The work’s lack of structure (the dates of the entries notwithstanding)⁵⁴ enacts one of Stein’s “Master-piece” tenets regarding beginnings and endings:

It is another one of the curious difficulties a master-piece has that is to begin and end, because actually a master-piece does not do that it does not begin and end if it did it would be of necessity and in relation and that is just what a master-piece is not. Everybody worries about that just now everybody that is what makes them talk about abstract and worry about punctuation and capitals and small letters and what a history is. Everybody worries about that not because everybody knows what a master-piece is but because a certain number have found out what a master-piece is not. Even the very master-pieces have always been very bothered about beginning and ending because essentially that is what a master-piece is not.

(358–359)

⁵⁴ In the introduction to *Studying Hunger Journals* Mayer writes that in that book she was searching for “a workable code, a shorthand, for the transcription of every event, every motion, every transition” of her own mind, as well as “a structure for MEMORY” (2–3). When asked if she thought she had found structures through the writing, Mayer responds, “I certainly couldn’t say what they were, but yes, I do” (Int). She also describes a change in her writing as a result of her work in *Memory* and *Studying Hunger Journals*, or rather that writing “transformed into something else.” She developed a more complicated practice, writing “while thinking of a million things, instead of a thousand” (Int).

The recognizable beginning-middle-end structure makes a text more pliable to the reader; in some contexts this can be a useful quality (in letters, rhetorical works, etc.), but in a masterpiece it would negate the work's timelessness and removal from human affairs. Mayer's *Memory* stands without a distinct beginning and end. The work's predetermined length of one month and division into days liberate Mayer to a certain degree, providing an objective (or, Wittgenstein might add, accidental) framework that is not essentially connected to the material, with starting and finishing points that exist regardless of what she writes or photographs.

This is not to say that the text is without any kind of shape—one can trace developments and movements within it. The opening does acknowledge the project's commencement: “& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation” (7). The white sink refers to a photo of Mayer's white sink, perhaps the first photograph she takes on July 1. And yes, the “main thing” *is* that the white sink is as good a place to start as anywhere else. Perhaps it is this leveling of the narrative imperative that inspires thoughts of a whole new language, that is, a new way of writing that is not tied to the ego-driven world of identifying. Mayer, having read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, was particularly interested in his refutation of the possibility of a private language (Int). In a sense, *Memory* takes on the challenge of rejecting “the grammar which tends to force itself on us” (*PI* §304) in the journal or autobiographical form and shows us a new grammar, a new language game that we must gradually learn.

Just as the beginning refers to its beginning, the book's final words—in a post scriptum section titled “Dreaming”—are something of a send-off: “& you find it out, what's there, as a struggle already dying to explore, what's there, as a piece, to mesmerize, to suck you in to leave all out to include all, you gotta be ready you're ready, eyes violate as I do every day, all born.

Now you tell me, can I say that” (195). This last passage could read as a summary of the exploratory project, which aimed to “include all” by recording every thought in writing and capturing the rest in photographs. The book’s ambivalent last sentence exposes the power of language games: either we hear a voice asking someone for confirmation, or it narrates a moment in which someone tells (or possibly asks) Mayer about whether “I” (the speaker or Mayer?) can say something. Either way, the question of whether something can be said points to the issue of a controlling and confining grammar at the end of a work where things were said without regard for precedent or propriety. And if we are to interpret the first clause (“Now you tell me”) as an introduction to a question (or a challenge, the flash of a gauntlet), could we possibly read here an anxiety about another’s authority to tell her what she can or cannot say? While I would not suggest that Mayer is displaying anxiety about *how* to end her work in a formal sense, the approaching end does occasion a palpable discomfort that accumulates in the last days of the month, revealing fatigue and even unraveling. The word “fear” appears repeatedly: “fear already started as a finish to memory” (150); “I cant stand it this notebook’s just some step away from fear & that has to do with communication & as a finish to memory I learn one thing, that the fear’s already started” (170); and “I’m exhausted: cause fear had already started as a finish to memory & memory as an opening onto a finish for fear” (189). Moments like these bring a new dimension to Stein’s claim that “[e]verybody worries” about beginnings and endings, suggesting that the worry—the larger question of whether one can avert authoritative structures and ways of expression—is not merely a formal conundrum but something quite visceral. Here we may have a real-life example of Stein’s assertion that it is difficult, uncomfortable, and even frightening to transition into (or out of) a state without identity. When asked about this “fear,” Mayer responds:

“By the end of the month . . . I thought I had gone crazy. . . . Not a happy occasion. . . . [It was] fear that I had lost my mind” (Int).

If the psychological chaos was an unanticipated product, the structural disorder is very much in the spirit of Mayer’s project, which, in spite of its documentary mode and division into daily entries and rolls of film, questions and resists the traditional journal and autobiography. At moments Mayer seems overtly to reject any possibility of a Wittgensteinian overview: “I am highly dissatisfied with life as it is or let me reform that for you wanna go higher you want an unsystematic slovenly mess that is chaos for all, then come along with me & you’ll have a journal & *no survey*” (100, emphasis added). That is, she is in the thick of it, writing writing. Indeed, she has not set out to make an *Übersicht* and her diary does not “perform a service, work words into a system, words put in a system”; instead, “its some play, some death, nautical, at sea with them” (81). One imagines sending the words out to wander the horizon aimlessly in perpetuity. This insistence that a diary is not “a reconstruction” puts the focus on words, and words alone. Likewise, Mayer overtly opposes the form of autobiography as a genre, as well as the cultural obsession with identity. On July 14 she writes:

death: for which reason I deny autobiography, or that the life of a man matters more or less & someone said we are all one man & someone said I count the failure of these men, whether they are jews or chinese or whether they are me or my sister, R., I count the failure of these people as proof of their election, they are all divine because they die, screaming, like the first universal jew the gentiles will tell you had some special deal (83)

As if gesturing to Stein’s lecture Mayer later reiterates this passage with a different departure point: “Time is running out, so, you know everything, the whole of it. Which is why I deny

autobiography or that the life of a man matters more or less & someone says we are all one man & later I'll say I count the failure of these jews as proof of their election" (137). These opening lines of the July 24 entry commence with an awareness of the passage of time and the approaching end of the "assignment." The reader may be unsure what to make of "you know everything, the whole of it," but if one links the awareness of time's passage with human activity, then a Steinian reading might be that there is nothing you can say about that sphere that anyone does not already know: "After all there is always the same subject there are the things you see and there are human beings and animal beings and everybody you might say since the beginning of time knows practically commencing at the beginning and going to the end everything about these things" (Stein 356). Since everyone "know[s] everything, the whole of it," autobiography is indeed futile, at least in terms of creating a revealing masterpiece as Stein would have it. Death, Mayer's first reason for denying autobiography, also appears in Stein's lecture, where she draws it into the time-identity complex: "no one is content with being a man and boy but he must also be a son and a father and the fact that they all die has something to do with time"—but, of course, "it has nothing to do with a master-piece" (362). We shall revisit the issues of death and individuality in autobiography below when we turn to Irena Vrkljan's work.

Wittgenstein also expresses misgivings about the enterprise of journal- or diary-keeping. While the *Tractatus* commanded that we be silent about that of which we cannot speak, Wittgenstein's journal entries from the 1930s are full of reproaches about the uselessness of what he *is* writing, calling into question the very act of journal writing. Such reproaches in fact reflect an abiding philosophical tenet for Wittgenstein, namely that a thing must go beyond the personal and have some shared usefulness if it is to be worth anything at all (Klebes 41). A diary that is removed from life amounts to a vain pursuit that distracts from what really matters. But perhaps

a mode of writing that is somehow closer to the stream of life would be of more use: “If it is to be in order, I have to be able to step outside of my diary as though *casually* stepping into the open—into life—and not have to either climb up into the light as though from a hole in the ground, or be jumping down to earth as though from a higher plane” (qtd. in Klebes 42).

Wittgenstein’s entry recalls Gertrude Stein’s claim that the writer must at once remain in the world of human affairs but at the same time outside of them. His position, that a diary should ideally not be separated from life itself, also resonates with the shift in his philosophy after the *Tractatus*: having rejected the idea of mental images (including memory images), one must ask “by virtue of which warrant are we justified in assuming that there is *something* which may be remembered, *something* which may be written down?” (Klebes 43). On the contrary, writes Wittgenstein: “One often thinks—and I myself *often* make this mistake—that everything that one thinks can be written down. In reality one can only write down—i.e., without doing something that was stupid or uncalled for—what emerges in us in the form of writing. Everything else appears odd & practically like dirt. I.e. something that should be wiped away” (qtd. in Klebes 43). Again Wittgenstein echoes Stein, in that his medium-specific orientation (seeing writing as a unique language occasion for which only certain utterances are appropriate) seems consonant with Stein’s insistence that the act of creation be in service to the work created, whether a painting or a novel.

Looking at Mayer’s *Memory* in the context of Wittgenstein’s remarks, it is also important to draw attention to a distinction that her work brings to light. In terms of writing “everything that one thinks,” she is in one sense doing just this, but in another sense not. While in the project she sets out to write every thought she has accumulated during the day, her raw approach and faithfulness to the language as it occurs to her *as she writes*, in the present, brings an immediacy

and liveliness to the work that clearly distinguishes it from a journal of recollections or attempts to *reformulate* thoughts that have fled. Mayer candidly admits that the process is not a pure one; sometimes she is “remembering,” sometimes she is not. If *Memory* takes up Stein’s challenge to write without remembering, with memory as its object, Mayer also seems to confirm Wittgenstein’s belief that “writing cannot be considered a suitable medium for the preservation of mental objects. It simply does not fix the meaning of those thoughts and sensations which could first—and *only*—be testified to by means of writing” (Klebes 43). In other words, she abandons any compositional method based on the idea that there must be mental objects conjured before her and recorded in writing, opting instead for an approach that takes the present act of writing as the only given. This would seem, if not a solution, then an alternative to the problem of something going “dead once it’s been said” (or written, as it were).

In its particular fusion of Wittgenstein and Stein, Mayer’s *Memory* creates a kind of realism based on word relationships with a wide array of memory experiences—an alternative to the identity-driven remembering that Stein claims is inimical to writing. The resulting raw language of memory, with its lack of order (deliberate and perhaps inevitable), gives us some clues as to why an overview of any autobiographical experience is so difficult to achieve: how to sort through such an intense concentration of details and assemble them? Instead of a cohesive whole, we get an enlivening document of how memory plays out as a present linguistic event.

4.2 Innocent Before the Judgment of Words: Irena Vrkljan’s *Marina; or, About Biography*

We have so far seen both Bernadette Mayer and Gertrude Stein criticize autobiography for its basis in identity; Mayer emphasizes the genre’s privileging one individual life over others,

whereas Stein groups autobiography with other genres that merely give information. Mayer's experiment in *Memory* hones in on language's relationship to memory, eschewing pitfalls of identifying moves such as description and chronology, tuning in instead to the many experiences that accompany memory as it occurs in the present. And yet, if one wanted to write about a life on a broader scale, would it be possible to do in such a way that does not involve identity—or, at least, not identity as usual? Is there a mode of autobiographical writing that makes use of what Bela Szabados, in reference to Wittgenstein, calls “shared sources,” that is, personal content that is “emblematic of larger concerns” (72, 74)? Indeed, to satisfy Stein, could we even envisage a disappearance of the self through autobiography? This would entail a more philosophical approach to autobiography, adopting Wittgenstein's view of philosophy that the use of personal content is meant as a mirror to stimulate thought in the reader (“I must be nothing more than the mirror in which my reader sees his own thinking with all its deformities & with this assistance can set it in order” [CV 25]). The flip side of this coin is, of course, that personal content lacking any wider relevance must not be included (“*Forget*, forget that you have these experiences yourself!” [Z 32e]). Croatian writer Irena Vrkljan's 1986 work, *Marina; or, About Biography*,⁵⁵ proposes an alternative to traditional autobiographical modes dominated by inherited hierarchies, which in her view incur damage to our actual experience of life and the world. Instead, Vrkljan seeks access to autobiography (and biography) through language itself, whose unique status as something shared and yet highly individual lets her show a life in a meaningful way through how a person *makes* meaning—including the imaginative connections between lives that only memory can enable. This engagement of the imagination echoes an important element in

⁵⁵ The original title is *Marina ili o biografiji* (“Marina or about biography”). Note that the original title is conspicuously lacking punctuation and that this change in translation could be read as a normalizing move.

Wittgenstein's morphological approach, and also acknowledges one of the most vital aspects of life—the mind's creative and generative powers, which find no place in rote chronologies. As with all the other works we have looked at, *Marina* too carries a heavy burden of responsibility, which informs Vrkljan's rebellion against what she perceives to be violent forms and demands a precise perception that moves case by case, word by word.

As the title suggests, *Marina* is not just about Vrkljan's life; one might say it is as much about biography and autobiography as about any of the many figures woven into its pages. This short book, divided into five sections that bear epigraphs but no chapter titles or numbers, finds its greatest inspiration in the eponymous 20th-century Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, whom Vrkljan read fervently and translated, and whose tumultuous, tragic life serves as the background for reflections on many of the lives surrounding Vrkljan as well as her own. The language of *Marina* is taut; terse sketches of events are interspersed by pithy comments or avowals such as, "The word is life. It is the beginning" (112). In this cautious, elegiac atmosphere Vrkljan delicately connects many lives, many selves, who in the historical world of events never met, never crossed. This almost gives new meaning to Wittgenstein's "criss-cross": language becomes the connector and writing the sole means of connecting.

Like Mayer and Stein, Vrkljan also sees autobiography and biography as problematic, and her book can be read as a protest against the cultural tradition of event-oriented chronologies. The imposition of such orders—the "cursed" biography of events (115)—does violence to the fluid nature of our lives and memories:

The past lives in us without chronology. Everything is simultaneously here, all colors, all feelings. As we talk, we often do violence to this simultaneous memory. Every book about life could run parallel, in columns, it could express the

whole if we were not brought up to believe in sequences, in hierarchies.

Important, unimportant. Beginning, end. This arbitrariness springs from our desire to intervene, to explain. But that is violence too, done to what we have experienced. In that way we have linked ourselves to the external biography, to the junctions. (140)

Insofar as the past *lives* in us, it is alive to change as much as we are. Vrkljan clearly does not subscribe to a view of memory that sees images filed away, separate from each other and frozen in time. Her assertion that the ordering of lives according to such a hierarchy does a kind of violence recalls Wittgenstein's preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, where he excuses the book's lack of a cohesive, "smooth sequence": "My thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination" (3e). But this affinity is rooted in still deeper ones, as we shall see. As the above passage suggests, Vrkljan has a view of history strikingly sympathetic with that expressed in Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

In forming his view of history, Wittgenstein, for his part, was influenced by Otto Spengler's physiognomic conception of history, which Ray Monk describes as follows:

What [Spengler] was concerned above all to combat was a conception of history as "natural science in disguise"—the "taking of spiritual-political events, as they become visible day by day on the surface at their face value, and arranging them on a scheme of 'causes' and 'effects'". He argued for a conception of history that saw the historian's job, not as the gathering of facts and providing explanations, but as perceiving the significance of events by seeing the morphological (or, as Spengler preferred to say, physiognomic) relations between them. (311)

To get a clearer idea of what these morphological or physiognomic relations consist of, we can turn to Spengler's inspiration, Goethe's morphological study of nature. Goethe himself coined the term "morphology," "a science of organic forms and formative forces aimed at discovering underlying unity in the vast diversity of plants and animals" (Miller xvi). It was, above all, meant to be a living science: dissatisfied with what he perceived as a dead, mechanized Newtonian approach to science, Goethe sought something that "recognize[d] living forms *as such*, to see in context their visible and tangible parts, to perceive them as *manifestations* of something within" (Erich Heller, qtd. in Monk 312). Thus in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, his extensive botanical studies lead him to posit the leaf as the proto organ of the plant, which assumes a range of different forms such as seed, stamen, and petal. In order to perceive the archetype "undergirding and guiding the formation and transformation of the material shapes we see on the stem," Goethe felt that we "must employ both the eyes of the body and the 'eyes of the mind,' both sensory and intuitive perception, 'in constant and spirited harmony'" (Miller xviii). As Monk notes, Wittgenstein's "synopsis of trivialities" is a descendant of this way of thinking; he himself calls his approach "the morphology of the use of an expression" (qtd. in Monk 312). Like Goethe and Spengler, Wittgenstein demands we involve both our powers of observation and a well-honed imagination, "collating one form of language with its environment, or transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole of space in which the structure of our language has its being" (Wittgenstein and Waismann, qtd. in Monk 312). The power of the imagination to reveal larger structures takes on tremendous importance in *Marina*, as well.

Vrkljan, in her own morphological way, constructs an alternative to the biography of events: a "biography of words" (115). This type of biography seeks to show how words live in us, taking on their own meaning for each of us through a rich accumulation of associations

connected to environment, circumstances, and situations; by examining these meanings we can learn more about that person's life than we ever could through a mere timeline of events. For example, she writes of her own experience visiting a friend—the Croatian painter Miljenko Stančić—at his home on the island of Brač. Stančić had been diagnosed with cancer, and Vrkljan recalls how they sat silently in his kitchen waiting for a phone call with test results. Vrkljan was painfully aware of the “white skin of the painter,” swollen in his face (reminiscent of her father's during his own illness); as they waited, Stančić particularly reticent, they could hear the sea and smell the pine resin from the nearby trees. Although the news that finally came was good (on that day, at least), granting a temporary reprieve from worry, Vrkljan writes,

that white kitchen one afternoon on the island of Brač remained in me as the beginning of an intimation of the end. Together with the scent of the pines, a sense of danger stole in. Is it true that since then the pine no longer exists for me? Is it possible only as it was up to then? The loud crack of the cones together with that swollen face? Those are questions about the pathways words take. Or more precisely, about the pathways of the loss of all imprecise content. Everything that is remembered alters the world from the point when something occurred.

Pines, a face, fear. (114)

This vivid, painful example serves as a perfect case study for Wittgenstein's argument that words acquire meaning not through reference alone, but through context. Vrkljan's autobiography, then, would need to include that for her “the letters *p i n e* spell death”—something that would contribute to a more holistic sense of her life. Meanwhile, for others, “there are thousands of other pines” (115).

As for those thousands of other pines, an equally meticulous investigation is needed to grasp their significance. A “living” picture of a life emerges only through seeing how that person makes meaning, how connections between words and contexts create pathways for that individual’s language and understanding of the world. Rather than seeing a life according to “a single scheme of similarities, namely the arrangement as a series in time . . . (presumably bound up with the uniqueness of the causal schema)” (Wittgenstein and Waismann, qtd. in Monk 312), a biography of words examines relations such as pine–face–fear–death. Just as Vrkljan was wary of our “desire to intervene, to explain,” Wittgenstein also oriented his later philosophy toward a careful examination of “ordinary” language practices rather than theoretical explanation:

It was correct that our considerations must not be scientific ones. . . . And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light—that is to say, its purpose—from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; but they are solved through an insight into the workings of our language, and that in such a way that these workings are recognized—*despite* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language.

(*PI* §109)

Wittgenstein is, of course, talking about undoing the tangles in philosophy, but the passage pertains to Vrkljan’s project as well: the way you come to an understanding of a person is not through an explanation using causal sequences, but rather in describing (perhaps among other

things) their language practices, in seeing what had meaning for them and why. Indeed, chronological and spatial limitations no longer exist in memory; in this way, memory has tremendous powers of liberation.

Traditional biography (and autobiography) works with a concept of time that runs along a line in a one-way trajectory toward death. It is this, says Vrkljan (echoing Gertrude Stein) that we must rid ourselves of if we are to create biographies that are alive rather than dead: “We have been granted this fabrication about beginnings and ends by our belief in experience, in the march of time, in aging. Physical death as the final point of a story, a life. The past, the future, rising, falling lines. I do not want to write for that death. I should like to repeat Marina’s question: Who will break the clock and so free us from time?” (140) Not only would the discovery of “some other kind time” through a careful arrangement of details (think of Wittgenstein’s “synopsis of trivialities”) somehow liberate biography from its death march; it also offers a possible antidote to the loneliness of a single biography and the infinite solitude of its end. “We should uncover other sources,” Vrkljan continues, “the whole surface of remembrance. Let us avoid all choice! For on the shore of such lost time there no longer exist favorite places, and there are no traveling companions” (140). Indeed, if there is any hope in *Marina*—so full of painful stories (deaths of friends, war, migrations, suicides, including Tsvetaeva’s)—it lies in a firm belief in these traveling companions: lives that meet and overlap in meaningful ways, perhaps not in space and time, but through other correspondences. Memory is the scene where these correspondences exist, thanks to the “simultaneity of remembrance,” where details from one’s own life are side by side with details from other biographies. Vrkljan, for instance, cites the “police station building in Paris” (where Tsvetaeva, under interrogation about her husband’s espionage, recited only her own poetry and excerpts from Kafka’s *The Trial*); “the book in the Zagreb shop” (owned by

Vrkljan's first husband, and whose collection included a first-edition copy of *The Trial*); and "accusations, misunderstandings, the same dull light." Then, as if to test whether any of these memories take precedence, she asks, "Is every thread in that fabric equally strong? I pull out threads of various colors. Blue means sea" (120). By mingling together, the memories affect and color each other.

Therein also lies Vrkljan's answer to the rejection of autobiography on that grounds that, as Bernadette Mayer puts it, "we are all one man," whereas autobiography implies "that the life of a man matters more or less" (M 83). As opposed to the hierarchical "important, not important" biography of events and the biographical imperative of a single, essential self, the model Vrkljan proposes is based on a fundamental interconnection between lives and offers some freedom in these connections cast far and wide:

We are composed also of lives that have passed. With this realization it is possible to fly away from here, from this gray zone of Berlin. It is possible to move along other roads, to stand behind the low fences of a suburb of Prague or in Meudon (the sounds of planes and cars here immediately retreat), it is possible calmly to accept predicted losses. And so take up residence in the imagined. Because we must live somewhere. (130)

While "the imagined" may be less preferable than a reality of nourishing, close-knit relations with those physically present in one's day-to-day life, it nevertheless presents a valuable supplement to that and, in some cases, the only tolerable alternative in cases of bare, uprooted existence. Moreover, as Gordana Crnković points out, through this imaginative contact with others' biographies of words, one's own life and words "are released from one's own lack of freedom of the (auto)biographical and factual past and into a freedom of a potentially different

being: [certain words] can be different than they were for me; thus, . . . I could, perhaps, still be different” (*ID* 107). After all, we are not “all one man,” but rather highly individual beings whose “lives and texts interrelate” (Crnković, *ID* 104), and so, “my autobiography is also always the biography of others” (105).

Equally importantly, in showing the need for these “residences,” Vrkljan also eschews the limitations of a single-person biography or autobiography, reflecting yet another shared characteristic with Wittgenstein’s later thought, namely that—in philosophy, at least—the personal matters only insofar as it resonates with others (Szabados 70–74). Thinking and learning about others’ lives can be instructive to us all, and autobiography, provided it is more than merely informative (the critique Stein leveled), has the potential to reveal something to us about ourselves. Wittgenstein, who employs the personal in his philosophy in order that the reader may see his faulty thinking and “with this assistance . . . set it in order” (*CV* 25), sidesteps the traditional moralizing position of the philosopher, looking down from above at human activity and directing us one way or another. Yet the mirror poses a pitfall, too: the self-deception that one is a “universal, general human being” (Szabados 71). Using the personal in philosophy, then, involves a careful balance, as Szabados explains: “[First,] there is an inclination to understand our mental language through the idea of the private mental image, through private experience. So [Wittgenstein] wants to resist this inclination. [Second], he wants to drive home the point . . . that nothing of human importance can be an individual quirk or peculiarity, or mere cleverness. This is the wrong terrain for ‘importance’” (72). Rather, importance must come from something that is of larger concern and relevance. And for Wittgenstein—as, it would seem, for Vrkljan—nothing is more shared than language. Perhaps we should grant, along with Szabados, the concession that some notions not stemming from

shared sources may yet have their place in autobiography (as opposed to philosophy) (73); still, in *Marina* we see how even very intimate notions are dependent on a broader context involving others. It may be precisely this aspect, one more of practice than of content, that makes the biography of words inherently of shared concern. Vrkljan's text becomes a mirror for the reader, who, if she so chooses, can begin to think more expansively about her own life and the many undreamed-of threads linking it to others.

The imaginative aspect of Vrkljan's approach is counterweighted by a strong demand for precision. Vrkljan is aware, with Wittgenstein, that the "resources of language" can lead us astray. Language can create a false picture that "[holds] us captive," resulting in an imprecise usage that seems "only to repeat [the picture] to us inexorably" (*PI* §115). This, according to Wittgenstein, has been the bane of philosophy; as for Vrkljan, she sees such potential traps in personal life as well as in the construction of biography. In one example she shows how "[i]naccurate words destroy sensuality" (108):

In 1950 I am standing indecisively beside my friend in a small apartment in Zagreb. He is stretching felt over a wooden mold with the help of short nails. He taps them with a hammer. The slippers he is making are gray, their felt soles black and ugly. A poet and a shoemaker. They don't sell well, and even I don't wear them around the house. At the trade fair, in the sun, they look so wintery that scarcely anybody stops in front of those five pairs he has set out on a white sheet. All that remains is a picture. (Is it accurate? I never went with him to the fair.) And the fact that the room smelled of glue. There were books lying on the table, papers, there was a little food in the fridge. That picture, thrown over the room,

turns it into a solid lump. That unknown man in it was my friend. Did I guess even then that our life together would not succeed?

We were imprecise, there were assumptions everywhere. He as a child in the school dining room, his mother a cook. The shame he felt. I never actually saw the child he was. I saw only tables, on them bowls of soup. Because that is what he talked about: his shame. It wasn't possible to learn anything real about that time. During our friendship I saw only a deserted school dining room. Empty pictures. Slippers lying in the dust in the sun. (108)

Vrkljan laments her inability to form a precise picture of her friend's past and to understand him better. In a sense, the young Vrkljan was unable to construct an adequate, meaningful biography, unable to "learn anything real" about his childhood. She also points out the influence that an imagined picture (her friend's unsuccessful attempt to sell his "ugly" slippers at a fair—she was not there) has on a real situation, as though it were "thrown over the room." These imprecisions had a deleterious effect not only on these young friends (possibly lovers), but also on the sensuality between them: "I don't possess any memory of his body" (108). Pictures, on their own, are not enough: we must ask ourselves if they are precise, we must look for understanding. "Are biographies merely a world of pictures?" Vrkljan asks, adding, "Marina, I would like to do more than simply see" (108).

Doing more than "simply seeing" is the way we arrive at precision and understanding, and this is where our responsibility (along with will and imagination) comes in: to see the connections and understand ourselves, what words mean to ourselves and others (what did the young man mean when he talked about "his shame"?). This is a large part of Tsvetaeva's strength; she becomes emblematic for a responsibility in using language with purpose and

understanding: “‘I am innocent before the last judgment of words,’ says Marina Tsvetaeva. And accepts responsibility” (115). If imprecise words destroy sensuality, precise words have the capacity to restore it. But how do we go about understanding? The first things required when formulating or verifying pictures of ourselves or others is patience, assiduity, and a willingness to accept that the criteria of authenticity may change from case to case. These simply cannot be generalized, as Garry Hagberg points out (220), for that would resemble repairing “a torn spider’s web with our fingers” (Wittgenstein, *PI* §106).

The Wittgensteinian concept of aspect-seeing proves particularly useful when it comes to thinking about how we can “do more than simply see.” Wittgenstein introduces aspect-seeing in *Philosophy of Psychology* through the example of the famous duck–rabbit drawing, which, depending on how one looks at it, could appear to be a duck or a rabbit (see remarks beginning with §118 in Fragment xi). Sometimes it is the case that we see a picture one way for a long time; the answer to the question “What do you see?” might be “I see a rabbit,” which is an expression of my perception (*PPF* §128). If I say I see a rabbit and someone asks me why, I could further explain “by pointing to all sorts of pictures of rabbits, . . . to real rabbits, talk[ing] about their kind of life, or giv[ing] an imitation of them” (§120). It is a different case when suddenly we see the same image in another way. If one says, “Now it’s a duck!” this is an expression of “the lighting up of an aspect” (§207). Nothing in the picture itself has changed; what has happened, rather, is that we connect it in different ways, to different things: “what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects” (§247).⁵⁶ Aspect-seeing is not the same as perception; perception

⁵⁶ The similarity to Gertrude Stein’s “entity” discussed in the first part of this chapter bears some comment. While both aspect-seeing and perceiving entity have to do with seeing something that has always been there in front of us yet somehow hidden, Stein’s “entity” stands in relation to

occurs as part of it, but there is a certain consciousness activated as well: “The concept of an aspect is related to the concept of imagination. In other words, the concept ‘Now I see it as . . .’ is related to ‘Now I am imagining that’. Doesn’t it take imagination to hear something as a variation on a particular theme? And yet one does perceive something in so hearing it” (§254). Now we are in a better position to see how Vrkljan’s example of “imprecise” assumptions shows us what happens when we miss or cannot see aspects of a picture. Mere seeing or perception is not adequate: at times we must involve something like imagination or creative will to consider different aspects (which Wittgenstein confirms: “Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as ‘Imagine this!’, and also, ‘Now see the figure like this!’; but not ‘Now see this leaf green!’” [PPF §256]). Could Vrkljan, for example, have shifted her focus from the empty tables and bowls of soup to the lonely, ashamed child in the picture of the school dining room?

This is not to say that one aspect is truer than the other. Indeed, another of aspect-seeing’s ramifications for (auto)biography involves the criteria for “genuine seeing”: “‘Is it a *genuine* visual experience?’ The question is: in what way is it one?” (PPF §190). Hagberg cites an example of Wittgenstein’s aspect-seeing in a silhouette: “I see that an animal in a picture is transfixed by an arrow. It has struck it in the throat, and sticks out at the back of the neck. Let the picture be a silhouette.—Do you see the arrow—or do you merely know that these two bits are supposed to represent part of an arrow?” (§180). Hagberg comments:

Importantly for the question concerning the possibility of stating general criteria

nothing else—perhaps for that reason it seems a more metaphysical concept. Wittgenstein’s aspect, however, is by definition in relation. Furthermore, as we discuss below, in aspect-seeing there is a question of which aspect is the “genuine” seeing, and the answer depends on context. Stein’s entity, since it is outside of time and human affairs, would presumably not change according to the situation.

derived from a general model of seeing, Wittgenstein considers both of the following emphatic responses to the silhouette case: “‘But this isn’t seeing!’— ‘But this is seeing!’” [PPF §181] These are both, we can see at a glance, rational and defensible responses that we imagine arising in different contexts, i.e. where the particular point, or conversational goal, of the response fits into a larger pattern of locutionary interaction—a language-game. (208)

Given that both responses are valid, if and when we argue that it *is* seeing, the question that follows is, “*In what sense is it seeing?*” (PPF §183). Only in—and from—the specific context will the question and its response derive its sense. When we apply this to our own attempts (in life, in [auto]biography), it is clear that what counts as genuine seeing is never a function of merely “[s]eeing the intrinsic properties or features of an object, and then giving those properties their bluntly factual corresponding descriptions” (Hagberg 208). Instead, the question of whether seeing one aspect or another is “genuine seeing” gets its answer from “a capacious grasp of the life of which the event in question is one significant part and where the rest of that life is known in sufficient detail to see linkages—linkages reported *within* that life’s narrative . . .—that give that life its teleology, its sense” (209). Vrkljan, it seems, would implore us to “uncover other sources, the whole surface of remembrance” in search of aspects we may have overlooked—perhaps to the point where she even rejects any notion of a “teleology” of a life. Final sense would only spell death. Indeed, real understanding may not be a matter of choosing one aspect or another, but in the perception of a change of aspect. Consider, for example, her observation that the manuscript of her first autobiographical work, *The Silk, The Shears*, appears differently in her suitcase when she travels from Berlin to Zagreb:

Does geography really alter memory? . . . [The book] changes in Zagreb and

becomes porous. Some other memory creeps in between the letters. Truth, accuracy, a foreign land. And what else? Are there places for luxury and places for indigence? Apart from place, does the past which lies over the experience also determine our choice and memories? I cannot free myself from the horror that the open suitcase in a Zagreb room suddenly contains a different book. Not untruthful, but different. (115)

The change in aspect unearths searching questions about writing, memory, place, and migration (Vrkljan moved to Berlin in the late 1960s);⁵⁷ moreover, the very realization that this different aspect is “not untruthful, but different,” gives Vrkljan a fuller, more dynamic understanding of her manuscript. It is aspect-seeing, writes Ray Monk, that is pivotal for Wittgenstein’s notion of understanding: “The ‘understanding that consists in seeing connections,’ one might say, is the understanding that results from a change of aspect” (517).

Later in his discussion of aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein turns to the subject of impressions, which, he argues, can be strongly informed by “certain associations and memories” (*PPF* §268)—in fact, he is illustrating how distant and various the connections are that have a role in the creation of meaning (of a word, sentence, etc.). Wittgenstein uses an anecdote in which he is on a walk with a friend through the outskirts of a city; all the while he imagines the city to be on their right.

Not only have I *no* reason that I am aware of for this assumption, but some quite simple consideration would be enough to make me realize that the city is a bit to the left ahead of us. I can at first give no answer to the question *why* I imagine the city in *this* direction. I have *no reason* to think so. But though I see no reason, still

⁵⁷ Vrkljan spent half the year in Berlin and half in Zagreb until 2015, when, following the death of her spouse Benne Meyer-Wehlacka, she returned to Zagreb permanently (Devčić).

I seem to see certain psychological causes for it. In particular, certain associations and memories. For example, we were walking along a canal, and once before, in similar circumstances, I had followed a canal, and that time the city was on our right. (§268)

When Wittgenstein's interlocutor objects, "But what a strange experience this is!" Wittgenstein responds, "it is not stranger than any other; it is simply of a different kind from those experiences which we regard as the most fundamental ones—sense impressions, for instance" (§269). The connection with Vrkljan is clear; what Wittgenstein does is rehabilitate such experiences from labels like "strange," "obscure," etc., and show how ordinary they are in fact.

He continues in this vein, using yet another amusing example to arrive at what he calls the "primary" and "secondary" meaning of words. In section §274, he asks, "Given the two concepts 'fat' and 'lean', would you be inclined to say that Wednesday was fat and Tuesday lean, or the other way round?" Wittgenstein himself is "inclined towards the former"—but do the words "fat" and "lean" have a different meaning than usual here? The use is different, and yet he could not have substituted different words, for it is "*these* words (with their familiar meanings)" that Wittgenstein wants to use in this case. We could investigate the sources for this inclination (associations from childhood, for example), but whether or not we find them, the inclination stands. It stands beyond much explanation: there is not another definition of "fat" and "lean" here: "Asked 'What do you really mean here by "fat" and "lean"?' , I could only explain the meanings in the usual way. I could not point them out by using Tuesday and Wednesday as examples" (§275). Here, like Vrkljan, Wittgenstein points out that words can have layered meaning in a single use: "primary meaning," the familiar meanings of "fat" and "lean" (or "pine," for that matter); and "secondary meaning," the more elusively defined meaning informed

by potentially intangible causes, such as “fat” in “fat Wednesday.” Wittgenstein is careful to point out that “[o]nly someone for whom the word has the former meaning uses it in the latter” (§276). Furthermore, this is not a case of metaphor, since the secondary meaning can only be expressed using the primary meaning (as we saw in our discussion of Mayer, above, Wittgenstein cannot explain that the letter *e* is yellow except by referring to the concept of yellow) (§278). Such inclinations toward secondary meanings are elemental in the biography of words. In *Marina*, Vrkljan shows us that how we use certain words can prove very revealing about our lives, particularly when we investigate their possible genealogies (such as the example for “pine” that Vrkljan gives). Moreover, in light of the existence of secondary meanings—which Wittgenstein confirms as a vital part of how we use language—the blunt biography of events does indeed appear impoverished. We could even go so far as to say that secondary meanings are bearers of an individual’s life, borne out in their use of language.

Skeptics may question the value of *Marina*’s biography of words, where so much of the meaning comes from connections generated by the writer’s memory and imagination. Hagberg puts forth a compelling counterargument in defense of such moves, pointing out that “they are not merely exercises in a constructivist or anti-realist free-for-all” (212). Interestingly, Hagberg supports this claim by “renovating” an early picture of the limits of language from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as discussed by David Pears. In this picture, the limits of language are clearly fixed. Beyond those limits, Pears explains, “there is only a void into which we may extend our language by constructing new patterns of speech. We do this by adopting new rules of inference after they have been proved to follow from existing rules, or simply by adopting new definitions of old words” (*PPWP* 106). Note that the possibility of a secondary meaning (a new use for the primary meaning) is not included here. Because the void is beyond

the limit of possible sense, there is no potential to create new meaning: “We do not extend language to fit what we discover beyond its limit, because there is nothing to be discovered in a void. We can shift the limit further out into the void only by constructing extensions to existing language, and never by producing innovations to fit what we discover” (106). Clearly, this picture of the limits of language (and logic) no longer holds in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. However, Hagberg uses the model to rethink aspect-seeing in the context of autobiography. We can, he writes, “picture new aspect-perception as antecedent to new self-description in such a way that the new aspect is believed to capture facts of the self that are in a sense waiting, just beyond the reach or boundary of our present self-description, for articulation. There, again, the criterion for the truth of the newly dawned aspect just would be that pre-perceived fact waiting in the ‘void’” (210). This new picture offers a model of how language “extends itself in the bootstrapping fashion of (as Pears puts it) ‘adopting new rules of inference’” (211). We have seen in our discussions of both aspect-seeing and primary and secondary meanings of words that any new meaning is always an extension of existing resources, which provide a vital constraint on this growth. As Hagberg assures us, “those extensions will be rational, justifiable, and indeed sense-making, but *not* (as would be consistent with the old picture) exclusively by linguistically ‘mapping’, or giving voice to, the undiscovered territory lying beyond the earlier limit, by giving voice to the pre-existing unnamed ‘possibilities’.” In other words, the sense they have is genuinely new, and language is “a more creative matter—but it is not for that creativity unconstrained, capricious, or wholly a matter of linguistic constructionism” (211). And, as it often goes, constraint affords some freedom, for such extensions need not “be realist *in the sense of correspondence to prior facts*” (212). Here we can easily loop back to Vrkljan’s wariness towards the temptation of realist (auto)biographical narratives where the meaning of a life, or life

events, is fixed within the limits of established facts; such models squeeze out the potential of discovering new meanings. And yet, her emphasis on precision involves both a vigilant awareness of the potential for other aspects to “light up,” as well as a responsibility to the sources one uses to make meaning.

The working method in *Marina; or, About Biography* both protects and employs memory’s manifold against the violence of imposed autobiographical forms. Mining an individual’s biography of words will necessarily lead out to other biographies and back in to the individual because the way we make meaning comes both from our contact with the world and our own imaginations. Staying attuned to the details before us as well as the resonances across time and space may even produce a sense of something of the unity Goethe felt underpinned life itself. It is a way to document both the things we can speak of, and those we cannot.

4.3 Necessary Deficiencies

Whereas the novels of Beckett and Selimović afforded those writers a fictional distance from which to express the difficulties of autobiography, Mayer and Vrkljan take on the problem directly. This directness, in fact, sets them apart from many other autobiographical works, experimental or otherwise. In both cases, the directness is characterized at times by a very raw emotion that is part of the *writing* (as opposed to a sensitive description of a past emotional event, or sentiment triggered by recollection). In a sense, they are playing out the fear, sadness, anxiety, and frustration that Molloy, Moran, and Ahmed Nuruddin express in their narrations. Mayer, as we have seen, refers to her own unraveling emotional state: “a long series of very bad days, this is my pole high-wire act where I do a turn in air again, & of those days there’s a

feeling of horror to recount them & disconnection” (M 155); “I’m lost so lost how lost can you be when everywhere you go it’s morning & the sun’s coming up over a map, lost & I am losing someone or something how lost can you be” (179). Vrkljan’s prose laments the losses as well; of a friend who died unexpectedly in an accident she asks,

Where does that black curtain come from, and the last image? Snow keeps on falling. We know the smile, the look, we hear the voice, we see images. We still feel the hoop of pain on our skin left by that day in December. And the glare of finality. Therefore not silence, on no account. We must speak, think, take you everywhere with us, ask you questions, listen. To ensure your place, say your name. We must live unforgetting. And so accept the loss. (176)

As we take others “everywhere with us,” biography slips into autobiography. But there is more to “living unforgetting” than this: elsewhere Vrkljan writes with a sense of judgment reminiscent of *Death and the Dervish*. Addressing a friend whom Vrkljan feels she and others failed, having let her drift into a state in which she no longer speaks or gets out of bed, she declares, “To write is also to name the guilt. But you cannot forgive, Dora, you do not have to” (181).

Honesty and rigorousness take the place of an ordered chronology where each event has its meaning explained. There are loose ends in both Mayer’s transcription of thought and Vrkljan’s morphological (auto)biography; much work is left to the reader—which is just as Wittgenstein would have it: “Anything the reader can do for himself, leave it to the reader” (CV 88). Their philosophical approach to autobiographical writing shares with Wittgenstein a faithfulness to “what came *naturally*,” that is, resisting “the urge to tweak thoughts against what [they] found to be their inherently dispersive force” (Klebes 45–6). In this way, the nature (or natures) of thought, memory, and writing does not appear “as a lamentable accident” or

insufficiency of the text, “but rather as an essential feature (not a virtue)” (Wittgenstein, *Wiener Ausgabe*, qtd. in Klebes 46). Wittgenstein’s parenthetical addition is key, reminding us that, while for the sake of a genuine investigation we should not deny the tangled shape of thought or memory, nor should we celebrate or flaunt it. It needs to be balanced by a continuous tug away from it, towards an impossible wholeness, towards impossible complete understanding.

Conclusion: Finding and Inventing

The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung’?)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §122

What would a Wittgensteinian autobiography look like? While we cannot “include everything” in an autobiography—life, like grammar, is “deficient in surveyability” (*PI* §122)—we can strive to make a surveyable representation that “produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’”. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*” (§122). These links help us make sense of the survey by showing us how things stand in relation to one another. With respect to autobiography, Gary Hagberg asserts that “finding” such links is straightforward enough: looking at episodes in relation to others, or in a framework encompassing a larger period of time, in order to make sense of it. As for the “inventing,” this takes us into less orthodox territory, making up similar, yet significantly different, cases that shed light on the one in question—for example, “imaginatively changing some of the morally relevant nuances of the case and asking ourselves how we would describe the case then” (Hagberg 249). In a genre where *vérité* is the prevailing assumption and at least one of the measures of value, this vital aspect of autobiography is likely to go neglected. And yet, it is just as crucial in autobiography’s therapeutic work (that is, of solving problems) as it is in Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing, where he examines hypothetical situations in an effort to see the actual ones more clearly. Indeed, such imaginative engagement helps resolve the kinds of problems that Wittgenstein blames on a “one-sided diet: one nourishes one’s thinking with only one kind of example” (*PI* §593).

Still, however promising—and central—the concept of a surveyable representation is, there remains the big problem of how to go about making it. As we have discussed in Chapter

One, Wittgenstein himself seems to question the prospects of doing so, given his expressed dissatisfaction with the *Philosophical Investigations*; perhaps the preface's reference to the work's album-like structure indicates an insufficiency of intermediate links. More importantly, as Hans Sluga points out, we should ask whether the very idea of a survey is itself an inherited super-concept from the progress-oriented technological culture to which Wittgenstein put himself in opposition (102). In the context of our study, doubts about the possibility of a survey seem most acutely present in *Molloy* and *Memory*, where the spray of phenomena cannot be brought into any order; instead, we are confronted with an ever-accumulating mess that, according to Beckett's and Mayer's sensibilities, is in keeping with the chaotic, "inenarrable" form of life (*TN* 109) and the world. Nevertheless, the idea of a survey, whether illusory or not, maintains its grip, and even within the mess we find repetitions and echoes—especially Beckett's "strange loops"—that perhaps signpost something like "intermediate links," giving a sense of a larger whole, albeit without beginning or end.

The clarity sought in a Wittgensteinian autobiography would presumably be of the therapeutic kind that characterizes Wittgenstein's philosophical work. That is, with an aim to cure certain problems by making them disappear: "Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem. There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were" (*PI* §133). "The philosopher," Wittgenstein tells us, "treats a question; like an illness" (§255). And as in philosophy, problems in autobiography are problems of language. What all the books examined here have in common is that, for them, "autobiographical investigation is . . . *grammatical* self-investigation" (Hagberg 245). They are conscious of the fact that, as with philosophy's "deep" problems, deep disquietudes in life do not gain their depth from some lower, inarticulate regions of the self (as the bifurcated model of

selfhood would lead us to believe), but rather “entirely *within* language” (245). Language then becomes not a means to an end in autobiography, but the investigation itself.

Treating these questions in a therapeutic way involves a delicate balance of acknowledging them without sublimating them. That is to say, it appears through the investigations that some things cannot be solved—though perhaps they can be treated. As Klebes observes,

what Wittgenstein’s readers are left with is a set of remarks that treat the very problem which disunites them: the similarities and dissimilarities of language games, of things we actually say and things we might, or would never, say. . . . [The] ways of language use Wittgenstein investigates [from the 1930s onward] suggest that philosophical clarity may consist mainly in pointing out areas in which clarifications are *not* likely to be forthcoming. (40)

As discussed in Chapter Four, there is a fine line between treating deep, problematic impulses as “raw material” (such as the interjections of Wittgenstein’s interlocutor, often beginning with phrases like, “I want to say . . .”) (*PI* §254) and transforming them into a virtue. They must stay the former if there is to be any therapeutic benefit. As we have seen, these impulses shed light that give meaning to self-investigation.

Across the works we have found some strikingly similar (Wittgensteinian) disquietudes that the authors (and fictional narrators) have attempted to disentangle. Perhaps the most salient issue is that of habitual seeing, which creates confusion, “paralyses our attention,” and spoils our relationship with the world (Beckett, “Proust” 516). On a macro level, we need to shed habitual ways of thinking about autobiography, including chronological models, causal histories, and the selection of details according to an inherited hierarchy of important events. As alternatives, we

have Wittgenstein's (and Spengler's, and Goethe's) morphological approach, perhaps best exemplified in Vrkljan's biography of words, as well as projects that involve a shedding of identity, such as Beckett's sweeping autographic anti-narrative or Mayer's experiment with "not remembering." At the micro level, of course, is language, whose rote use (Beckett's "pensum") can easily mislead. This calls for an obsessive vigilance in composition, of which we have seen plenty of enlivening examples: Mayer's (Steinian) word relationships, Vrkljan's precision of pictures, Beckett's efficient misuse, and even the dervish's tangled, breathless prose.

Beckett rightly points out that living outside of habit (of narratives, of language) leaves us uncomfortably unsheltered—much as Molloy and Moran find themselves literally exposed to the elements and all kinds of assaults. Stein echoes his position, noting how frightening it is "to know what one knows"; thus, it is unsurprising to find fear and discomfort throughout the texts, and even the novels' fictionalized angst does not seem an exaggeration. In spite of these difficulties, there are also positive, creative aspects to autobiographical investigations that must not be overlooked, as it is they who really move the therapy closer to its cure and "the free play of every faculty" (Beckett, "Proust" 516).

First is the shift in the concept of memory from frozen, recalled image to something that takes place in the present and may have any number of accompaniments: as we see in *Memory*, such sensitive documentation of memory's different modulations can have a liberating effect, returning us to a more fluid and dynamic relationship with the world (Rubinfine 5). Rubinfine calls such modes of representation as those in *Memory* "archaic," that is, prior to the dominance of the "present day ego structure, defenses, interests, needs and moral values" (5). Secondly, the autobiographer must tap into a certain will and imagination in order to shed habitual modes of thinking (we can recall here Wittgenstein's insistence that it was issues of the will, rather than

the intellect, that interested him). This entails, to greater or lesser degree, stepping outside of human affairs and moving into the garden with Moran, towards that “animal thinking” and potentially a new language. Herein lies perhaps the greatest paradox, which Stein aptly pinpoints: the autobiographer occupies some border territory between ordinary life and writing, apart from human affairs and yet writing about them. A “whole new language is a temptation” indeed (Mayer, *M*, 7), but probably an impossible one to master—hence *The Unnamable*’s “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (*TN* 407).

Will and imagination for Wittgenstein are related, reflecting the kinship between ethics and aesthetics. We could say that the imaginative aspect of self-investigation implements and speaks for those unspeakable realms, which are as much a part of life as the “biography of events.” Here are Ahmed Nuruddin’s “honesties”: judicious fictions that reveal something about the matter at hand. In *Death and the Dervish* this includes the hallucinatory elements of Nuruddin’s account; *Molloy* moves towards an animal thinking outside ordinary discourses; in *Memory* we have Mayer’s nonrepresentational language and strong synesthesia; and Vrkljan’s entire premise in *Marina; or, About Biography* relies on the engagement of imaginative faculties, considering secondary (and tertiary) meanings of words, precise aspect-seeing, and “tak[ing] up residence in the imagined,” populated by myriad crossings in memory (130). All of the works seem to urge us toward imaginative thinking as a prerequisite for reaching some degree of clarity or precision in the high-stakes investigation of a life.

In spite of the “curse of prose” and the clarity that may never come, the will and imagination offer a space for possibilities, for a language like a tree that unfurls new leaves yet maintains its roots firmly in the situation. There is no private language, but there is personal language—and it appears in Wittgenstein’s own writings as an essential part of his philosophy

and one of its most enduring, striking features, reminding us of the dervish's words: a personal tone is poetry.

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