

UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA  
FACULDADE DE LETRAS

PROGRAMA EM TEORIA DA LITERATURA



**TWO WAYS OF TRANSCENDENCE  
- AN ESSAY ON POETRY & PRAYER -**

**BERNARDO MANZONI PALMEIRIM**

**MESTRADO EM TEORIA DA LITERATURA**

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**Abstract:** My aim has been to compare two practices which are commonly linked to conceptions of the ineffable and the transcendent, namely poetry and prayer. The authors which have been fundamental to my claims are Ludwig Wittgenstein, Simone Weil, and Nelson Goodman.

I start by trying to understand our general use of language, next focusing on the elements which will be relevant for distinguishing the two language-games above mentioned. By trying to understand their specific grammars, I shall do my best to justify their use, which often runs the risk of falling beyond the grip of any common sense whatsoever; hence requiring the effort of clarification so as to be afforded at the very least a shallow hope of redemption. I shall discuss such notions as personification, the uses of figurative language, beauty and allegory, argumentation, interpretation, revelation, and contemplation.

**Resumo:** O meu objectivo foi o de comparar duas práticas que se encontram vulgarmente associadas às noções do inefável e do transcendente, nomeadamente a poesia e a oração. Os autores que foram fulcrais para a minha pesquisa foram: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Simone Weil, e Nelson Goodman.

Começo por tentar compreender o nosso uso geral da linguagem, focando de seguida os elementos que serão relevantes para distinguir os dois 'jogos-de-linguagem' acima referidos. Ao procurar entender a especificidade de cada um destes, tentarei dentro do possível justificar os seus usos e propósitos, que frequentemente correm o risco de nos eludirem ao ponto da falta de sentido total. Daí o necessitarem o esforço da clarificação para poderem ao menos receber o vago vislumbre da redenção. Discutirei noções como a personificação, os usos da linguagem figurativa, a beleza e a alegoria, a argumentação, a interpretação, revelação, contemplação.

**Keywords:** Language, poetry, prayer, beauty, transcendence.

**Palavras-chave:** Linguagem, poesia, oração, beleza, transcendência.

## RESUMO

*Dois Modos de Transcendência* trata de comparar duas práticas que se assemelham numa forma bizarra: ambas são amiúde descritas como inefáveis, ou formas de ir 'para além do mundo'. Isto é obviamente muito misterioso. Dado que esta peculiar semelhança pouco nos elucidada acerca do propósito de cada uma, a minha tese visa tentar aclarar o pouco que seja acerca desta violência ao senso comum encontrando contrastes entre as duas.

Para as distinguir - como forma de tentar clarificar o uso específico de cada uma - baseio-me fundamentalmente em noções de Ludwig Wittgenstein, e essencialmente no seu prestável conceito de jogos-de-linguagem. Este conceito informa-nos essencialmente de que os significados das palavras - e logo de "poesia" e "oração" - estão directamente ligados às formas como as usamos, cabendo-nos a nós distinguir as regras que subjazem a cada prática específica através da descrição destas mesmas práticas dentro dos contextos que lhes são próprios. Torna-se assim necessário assinalar as margens dentro das quais poesia e oração adquirem a sua significação. Dissipando confusões gramaticais (as regras de utilização de determinadas práticas) chegamos a uma base onde as palavras que usamos para nos referirmos a estas práticas já têm um sentido próprio, e logo utilidade.

Dado que estou a tratar de textos, começo naturalmente por falar da nossa relação comum com a linguagem, aquilo que está na base de toda a referência a que a linguagem está presa. As palavras são como etiquetas que colocamos no mundo para podermos falar dele, mas como não podemos apontar para o nosso interior da mesma forma como o podemos fazer em relação a objectos concretos, as nossas representações (aquilo que mostramos para nos referirmos a coisas) tornam-se bem mais estranhas quando queremos 'expressar o que nos vai na alma'.

As representações do nosso 'mundo interior' utilizam invariavelmente uma linguagem figurativa, que não escapa à regra do seu próprio uso. Logo, onde uma metáfora escreve que "A = x", devemos de facto ler "A é como se fosse x". Isto tem a utilidade de nos acautelar quanto às nossas descrições do mundo e da nossa relação com ele. Posto que crescemos num mundo partilhado com

outros onde muitas frases já estão estabelecidas, muitas vezes a força dos nossos hábitos leva-nos a esquecer o uso metafórico que fazemos das nossas palavras e expressões mais comuns. Não há mal nenhum em *falar* assim, o problema surge quanto o entendimento é hipnotizado pelo poder sugestivo das palavras e seus usos. Quanto à metáfora e questões afins recorro, entre outros, a Nelson Goodman.

Como breve exemplo do uso figurativo da linguagem, ainda há pouco falei do nosso mundo interior, quando isto é claramente uma metáfora. Assim, a palavra "alma", que é muitas vezes encoberta pelas descrições que se estendem dessa mesma metáfora, e a imagem que ela nos oferece do mundo, sofre duma confusão metafórica. Eu não tenho nenhum espaço tridimensional dentro do qual arrumar e do qual provêm as minhas ideias: não consigo pôr a minha mão dentro da minha cabeça para dela retirar uma palavra que estivesse a um canto e da qual não me consigo lembrar. Propriamente dito, são caixas e prédios que têm "interior". 'Cá dentro' só tenho órgãos, que não me ajudam por si só a compreender o mundo: tenho de passar por uma aprendizagem para tal.

Daí a importância da forma como aprendemos uns com os outros, passando todos por uma tarefa que, essa sim, nos permitirá entender melhor o que se passa tanto à nossa volta como 'na cabeça' dos outros: a linguagem. Aprendemos a falar através da imitação, 'agarrando', muitas vezes inconscientemente, regras de utilização acerca de como relacionar verbos, ideias, e emoções em frases. Temos de nos fazer entender, e para tal as nossas expressões têm de ser minimamente claras. É esse espaço entre o grunhido - "O que é que disseste?" - e a frase eficaz e bela que nos diferencia das demais criaturas neste mundo.

Mas como já referi, este nosso talento linguístico vem com as suas armadilhas, e a façanha de nos apercebermos delas é uma questão de sabermos, sobretudo, distinguir aquilo que dizemos daquilo a que nos estamos a referir. Temos, portanto, de aprender a ler. Uns quantos tornam-se proficientes na arte da escrita, mas se estes não souberem ler (o mundo) cuidadosamente,

aí a façanha de o compreender passa por mãos que acabam por complicar ainda mais a questão. Daí a *obrigação* de sabermos ler, e, especialmente se se tratar de poesia, de conseguir distinguir frases belas e patetas de frases correctas, sejam estas bonitas ou simplesmente certeiras.

Tentativas de explicar o inefável (ou a 'verdadeira realidade') - desde teorias científicas a filosofias, poemas, religião e superstição (as *descrições* destas últimas muitas vezes não se distinguem) - não escapam à linguagem figurativa. Oferecem-nos alegorias, metáforas extensas. Estas são como quadros dentro das quais podemos projectar as nossas descrições acerca do mundo, e muitas vezes, quantas mais descrições couberem dentro deste quadro explicativo, mais verdadeira nos parece a explicação. Estes quadros, quanto mais elegantes - i.e., simples e persuasivos na sua exposição - são mais facilmente aceites. Neste sentido, discuto nas páginas que se seguem o modelo mecânico dentro do qual a ciência - e Freud, *mutatis mutandis* - operam; e, associado a este quadro descritivo, um conto de Kleist que me permite ligar este modelo a uma certa concepção de beleza. Quanto a modelos doutro tipo, e no sentido de melhor explicar o que entendo pela colecção relativamente variada de quadros descritivos, ou melhor, alegóricos, que temos à nossa disposição, é útil lembrar a famosa alegoria da caverna de Platão, que não parece necessitar de mais nada para nos satisfazer enquanto explicação da nossa tarefa espiritual neste mundo. Mas para compreender as implicações deste quadro em particular é necessário passar por algumas palavras - e isso relego para a tese, onde elas têm mais espaço onde se articular.

Discuto também, falando de Platão, o diálogo de Sócrates com Íon, que serve, entre outras coisas, para observar uma alegoria da inspiração, e que se presta também à distinção entre os papéis e modos de representação da filosofia e da poesia. Quanto às distinções que nos interessam em especial - entre poesia e oração - utilizo alguns textos: dois poemas em especial (um menor, de Jim Morrison, e um mais elaborado, de John Ashbery), citações da Bíblia, é claro, e vários excertos de

Simone Weil, sem a qual não teria compreendido a especificidade da oração e suas implicações.

Temos de ter muito cuidado com as explicações que aceitamos. Isto, obviamente, se à partida tomarmos a nossa existência como sujeita a uma *tarefa* de todo. Mas nesse ponto não toco: sentir essa necessidade é uma questão da atitude de cada um, e está para além das minhas palavras, pelo menos aqui.

## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The reason that first made me want to join a Program in Literary Theory concerns the justification of poetry, a practice which is subject to the precarious balance between the highly significant and the nonsensical. This moved me onto my topic, which is related with the confusions which arise from the overlapping uses of certain fleeting words such as 'transcendence' and 'revelation' in the descriptions of poetry and prayer. The idea that these texts can take us 'beyond the world' calls for some sort of investigation. Fortunately I found a Program I felt I fit in, and that indeed helped me clarify substantial doubts and misconceptions. What drove me to write a thesis at all was my need to establish my own ground in a world where we stand puzzled by quite distinct things, and what I have written naturally extends from the confrontations involved in the process.

In reading my thesis, it will become apparent that it is neither an extensive critical study nor a treatise on prayer and poetry. It is an admittedly simple text on two accounts: for one, I have an elementary grip on these matters which has but begun to mature; secondly, I have endeavored to achieve plain, commonsensical assertions in an attempt to make things relatively clear both to me and others.

Two authors were especially groundbreaking for me: chronologically - Ludwig Wittgenstein, and more recently, Simone Weil. Both authors, in the way they have brought philosophy and religion 'back to the world', provided me with more solid handles, and I am still delighted and awed by their geniality. They put up the outer circle in which I have, to the humble extent afforded to me, been able to relate these matters. Wittgenstein's spirit extends throughout my research, whilst Simone Weil I have, for obvious reasons, saved for the second half of the essay. Nelson Goodman - whom I read post most of my readings of Wittgenstein - gave me a further grip on the uses of language with his useful terminology and exceptional perceptiveness. His notions of denotation and exemplification

were manifestly fundamental in regard to the distinctions I make here. O.K. Bouwsma's essays, collected in *Without Proof or Evidence*, were also very helpful in understanding the expressive purpose of religious writing. I must not (and shall not) forget William James' *The Varieties of Religious Belief*, which was the first major work that I read on this subject. I believe his efforts in the elucidation of religious issues worked on me; and his general outlook has seeped into the background of my mind, on account of which he is hardly quoted. Whatever insights I had were by and large inspired by the authors above and by what I was fortunate enough to have grasped in the Program. The remaining texts were mostly a matter of illustration - I collected words which continually unfolded things as I went back to them; most notably Ashbery's poem, which I perchance stumbled across in the world wide web.

Of course my essay is subject to a series of shortcomings, but I have only space to mention but a few. I would have liked to include a more detailed study on how science, philosophy, art, and religion go about in their specific uses of language, providing a more technical analysis of respective texts and bringing out the ways they provoke effects on the readers with their descriptions. I would especially have liked to have submitted an analysis on the sublime, which would have befitted my discussion. That would, however, have taken up time I did not have. Although I did have some discussions on these points under way, I was forced to exclude them on this account, since they have not yet succeeded in meeting my satisfaction to an acceptable degree. I expect that my survey on figurative language could do with some revision, and further examination of Goodman's detailed *Languages of Art* would definitely have enriched my essay.

As for the way my writing unfolded, I have a feeling that I have described things in a sort of spiral manner, returning to issues at a later point so as to regard them from a different angle. In this respect, I hope I have not repeated myself to a tiresome extent, and that each different angle can offer at least an inch of light instead of shadow.

I also find the beginning to be of quite a different nature from the end (more elementary in a sense), but although that is essentially connected with the nature of what is being discussed in each part, I have also tried to start off very slowly so to speak, so as to later be able to relate the natural with the supernatural (and the literal with the figurative) over some common ground.

I shall be speaking here of some particularly delicate issues such as faith, but decisions of this nature are for each one of us to make, and accordingly I step down from taking any sides here. I wish only to *describe* the differences I have encountered between the language-games in question. The rest is up to silence, or poetry.

### **Overview**

I have given the thesis a tripartite division, of which I do not provide the titles here, but only the general topics:

I: Language and worldmaking;

II: Allegory and 'big pictures' (distinctions between science, philosophy, and poetry);

III: Distinctions between poetry and prayer.

With Part I, I have tried to show some ways in which language is directly implied in our worldmaking. I have tried to pull separations (in/out; soul/world) together, which would indirectly assist my claims towards the end. I start by introductorily discussing the role of abstract words, 'meaning' and rules, and denotation and exemplification. Here are the main tools that will help me distinguish the language-games I will discuss in this thesis. Next I move onto personification and projection (which, as an incomplete notion, is followed by a first look at interpretation), that provide a further discussion of the ways we use figurative language; and which are connected with the ways with in which we are involved with certain descriptions, and more specifically those proposed by poetry and prayer. I finish this section with Auerbach's comparison of Homer's *Odyssey* and the story of Abraham and Isaac. This gives

me a more concrete ground on which to enhance Goodman's sense of notation and exemplification, which will be essential. Indeed, each Part ends with referring back to Goodman's basic contrast of denotation and exemplification.

In Part II, I am mostly busy comparing poetry to first science and then philosophy. I start by introducing the notion of big pictures, looking at science's mechanical model and then using Wittgenstein's examination of Freud's use of it. That prepares ground for the distinguishing question of values, which I connect to the use of absolute terms. I compare philosophy and poetry through the Ion dialogue, which allows me to, in addition to looking at how Socrates dismisses poetry with his use of argumentation, discuss (his allegory of) inspiration.

In Part III, I finally concentrate, having hopefully prepared the foundation for them, on the distinctions between poetry and prayer. I often pick up on previous notions, but putting them to a more specific use. "An American Prayer" and Psalm 4 are intended to serve only as the starting line, and I use them mostly to talk about beauty and interpretation (and the lack of) - two distinguishing features. Kleist's short story takes another look at beauty, whilst referring to the mechanical model from a different angle. I next essentially compare efforts in relation to texts (interpretation revisited) with efforts in relation to the self, a section in which I mostly fall back on Weil.

The final contrasts, for which I use Ashbery's "What is Poetry" and another series of quotes from Weil lead up to my final statements, where I make a concluding remark on 'transcendence', which is the backbone of my title.

#### **Additional remarks**

I have chosen to quote by following a system of abbreviations, which I personally find less cumbersome than embedding bibliographical references in the main text. I have included footnotes chiefly where I felt a need to make a parenthetical remark, or when quoting from an isolated source;

and also where the reference would look aesthetically awkward if included in the main text.

As for my titles, I have taken quotes almost exclusively from The Bible and Shakespeare's Sonnets (there is just one silent tribute to S. Weil). Some of the 'quotes' are not exact but appropriated versions, and there are some cases of omitted words or advanced question marks.

### **Acknowledgments**

The last three years I spent at the Program in Literary Theory were beyond shadow and doubt the most intellectually stimulating years in my life. The teachers, colleagues, and issues I therein encountered have been of insuperable worth to me.

I am especially indebted to Professor Miguel Tamen, who has proven a special talent for drawing thought out of me. His way of clue-dropping and confronting unclear intellections with questions instead of answers has never failed to leave me with the laborious task of untying knots where straightforward persuasion would have been far more comfortable for either of us. He was the midwife that Socrates could not have been.

As for home, I most certainly could not have arrived at this point in my education and character without the helping and patient hand of my family, which I shall forever hold in my thankful heart; and my dearest friends, who see from where I cannot, and tell me what I could not say. Maria: your labor of love has changed the life I intend to spend by your side. To all above I extend my humblest thanks, and treasure the fact that life has crossed our paths.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout the thesis, I shall refer to the works quoted in the main text by using abbreviations to their titles, in English if a translated work. More idiosyncratic quotes will be either footnoted or directly referred to in the main text. Quotes from the Bible or Plato will follow the appropriate citation system. Please refer to the Works Cited section at end for bibliographical information.

- AE** *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Ludwig Wittgenstein
- AP** "An American Prayer", Jim Morrison
- CV** *Culture and Value*, Ludwig Wittgenstein
- GB** "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough", Ludwig Wittgenstein
- GG** *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil
- LA** *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman
- LE** "Lecture on Ethics", Ludwig Wittgenstein
- MI** *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach
- MT** "On the Marionette Theatre", Heinrich von Kleist
- OC** *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein
- OD** *The Odyssey*, Homer
- RE** *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James
- WB** "The Will to Believe", William James
- WP** *Without Proof or Evidence*, O.K. Bouwsma
- WW** *Ways of Worldmaking*, Nelson Goodman

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## I

It is usual for us to talk of how we 'see' things: "Do you see what I mean?", "You're not seeing this properly", "I finally saw the truth", and so on. Most of the time we are not talking of visual perception but of understanding and awareness, of mental going-ons. Whereas in seeing we use our eyes, when we talk of 'seeing' we are usually referring to ideas and descriptions. Used in this sense, the word is sometimes pushed to the limit, and people talk of "revelation", as if they had seen something they were previously blind to or was veiled by something; and this in turn can give way to "transcendence", as if they had actually gone 'somewhere' they had never been before. Poems and prayer are especially tied up with these descriptions. Even though I will hardly be using these very same words (revelation, transcendence), they underlie most of what is being discussed in this thesis, and specifically towards the end, where I shall be comparing poetry and prayer, two practices which seem to, by way of common description, revolve around these notions. This chapter focuses chiefly on the general use of words, which allow us to refer to these shady concepts in the first place.

**And whatsoever Adam called every  
living creature, that was the name  
thereof**

The beginning: We grow up in a world, not alone, but learning from one another. We have common languages that enable us to grow in tribes, and in the course of that long and dynamic process where tastes and ways of doing things are both continued and discontinued, our world and ideas are altered by the participants involved. These changes have allowed us to form different communities throughout time, where both similar and dissimilar ways of seeing things co-exist, ways that end up

attracting and opposing types of people. Our "world" is essentially a general term that comprises families of beings and ways of doing things. We are life forms embedded in ways of life, building our ideas about things from descriptions we and others make. We discuss them, correct them, doubt them and even fight over them.

But we are all *introduced* to the world. (Your father takes your hand. "Look. This apple *plus* this one *equals* two apples. See?") A new practice has started taking shape. "One potato and another potato makes..?" The child is shown more examples of the same kind, and selected words are stressed so as to forward common ground for the practice, while a correct answer is elicited. In this specific practice of learning, the student can be right or wrong; there are no two ways about it. Under normal conditions, and especially if the practice continues to be taught at a higher level, he will develop a new skill. He may decide he likes doing this or not. He may work at it, who knows even make a living out of it. Whichever way the story ends, the point is that in addition to adding, there are multiple tasks we can learn to do. We seem to come into the world with a natural gift for learning.

But it is an aptitude that cannot grow on its own, and requires the guidance of others. What makes for a common world are common practices, and by granting them life and tradition, we enter a culture, a whole way of living. Humanity is made up of a series of different tribes persisting in diverse ways of life that nonetheless share some essential features. Let us say we mostly grow up in one tribe. How does most learning go about? ("Da-di", daddy says). Take the alphabet: you recite the song the teacher taught you. Words: you copy them onto paper, mimicking the grown-up's sounds and markings. Colors: you point at the correct examples. We first learn words by being shown examples of things outside, and are tested by being asked to represent them with the right word. At the very beginning people played with us the game of learning words. They would point at something and say a word, you repeat it, and they say "Good!" We were thus imparted

the tools we need to be an active part in a shared form of life. The pictures - the selected examples - we are shown of the world come to form our vocabulary, and we can use them thereafter to communicate directly with other members of our tribe without the demand for constant exemplification. Examples are called for only when doubt is lurking.

The examples we are first shown are a part of our tribe's common ground, the essential tools. When we make mistakes we are corrected, but after a while we quite forget we ever really learned them to begin with, so naturally do we use them ("I want the blue shirt over there.") We come to make use of subtler distinctions as well ("Hand me the pale turquoise t-shirt, please.") There are simple words like "blue" and more difficult ones like "turquoise". Readers and writers are those who come to enjoy words and the manifold ways in which they can be used.

How do we use words? I suppose the most basic and widespread function is that of enabling us to get along in our practical affairs. ("Can you pass me that book over there, please?" - "Where? I can't see it..." - "It's under the table." He looks and sees it.) But how do we 'see' ourselves - what kind of descriptions can and do we give of ourselves? Strictly speaking, we can only see ourselves in the mirror or in representations of ourselves, such as paintings or photographs. I cannot see my face outside these conditions. Nonetheless, I am certain it exists. If I smile I cannot watch myself doing it, and yet I know I did it. Our face is like a mask that is hooked up to our minds. If I want to blink, I blink. I did not see myself blink yet I know I did. I know not because I happened to look in a mirror but because I do not doubt it. Our self-descriptions are provided on a basis of trust we have in certain ideas we have of ourselves. These ideas are built, undone, and refashioned not only by self-descriptions but also by descriptions others make of us, themselves, and others, with which we may or may not identify ourselves. There are pictures competing for the 'I'; we must learn to choose which ones are to be set in place, for if we do not our self will not be in our hands.

So that my self-image does not crumble away I must have some sort of notion of self-unity. This notion of identity circles around the name I was given, or around the word "I", for example. Our self-image is represented in these forms, being that the word "I" can hold anyone's self-image. A proper noun must always have a unique form so that we know what we are talking about, and be constructed around relatively stable ideas - even though different people may have different ideas about the same thing. If someone were to say "Bernardo is a vicious man" and I disagreed, I would either be proud and a liar, or would not include that quality in the list of possible descriptions about me and would say "Excuse me, you are mistaken." A name is like a bag for different descriptions: a simplified collection that we continually build on and sanction so that the name continues to make sense to us.

My name, "Bernardo", can be associated with certain ideas, but they do not all come out at once when I use it. If I simply say "Bernardo" you will not have a sudden vision of a parade of ideas 'contained' in my name. We do not know to what aspects of the self we are referring to when we use a name unless we go into some detail and compile further sentences so as to clarify what we are talking about. The usefulness of having names is directly related with the possibility we thenceforth have of being able to refer at something as a whole. When we use names like this, we are using them on the simplest terms: that person is to be referred to by that name. No further information is provided in pointing at someone in this manner, there is simply a matching of a name with a person. It is a verbal tag, a label. After having been given a label, we can go on associating predicates to that label. The label does not let you into all possibly related information, but can serve to 'store' information. If I meet Carlos and form an opinion of him, I can recall that opinion by remembering his name for I will have associated name and attributes. Since there is no context to establish a setting, you will not be talking about any particular aspect - you describe Carlos 'as a whole'. We can 'see' souls (or people if we deflate

the word) by remembering the names that place-hold the ideas we have of persons.

Ideas are for the most part simply mental versions of things (or people), represented in our language. This handle on invisible things (ideas) through words is also extendable to things outside us - which once named can become a 'part' of us. The world is made of things we see and apprehend through our senses. But do I need to constantly perceive it to know it exists? The idea I have of a pen, for example - I need not look at it to know I am spinning it. In spinning it, the pen, just like my face, is an extension of my mind: my will controls what I do with it. I know that this is a world where pens can be spun. This is *not* a world, however, where we can fly without the aid of machines.

Here we have two descriptions (positive and negative) of what the world is; descriptions involving pens and flying. We learn that it is justifiable to provide these descriptions through experience and common sense. These are descriptions that can be true or false because they are verifiable - I beat my arms yet I cannot fly. The world has a set of rules it abides by. But the test is not summed up in the fact that *I* can check its rules; other people need to agree on them as well. If everyone else flew by flapping their arms you would be the odd man out. We need common *public* knowledge. These descriptions limit and hence grant meaning to my world. But what is it to describe my *relation* to the world?

We know that I cannot see myself, that we see the world, and moreover that we cannot see our relation to the world. Where is the feeling of stress I had all day long for me to show you? In a state of anxiety everything before me is liable to get on my nerves. Today I deal with an irritating world. Yet *where* is the irritation in it? In my computer, mad at me somehow, trying to get back for something by not allowing me to print out my paper? Computers do not get mad, yet we 'see' irritation in them. What kind of outlandish language is this? We cannot touch, smell, hear, taste, let alone see these relations. Yet neither can we

talk about them differently. Our inner thoughts seem to be entangled with the outside world. We have the power of projecting ourselves into, or onto, things with the use of words.

Words give us handles on the world. They are labels we stick on it, like "This is blue." We are first shown where to stick them. In most of our ordinary discourse we make use of these labels by remembering the right examples to stick the labels on, as in "Can you please pass me the milk," where "milk" applies to the milk carton. If there were any doubt about what a "milk carton" might be, it could be pointed at; it is right in front of you. If reality is not like this, then how is it? - Does he speak English? - Or have I misplaced words? If I cannot point at things to say what I mean I am lost, and will have to learn words all over again. There are certain things that secure the ground of the world and keep it from crumbling. The gravity of our practices holds things down. Ground: take this away, and the whole thing will crumble. Yet, solid as our ground may feel in our certainty of it, it is a linguistic construction: The world floats on the thin air our language is made of.

Words have a particular trait that distinguishes them from, for example, visual icons: they are almost exclusively abstract, in the sense that the representation (the word) has practically nothing in common with the represented. The only relation between the word "house" and a house is a sound we have invented to designate it, a sound that we, as a tribe of English speaking beings have ended up using to refer to a thing. Words are verbal surfaces for a mental world that lies beneath them, yet would not exist as something we can all refer to without the linguistic surfaces we create to give it tangible form. This is the world as we know it. We have access to mental representations of things through the use of language, including pictures, sounds, gestures, and words. But to refer to things we must learn to use language, which comes in all sorts (painting, music, etc.), although above all we use words, sentences, texts - terms which describe things that go on within and without us. A term can be thought of as a 'unit of meaning': something simple (a word), or

composite (a text or sentence), which refers to an idea. We can also combine terms to achieve composite ideas by using lengthier descriptions, which in turn can be simplified by fitting into more abstract single words, as for example, "life". Being able of using language in this simple, everyday manner is to be capable of describing the world, and in turn description is what allows us to understand the world. Language is our tool for worldmaking.

We use words to refer to two different realms of things though, namely the 'real', concrete things; and the 'inner', mental things, which are what we call ideas. A curious fact, however, is that we have 'inner' ideas but we see them immediately outside in things. Take the following example: A son who looks at his mother: that same glance can carry a vast assortment of connected ideas. There are not two separate moments present - one of sight (to see face, hands, etc.) and another of interpretation (that of coming up with ideas to answer 'what is my mother?': she is kind to me, she is a human being, she is generous, etc., whatever is the case). It is *one* moment in which he looks and knows it is his mother and how she is. So the idea we have of something shapes the vision we have of it. What we know of something accompanies, so to speak, our vision of it. That fully accounts for the saying that 'wisdom occupies no space' - for when we look at something we can understand, it is those things we know in it. The world itself reminds us of what we know, for it is already present in our vision. *We see our ideas directly in things.* A good metaphor for this is *grasping*, which is suggestive of our ability to immediately pick up on aspects we identify things with. This is quite a common although remarkable talent, which can be put to use in the various areas to which we choose to devote our attention. A self-taught singer can grasp different styles of singing simply by listening and imitating. He 'sees' what is going on just as a native English speaker can pick up the rules of the English grammar without having to learn them by rote. He learns by trial and error, and by having others correct mistakes in his usage of words and sentences. A non-native speaker will probably learn a foreign

language by studying rules and practicing them, in an attempt to cover the skills the native speaker acquired naturally over a much lengthier period of time. But grasping rules and being able to describe them are two quite distinct operations. The singer might be at a loss when asked to explain how he does what he does. You might also have learned on your own that fire is both a mesmerizing and extremely painful thing, although you cannot explain why in causal terms. Similarly, we may be proficient judges of works of art without ever having been taught any (in this case inexistent) law for it. This is why critics are often better interpreters than authors: reading and writing are different talents.

Many of the things we do, we learn by simply grasping them or by imitation. We mostly learn to grasp, though, by having learnt to imitate. First someone tells me how to cross the road - there is a helping hand. But I could have just learnt by observing that everyone waits and looks both ways before crossing, usually after a light has turned green. Then I do as they do. Common ground. Lots of these practices are practically forced on us; we are in fact persuaded into them. Education: 'Listen to me'. Sometimes along the way rewards are granted, or punishment is inflicted - there are gifts or angry words, smiles or a smack on the bottom. But most of them we just end up doing because we must have a base for action in this world. We require systems of reference to help guide us, which are formed by rules we erect, abide and break, and grant us the ability to go on doing things correctly. In other words: we must have rules to learn our way about the world. As long as people talk, we all go to schools of different sorts. ("*This is how you hold the tennis racket. Now you try... hmm, no. Further down the handle.*"), ("*This text is full of mistakes of all sorts - redo these parts here especially.*") But we can also learn from the world itself after having learnt what learning is about: paying attention to things. And a world begins to form, a ground made in calling-outs, rebellion, acceptance and denial. A world under constant revision, where ground consists of what has been assimilated in

learning and sunk into instinct, where certainty lies. We cannot truthfully doubt our instincts (if you are hungry or angry you will not doubt it), although we can transform necessities and desires by exercise of the will.

Grounding is fitting the world into place. It is really nothing out of the ordinary: a talent, a gift of nature like the capacity to remember things, organize them in our heads, create, etc. We test things, believe in things, revise notions of what we have grasped, inventing newer or sharper ways of looking at them. But we do so in a world we are already in, which has its own ways of going about - the ways of the men in it. If for every time I nodded saying yes you took that sometimes as yes and sometimes as no, I would find it quite strange. It would seem that you do not understand what nodding is about. The implicit rules of nodding, its grammar - that up-down means yes - seem so simple to us that failure to comply (to show the sign of 'understanding') will make us think the person is mad. (Or lost, like I felt in Greece when they first raised their eyebrows meaning no.)

Instinctive reactions present a good way of learning about someone's ground. (I tip the glass over the table, he grabs it before it falls: he expects gravity to act). There is no 'gravity exists so I know it'll break if it falls' going round in his head before or during the saving catch. No doubt or justification going on - he just did it. One could say his 'instinct is certain', but that is just going round in a circle: "instinct" is certainty. I want to say he is completely sure of his sense of gravity. Possessing ground is all about having one's instinct shaped a certain way, and having common ground mostly about reacting in a common-sense manner to common-sense situations. Our ground is our grasp of the world.

**According to the writing thereof, that  
every man should bare rule in his own  
house**

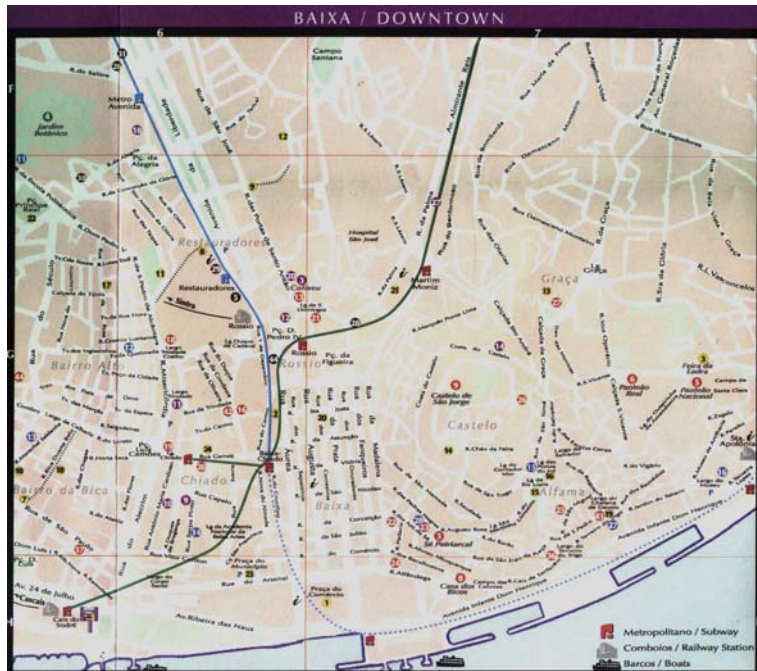
Our usual proceedings in the world are bound to a number of implicit rules that shape our actions and expectations. Most of these rules are so sunk in that if things suddenly began to float we would surely (after a violent moment of surprise) proceed to investigate what could have caused such unruly phenomena, in an attempt to find a new set of rules which would explain the occurrence. We have to know what the rules of a game are in order to play it - you are not allowed to kick balls in tennis. Things are smoother when the rules are set out, but this does not always happen. Most players know some rules of tennis, but no one knows exactly what to do with a poem, for instance, especially an abstract one. Moreover, each is its own case, although some are reasonably similar to others in the measure that they share a number of characteristics we group in "styles", which boils down to writers imitating aspects of other writers. When the context is no longer that of the 'regular world' - the one we have grown used to -, we have to discover how to go on in each different case. But before we gain the habit of certain practices at all, we have to learn them, like in reading maps for example. We have to grasp a new system of representation. With systems of representation in general, we look at objects that focus on certain aspects and overlook, abstracting from, unnecessary ones. We really have no option but regard things in scale: we either focus on details and lose sight of the big picture, or we focus on the whole and lose sight of the little things. We use abstract notions all the time, to speak about things on a more general plane, moving to another register of seeing, where we pay more attention to general traces than to details. It is something we do so that we can, among other things, consider and act upon a collection of things at a time. When you describe in increasing

detail, a description can go on forever, but when you try to describe something on the whole, you must keep it simple.

Representations bring certain aspects to the foreground in order for us to concentrate on what matters in relation to a specific goal we have in mind. The subway, for example: we talk about the subway in a number of ways, depending on what we are focusing on. If I am traveling by subway and need to know when I am supposed to get off at a particular station, all I really need is a diagram of this sort:



But if I do not know my way around town and want to know the geographical location of the subway stations and their surroundings, I would require something of this nature:



We invent ways of referring to different aspects of one same thing. Both illustrations are based on conveying information about the subway, they just pick out different aspects of it in accordance to what I need to know about the subway and what I am going to do with that information. Maps are bought and sold because we need distinct tools to do different things. I do not need to know the energy use or history of the subway to know where to get off. The 'meaning' of words and representations in fact depends on the use we make of them, and can be clarified by paying attention to rules - what we do and do not do in certain cases. If someone says "Let's go for a walk", I will not expect him to sit down on the ground and fall silent. This is not what "going for a walk" is.

The diagram focuses on one aspect of the subway: it is a purposeful reduction of other aspects that relate to it. We narrow down aspects so that we can use the diagram without

confusion. It is also a diagram that applies to a single case: that of the city of Lisbon. But were someone to subtract the references to this particular case, we might still recognize the diagram as belonging to the *kind* of diagrams that refer to transportation stations. "Where we cannot determine whether a picture [represents something] or not, we can only proceed as if it did not - that is, confine ourselves to considering what kind of picture it is." (LA, 26)

We can perceive this last diagram as belonging to a kind of diagram because we have seen similar diagrams used in relation to different cases of transportation systems. Since there is no longer any reference to a particular case here, this more abstract version of the diagram could be used to establish a different number of associations. It is now a kind of diagram, which relates more loosely to the theme of transportation in general, so can therefore have certain ideas attached: journey, sequence, riffraff of commuters, changing places, etc. - the kind of things that are generally tied in with transport-related situations. I am no longer using the diagram to know where to get off at, I am using it to talk about other aspects associated with the idea of transportation. Here we can go from looking at a particular case to a general case.

The meaning of the diagram is bound to a specific case if we recognize it as something we use in a specific situation, but if we force it into another context (one separate from 'this is to be used to find out where you are supposed to get off at') what we can *do* with the new diagram also changes. If I put this last diagram in a frame and set it on a wall, the kind of thing it is changes: it is no longer a diagram of the subway line but something that can be used to talk about life in a number of ways. We will probably look at it figuratively when it is framed on a wall for that is what we usually do with artworks. When we try to describe this framed diagram we might come up with a number of descriptions, like "It makes me think of how urban life is a riffraff of going to and fro" or some cliché like "Life is a journey", etc. These are interpretations of the framed diagram,

ways to trying to make sense of it. Since it is no longer bound to being read in reference to the Lisbon subway, we are free to associate it with any case, "life" included, for the framed diagram can now be seen as referring to any case. "Life" is merely a very abstract word we can relate it to. "How are we to understand this?" also means something like "In relation to what am I to read this?", and since there are really no set rules as to how we are to read artworks and we are not bound to any specific type of association, we can link these abstract representations to very general ideas like 'life' or 'us' or 'me'. We are now looking at the diagram in a figurative way since it is no longer connected with any particular instance. A symbol is general in the sense that it no longer applies to a particular case but can apply to a number of them.

But we can also look at the particular Lisbon diagram in a figurative way as long as we take the references to the city of Lisbon not as referring to a specific place in the world, but as examples of places in general. We can abstract away from the city of Lisbon in particular and simply regard the names of stations as being there as if by chance, as if what really matters is the kind of diagram it is and not the habitual use of a subway map diagram in particular. As long as I do not intend to use it to know where I am supposed to get off, and look at it in a figurative way it can be used as a symbol. The way I look at the diagram - what I want to do with it - changes its 'meaning'. We can abstract ourselves away from the particular case of Lisbon stations and take the diagram as a general symbol even though the station names are on the diagram. But it is *as if* they were not, it is as if we were looking at something quite new we can discover for ourselves.

**Shall I compare thee to a summer's  
day?**

When we answer questions that test the ground our world is built on, the questions generally hit a wall: ("How do you know you have hands?" - "Look:" He shows them.) The strange fact is that we also hit a wall when we try to answer questions about our 'invisible life': ("What is a soul like?", "What is life like?"). These questions are unavoidably answered with stories, pictures, songs - pretend-stuff, nonsense: figurative representations.

Figurative descriptions have a peculiar trait: they are used to talk about our 'inner' part. We thus have a specific use of language that enables us to talk about the spirit or soul or mind - whatever you wish to call it - and that uses a constant logic of 'as if this were x', as in Petrarch's 'Love is a fire that burns unseen'. The elided rule 'as if this were x' (which underlies the "is") reveals the condition of figurative (or metaphoric) language, which is simply this: we cannot talk of the inner without pointing at the outer, from which we collect examples to illustrate what we want to say. Taking the issue of figurative language one step forward, we come to confront the very use of "inner". The very word is a metaphor. It is boxes or houses, for example, that have things inside them - but where is my soul for me to put outside and see? The use of the inner/outer dichotomy that refers to the relation between us and the world is therefore also a part of figurative language.

How does figurative language function? Nelson Goodman's notion of *transference* is very helpful, and reminds us of how we often use the same words for different purposes by applying them in different contexts, or 'realms of use' (Cf. LA, 72-84). This forces words to shift in meaning whilst retaining their original form - as in calling someone a rat, which literally applies to certain rodents and only figuratively to people. What we do is use "rat" to refer to only certain aspects of rodents (they sneak away, are pestilent, etc.) in reference to people. We do not of course mean that people actually have whiskers and tails: we

transfer only certain aspects from one realm of reference to another. Once the word has fixed itself in its use as a metaphor in the new people-realm, it can stretch out to apply to aspects even rats do not possess - unless they are personified representations -, like snitching. The fact that the label used remains the same throughout means that all these other ideas are liable to get imported into the new realm as well -, and that clarity of use depends on being clear about the specificity of our application. That is to say that the margins of significance can be discerned, but only by considering the label within its specific use, its context, since the label as a whole (outside any specific use) has a trail of uses appended to it, and the rules of its application cannot be distinguished outside its use. Since I can use "rat" to refer to different situations and aspects of things, when I abstract myself from the given situation and look at it as a symbol, all these ideas come along with the label, and are restricted only by context and interpretation, where we block out the references which are not in use. Labels, especially those we use figuratively - i.e., those which are transferred between different contexts - are like *wordbags*, filled with other words and descriptions which must be discerned and removed by looking at the surroundings of each case.

Take the example of the snake in the Garden of Eden. Aspects are transferred from both realms of snake and man, but the sum of what is transferred meets up in a third element: the representation itself, which is neither wholly snake nor human. It is a symbol, a figurative representation referring to an idea all of its own, a product of mixed aspects. When looking at a painting of the snake tempting Eve, a relatively standard idea comes to mind if you know pictures from the Bible (texts which help us narrow down the possible meanings), but if you have never heard of these stories, the painting might be described as representing a number of things (provided it is regarded as a representation - the portraying of something else - in the first

place). Symbols are the representational - or linguistic - counterparts of ideas, their visible face.



This is a photograph, and it portrays a particular boy. It is a concrete representation, showing us the physical appearance of a boy at a precise moment in time. It neither shows us his hands and feet nor the back of his head but his face as seen from a certain perspective (head-on) in certain light conditions, in detail. Not much more can be significantly added to this description in terms of this particular perspective: there is no relevant lack of information in this depiction. It is a pretty full account of the view at stake, and would fully satisfy me as an example of this particular boy's face. If he went missing it would perfectly do as a resource to help us find him.

This is a photo of relatively good resolution: the level of information (color of eyes, skin, shape of mouth, hair cut, etc.) it conveys is high. To describe this boy's face in detail and in writing would take quite some words, which proves true that "A picture is worth a 1000 words" - when it is a picture we are describing. The higher resolution it has, the more precise the picture is as a description of certain aspects. A 'concrete representation' of this type involves a 'closed' way of referring in the sense that it requires no further information for the use we commonly put it to: the representation of a he, she, or it. It satisfies our purpose.

We might call it a 'realist' representation, grouping it with certain families of representations like naturalist painting, etc. But this label (realism) must not trick us into thinking that it extends *reality* to us in a sense that other types of representation (namely, figurative ones) cannot. A caricature of the very same boy could be, if achieved with talent, just as representative, although of *different aspects*. It might convey the boy's wittiness, for example, by placing a slight twist on the lip and a glint in the eye. 'Realism', or photo-like representations, is simply the most commonplace system of representation, one which we have forgotten we have once learnt to 'read' ("See, this is a photograph of you.") A man living in a tribe in some far-off island would most probably be quite astounded the first time you showed him a photograph of himself. Reality is not at issue here, but the standardization and effectiveness of representations. "How literal or realistic the picture is depends upon how standard the system [of representation] is. If representation is a matter of choice and correctness a matter of information, realism is a matter of habit." (LA, 38) This is related to our tendency to elide information that our habits take for granted: We constantly talk about our world eliding "my" and substituting it for "the" world, where phrases like "The world is beautiful" or "The world is full of sick people" are really descriptions of the way you see things. But there is a world of difference in the effect of the absolute "the" vs. the relative "my", one that conveys a sense of knowledge and authority to the description. How we talk of the ways in which we represent things is also affected by an omission: what we call a 'realist' painting is really just one that follows certain basic, standard rules of representation. It is not an exact copy of any sort (how would you simultaneously include all angles and aspects of a person - that he is made of atoms, veins, thoughts and actions, in one representation?), but a selected number of aspects portrayed from a specific point of view. What the habitual mode of representation is varies in fashion and culture in time, even though we use the label

"realist" for our standard system of representation: "Our tendency to omit specifying a frame of reference when it is our own." (LA, 37) At any rate, the photo I have shown you will amply satisfy any eventual need to identify the boy in question, and will not present any problems as to what the representation refers to. It has a fixed meaning: that boy. And unless a doctor succeeds in performing a full facial, it will never represent you.



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On the other hand, here there is space for description. This is not a 'realistic' representation but a symbol, and it refers to no one in particular. We cannot tell if it represents a boy, girl, man, old man, etc.; it is an abstract representation - the forwarding of an idea. It is made of only a few traces, and the information displayed is scarce - indeed, it is a very simple, cut-down, drawing. Even though this representation does not point to anyone in particular, it can serve to describe a whole number of relevant cases. In fact, it is because we cannot figure out whether the doodle represents a man or woman, boy or girl, that it can stand as and exemplify any of the above.

The margins of its possible meanings are very ample in the sense that the drawing can represent any human being regardless of age, color, or other aspects; yet these same margins can be said to be restricted in the sense that we will not confuse the doodle for a chair or a door, although we might take it as a personified pebble or the face of a snail. It refers broadly but functions only in regards to the human realm. It is not a specific but a kind of picture: a human-picture. This is an

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<sup>1</sup> This example and some ideas in this section were inspired by the exceptional *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (for bibliography please refer to "Works Cited" section, at end).

'open' way of referring to things - we are free to imagine what the symbol is referring to because there are few yet essential margins delimitating it. Since symbols are not explicit about their referents (there is no caption under it saying "This refers to people"), we are confined to either ignore what they are supposed to be mean, or attempt to interpret them. Some are repeated so often that they soon lose the need for interpretation after their meaning has been grasped. Between what x is and cannot be lies what x can be; and the less that is said of what it is and isn't, the more it can be. In this case, and most significantly, the doodle can stand for you. In fact, the word "I" can function much like the doodle, opening space for the projection of you and your thoughts. You can 'live' in texts because they have left a pronoun where you can fit, for it refers to you as well as others. Unless you find, in your reading, that the pronoun could not possibly be describing you - if you could not come to agree that it depicts you somewhat -, it will always have an effect of referring to you. And so 'poems have life': the aspects that you can place in it.

A symbol can function as a memory-trigger, making you conjure an ensemble of ghostlike presences - the descriptions 'within' the apparently simple wordbags symbols are, which can be ideas of both inanimate or animate things (which are far more 'lively'). The more abstract a word is, the less there is to point at in the world to show someone what the word refers to. Accordingly, we always have a much harder time both explaining and understanding what "soul", "time", "beauty", etc. refers to. Common and proper nouns, however, usually refer to concrete, real-life things in a general way. What can get rather bizarre about abstract nouns is that the idea we have of how a common or proper noun is used - to refer to actual presences - is sometimes dragged along and associated with them. This confusion that arises from including the sense of *how we use* nouns (to point at things) in *what the thing is* (the idea we have of it), is patent in the way a lot of people talk about abstract things as if they were concrete things. This is a grammatical mistake, one of

applying rules which apply in one case (the concrete), to another (the abstract). Furthermore, a condition for this to work is born out of the necessity for it to make sense: if abstract words refer to things which are real but nevertheless invisible, then these abstract things must exist 'somewhere' else, in a different place or dimension. In these conditions, nouns grow in magical power for they seem to point somewhere we can not quite put our finger on. They provoke a certain ineffable sensation at the same time that they refer to 'something' that must be somewhere. So when we look at words that are not referring to any particular case, we can get sucked into a pursuit of 'something' 'somewhere'.

Since symbols do not refer to particular cases, they cannot point, and so as to avoid the risk of leaving a void hanging in your hands, they bestow on you the only thing that can save them from meaninglessness: the chore of reference. Symbols do not *themselves* say: you say them. "Apple", for example, does not say "sin", a word you might use to explain its symbolic meaning. Goodman provides us with some useful terminology to account for this: "apple" is a label that *denotes* apples (like the photo above denotes the boy), simply by referring to the idea of apples within a common linguistic system. The word itself is a conventional representation: it does not share any resemblance to apples - it is neither round nor tasty. Onomatopoeic words are an exception: they mimic certain (auditory) aspects which are, nonetheless, always a matter of convention also: whereas in Portuguese a dog's barking is represented by "ãõ ãõ", in English it is represented by "woof woof".

Words, however, do not only serve to denote. Goodman gives us a concise example which can explain this further: "Before me is a picture of trees and cliffs by the sea, painted in dull grays, and expressing great sadness." (LA, 50) Just as "apple" denotes an apple, this picture denotes trees and cliffs by the sea. The picture is also gray, although it does not represent gray in the way it represents trees and cliffs. While it looks as if the picture is showing us trees and cliffs (calling our

attention to them), nothing in it is calling our attention to the fact that it is painted in dull grays, although we do say it is gray. Saying "it is x" makes us talk of properties, and extensively of what x *has* - thus we say the picture 'possesses' grayness. Put simply, "the picture *does not denote* the color gray, but is *denoted by* the predicate 'gray'." (LA, 52) Goodman calls this *exemplification*. There is, as the title he chose for the chapter in question tells us, a difference in direction here: exemplification is inverse denotation.

In regards to our doodle above, there is nothing to which we could point at, saying, "Here: *This* is precisely what the doodle is representing" (as we could in relation to the photo by pointing at the boy), and this interpretative problem is solved by our propensity to exemplify. We say this represents people in general - nothing in particular about people, just "people". We thus end up talking about nothing in particular, which of course means talking about something we have never seen. I see people, but I have never seen a people-thing. We do this all the time, of course: no one has ever pointed atoms out to me, only described what they are supposed to look like, yet I use "atoms" on different occasions without a problem, and everyone seems to understand what I am talking about. "Atoms" refer to *descriptions*, not to something I can point at. I also use "angel" without ever having seen any. If someone asked me what I was talking about, it would become apparent *in my subsequent descriptions* that I was referring to the kind and loving ways of a woman, for example - her "angelness" if I were pressed into one word, or her "beauty". Some words do not cling onto things we can point out at all, but onto other descriptions.

Coming back to Goodman's example, sadness is not being denoted by the picture either, yet it can also be said to be a property of it, although in a different way from the case of exemplification stated above. Although the picture has gray paint on it, there is no sadness on it: the picture *expresses* sadness. This is also a question of exemplification, but whereas grayness *literally* applies to the picture (it is really there), sadness

applies to it *figuratively*. The label "sad", it must be noted, is transferred from the realm of human feelings - whereas "sad" is used to literally exemplify people, here it is used to figuratively describe pictures. It is 'as if' they were sad. In fact, this is a case of personifying a picture.

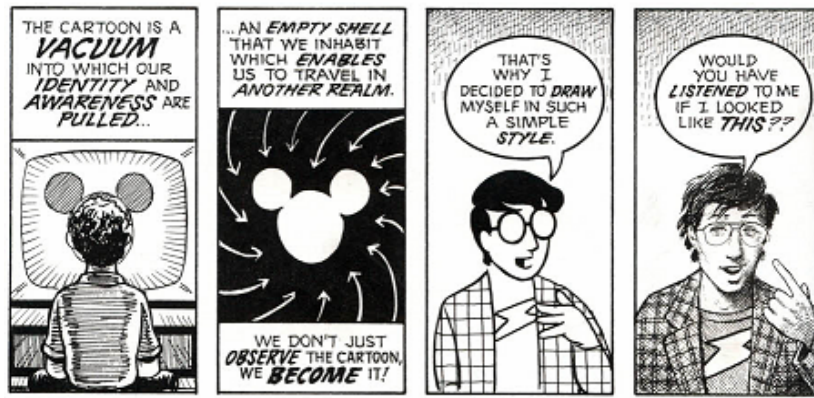
We have a tendency to personify, to transfer human aspects onto non-human things. We are overtly self-centered - we see ourselves in everything. Place two dots on a piece of paper and something or someone is looking back at you. Or a stormy sea 'punching' the rocks. We sense presences where there are signs of life - or what's more, anything akin our kind of life -, like are eyes. When we have snakes in stories or documentaries they are pretty much always described as doing a mixture of what snakes do, like hiss and curl and crawl, and what we do: talk to each other and make plans, etc. They are depicted as evil and cunning - or intelligent and elegant - in their hunting-downs or other activities: words describing qualities which are proper to humans. We cannot ask a snake if it is feeling well today, or if it has thought up of a new trick to seize its prey. In this case, snakes are being *presented* in a personified manner: the documentary's script is 'written down' that way. In fact, how could the commentator go on about it otherwise - should he say that the snake was ssssing? We can only describe animals in this fashion, for we are naturally using *our* language in describing them. But the way we take, or interpret representations is a matter of 'reading'. Take a description of God, for instance, one that depicts a supernatural being with a mature white beard. We could look at it in two basic ways: in a literal reading, a beard is really a beard, i.e., God is a being that has a beard. On the other hand, in a figurative reading the beard is there to remind us of, for example, wisdom - it has an expressive function. We can look at things in different ways: a figurative as opposed to a literal outlook is a manner of regarding things, but we often use these words to describe, judging, the kind of representation we are looking at ("it is a figurative [or a literal] representation"); when it is we that make it into a 'kind of

thing', like with the above representation of God. These two manners of looking at a thing involve two different talents, separated by the imagination, the gift of association. We associate aspects from different realms in figurative representations, and must be wary of our doing so at the risk of confusing the literal and figurative, as I once heard of a lady who was shouting at an actor she chanced upon for 'his' wrongful doings in a soap opera.

Poems associate symbols and aspects, in an additionally unexpected manner, yet not without intent. They always want to show you something, otherwise they would not have been written down on paper. What are poems representational systems of? A symbol, as we have seen, is the representation of an idea. Symbols are tools that we can use to express our inside, our thoughts and soul, whatever comes out of our awareness of things. We have ideas of things thanks to the referential function of language, and it is the similarities that we match between groups of things that provide abstract ideas, simplified words for a pattern of things. Furthermore, it is the relation between ideas (something we can never see for we induce both relation and ideas from events) that allows us to make sense of the world, to view it as a whole possessing constitutive elements. Language is what allows us to separate the world into words and hence longer descriptions thereof. Ideas can have form once they have come into being as linguistic objects, which we can put to use in a number of ways.

A symbol needs a down-up (particular to general) relationship to come into being -i.e., a particular shape and form which can stand for abstract things -, but is recognized by us in the inverse way: its form is an abstraction, a simplified representation that can evoke particulars. This is usually called abstract thinking. Let us look at an example. A choreographer instances a stumbling dancer: "More grace!" These words serve merely as loose clues for the dancer, since they offer no minimally precise instructions as to how to dance (e.g. move your arm up like a snake at the downbeat) - they provide the dancer

with something vague like 'Do it this way in your own way'. A way of doing something involves a series of predicates (there are a lot of details that could describe a manner of doing something) because there are indeed many different ways of doing things. We are experts in developing techniques: inventiveness is our brand mark. "More grace!" is an instruction that requires the listener to come up with an interpretation all of his own: the dancer must invent a personal version in her effort to *exemplify* "grace", based on a loose imitation of examples she has grasped, and, well, her talents as a dancer. The more abstract the term is, the more we can project into it, that is, the more we are left to interpret it on our own.



<sup>2</sup> Understanding Comics, pp. 36-37

Symbols seem to have a special power - we say they can make us 'feel things'. How does symbolic language 'touch our feelings'? - Our ideas are inextricable from the 'journey' we had to construct them, inseparable from our emotional experience with things and descriptions of things. When we grant meaning to a symbol, life follows. Imagine a very hot day: you stop at a coffee-shop and drink a glass of ice-cold water, eyes closed. What happens during that moment? You relish the water, that cools you, and since your eyes are closed, all you are (all you are aware of) really comes down to a glass in your hand and cold liquid streaming down your throat. What takes place in your being *is* that water going down, because you are concentrated on what's going on during that refreshing moment. Days later, on another scalding day, you might see an advertisement where a similar situation is represented, and the photo might evoke that replenishing cool feeling you had at the time of drinking. So it seems as if symbols are there for our projections: they are an open space where we can deposit our 'feelings' and the like.

This emphasis on projection will, however, be incomplete if we do not take into account the 'form', so to speak, of symbols, which serve as restrictive margins of meaning to the 'content' (a term the notion of projection drags along). "Turquoise" is not the same as "blue", but more significantly than not referring to the exact same color (some might say 'as not having the same content'), it does not have the same *effect* on us as saying "A shade of blue tinged with green". It would be funny to go around substituting words in poems for dictionary entries, and we would place the poem in the certain danger of losing its aesthetic power. Content is not separate from form: it is precisely the uniqueness of words which allows us to have specific meanings, and beyond that, to assort words into games of rhyme and rhythm where minor changes in form invariably produce a change in significance. The strict interdependence of 'form' and 'content' is best visible in poetry, where words are the very essence of the game. Only when we make mistakes in interpretation does our 'content' fail to correctly match the 'form', although we may be

wholly satisfied with 'wrong fits' ("Oh, I thought x meant y.") That fits become wrong is often a matter of others pointing out mistakes to us, and stable meaning a question of agreement between interpreters. We are not alone with our words. In point of fact, the 'form'/'content' division is much like the 'in'/'out' metaphor we observed upon earlier. There is nothing 'inside' words: neither is there anything 'behind' a piece of paper than possibly the table it is lying on.

Projection is the talent we have of placing our own experiences and feelings 'in' words. But can we project anything we please onto words, 'let it all out'? 'Feelings' is really too vague a word for use: it makes it look like anything we feel could 'go into' texts, and as if *all* that is going on is a case of us throwing feelings out onto an empty object. Projection is a part of the reading-talent, and is sometimes referred to as the reader's 'productive imagination' or 'sensitivity'. The other side is missing: the poem. We could only cast whatever feelings we so desire by twisting the meaning of words as to make our feelings clumsily fit. ("What are your favorite poems?" - "All of them, I love all poetry, it makes me feel things.") Poems are bound to the practice of interpretation, which must compare, distinguish, and order ideas into a comprehensive organization of ideas. Feelings, of course, also come into this, but they must be distinguished from a meaningless pulp - "This one is melancholic, this one joyous, that one witty". If they are not then our passions and the desire to signify will run over the words presented in the texts, muting out any understanding of what they are trying to say with the surging waves of your 'feelings'. We must not overwrite when we are meant to read.

Writers employ some peculiar tricks in descriptions (and there are many, each kind its own achievement), including the mixing of aspects in a relatively free manner, like of snakes and humans. In personifying, writers bring human aspects to the foreground of the reader's attention, in much the same manner as McCloud's cartoon above is "just a little voice inside your head". Allow me to elaborate: although we may enjoy the way Matt

Groening drew The Simpsons, 'they' would most probably be dismissed into oblivion if the whole surroundings of the series did not captivate us. The jokes, the characters' quirks, the twists of events, etc. What Groening has done is grab our attention; and having managed to do that, he is then free to show us what he has chosen to forefront. Like in any significant story, there are 'deeper' issues that Groening waves at us, like attitudes between people and how we must struggle to change things, etc, enveloped in pleasurable comedy.

Stories make as much a part of our world as descriptions of planets or quarks do. ("Planets are actually huge"; "Atoms are little balls circling around a cluster of other little balls"; "Whales communicate hundreds of miles apart in the ocean.") Although I have never witnessed, but only been described these things, these stories I believe: this is my world. Someone might say over a couple of drinks: "I've known Joe for some years now, and let me tell you: he's got the naïveté of a Don Quixote!" This could be a very exact description of someone. Another one of his buddies might laugh out across the table: "Precisely!" Figurative depictions can be veritable aids in our worldmaking, effectively helping us in it. If we built a time-machine and discovered that there was no Socrates after all, that Plato had made this brilliant character up - would it detract from the power of the dialogues? The words are just the same, are they not? The same holds true for Jesus Christ, Don Juan, Mowgli, etc. That they 'truly exist' is not what is at stake here, but the descriptive power of words and their ability to assist us in worldmaking.

**Is it thy will thy image should keep open  
my heavy eyelids to the weary night?**

Erich Auerbach, in his first chapter of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, looks at two different types of texts - Homer's *The Odyssey* and the episode of Abraham and Isaac in the Old Testament: "It would be difficult,

then, to imagine styles more contrasted than those of these two equally ancient and equally epic texts. On the one hand, externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense." (MI, 9) Auerbach is referring to Homer's writing, of which I shall provide a brief example so that we can better understand what he is referring to:

"For two nights and two days he was lost in the heavy seas. Time and time again he saw his end at hand. But in the morning of the third day, which Dawn opened in all her beauty, the wind dropped, a breathless calm set in, and Odysseus, keeping a sharp lookout ahead as he was lifted by a mighty wave, could see the land close by. He felt all the relief that a man's children feel when their father, wasted by long agonies abed in the malignant grip of some disease, passes the crisis by god's grace and they know that he will live. Such was Odysseus' happiness when he caught that unexpected glimpse of wooded land. He swam quickly on in his eagerness to set foot on solid ground. But when he had come within call of the shore, he heard the thunder of surf on a rocky coast. With an angry roar the great seas were battering at the ironbound land and all was veiled in spray. There were no coves, no harbours that would hold a ship; nothing but headlands jutting out, sheer rock, and jagged reefs. When he realized this, Odysseus' knees quaked and his courage ebbed. He groaned in misery as he summed up the situation to himself". (OD, 98)

We easily understand what we are looking at - there is no doubt in interpretation involved here, no reason to think that things are not of a 'what you see is what you get' quality. Understanding flows: things can go on without a glitch, for they

are standing there unveiled for you to grasp. The text is relatively easy to understand provided you understand the words. Some texts are pretty straightforward about what they are talking about, while some are not so clear, requiring a greater deal of interpretation and problem solving. The *Odyssey*, like an unambiguous adventure movie, does not seem to call for any additional information in order to make itself understood, it is 'all outside', "foreground", as Auerbach puts it. "The Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret meaning. Homer can be analyzed, as we have essayed to do here, but he cannot be interpreted. Later allegorizing trends have tried their arts of interpretation upon him, but to no avail. He resists any such treatment; the interpretations are forced and foreign, they do not crystallize into a unified doctrine." (MI, 11) Auerbach provides us with a description of Homer's text that can be related to the boy's photograph and denotation. In neither representation (*The Odyssey* and the photograph) does a need for interpretation arise: they are unclouded in their reference.

Abraham's episode is not so clear in this sense: "On the other hand, the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'. (MI, 9) Whereas Homer is basically 'foreground', here we are talking essentially of 'background' - a question that could otherwise be referred to as "depth". Things seem to happen unseen, behind the scenes, and there is a sensed 'space' for things to happen in.

Curious minds have a natural tendency for wanting to tie up loose ends. Drop a question in an inquisitive spirit and watch it struggle to come up with answers. According to Auerbach, in the

Old Testament's mode of description things seem to exist behind what we are shown, somehow 'veiled'. 'Veil' and 'space' are verbal symptoms of doubt, metaphors for a problem: the problem of interpreting what we read. It is an expression of a problem, a kind of elaborate cry, labeled with an abstract word. Remember those join-the-dots games? They had numbers on them, so we knew the order in which to establish links and the correct form would come out if the game were properly played. Yet here we have dots but no help, no numbers. Questions pop up galore, and if we set our minds to them we shall find ourselves wrestling for conclusions we can only pin down in the relative, never in the absolute - most of all simply because we cannot ask texts questions: they do not talk back. This point alone suffices to cut short talk of texts being akin to people (a common metaphor that probably arises from the love/hate attitudes that we sometimes have towards texts). Due to this silence, our investigations reach a point where we cannot find answers in the texts to fully clarify our doubts, and so our eagerness to make a general sense out of the text usually pushes us into making words mean more than they do at face value. We are then relatively free to pursue in conjecture. Poems do this to us frequently: instilling doubt is a powerful technique all of its own, and usually involves the consequence of making it look like the author has the key - and since he is either dead, absent, silent, or customarily just as vague as us in his own interpretations, we are left on our own.

Texts are among the type of things that bring us into interpretative stances. Following Auerbach's line of thought, a basic ingredient for this move is the absence of information. Where there is information lacking, information that would enable us to answer certain questions we might feel a text or something is posing us, we are either facing something that is completely opaque in which we are lost, or, in order to attempt to find our way, we must face these questions using the only context we are familiar with: our own life and experiences. On page 10 we read: "In Homer, the complexity of the psychological life is shown only

in the succession and alternation of emotions; whereas the Jewish writers are able to express the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them." While in the Odyssey we see a number of pictures that follow each other with no further need for interpretation, in the Old Testament story there are a number of things going on at the same time: "Humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher than in Homer, and they belong basically together ... The reader clearly feels how the extent of the pendulum's swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history" (MI, 15).

*But we are not told of these things,* we do not read of these violent swings of emotion. Throughout Genesis 22, all we can read are statements of fact: "And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass ..." (Gen 22:1-2) God said certain things to Abraham and Abraham did what he was told, no questions asked; (except those we ask ourselves). These are not embellished sentences expressing feelings and the anguish of the promised slaying, they are propositions, informative sentences about things reported to have happened in a past. We are sucked into imagining these swings of emotion - the void of information and the ways people react propels us to -, and the only way we can do so is by proceeding in the story imagining these events as happening to someone like us, a human, thus involving our sense of what it is to be human in our reading. We are given only the most skeletal events of the story; the psychological dimension must be fully projected in order to exist: it is we that have to denote what the text 'says', by exemplification.

In most stories, there are main and other characters. When we compare ourselves to people or characters we mark a position relative to their behavior. We might be especially prone to comparison if the actions depicted are out of the ordinary, and ask things like "How would I fare if I went through that?!" We

might answer things like "I'd run away", or "He is despicable"", or "He truly mirrors me". By comparing we can find out what kind of person we are in the sense of realizing what we think we would and would not do. "I couldn't do that even if God asked me to, I am not like that, I'm naturally too attached to my children, I am too..." - We start talking about ourselves, either recognizing or distinguishing ourselves from a character's thoughts and actions, and revealing our own character. Some stories are more favorable for this than others. Some entertain us while others elicit us to describe what they do not say. We usually call these last 'deep', and the way they often pull us into the 'depths' is by making us talk about them. These are stories that require projection into an extraordinary human-mold. A story can thus lend itself as a stage for self-descriptions.

But despite all the abstraction involved, Abraham does not feel too distant for empathy, for there are things going on which we can relate to albeit imaginatively, such as the question of the unavoidable transformations he must have endured under the orders of God. Even though we are not pushed into Abraham's psyche by a persuasive style of writing (a suggestive narration of how he felt which would induce in us pity, etc.), the ways we expect we would react under these harrowing twists of events contribute towards the character's background, making him feel more alive, more human. Ulysses, on the contrary is "flat", as Auerbach puts it: "Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier." (MI, 14) He is much the same man. Such is the lack of contradiction in Ulysses that he comes out as over-simplified, as if someone were telling us a story that sounds slightly overdone, traversed by way too little error. "But what a road, what a fate, lie between Jacob who cheated his father out of his blessing and the old man whose favorite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast!" (MI, 14) Ulysses reeks of what Auerbach terms "legend": he simply does not seem (complex enough) to be one of us. We all change in time, especially if we have lived through strange ordeals, but Ulysses' inner life, Auerbach maintains, seems unscathed, for the focus of

what we are given to read falls mostly on adventurous episodes which are intended to give us something quite different from the depth Abraham's story can evoke. We are taken from one incredible escapade to the next, rather than from one transformed Ulysses to another, entertained by remarkable fictive descriptions and a gripping literary style. On the other hand, Abraham's story does not seem intended to be read as fiction with flair, but as a rather dry and straight to the point sort of biography.

The episode of the near-slaying of Isaac was painted by Almada Negreiros on the stained-glass windows of the church across my parents' house. It is there, impressively large, as a striking example of something: "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am." (Gen, 22:1) Taking these surroundings into account, Abraham is not to be seen as an example of some crazed old man who puts it into his head to kill his son; he is undergoing a test that is stretched out beyond any ordinary state of affairs. The unbelievable suffering he must have gone through is the mark of the lengths he is willing to go to in order to affirm his belief in God, his Lord. This picture serves quite a precise purpose, then: that of conveying an idea - that we must submit ourselves to the absolute will of God and no matter what amount of pain if we are to pass the test of faith. The story of Job, alike. This is obviously not a remarkable statement for anyone who has had some religious upbringing in the light of these texts: teachers and priests repeat these things all the time. It seems like there is a powerful idea underlying an otherwise boring text.

Whereas Ulysses has endured tests of muscle and cunning in his grappling with monsters, Abraham has endured a test of faith, a test of the control he has over his most basic instincts (love for his son). The sense of the inner transformation implied here must be staggering to anyone bearing a shade of sensitivity, although the feeling of sympathy can only arise once we have grasped what is being expressed by the episode, and are capable of lending ourselves to the (not so pleasurable) emotions

involved. The adventures of Ulysses, on the other hand, astound people with constant dangers and near misses, fabulous imagery and a highly-praised inventiveness of verse. The important distinction is this: what people love about Homer can be found in the words present in the Homeric texts, whereas love for Abraham's courage is not essentially a question of language. It is, of course, bound to the words present in the Bible, but the point of the episode could still come across as long as a general attitude of reverence and belief was forwarded in the words. It would of course destroy the picture if instead of "Behold, here I am", Abraham had said, "Howdy, what's up?", but it would not be a severe blow if "Lo, I am before thee" was there instead. Translation appears to work with more ease here, as long as aspects akin to awe and respect are maintained. Language is the base of Homer's fascination, faith that of the Bible.

## II

### **Not from the Stars do I my Judgment Pluck**

Probably just as much as philosophy, science has a quarrel with art concerning the way to knowledge. But our initial collapsing of the in/out distinction and the emphasis on the *public* world we live in, made of descriptions of all sorts should smooth things out. Indeed, as Goodman underlines at the end of *Ways of Worldmaking*, both art and science are involved in how we build our ground. New assertions in both science and enlightening poetry can force us to revise the world as we know it, remaking it. They need only leave us puzzled to set our ground at risk, and the resolution of that mystification will most probably result in the reshaping of our ground, unless you discover that the equation/sentence was merely telling you something you already knew in a confusing, ungrammatical way. As long as descriptions of reality come to spook you, going round and round in your head, you will be taunted. Either they settle and your ground is fixed, or reality is left ragged and troublesome.

Ways of describing the different facets, or aspects, of "reality" are to be sought in differently organized language-games. This is a term Wittgenstein coined for picturing the different uses we make of linguistic tools in order to answer different needs. It can be used to describe any case of 'doing things with language' (as outlined by the subway maps), but here I want to look at how language can be organized in schools of practice that revolve around the 'big issues'. Philosophy, science, art, and religion, are all ways of going about tackling puzzlements. They all spin around the wordbag "life" and are therefore commonly regarded as speaking of the same thing, each claiming authority of description over it - and hence "knowledge" of the subject. But remember that, although we talk of ideas as a whole, representing them in a sole word, we can only *describe*

different aspects of it. And a description of the term is necessary for our understanding and subsequent correct use of it. When we unfold the way each specific language-game uses wordbags, it is then clear that they are describing different aspects of the same word. That means, of course, that none of them can tackle all puzzlements solo.

But sometimes suitors from each end claim to tackle the only things that matter, accusing the others of blindness and babbling. More than the suitor's elementary sense of pride that he is absolutely right, I see it as an expression of a lack of puzzlement about certain departments, certain aspects, of ideas. First a not paying attention to certain questions, then a claim that there are certain types of doubts and thoughts (those which instigate and are significant to you) that are the only "true" ones. "Knowledge" here is simply an underlining of how certain you are about determinate things, and on top of that, a matter of invoking authority over them. But authority is often a case of proving how good you are at applying certain families of rules, and can hardly be all-encompassing. We use different tools to perform different tasks. You cannot solve an equation without understanding the grammar of equations (its rules, how equations work) and what the mathematical problem is: and for that you need to learn mathematics. Similarly, you cannot describe your soul with equations, even though you could use equations in a poem to express a sense of perfect harmony. But this is no longer mathematics. Solving doubts within a language-game requires that you pay special attention to its own set of rules.

Science produces knowledge, descriptions of states of affairs which can be described in ways that in turn can be tested by experience. But even science proceeds in its work through an effort to apply descriptions (hypothetical formulae) to reality which must be tested and reviewed so as to produce descriptions that work. What Newton is reputed to have "discovered" was not gravity *per se* (most things did not float in the air before his apple fell, they fell to the ground and everyone was aware of this) - Newton found a way of *describing* how things fall.

Mathematical physics does not involve coming up with physical proof - although it must be verified by experimentation - but mathematical constructions, i.e. linguistic constructs of a specific kind. The very descriptions are the proof of having found the object of what the mathematician was searching for. Mathematical knowledge is a question of having mathematical strings of 'words' to show as proof, which is the "proof" required in this language-game, which is different from other sense of "proof": if you claim to have discovered evidence of a previously unknown dinosaur, we will demand to see something concrete. The world still 'acts' the same way, but with abstract knowledge we can create things that work alongside the rules of the world (e.g., sending balloons up into the air, a pendulum, etc.) We can do this because our expectations are met by the ways in which physical objects abide by the rules we achieve by means of description. Systems of laws are big pictures that enable us to describe a whole series of affairs.

Big pictures are of course not exclusive to physics, and they possess an elegance all of their own: the same description of "life" can work for some people and simply not for others: it holds no attraction, no power over them. Even science, which deals with what counts as 'concrete reality' does not escape the persuasiveness of the big and ultimately vague pictures scientists must confront in the end, after having exhausted their descriptions in terms of cause and effect. Despite the fascinating recent advances in Superstring theory and Ed Witten's 'M' theory<sup>3</sup>, for example, no one has been able to tackle the question of the big bang to a closing finish. Both "there was nothing" and "there is everything" are big-bags where all other pictures can fit, but each description extends from the serious impact the power of pictures have on your beliefs - "there was a creation" vs. "it's simply like this" - which amounts to expressing fundamental attitudes towards things, instead of advancing any clear description of undeniable facts. The first

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<sup>3</sup> I have only space here for recommending the viewing of the intriguing television series "The Elegant Universe", aired by PBS and hosted by Brian Greene. Full transcripts at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/3014\\_elegant.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/3014_elegant.html)

belief (a creation) implies purpose, whereas the second does not really require anything beyond what we can point at. Yet the question stays put for all curious men to gaze at. This has clearly nothing to do with discovering the truth about something, but with the way our ground - our shaped instinct - agrees or rejects certain descriptions of the world.

Knowledge is quite a comfort, coming to our assistance and helping us trick nature with the use of technology. We live longer, build cities, TVs, fly to outer space, etc. None of these manifestly advantageous things would be possible without a way of representing the mechanisms at work in our universe, the rules that make it what it is. "Paradigm of the sciences is mechanics." (AE, 28) To practice science we have to look at things as if they were mechanisms abiding by definite rules: the universe is the super-mechanism. Science is a particular description of "the universe", which must conform to the set of rules established by mathematical physics. It tries to describe how stuff that can be detected and measured works. This is the facet of "life" that the language of science can describe.

Since mechanics is the model of science, it is a big picture that holds a powerful descriptive allure - (*This explains everything*) -, and that infatuation can only let it too easily slide into descriptions of other facets of life. Wittgenstein notes that whereas in science laws abound, in psychology they are none. (AE, 42) Nonetheless, Freud treats the soul mechanically when he attempts to provide the soul's secrets by 'discovering' the interpretative rules of dreams. But how do we know dreams are really representations of a sort in the first place for us to explain them as concealing some hidden truth in the mind? Plus: who selects the parts and why should his interpretation outweigh others'? Perhaps I agree with an interpretation, since it sheds quite a new light on something very mysterious, which looks as if it means something. What if someone else comes up with an even more compelling picture? What does that say about the whole game of interpretation? If an interpretation cures a stammer, Wittgenstein points out (AE, 25), it has won a different battle

than that of interpretation. Interpretation asks "What does this mean?", whilst asking to be cured of a stammer is more like "Please show me how to stop doing this!" Interpretations heal puzzlements, not speech impediments, although when set out as simple explanations (this is really this) they can have such a convincing effect that its suggestive power can make us change the way we act, the world seen under a new light. It is not that it does not show us anything in the least relevant, but that "there are certain differences which you have been persuaded to neglect." (AE, 27). One explanation comes out as the truth because blind spots are pushed into place by the suggestiveness of a certain picture. We must take care with how we describe our soul; and a mechanism is a pretty twisted way. ('I do not like the way you think, please pull the respective lever inside your head; or I'll pull it for you.') This mess arises from the simple confusion of displacing one system of representation into a completely different one. It is a metaphor gone wrong.

Another certain type of scientific description aimed at 'explaining' the soul is quite common nowadays. I am thinking of neurology and talk about ideas and feelings in regards to their location in the brain. Goodness is at CP4.5/R. But what would this account give you? Life-long satisfaction by continual electric stimulation? To be an example of goodness you have to be labeled as "good" by other people. The test of your goodness is how you act and intend to act; and this can be put to the test both by you and others: it does not follow that just because you are 'in your skin' you understand the repercussions of your actions better than others. Often just the opposite is the case, and we require others to fill in our blind-spots by providing non-exculpatory examples of things we have done, at times with staggering implications, or violent discussions ("I am *not* like that!") We can judge goodness to several degrees - one could be deemed so-and-so good, or so exceedingly good that one says he is absolutely good. This is no longer a matter of existence (places in the brain or 'soul') but of *value*: "Neither judgment [of propositions of existence or of value] can be deduced immediately

from the other. They proceed from diverse intellectual preoccupations, and the mind combines them only by making them first separately, and then adding them together" (RE, 4). The soul is good, bad, or more or less so in terms of value. When one talks of "existence of the soul" one is not using "existence" in the same way as in the phrase "the existence of cars", but in a sense akin to "the existence of time". The soul only gains consistency by the notion of value; and value, in turn, is dependant on judgment.

We judge things that go on in the world all the time, using criteria - general guidelines - we have picked up in the course of our lives. We learn about choices, always in terms of right or wrong. This distinction is a very strange thing. Enclosed in a viewpoint, we sometimes claim that something is wrong in every sense (murder). Sometimes some cases are dismissed for self-defense, and guilty men are easily exonerated outside a court of law when both guilty party and judge is the same person (here murder can be a profession). We need external judgments of value to establish a common ground for the soul. For one to judge himself, he would have to do the impossible - step outside himself or die, thus 'attaining' a comprehensive view. We need others to point things out to us: "Everyone says I am like this, I can't believe it!" - "Well, maybe they're right". ("Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving yourself.") (CV, 39e)

We all have blind spots about certain things, which is why information is so valuable and often expensive. Information yields power and disclosed secrets can turn our worlds upside-down ("Are you blind?! Can't you see she loves you?" / "That man is a spy, arrest him." / "That woman is a witch, burn her!"). The ways gossip trickles down the grapevine often changes the course of events; and politics is often associated with the control of what seeps out to form a "public image". Notwithstanding, disclosed facts may or may not weigh on our options, and this is tied in with the value we attribute them. At times we find important things rather trivial and vice-versa, and that bears on what we do, our attitudes being permeable to time and the

disclosure of information. Moreover, people do not agree, especially when private interests conflict, and this calls for a resolution of one sort or another, since our longings cannot leave things forever hanging at the risk of lifelong dissatisfaction. We need judges because we are humans in a world of humans. The choices we make might always be wrong in terms of some bigger picture we cannot see, but can be judged correctly in accordance to the picture we have and the way we, in general consensus, take things. The symbol of Justice expresses blindness because it can be corrupt *and* wrong. Although values are sought and fought over, the values themselves - the words "right" and "wrong" - are not at stake. They still refer to something universal outside all particular cases, and being *absolute* terms, they are untouchably fixed, ideal forms. It is the very fact that they are static that insures their condition as guidelines to begin with.

In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein comments on the use of absolute words, and, curiously enough, finds that when he wants to remember the use of such words as "Good", "Beautiful", "Value", which refer to nothing specific (as opposed to relative uses of such words, as in "That car is very good") he comes up with experiences such as a) wondering at the existence of the world, or b) that of feeling absolutely safe (which are both nonsense in the sense that a) "I cannot imagine it not existing" and b) a plane could crash into the building I am in). Things which are good or bad (like c), feeling irrepressibly guilty) on *all accounts* seem to strangely refer to how we fit in the universe - our relationship to it. I say strangely because of their nonsensicality. But could it be expressed in any other, clearer, way? "These nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language ... to run against the boundaries of language." (LE, 44) Wonder, safety, innocence: just as we seek descriptions to fit the world, we also desire to fit in it ourselves. Tackling these

terms, which are a question of personal experiences and their meaningfulness (how important a place they take in your life), however, is no straightforward matter. These words show us nothing yet call on us somehow. We may not know *how* to fit, but we have no doubt that we desire to.

Values involve a more or less vague sense of compliance to fixed points, guidelines, rules. We 'follow their calling', if you like. For a believer, there is no specific path pointed out in Abraham's story to follow; and yet Abraham is a model of faith to be followed: he expresses the *idea* of faith, of obedience to God, an unimaginable suffering sustained for a higher love. We need people and model examples in stories (which can be just as effective) for guidance in conduct - a question, once more, of imitation of aspects. The idea of faith is nowhere to be found in the words of the episode itself: it is, in the sense of an expression commonly borrowed from Wittgenstein, outside the world; it is there to the extent that we see it in the story, that we exemplify it. Values, set in this metaphoric light, presuppose an end, a purpose to which we must aim: values are about *transformation*, for they are only a requirement when adjustment and fitting is called for. But we can't regulate absolute ideas or the sense of the words which refer to them: we must change ourselves. Values mostly surge as a "calling-force" when things are *wrong*, and begging to be set right. According to what? (Sometimes they are seriously wrong: "For the love of all that is sacred, *please* do not do this! It's wrong - in every sense of the word!") Here there is a whole ground calling on another to think things over, to make a different choice. ("You *mustn't* do this!") - We are invoking full authority on the matter. ("Sorry, that is what you think.") When we talk in absolute terms like this, our whole ground is involved: as when you say "The universe is blue" you are in fact referring to yourself, expressing something like "I am *really, really* sad." Take the instance of sight: I see a whole picture before me which is indeed but a perspective. So I repeat: we grasp things as a whole, but can only talk of aspects - and once more cite as a

reminder against our established customs: "Our tendency to omit specifying a frame of reference when it is our own" (LA, 37)

Criteria for right and wrong are rooted into our very ground, and the feelings of necessity which encircle them - the calling-out of the instincts which form our base - push them into persuasive forms like should/ought to/must/have to, etc. Notice that all these forms are modals followed by infinitives: they indicate action, a bidding to move from one footing to another. We talk in ways that express absolute authority, and these adamant viewpoints often rage wars in this world, each claiming sole right to truth. Where there is peace, authority is settled by consensus - chiefly by allowing for what is successful to pursue its course. "This way of doing things is good, everything's been running smoothly for years." This is open to public evaluation: "The roots of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christians." (RE, 20) The test of propositions of value comes down to how we fare in comparison to them.

When a guitar is out of tune, we know what to do. We tune the guitar in accordance to a fixed pitch, usually that of 440 Hz (the equivalent in frequency of the musical note 'A'). Here is an independent point to guide us: the closer one comes to imitating the sound, the more the value increases in correctness. It is easy to find a tuning fork in music stores, a common piece of equipment which is useful due to the standard value it proposes, established by convention. We straightforwardly know what to guide ourselves by (we have a clear-cut picture to follow, much like a map); it is just a case of training the ear to match, by imitating, sounds. It is not that easy, however, to find answers for complicated situations involving ethical or existential choice. 'How should I live my life?' The pictures here do not apply as simple pictures to follow *verbatim* but as general cases to be *inspired* by.

To "be inspired by" something is a curious saying. "To inspire" comes from the Latin *inspirare*, meaning to inhale, to

breathe in. This might help us visualize the picture, only the meaning has been reversed in the saying, for normally it is we that inhale. The Holy Spirit inspiring disciples is a standard picture, as is that of poets being inspired by muses. In stories we are usually inspired by heroes, role models, and this, of course, provides a clue for us: the 'breathing in' of someone's spirit. This may appear far-fetched, but is easily deflated into simpler, down to earth, terms. We often abide by people's words, or orders, especially when learning. We are transformed by their attitudes and their words: and the way attitudes inform words can sometimes push for the metaphor of being inspired not by mere vocabulary but by someone's 'spirit'. Others' descriptions come to make a part of us. ("When in hardship," your mother tells you, "remember the words your father told you.") In imitating, either words of authority or words we love, we harbor words and attitudes. But we can imitate only general ideas ("More grace!"), not exact descriptions or gestures.

This is not a case of having a step-by-step manual to follow (for the perpetually new surroundings are always a case-by-case matter) but of grasping certain essential aspects which can be expressed in varied ways, stories included. We try to grasp a sense of what is expressed and picture that as a guideline. But we do not always have a tuning fork beside us (neither do those work for tuning people), and so we remember and repeat or rephrase words of wisdom, as in reciting verses to ourselves, or praying. To be 'inspired by goodness', to 'desire good'. The purpose: perfecting ourselves. The way: following an idea, like the concert pianist does when chasing his understanding of what a piece is supposed to express as he plays the notes - he must conform the way he taps his keys to a general idea formed in his aesthetic judgment, or his sense of beauty one could say. People can be more or less lost here, but certainty can exist just as we are sure of our sense of gravity when something topples over a ledge. We seize it before it drops.

**And the Lord rooted them out of their  
land ... in great indignation**

In his dialogue with Ion, the rhapsode, Socrates describes inspiration as a magnet holding together a chain of inspired people (poets, rhapsodes and readers) via the magnetism of the Muse, and by the end of the dialogue, both Socrates and Ion agree that he, Ion, is divinely inspired and does not possess any art - he is an untalented mimicker of the power that flows through Homer, originating from the original magnet. Socrates strips Ion of any talent (than that of the *fluke* of being possessed by a divine spirit) by demonstrating to Ion that he does not have any knowledge of the talents described in Homer's works. These talk of charioteers and doctors; chariot-driving and exercising medicine being two things Ion has absolutely no knowledge of. Socrates denies Ion any talent yet does not even stop talking long enough to observe Ion do anything but defend himself or concur with him, Socrates.

At any rate, in Socrates' picture, Ion is all about instantaneous miracles happening in someone's head, who proceeds to open his mouth to let spirits come out. I do not think this is in every aspect a bad picture (for ideas do take us by surprise), yet it is incomplete and can lead to confusion when taken at face value. Socrates says that if Ion was really knowledgeable about poetry he should be able to interpret all poets, good and bad, and not merely Homer - "It is plain to everyone that not from art and knowledge comes your power to speak concerning Homer. If it were art that gave you power, then you could speak about all the other poets as well. There is an art of poetry as a whole? Am I not right?" (532c). Socrates is claiming that poetry is a whole and that consequently, if you cannot understand any given part of it, you cannot understand the assemblage. But this is a funny thing to say: it is like saying that a jazz pianist that cannot play Bach to save his life is not a musician at all and has no talents whatsoever. From all the talents Socrates cared to

dismiss, he did not think of *performing* - which is precisely what Ion does. Ion is a renowned crowd-pleaser, distinguished for the special way in which he can say the words of Homer, much like the way classical pianists can play the same score in different manners, playing with varying intensities, pauses, accentuations, etc. Each interpreter produces his own version of an original that was previously written down, a *fixed idea* awaiting someone's deliverance. This is surely a talent, one which Socrates substitutes with a description of ghosts going through poets and rhapsodes - the divine directly traversing poets, and Homer (with his own share of divinity), Ion. "Far from giving the display, you will not even tell me what subject it is on which you are so able, though all this while I have been entreating you to tell. No, you are just like Proteus; you twist and turn, this way and that, assuming every shape, until finally you elude my grasp and reveal yourself as a general." (541e)

He really leaves him no choice: "Choose, therefore, how you will be called by us, whether we shall take you for a man unjust, or for a man divine." (542a) Ion's only escape would be for Socrates to acknowledge him as an excellent *rhapsode*, but he is denied that possibility from the start. Socrates fails to see the way in which Ion could actually be called a general of sorts: Ion partakes in the general's talent of inspiring men to give up their lives for the promise of a brave new world, and with his recitations convinces men of a sense of beauty, bringing it home to them with a tactful use of words. Robbed of that (and any) skill, he clings to the only scrap of dignity he sees left, and concedes that he must be inspired. Socrates is himself being a poet in a way, *persuading* Ion, inspiring him as to mirror *his* words. Fortunately for himself, Ion can still go on being a rhapsode, holding onto his identity. In view of his constant forgetfulness - "Are you really so forgetful? Indeed, it would ill become a man who is a rhapsode to forget. - Why? What am I forgetting?" (539e) -, by tomorrow he will surely go back to believing, laurels of praise on his head, that he indeed has an art, and knows how to do something remarkable well. In a sense,

Ion was beaten at his own game, for his job revolves around persuading his audience of the power of Homer's words, captivating his listeners by placing pictures in their minds. That he 'puts' something 'in' their 'minds' (I am parading Socrates' metaphor of the contagious magnet, nothing actually 'flows across' but is achieved in representation and grasped or not) comes out when people repeat Homeric verses in awe of its beauty, or talk about certain episodes as perfect examples suiting situations or people like a glove, or tell other people to go read/hear Homer (or, specifically, Ion's rendering of it), etc. - that is, when they go back to certain texts and descriptions, as if they were being pulled by a magnet. (Would this not count as the practical side of what Plato's metaphor, *anamnesis*, expresses?)

Socrates, despite his overall achievement of clarity and unambiguous discourse, falls back on storytelling, turning to an allegory to make his point cut across. This use of suggestive resemblance occurs because he has hit the wall of language Wittgenstein described earlier when talking of the use of absolute words ("nonsensicality is their very essence.") This use of allegory furnishes Socrates with a big picture that has a simple elegance quite unlike his lines of reasoning which focus on counter-arguing particular points in Ion's exposition; setting up a frame which can be used to describe several instances, and opening up space in a representational system where Socrates' arguments can all fit. In his recourse to allegory, we can find Socrates jumping from a description in the Homeric style as described by Auerbach, to one akin to the manner of description found in Abraham's episode. His allegory of inspiration as partaking of the force of the "stone of Heraclea" (533d) has magnetic properties of its own.

Ion is apparently beaten at the instances in which he agrees with Socrates and seems to be possessed by the ideas Socrates presents him, the likes of which had never really crossed his mind. But the game is not over yet: if Ion completely agrees with the picture Socrates presents him, he will have to

let go of the picture in which he has a certain talent. The picture here is made of words (incidentally, I like "picture" because it conveys a simpler idea than the potentially weblike structure of "text", and does not have its emphasis on interlinking structures, which nonetheless operate in the background of the attention), and has the "push" or "pull" - the power - of someone else's beliefs. We are relatively used to this kind of expression: words, sentences, argumentation. But what of Ion? - it looks as if he is not very good at argumentation; at any rate he cannot build a picture concerning how he does what he does, and so he lets Socrates sell him one. Ion takes Socrates' picture (at least for the time Socrates is tormenting him) because he evidently has none that will satisfy his inquisitor: Ion has no *proof*, nothing that would count as evidence of knowledge of any sort for Socrates.

Ion has not been allowed a go at his own game. But would it have mattered? Socrates insists that poetry tricks belief into thinking we are being presented with knowledge when all it does is offer illusions in the guise of marvelous words. If we grant Ion talent and regard him as doing the saying, then nothing need be flowing into his mind at the time of recitation. Ion does not mirror Homer but *represents* his words, making his own creation as one need do when translating a poem. In point of fact, why does translation break our backs so? Touch the original poem in the slightest and its magic flies in your face. A translator's only redemption is to make a new poem based on the first, a correct 'imitation', one that works, that 'clicks' for us.

But how is this purported 'imitation' supposed to come about? There is indeed a talent for it, as any translator or performer knows. "Original and translation will of course differ in some properties; but so do any two inscriptions of the same word, or even any two red inscriptions if 'red'. The goal is maximum preservation of what the original *exemplifies* as well as of what it says. Translation of a staccato by a legato text may do greater violence than some discrepancies in denotation." (LA, 60) In other words, there must be a compliance to the properties

present in the initial text, and due to the nature of reading and writing, the grasping and the rendering of the original properties are subject to wrong ways of representation ("Forget it. The original is elevated, raging; your version is foundering and boisterous.")

The copy will not 'click' for everyone, and will 'click' in different ways for different people. Since it varies so, I cannot exactly say what the click is, just that the translation accurately represents what is being said in the original ("I think it's all right except for this paragraph - correct that and you're set.") I can tell you that it clicked for me (that the poem is good) but I cannot show you the click: just tell you that it satisfies me. This use of "click" holds true for other absolute terms: there are various instances of beauty I can point out, but while there is the abstract word beauty, there are no particulars for it except the cases to which it applies, which vary from case to case (the shape of her chin, the way she laughs, the provocative gesture: none are the same "beauty"). The word comes into being because of the very group of resemblances and contrasts present in the various cases. It is a wordbag that can live on its own, exemplifying cases but never revealing what it is, very simply because "beauty" exists in English as an abstract noun. It is one of those enormous wordbags with many examples inside, so large we cannot describe it from outside since it stretches beyond our scope of vision: we have to walk and walk to get around it so as to describe a series of facets of it; and it is by comparing these facets that we might get somewhere.

Apparently a poem is not the proof Socrates wants, although he fails to criticize his own use of figurative language. He uses argumentation as a path to knowledge, but what is really going on is Socrates persuading Ion of how the world works with philosophical lingo. The way he does so can be seen in the way he describes things: explaining the logical relationships of concepts by argumentation. In badgering Ion for arguments (which would satisfy him, Socrates, as proof of knowledge), Socrates is

looking for something that poets are not required to do in the first place, at least not for poems to work. Poems do not require third-party interpretations from authors and critics to work at all. Their explaining might change the way we see the object, but if, say, the author's version establishes itself in your descriptions of the poem, then all that will be happening is that you are following someone else's reading of an object. The idea that the author has privileged access to the poem shows its flakiness whenever the author's interpretation is less powerful and persuasive than interpretations produced by other readers or critics. In his Defense, Socrates (like with Ion) takes a lash out at the common vanity of artists: "Well, gentlemen, I hesitate to tell you the truth, but it must be told. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any of the bystanders could have explained those poems better than their actual authors ... and I also observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant." (Apology, 22b) Whatever aesthetics is discussing, it is always tied in with the work of art itself, which does not itself change no matter how many different descriptions we manage to give of it.

Poets create, readers grasp, and rhapsodes like Ion need to grasp *and* convey the power of specific poems, not *explain* them. One need not forcefully be able to list the rules of musical composition in order to make songs; besides, there are no fixed rules in reference to a product which is supposed to be strikingly new, and, accordingly, we cannot get a grip on whatever causal mechanism those which desire proof demand concerning art. The portrait of a half-wit rhapsode taking an intellectual beating from Socrates can be turned on its head by stating that Socrates is actually asking Ion all the wrong questions, somewhat like questioning a singer about the way his vocal organs function: he might or might not know how to explain this, but either way, the second (knowledge) is not a requirement for the first (talent). It is about time we take statements like "I do not know how it works" seriously, for knowledge of certain

matters is not what is at stake here - only what is accomplished with words. The justification of poetry (the quest for its value) is quite a different job from the poet's, properly left in the hands of philosophical thought, and more specifically, literary theory. The poet's job, of course, is producing the object of aesthetic value, the poem. The talents at work in philosophical argumentation are quite distinct: the sorting out of confusions which ensue from the inevitable trouble-spots (wordbags) in language. Poetry need not concern itself with this, in fact, it mostly makes use of paradox and the plurality of ways language can be used, by producing and enhancing confusion and bewilderment. But poems do not decide their meanings for us: that is for us to decide. Poems need not answer questions, just as the world does not explain itself to us: there are no handbooks to guide us in 'the' right path. But this remark on distinguish specific talents need not be taken as far as the claim that it is impossible for poets to be able to justify their poems (although few can and/or worry about this) - there are a handful of good jacks of all trades.

What have we got so far? Poetry and philosophy: two different language-games, each claiming that it is entitled to describe time, soul, truth, reality, etc.; that each can tell us what these ideas are about. But one uses beautiful words whereas the other uses argumentation. Both, though, as we have observed, *persuade*, bringing us towards certain pictures. What is at stake is convincing people of certain pictures through the use of different tools and talents. ("This is how the world really is, this is what you're doing when you do this"). I am not assigning blame or guilt: we all do this. Submitting, denying, accepting, enforcing. I would say that what counts in the end is that you have the *right* pictures in place. And this is a question of discerning the value of specific practices.

Men get caught up in describing ideas, a complex task on account of the many aspects wordbags hold. But there is not only one way of going about it. Philosophy has seen various styles of exposition unfold along time, stemming from individual ways of

thinking and expressing thoughts. Nietzsche's on the whole more exhortative and dare I say literary style is quite disparate from that of, for example, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. But I cannot dismiss the idea, in recognition of the latter's thought, that philosophy must be able to, on account of the inevitable role of language in our descriptions, distinguish features into classes in order to *clarify ideas*, separating the muddle caused by wordbags. That ideas (the mental counterpart of things) are fixed and held in place by abstract nouns is what forces philosophy (I shall for the most part use this term in reference to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy) to try to propose a grammar that will allow us to correctly describe them. Poetry, on the other hand, does not tidy up wordbags: it fuses features into new expressive units, sending wordbags whizzing, clashing, dancing around each other. While philosophy *denotes*, poetry *expresses*: we must chase its metaphoric promptings. Two different pictures are offered us: philosophy endeavors to present us with no interpretative problems, poetry calls on us to describe it.

### III

#### **What is your substance, whereof are you made?**

From poetry and philosophy I now want to move onto my main concern: poetry and prayer, which I will try to contrast so as to make their individual differences, their specificities as language-games, come forth. It is not extraordinary to hear certain expressions nonchalantly applied to both, such as "This is profound", "spiritual", or "divine"; and even observe attitudes of implacable seriousness and steadfast respect for both language-games. Some people can become very angry when silly things in the guise of knowledge are thrown in the air about these matters, which immediately underlines their status as something highly significant albeit not self-explanatory. Either way, some sense of 'supreme vision' is constantly revisited in descriptions of both poetry and prayer. I suspect that this awkward similarity is not a bad starting point to attempt to untie some knots.

What are we supposed to 'see', and what is this type of 'seeing' anyway? Whatever it is, it is text-related, and so we must start by looking at a couple of these. Let us begin with a fragment of a poem by Jim Morrison called "An American Prayer". The title raises an issue because I said we were going to look at a poem, and it dubs itself a prayer. It starts off like this:

Do you know the warm progress  
                                under the stars?  
Do you know we exist?  
Have you forgotten the keys  
                                to the Kingdom?  
Have you been borne yet  
                                & are you alive?

Let's reinvent the gods, all the  
myths of the ages  
Celebrate symbols from deep elder  
forests  
[Have you forgotten the lessons  
of the ancient war]<sup>4</sup>

How am I to take this - as a poem, or a prayer? Maybe we should look at something from the Bible, some ancient words of praise, to see if they can help us decide:

Psa 4:1 [To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David.] Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy on me, and hear my prayer.

Psa 4:2 O ye sons of men, how long will ye turn my glory into shame? How long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing? [Selah]

Psa 4:3 But know that the LORD hath set apart him that is godly for himself: the LORD will hear when I call unto him.

Psa 4:4 Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. [Selah]

Psa 4:5 Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the LORD.

Psa 4:6 There be many that say, Who will show us any good? LORD, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us.

Psa 4:7 Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased.

Psa 4:8 I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety.

Both texts pose questions (Do you know.../ O men...) which seem to operate more like rhetorical questions, calling on us to pay

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<sup>4</sup> (AP, 3)

attention to something we may have misplaced (our attitudes in life). Also, both offer some advice ("Let's reinvent the gods" / "Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.") So in a sense they both look like a 'Hey, are you aware of what's going on? - Don't waste your life, do this' sort of thing: *persuasion*. These two texts were also meant to be accompanied by music ("Selah" is some sort of musical notation), but this is not at all strange, for one sings in church as well as in concert halls.

This kind of approach has not really gotten us very far; perhaps we should be wary of how we go about comparing objects. First of all we must not get stuck on too many similarities, for this process will not help us distinguish the grammars underlying the practices. Let us establish the following: we are looking at objects which can appear quite similar in some aspects - and that is exactly what messes up the whole contrast business in the first place because aspects become entangled. To find subtle distinctions our questions must change: in order to look at them as language-games we must look into the use of these practices, and overlapping characteristics can fall into the background as an effect of the confusing ways in which we use labels such as "poetry" and "prayer". Furthermore, we must acknowledge that these textual objects need not always be 100% "poetry" or "prayer" in terms of say rhyming or having "Amen" in it (i.e., in terms of conforming to a fixed list of aspects), but a part of larger forms of life wherein these language-games acquire 'meaning' by virtue of their use.

So let us start again, this time trying to move between particular cases and general practices. To begin with, the poem is addressed to readers, whereas the psalm to both listener and God. So the audience is different. But I must not omit that later on in the poem Morrison writes, "O great Creator of being / grant us one more hour to / perform our art / and perfect our lives". So once more this collapses into similitude with prayer... Maybe I should have started off by saying that no one reads this in mass, while the psalm fits in religious ceremonies that uses the Bible as a textual source. Here there might be a starting place for us

to point at a more helpful distinction. Whereas poems are read by *one reader only*, either by himself or to an audience during recitation (for the most part an obnoxious exercise), prayers can be both a case of solitary intonation or read out by a whole community of believers simultaneously, who come together in a place specifically built for the cult of God. I would like to state that reciting poetry only makes sense in *performances*, where the aesthetic element is maintained by the surroundings of the reading.

Why is this so? Reading poetry is very delicate in the sense that rhythmic displacement, wrong intonation, stuttering or errors of the like can bring the whole thing down. If the object is thus tainted, a sense of repulsion ensues. The same with a piano concert: the performer must be extremely wary of his every move, of the breathing and dynamics of his finger-tapping. But one interpretation is never the same as the next, in spite of the fact that the object which runs the risk of being defiled (the poem or the score) never changes. But no one stops his neighbor in mass to say "You're stressing the wrong syllable there." In this language-game this would be rather abstruse; one would want to remark that he is in the wrong place if he wants to say things like that.

A flipside to my last set of remarks is that conjoining believers all agree on the words they are saying, without having a need to interpret them ("What do you mean 'What does this mean?' - I am reminding God that I believe in him"), whereas readers have a hard time agreeing on the meaning of poems. These two types of text are opposing in the sense that the words pose no problem whatsoever to him who prays, while poems raise all kinds of interpretative issues to its readers. So here we have a first distinction that might be approached in the following manner: whereas prayer is to be used in much the same way throughout time, what we get out of poems hardly ceases to vary.

This points to other aspects: we have just looked at how poems remain the same and how good poems are untouchable at the risk of falling out of grace. So the question of shifting aspects

(even though we sometimes place this property on the object itself in ordinary speech: "poems constantly reinvents themselves") refers back to the other element in the equation: the reader. But we do not want to get lost in the multifarious ways in which people's individual readings vary, so let us stick to the ways in which they are relatively constant. For the meaning of a prayer or poem to have stabilized (for poems can also 'come to a halt') means that you are thenceforth in possession of a picture you can use in describing the world, for as we have seen, pictures aid us in worldmaking. But the distinction goes further - poetry (as a whole) offers you buckets of pictures, overlapping, competing, sometimes even attempting to destroy each other. Prayer, however, does not function in this way: these pictures do not battle between themselves, on the contrary, they are all regarded as a part of one big picture. So let us establish a first major distinction: the way we use poems can *shift*; the way we use prayer is *fixed*.

Let us consider another aspect of this distinction: all I showed you was the beginning of Morrison's poem for the specific purpose of presenting a poem that looks like a prayer, while quickly flashing by you the notion that a prayer can also harbor aspects related to aesthetics (the musical accompaniment). But praying does not *depend* on music at all, whereas the strength of Morrison's "American Prayer" mostly resides in the musical rendition accomplished by The Doors. I even find it hard to look at the words without evoking it as a song; and when that memory does not flow in, the magic of most other words seems to vanish into thin air (just as the magic first appeared). So poems seem to be dependent on aspects that prayer is not. The point, of course, is not that poems require musical notes, but that without the magic I was referring to - i.e., the beauty that in this case was supported by The Doors as an ensemble - the poem is simply not a good example of poetry anymore. If it is not beautiful as a whole, the poem loses poetic value. Prayer, on the other hand, does not depend on beauty at all, although if an aesthetic element is added it is sometimes welcomed as a gift, found

irrelevant or secondary, or even shunned as blasphemy: either way, beauty is not a required item for the language-game. Beauty is not a part of the grammar of prayer, of the rules that make it a specific practice.

Prayer is a ritual, and rituals are related to things we cannot control; they are an expression of the uncomfortable distance between desire and object. "Kissing the picture of one's beloved [or the feet of baby Jesus at Christmas]. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied. One could also kiss the name of one's beloved, and here it would be clear that the name was being used as a substitute." (GB, 123) This could be called a *magical* use of the picture or name. We do not do these things to actually change anything in the world (as one may superstitiously fall into the desire of one's own wants), but to express a wish, the lack of something we feel as overriding and necessary ("I miss her so much!..") "Magic brings a wish to representation ... An error arises only when magic is interpreted scientifically." (GB, 125) This is quite parallel to the world of facts: in this light one can understand a series of magical language-games, such as rain-dancing, etc. It does not follow that the dancers are completely ignorant as to rain cycles and the course of seasons - they are expressing a wish that something comes into place or was not so, like a mother repeatedly screaming "No!" at the death of her son. "The same savage, who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his arrow skillfully and not in effigy." (GB, 125) This is not a matter of ignorance, but of using language to deal with something other than knowledge. Both poems and prayer are in this general category of uses, despite their other significant differences - only here do they escape from the general indictment of nonsense.

Rituals do however, at face value, often appear quite absurd to those who do not practice them. But to the believer,

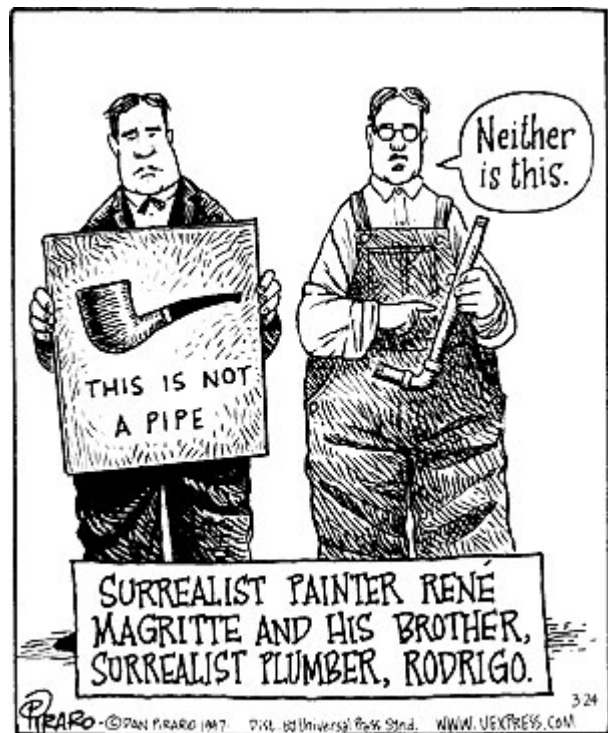
they are simply a part of his life. Europeans can be quite taken aback by such everyday Oriental commonplaces as the eating of insects: we grow into forms of life, both in language and practices. Yet magical or religious rituals do not address the same kind of necessity than that of survival by food. The Christian holy bread and wine are different - they are metaphoric stand-ins for food. "Anyone who listens to a child's crying with understanding will know that psychic forces, terrible forces, sleep within it, different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage & pain & lust for destruction." (CV, 4e) We all have primal instincts at the roots of our being: we usually call them feelings, which is a word of such broad ambit (for we all have them, they are built into what it is to be human) and undefined scope that sometimes, as we have discussed, people use it to try to explain everything about our nature when obviously they are saying nothing at all by trying to say everything at once. Be it as it may, they are easily attested: if I stamp hard on your foot, you will scream out in pain. There is nothing hazy here; on the contrary, you will have no doubt whatsoever that you felt deeply distraught.

When you scream you know precisely what you mean: you are emitting a *pain* signal. This is no figurative, but literal statement: you are denotatively representing an *immediate* (and thus "thoughtless", or non-linguistic) reaction. If you can muster your pain threshold (and take time to cool off) you might composedly say: "That really hurt," and again, there is no doubt about this statement - pain is precisely what you are referring to. In prayer, something similar is going on: people totally agree with what they are saying, and there is no need for interpretation ("What do you mean 'What does all this mumbo jumbo mean?' - we are reminding God that we believe in him, aren't you listening to what we are saying?"); whereas readers have a hard time agreeing on the meaning of poems. These two types of texts are opposing in the sense that the words raise no problem whatsoever to him who prays, while poems raise all kinds of interpretative issues to its readers. Whereas prayer is to be

used in much the same way throughout time - "The distinction: in science there is progress, but in magic there isn't. Magic has no tendency within itself to develop." (GB, 141) -, what we get out of poems hardly ceases to vary, for they constantly push us into interpretative stances.

This is related with what we said earlier in our contrast of poetry and philosophy: poetry figuratively exemplifies. Issues with words are at the very base of our relation with poems, and although a poem can also be a shout ("O Captain! my Captain!") concerning something else than literal pain - an expression of our basic reactions to ideas, people, other representations, etc. (of disgust, love, confusion, etc.) -, poems do so with a *refined* use of words (words used in poems are not monkeys' grunts). "Within all great art there is a WILD animal: tamed ... All great art has primitive human drives as its ground bass. They are not the *melody* (as they are, perhaps, in Wagner), but they are what gives the melody *depth & power*." (CV, 43e). The way artists use language to represent is the crux of the aesthetic matter; and moreover, they can only represent by using language: no poem (or only one, recurrent, 'conceptual-poem') is a blank.

Language cannot escape reference - even anti-referential gestures in art (the cutting up and mixing up textual fragments like William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch*, or pitch black movie screens like João Cesar Monteiro's *Branca de Neve*) can be taken as "I want to destroy the use of language" statements - *referring*, therefore, to this idea. This is fun only once. We are language-bound because language perpetually refers, i.e. uses words, etc. to express ideas. Language is what enables us to make distinctions, separating things into more or less tidy categories which allow us to, more or less precisely, refer to things and ideas.



Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" goes to show to what extent language pervades our world: we are so used to language, that if someone forefronts the way it is but layered over the world, that very representational act seems nonsensical ("Of course it's a pipe!"). I chose this cartoon by Dan Piraro over Magritte's painting because the surrealist plumber-brother's 'pipe' is an additional illustration of how wordbags have different things in them. Distinguishing reference and establishing overall representational meaning is an activity that can stem from the most basic common sense to the most complex interpretative skills. The way our world is, we cannot escape words, only try to relate to them in a peaceful, stable manner that soothes interpretative doubt. Poetry is not very helpful in this respect; it perpetually promises meaning it never yields - we are left to that chore. The sense of promise can be driven further by applying a literal reading to a figurative representation: the strange expectation that somehow Magritte's painting of a pipe would give us a 'pipe' to 'smoke'.

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<sup>5</sup> Found at <http://foucault.info/documents/foucault.thisIsNotaPipe.en.html>

Literature can seriously play with our expectations, especially when it mimics aspects of reality to such an extent that it is easy to confuse characters with actual people. Successful literary tricks induce emotions, senses of presence, and stalking ideas. Far-fetched literal readings of prayers can also trick us into imagining physical presences instead of ideas (the mental *twins* of things). "'Our Father, He who is in heaven.' There is a sort of humour in that. He is your Father, but just try to go and look for him up there!" (GG, 95) ... "There is a resemblance between the lower and the higher. Hence slavery is an image of obedience to God, humiliation an image of humility, physical necessity an image of the irresistible pressure of grace, the saints' self-abandonment from day to day an image of the frittering away of time among criminals, prostitutes, etc." (GG, 34) Understanding representations means before all else regarding them *as representations*.

Different rules apply in religious texts as opposed to poems. O.K. Bouwsma's *Without Proof or Evidence* is the name of a collection of essays which are to a large extent about the grammar of the Scriptures, the margins of meaning in which the scriptural texts make sense. Language-games are easily confused when we have words being transferred from one language-game to the next (as Morrison does, mimicking prayer), and so the vocabulary must be explained within the corresponding language-game where the pictures fit when described in a determinate way. The world of the believer has pictures that fit accordingly, just as that of the unbeliever. "And now the point of what I am saying is that to understand a word is to have an ability, the ability to speak and to write the language in which that word occurs, and to understand others who speak and write. The understanding of a Christian consists in his ability to employ the word 'God' in his Christian practice, in prayer, in praise, etc. ... If anyone is interested in getting into perspective the meaning of the word 'God' among Christians, his resource must be the Scriptures." (WP, 59) Kierkegaard also felt this necessity to elucidate Scriptural significance: "We face perhaps a more serious

bankruptcy in the world of spirit; for the concepts have gradually been emasculated, and the words have been made to mean everything and anything."

It is often the case that we cannot get a hold on what poems are referring to, mostly because it is a part of their grammar to be free to transfer words from anywhere they wish. Thus when we read "pipe", it can mean any sort of pipe or anything that holds any degree of resemblance to an idea of 'pipe'. On the contrary, there can be no doubt as to the 'object' of prayer in prayer, for certainty is the very nature of the language-game. The pictures that compose this 'object' (a metaphor to express reification) are to be found in the texts that have for thousands of years made an effort to teach the faith that brings the 'object' into being. Descriptions of Christian faith are to be encountered in biblical descriptions, for what allows "faith" to blossom is "God". Interpretation of words is also a case of knowing where to look for relevant references of meaning.

We read poems, in an attempt to understand them. Poems are usually not addressed to anyone in particular, and if they are, you probably do not know him or her anyhow. Maybe it says 'I did something or other', or 'Joe did something or other'. You could take it as always or in some places referring to you (you find descriptions that remarkably fit how you would describe yourself), or as referring to someone you know; or some words might just grow into a character you get acquainted with and grow expectations of, laugh and rejoice at or contract in repulsion of - mimicking what you do with people. Perhaps there are no people at all in the poem, it just describes events and things in funny ways, etc. However you read it, and whatever type of poem it is, both vary a lot on a case to case basis. What we call poetry *shifts* not only because our readings of the same poem shift (there we are probably groping at it, or on the up side, have found a new way of looking at it) but mostly on account of the enormous amount of poems there are, which all get flung into the "poetry" wordbag.

Yet poetry can be *fixed* as well by long experience with poems, allowing a more stable idea of poetry to settle down. One instance would be: "For the judgment of style is the last and crowning fruit of long experience."<sup>6</sup> With the sharpening of taste, poetry can be separated into good and bad, allowing us to tidy up the wordbag. Also, people have the songs, the poems, the paintings, the phrases 'of their lives' (and the kinds of poems they collect usually acts on the way they describe 'what poetry really is'). We collect remarkable representations of our lives, examples we can use to remember (the descriptions of) what the world is and 'recall' the ground we have made out of certainty and ideas. The meaningfulness of poems can also serve to distinguish them into good or bad.

But where I want to get at for the time being is that poetry shifts not because poems change but because the reader does. The *shifting/fixed* differentiation lies on the side of the reader, not the text, although we often speak of the *texts* as the thing transformed ("It's funny: its true meaning dawned on me yesterday when I already thought I had it. What extraordinarily slippery things poems are...") All that is mysterious - a poem or the universe - sets off metaphoric descriptions, which, due to their exemplificative nature, makes us describe our stance towards it. The scientists were not describing the big bang as much as they were describing their position towards its marvel.

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<sup>6</sup> Found at <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/longinus/index.htm>

Pseudo-Longinus. *On the Sublime*. Translated by W. Rhys Roberts. Quote from section VI

## **O frowning Fortune, cursed, fickle dame!**

In the short story "On the Marionette Theatre" by Heinrich von Kleist, the narrator's companion tells him about dancing puppets which had fascinated him. Their dance was "very graceful" and could be controlled by the puppeteer by very simple movements. "When the centre of gravity is moved in a straight line, the limbs describe curves. Often shaken in a purely haphazard way, the puppet falls into a kind of rhythmic movement which resembles dance." (MT, 1) Here we have a mechanism that spews out graceful dance. The puppet entices, the strings are invisible, and so is the puppeteer. The puppet master could well be substituted for some tiny randomized robot with much the same effect, which just goes to show how much the whole thing is soulless. As Paul de Man suggests in his brilliant reading of the short story, "Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist", this narrative is about the illusions of beauty, and a parody on knowledge as the path to ultimate truth. There is a machine without a soul - without any true making of *choices* - that produces graceful dancing, a boy whose character crumbles because he is told that he does not resemble a work of art, and a bear (reader) whose blocks cannot be outsmarted by an expert fencer (writer) who fails miserably despite all his swordsmanship.

C (the companion), is so infatuated with the idea of a grace-machine that he wants to eradicate all traces of human volition from the dance and transfer it "entirely to the realm of mechanical forces". With this move, dance is rendered completely expressionless (like the topography of gymnastics in classical ballet), and it is hence simply a question of fabricating the right mechanism to produce the right sort of movements. Subtract the human element from the creative equation and you've got grace. But something must be definitely wrong with this picture if all you need to create art is a machine. Machines can only do what they are designed to do - present them with a problem outside its range of computation (the rules we choose to program

it with) and a computer crashes. A computer cannot improvise, work its way around unexpected problems. Like a failed writer wrestling against his readers, a computer can only feint and thrust (the tricks the fencer learnt to do), instead of being able to come up with some new idea that may, to everyone's surprise, break the rut. A robot just continues doing whatever it is it can do *ad infinitum* (all it needs is electricity), and even though a computer does not need to rest like we do, it cannot break free of its programmed nature like we can.

Souls - people -, however, have wills of their own. If this is not treasured then what it is to be human is lost. C's picture of an art producing mechanism reduces what is required of the artist to a number of simple waves of the hand where the wand does everything. All he needs to know is the verbal equivalent of say five words, the elements in the simple magic formula that make the puppet dance gracefully. Movement A, B, etc. How many good poems can you make with a strict handful of words?

To achieve grace seems only too easy here, like slipping a coin into a jukebox. Towards the middle of the story, it is the narrator's turn to tell C about something he had witnessed:

"'About three years ago', I said, 'I was at the baths with a young man who was then remarkably graceful. He was about fifteen, and only faintly could one see the first traces of vanity ... My friend looked into a tall mirror just as he was lifting his foot to a stool to dry it, and he was reminded of the statue [of Paris pulling a thorn out of his foot]. He smiled and told me of his discovery. As a matter of fact, I'd noticed it too, at the same moment, but... I do not know if it was to test the quality of his apparent grace or to provide a salutary counter to his vanity... I laughed and said he must be imagining things. He blushed. He lifted his foot a second time, to show me, but the effort was a failure, as anybody could have foreseen ... He must have lifted his foot ten times, but it was in vain. He was quite unable to reproduce the same

movement. What am I saying? The movements he made were so comical that I was hard put to it not to laugh." (MT, 4)

This episode also denounces an idea of beauty being easily acquired: the boy believes that he resembles a work of art because he can imitate one in its stance. When he is told he cannot (when indeed he did, in that first moment of *chance*), his whole world collapses and he cannot escape the fall from grace: he is told he is not one of the gods. As his vanity evaporates, cheated from him by an insidious chance remark, he grows into an empty, soulless wreck that no longer has the power of grace. "From that day, from that very moment. An extraordinary change came over this boy. He began to spend whole days in front of the mirror. His attractions slipped away from him, one after the other. An invisible and incomprehensible power seemed to settle like a steel net over the free play of his gestures." (MT, 4) What did he stake his life on - a fixed form of beauty that, imitated in an exact way, would work at all times, like a finely tuned mechanism? That would be like having the ability to *effortlessly* step into a place that would immediately grant you grace. (When I was a child I remember trying to wish my way into being Superman, i.e. having his powers; but nothing happened in spite of all my intense frowning.) The boy in the story fell because he discovered that his belief in beauty was misplaced, that he was chasing a promise that did not actually transform him in the end. The point is not that beauty cannot be reached, it is just that it must be created, crafted by developing the talent to master representations, even if these creations can come into being by chance and "free play". This requires some guided effort, different from that of frowning your way into Superman. Whatever poems are, there are between the self and language; while prayer is essentially a question between the self and "God". There is another obvious distinction to be made here, previously alluded to: while God is (figuratively) an 'object', it is not an actual fact object. Poems are textual objects which we read, but prayers we pray. There is a strange redundancy going

on in the second term: we pray prayers. But we do not "poem poems" or "poetry poems" - these are not verbs.

Poems, as signaled in our discussion of *An American Prayer*, are bound to the beauty of words. That is their aim: each poem is an autotelic system, since its beauty is what justifies it in the first place, and we only significantly talk of poems when we judge them to be beautiful. Prayer, contrariwise, implies a teleology, an end. The saying that a poem is an end in itself and 'useless' stems from the fact that the grammar of poetry does not absolutely require that the poem serves any purpose at all beyond that of the aesthetic pleasure that distinguishes it from other types of texts. Talk of an *end* sounds strange here, since the purpose of a poem is bound to what makes it a poem in the first place. On the other hand, prayer is not required to be pleasurable at all; nor is it an end in itself, but a means to direct the soul to God.

But whereas poetry requires an effort in interpretation, no effort of the sort is required in prayer. Interpretation of art works is really a sort of pleasurable activity, no matter how much brain-sweat is involved, and is much like a sort of sporting activity, congratulating itself in achieving a position among other interpretations; one which maintains its place in the podium by the power of its influence on readers - we are persuaded that here is a better way of reading a poem. Readers may feel absolutely satisfied by an interpretation and actually shun all others on principle (a rather dogmatic attitude), or take it as a brilliantly achieved insight regarding an object that can, notwithstanding, be described from different angles as well. Prayer is not a competition in understanding texts: it not only has no need for beauty and pleasure but actually presupposes *pain* of an intense sort: the *giving away of ground*. Prayer does not require an effort in interpretation, but an effort of the *self*.

## Decreation

We have to forget poetry for now; it does not come in here. Going to God is not about beautiful words, despite the fact that beautiful things can remind us of the absolute beauty of His creation. Religion often talks about a spiritual path to God, and for this to make sense we must use the language of religion, for that is where "God" makes sense - "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psa 119:105). We are taught mathematics with numbers, and English words and phrases that refer to their usage; we are taught about God in the Scriptures and other books of the kind. "Gravity and Grace", a collection of Simone Weil fragments is a very good source for our purpose. Weil is a very special philosopher, describing spiritual life in a cool, clear tone that I believe Wittgenstein would cherish, and meticulously setting down the grammar of God throughout. In fact, I must say, this book describes what religion is about in a remarkably austere way. This is not a path replete with beautiful words; there is truly affliction and a cross to carry as well. The flowers of representation stay in the poems they issue from.

I find her image of the lever very poignant:

A lever. We lower when we want to lift.

In the same way 'he who humbleth himself shall be exalted'.

There are necessity and laws in the realm of grace likewise.

It is human misery and not pleasure which contains the secret of the divine wisdom.

The upward movement in us is vain (and less than vain) if it does not come from a downward movement.

And allow me to add the book's opening line: "All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception." In this metaphor, we cannot go up if we do not first go down. Weil describes three movements: the downward thrust that you must will

at your own expense, the upward lift that the offering offers, and finally, the *descent* of grace. In this picture, grace is a gift from God, a present He bestows on us for the internal effort we make in giving ourselves to Him, and not only for our good public deeds (although these are a part of the big picture too). This turning (a metaphor to emphasize the reflexive action of the will on ourselves, pushing towards God) is performed in absolute solitude: morality is a purely inner act, one that wishes to do away with all that is base in us.

Sin, the stain of guilt in relation to an absolute notion of rightness, is what we must veer from at all costs. "There exists a 'deifugal' force. Otherwise all would be God." (GG, 33) Recall: "There is a resemblance between the lower and the higher ... On this account it is necessary to seek out what is lowest, as an image. May that which is low in us go downwards so that what is high can go upwards. For we are wrong side upward. We are born thus. To re-establish order is to undo the creature in us." (GG, 34) We are born as creatures into forms of life which might help transform us. Language is an essential requirement for distinction, thence also a crucial tool for separating right from wrong. People can admonish us just as much as stories, which always find a way of pointing themselves, through the use of pronouns and other tricks, at the reader. But words alone cannot turn us: only we are able to do so. There is a talent in reading words just as there is a talent in turning our eyes around to ourselves and God. Work of different sorts, one pleasurable, the other painful.

The pain is in contradicting our instinctive desires. We frequently discover that we are temptingly attracted to things by a calling of the body. The typical argument for hedonism is that since this is *natural* (which it is, for the initial calling is out of our hands), it should not only be indulged, but pursued. Since art is mostly about pleasure, it is common for some artists to give free reign to hedonism and 'bohemian lifestyles', which pleausurably fits this picture. Delight in pleasure though is not

something religion shares in, but supernatural joy in God and His manifestations:

Psa 4:2 O ye sons of men, how long will ye turn my glory into shame? How long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing? [Selah]

Psa 4:3 But know that the LORD hath set apart him that is godly for himself: the LORD will hear when I call unto him.

Psa 4:4 Stand in awe, and sin not ...

"Illusions about the things of this world do not concern their existence but their value. [Plato's] image of the cave refers to values. We only possess shadowy imitations of good. It is also in relation to good that we are chained down like captives (attachment). We accept the false values which appear to us and when we think we are acting we are in reality motionless, for we are still confined in the same system of values." (GG, 51) The Good is not merely a question of acting in accordance to a pious (e.g., Christian) or ruthless (e.g., Spartan) system of ethics. "The word good has not the same meaning when it is a term of the correlation good-evil as when it describes the very being of God." (GG, 99). Weil is not describing a system of rules of action but a *state of being* - of being in love with God -, otherwise known as faith. But this is no regular passion, no overnight infatuation. "Faith is experience that intelligence is enlightened by love. Only, intelligence has to recognize by the methods proper to it, that is to say by verification and demonstration, the pre-eminence of love. It must not yield unless it knows why, and it must know this quite precisely and clearly. Otherwise its submission is a mistake and that to which it submits itself is something other than supernatural love." (GG, 128)

Reason is the instrument that can help us distinguish true love for God from deluded love, for we can be mistaken about where or with whom we deposit our commitments - treachery (of one side or the other) teaches this only too well. That we slip in

our loyalty is just proof of our delusion or weakness. Sin must be avoided by tempering our wrongful passions to the rule of reason, which can almost always tell us of our unlawful actions (being aware of guilt), but cannot prevent them from succumbing without the placement of our *attitudes* under its decree. We are all subject to our passions: rightful action is a matter of being aware of the danger of that submission and placing ourselves in a position where we are able to *disintegrate* temptation of all sorts. Not all sins are carnal: that we are led astray by the spell of language's promise of 'higher truth' or 'higher beauty' is just as grave a peril.

In Darren Aronofsky's alternative 1998 movie *Pi*, Max, a mathematical genius is literally obsessed with decoding a numeric pattern that would represent the secret of the universe. He believes it lies within structures working in the stock market, and is persecuted not only by Wall Street goons who want to use his eventual discovery for greedy purposes, but also by a cabalistic sect that is also trying to unravel the secret of the universe by decrypting scriptural texts in which they also perceive an underlying numeric grand scheme. Max is driven by his belief that everything around us can be represented and understood by numbers, and is certain that by grasping the mathematical representation of that ultimate pattern he will hold the universal truth in his hands. His quest drives him fantastically mad as he completely shuts himself off the world and recedes into total neurotic collapse. A wasp's nest made of formulas takes over his churning mind until, finally, he compels his mangled self into silence by self-inflicting a studied lobotomy with an electric drill in his bathroom. Running for our trap-door, he suicides his faculty of language out of hell. "Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation." (GG, 32) Having deposited his universalistic hopes in language, and despairing in his own representational shortcomings, he finds no way out of this snake pit except by *forcing* himself into silence.

How did his madness begin? "Strictly speaking time does not exist ... *We are subject to that which does not exist* ... But our submission exists. We are really bound by unreal chains. Time which is unreal casts over all things including ourselves a veil of unreality." (GG, 52) He was captivated by what we are captive in - haunted in trying to descriptively unfold what we represent in single abstract words or numbers: 1. Poems have the capacity to lock us in the wonder and promise of its descriptions. I think Max's greatest sin (in Weil's vocabulary) was not in having destroyed one of the most marvelous natural endowments we are gifted with, nor in his misanthropic actions, but in his misplaced search for reality. "Revelation does not involve that God tells someone secrets. God's revelation is a matter of putting one into harness. God's revealing something is God's making something of a mere human being. God's revelation is power." (WP, 14) The epiphany he was desperately searching for (the key to unlocking the world) is not to be found in language - or in *searching* - at all. "Desire is impossible: it destroys its object. Lovers cannot be one, nor can Narcissus be two. Don Juan, Narcissus. Because to desire is impossible, we have to desire what is nothing." (GG, 94) Revelation is not about words, although it is expressed by them, but about submitting oneself to God.

It is in the nature of poems to startle, to leave us in wonder. But the wonder it forwards has always puzzlement attached, for it does not offer anything beyond the *expression* of wonder. We are sucked into puzzles because they are, for one, beautiful puzzles which persuade us there is something more than language itself proposed in the words, and for another, because what we do with poems is interpret them, and that leaves us talking in their place. Poems, no matter the degree to which they are composed of statements, leave us *questioning*. Prayers are far more benignant in this respect. I must repeat myself at this point: We pray prayers, we do not poem poems. Prayer is not really a sort of saying, it is a sort of *gesture*. The true believer does not merely intone words, he truly means them - and

the use of this meaning is his total surrender to the power of God. This does not imply questioning in any way, but is in fact its complete opposite: belief. What does he give up? "We possess nothing in the world - a mere chance can strip us of everything - except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God ... There is absolutely no other free act." (GG, 26) We must decreate the self in order to 'see' reality. Revelation is not a matter of adding up descriptions, but of *subtraction*.

The reason why so-called abstract poems can often be seen as alluding to 'naked reality' is that abstraction is the *linguistic analogue* of subtraction, its representational counterpart, which sucks in descriptions by cutting away at elements in order to achieve simplicity of form, as we saw when we looked at the symbol. So the 'I', the images and descriptions we give of ourselves must give way to God, thus replacing the natural by supernatural ground. The certainty encountered in this spiritual realm is called faith.

"Life can educate you to 'believing in God'. By *experiences*, not visions or other sense experiences. Those do not show us God as a sense experience does an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts, - life can force this concept on us." (CV, 97) People often dismiss faith in God as some sort of mistake of the imagination *on the grounds that* no proof or evidence is shown to support such outlandish belief. "We may say that a Christian and any man called of God have an environment which other men do not have. When a Christian, with the psalmist, looks out upon the heavens and hears them declare the glory of God in flaming red or sees the firmament declare, in the green finery of spring, God's handiwork - he sees the same setting sun and the same expanse of earth and yet he sees something different." (WP, 13) From Psalm 65, Bouwsma extracts: "And the hills are girded with joy / The pastures are clothed with flocks: / The valleys also are covered with grain; / They shout for joy, they also sing" and proceeds: "'The hills girded with joy' are not evidence that they are God's

creation. They are the hills seen by the psalmist or as seen by the psalmist. A transfiguration of the landscape." (WP, 14)

What *proof* but one's shout or refined reaction does one have to show for the pain experienced when one's foot is stamped on? What kind of evidence is one expected to produce - Experimental results? Pointing to a place in the brain? The question of a mistake does not appear in the shout, but in expecting any similar sort of 'explanation' in the first place. Explanation here, of course, has the connotation it receives from scientific explanation: but there is no physical cause to show here. How can the psalmist tell you the 'reason'? Look at it this way: If you ask me why I was so angry and flew out of the door that day, I will tell you the story of what happened, and *that will be all* anyone can offer in such cases. I am not puzzled, I am telling you what happened - why are you? The words I am using are simple enough, what is there for you not to understand? There is no room for doubt in interpretation here - only for disbelief.

Those parts of thee that the world's  
eye doth view

What is poetry

The medieval town, with frieze  
Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow

That came when we wanted it to snow?  
Beautiful images? Trying to avoid

Ideas, as in this poem? But we  
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving

The mistress we desire? Now they  
Will have to believe it

As we believed it. In school  
All the thought got combed out:

What was left was like a field.  
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.  
It might give us--what?--some flowers soon?<sup>7</sup>

Let me try to interpret this on behalf of our purpose. Half of the poem consists of a list of questions, the other half of statements that appear to conclude but end in a question. From reading the title, we proceed down a list that appears to answer "What is Poetry" although at the same time it is not clear which of the items is the right one: an incoherent picture, something puzzling?, an answer to our desires like the pressing of a magic button?, pretty dreams?, trying to avoid stating a message, by looping in doubt? These tentative explanations at poetry have

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<sup>7</sup> "What is Poetry", John Ashbery (refer to Works Cited)

failed: they are all questions, and none an answer. The last question mark of the question section, forced into an otherwise adversative conclusion ("But"), simultaneously expresses bewilderment (do we do this?) and again leaves us uncertain, this time as to if going back to the wife requires casting out sensuous beauty at all, or whether casting out beauty implies getting the wife back anyway. At the center of the poem there is a statement of bewilderment mashed into a question, a tangle that is loosened by what follows. At the center there is a 'wow!?', a mixture of wonder and puzzlement.

"Now they / will have to believe it / as we believed it." For the first time in the poem the questions end - for as soon as belief steps in, doubts are healed. The assertion is that poets keep going back to ideas, and now that that is cleared up, those who did not believe poets could ever go near ideas (like Socrates) must now face the unavoidable proof of contact that Ashbery presents: the poem itself. By its approach to "ideas", Ashbery appears to be distinguishing 'nice' poetry (beautiful but unintelligent) from meaningful poetry (which is supposed to figuratively refer to something we can use in our lives), and thus outlining some sort of role which significant poetry is supposed to have.

Yet so slippery does this contact with ideas appear to be, that even the poets must remind themselves of what they first 'saw' when they were inspired by the ideas that brought on the poem. There appears to be a disagreement being expressed here - Poets: "See: We saw" vs. 'Others': "There is no way you can convince me." Is this faith? Whatever attitude or thing it is, it remains undisclosed, for Ashbery inscribed "it", an indefinite pronoun that will not budge. Whatever may fit via the force of our own words, the fact is that the poem will not give up its unrevealed "it": nothing is named, objectified. It is a closed-class word, one that has a grammatical function but no recognizable meaning (like the "it" in "It is raining.") What is "it" a picture of? Maybe it is not a picture of anything at all, just an empty representation of something that cannot be

described, like a label on a black box saying "Inside is:", but without a lid to open. But even if that is the case, "it" never loses the pull of language's permanent state of reference. Poetry has no full stops.

I just thought of an objection: Ashbery's "it" may refer to the-looking-up-the-fine-line and not to an 'object' at all. He is talking of a specific action. But what about what he is looking at, or whatever lies in that direction? It is a specific, "thin", direction; a path, actually, that must lead somewhere. He need not be able to see anything but at the very least he is expecting something in return. What is to be received ("flowers" is a possibility), and who gives? Or what does this special way of looking involve? In each of my questions there lies an 'it' which is not written in, but always suggested by the poem.

Bouwsma's appendix to *Without Proof or Evidence*, apparently a review that Bouwsma makes of his own collection, is a good treasure box in the sense that it sums up substantial aspects of the preceding essays and looks into new ones from on their shoulders. The following fragment is under the heading *The Biblical Picture of Human Life*: "In the center of that picture is the figure of man. Let that represent a man's life. Surrounding spaces must be filled in. (...) But in the picture that we are given in this case, there are details that no man could possibly have been acquainted with. Man's life, as we know it, once we are given the picture, is like a part of a picture torn out of the whole picture. Given such a part, it is obvious that artists might go about providing surroundings for that part in ever so many ways." (WP, 159)

How are these surroundings, these 'missing pictures' achieved? Do they fall out of the sky, like the flowers Ashbery might get? Poets look up and, behold, a vision occurs. Every time they look up? Representations come in different languages - take singing for example: everyone knows that singing is about placement of voice and the control of the diaphragm, but how easy is that? We know it is not simply about muscles or a couple of sit-ups would do the trick. True poetry, like true singing, does

not come out of nowhere: it is worked for, no matter how much easier or more difficult that is for different people. It requires one to give oneself to singing, by lending our attitudes to it. Talents, either for making or reading poems, or praying, are gifts that are *won*. (The simplicity of Alberto Caeiro was a style achieved, even though Caeiro talks of an absence of style - 'No affectation, I just say things like they are').

But now there is a problem. We can work on talents so as to attain grace, but where do the talents themselves come from? The brain? (We have been through this). The soul? (What does *this* say? - it gives us a lidless black box). Perhaps a part of the soul, the will then: we *desire* to act gracefully. That is better. But *why*? The will has to point somewhere ("I want a candy-bar") and there is no candy-machine for grace, no buttons to press. So to talk of desire we forcefully need (for that is a part of its grammar) to think up an 'object', such as God or Plato's Forms. "Experiences, thoughts, - life can force this concept on us. So perhaps it is similar to the concept 'object'." (CV, 97) Now we can refer to something being "given to" us: when an absolute word (one we can only describe by recalling experiences) is in place.

Sometimes people talk of chance, and good fortune. Flowers fall out of the sky. But we are left in the same place, and nothing seems to follow. What am I to do with these flowers, can anyone tell me?, they are going to wither. The problem with the "chance" explanation which so easily ensues from the inspirational picture is that it does not tell us what follows from it - it does not present us with any use because it sets all things on an equal scale. What is the *value* of whatever falls out of the sky? "Chance", it must be recognized, is too obvious a substitute for "I do not know." Perhaps if we knew exactly what it is we are supposed to get from Ashbery's "What is Poetry", we might find an answer to: what is art? But it looks as if Ashbery is not willing to tell, or does not exactly know himself. "If attempts to answer the question 'What is art?' characteristically end in frustration and confusion, perhaps - as so often in philosophy - the question is the wrong one." (WW, 57) As Goodman

suggests, we should instead be asking *when* is art: "To say what art does is not to say what art is; but I submit that the former is the matter of primary and peculiar concern. The further question of defining stable property in terms of ephemeral function - the what in terms of when - is not confined to the arts but is quite general, and is the same for defining chairs as for defining objects of art." (WW, 70) I have clearly been pointing in this direction by underlining the use of language-games, which takes us to reformulate the question of *what* is prayer - or even what is God - in terms of *when*.

In regards to the claims I have been arguing for, this is the same as asking when we receive flowers (the beauty of a poem), and when do we submit ourselves to the will of the Lord, which might allow us to say that "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased. / I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety." (Psa 4:7-8) Apparently, the time for receiving gifts is not something we can control: "Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer." (Psa 4:1); "Now open them on a thin vertical path. / It might give us--what?--some flowers soon?" This is why Socrates' picture of inspiration is not a mistaken one on the whole, although it was lacking proper respect for Ion's art of representation (foolish though he may be in his excessive vanity). Inspiration is about *waiting* for grace, not going off looking for it somewhere, since there are no 'somewheres' in the soul; and yet it fits to say that we must be correctly placed in order for grace to come. "That action is good which we are able to accomplish while keeping our attention and intention totally directed towards pure and impossible goodness, without veiling from ourselves by any falsehood either the attraction or the impossibility of pure goodness. In this way virtue is entirely analogous to artistic inspiration. The beautiful poem is the one which is composed while the attention is kept directed towards

inexpressible inspiration, in so far as it is inexpressible."  
(GG, 97)

I believe that sheds light on: "In school / All the thought got combed out: / What was left was like a field. / Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around" and "Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer." But before we focus on the act of placing one's attention, which both language-games share, we must go through some major differences separating them. It must have occurred to you that what I am saying does not make much sense unless one takes the question of a missing piece seriously. Let me tell you about two types of men: one walks in the world and is not puzzled by its existence in any way (even though he may learn to mimic that puzzlement by putting the right words in the right place), the other cannot shut up the questions or the wonder that ensue from being dropped into a place he finds there is something very odd about. Sometimes we are one, at other times the other. Or mostly one or the other. Yet the second man always wants to attain the position of the first, the one at peace. Doubt is never pleasant; certainty (even if sinfully welded in illusion), has *necessity*. Our ground must be quieted.

Men who have a gift with words can come up with pictures to fit the missing piece, but how do all these pictures fit together? If I manage, will I see it all, will I *know*? Will the truth be revealed to me, or should I resign to the play words grant<sup>8</sup>? Sometimes we talk as if it has been revealed: "The poem showed me the way", "Those words were truly revealing", "Rimbaud was truly a prophet." This is proof that 'when is art?' has found something to show. This occurs because of the role of allegory in explanation. An 'as if' enters into our descriptions when there is no other way of putting it, like we saw with Socrates' use of the magnet story. We hit the boundaries of language and either shut up, or say senseless things in our effort to describe what is too large for words. But hitting the wall means we actually left a mark on it, and the proof is the words that bounce off: the long metaphor - the allegory. Allegory functions as a doubt-

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<sup>8</sup> "I'll always be / a word-man / Better than a birdman" (AP, 13)

stopper, placing words in the gaping, gasping mouth. It is certainty, with an expiration date.

Beauty wears off, or is superseded by the novelty of other representations. We get tired of toys, and flowers must sooner or later be replaced, unless we prefer plastic. Beauty does not hold still. In fact, novelty of one sort or the other is an essential part of beauty: that which is unsurprising holds no aesthetic effect; it is precisely the things which stand out in some remarkable way that seize our attention. This obviously does not mean that 'old things' and clichés (Mona Lisa, Parthenon, etc.) cannot be beautiful - they are clichés on account of having achieved a public mark of "beautiful", standing out as remarkable pictures at some point, and maintaining that statute throughout time in the eyes of a community of appreciators. That goes to say that the fact that the remarkableness of certain works of art does not quickly wither away only adds to their aesthetic value - and we sometimes say that they have an 'eternal' quality. We go back to them precisely because they have managed to elude our descriptions of them, because they keep us talking about them in a way that never settles into a final explanation (thus the 'ineffability of Beauty'). They survive for they keep clinging onto different aspects of the world in our words: they shine back the world in shifting perspectives.

Works of art maintain the world under constant revision, for these objects go on forcing us to re-describe it. And much like the way words can join up in never-ending descriptions, there appears to be no end to the proliferation of these objects. As long as we cannot figure out how to shut up for good - separating words from wonder -, it looks like art will find no end to its chatter. But what of the ineluctable missing piece, will one forever have a big picture with a gap in it? Obviously big pictures cannot have gaps, or they will not be able to fulfill their function of relating everything. Perhaps we are just thinking of the ink on the canvas - Have we forgotten the *frame*?

"What we know cannot be the whole picture, and one might say that we need the whole picture in order to understand the little we know. But where would one ever get the idea of the whole picture? Perhaps from religion ... God, the unknown - how then could a man fill out the picture?" (WP, 160) Religion is no picture: it is the big picture where others fit: a canvas *within* a frame. "I think that Kierkegaard regarded it as the glory of Socrates, not that he completed the picture, but that once having completed the picture as *the* picture, he stepped into it and never stepped out again. When other men said, 'We'll kill you if you do not step out of that picture', he did not budge." (WP, 159) You must step inside. Kierkegaard called it the *leap* of faith. The idea afore mentioned, that prayer is related to pain and gesturing, is directly related to the fact that new ground can only be attained by renouncing the old. This leap is not some kind of pole vault, and it is more than holding onto something we *like* - it is, as I have been repeating throughout, an act of submission; an act of submission to that which is *absolutely necessary*. The name that place-holds this attitude is "God". ("In the name of God, you *cannot* do that!")

That there is a fixed word, God, founds the entire religious practice. Poetry, on the other hand, functions essentially with shifting indetermination, revolving around something it never touches (or 'touches' but does not name). Again, believers all agree on the words they intone; interpreters, critics, readers, their very authors mostly do not. That is one of the senses of the expression "The Word". Poets do not stick to The Word, but words. "I do not believe in the Word. The fact that I make the poem at all means that I still believe in words."<sup>9</sup>

In the light of previous discussions, poems (words) show us incomplete pictures which call on us to engender our own, while

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Hill commenting on "Annunciation" (in Geoffrey Hill, *New and Collected Poems 1952-1992*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994); Kenneth Allott, *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1962) pp. 391-92. I have Professor Brett Bourbon to thank for this quote, included in his lecture "Saving Myself in the Mistrust of Language", given at the Faculdade de Letras, University of Lisbon, in 2004.

the Word shows us a big picture where all other pictures can hang. This distinction provides the fleeting notion of 'transcendence' with a more definite use since there is a fixed 'place' to transcend to in the language-game of prayer ("The Lord will hear when I call unto him"), in contrast with the slippery 'it' that poems evoke. "O men, how long shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?" This has less to do with representation than with the requirement for different types of *men*. The fact that prayer has a subject, an addressee, means nothing less than that the search for such the missing piece is over. For prayer to be of any use whatsoever there must be an 'object' to receive our words.

In *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein uses Ethics in a wider sense than Moore's "'the general enquiry into what is good' ... in a sense in fact which includes what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics." (LE, 38) He is basically referring to wonder, as you can recollect from when we looked at the experiences he connected to the sense of absolute terms. But the second experience of *safety* is key here as well, and must be fused with the first in order to relate these experiences with those described in religion (or the supernatural) in general. Here we have wonder without puzzlement, a wonder accepted without question (what 'Truth' refers to).

"And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be *the* thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world. Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and

sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water [even] if I were to pour out a gallon over it." (LE, 40)

Elsewhere, he states, "What is Good is Divine too. That, strangely enough, sums up my ethics." (CV, 5) To state the supernatural - the impossible - we must go beyond the language of fact, into the language of nonsense. This is no novelty - we have observed how poetry and prayer share this characteristic. But whereas poetry dazzles and confounds (and is dazzled and confounded), prayer is the expression of a settlement: "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for thou alone, O LORD, makest me dwell in safety." The passage from puzzled (lost) wonder into wonder of something we can fix is the mark of the explosion. The Bible - the book of God - *has* exploded the world of the believer: words have flowed over the boundaries of language. This is the purpose of Scripture: to explode the ground of the unbeliever - to convert, *transform*. This passage out of words and into The Word - the inexpressible name and voice of God ("How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful [possible] for a man to utter" 2Co 12:4) - can only be accomplished if we fully embrace the contradiction of life. Acceptance of God and the explosion of the world (the world seen in a new light) is the stigma of transubstantiation. If God is the whole picture, then everything, life *and* death, must fit and be consented to without reserve: for if it is so, it is necessary, and what is necessary is real.

"Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything. Contradiction is our wretchedness, and the sense of our wretchedness is the sense of reality. For we do not invent our wretchedness. It is true. That is why we have to value it. All the rest is imaginary." (GG, 95) "Belief in immortality is harmful, for it is not our power to conceive of the soul as really incorporeal ... it robs death of its purpose." (GG, 37)

Death sets margins on our life, and thus meaning. It is only in the full realization of future death that a true sense of

purpose can seep into our lives. Not only must we realize that we shall die, but also that we have, all of us, been granted the gift of life, with all the opposites (good/evil, love/hate, etc.) that are to be found within these, of themselves, opposing margins. There is a perplexity which must be met if we are to make the impossible crossing beyond doubt: "All true good carries with it conditions which are contradictory and as a consequence is impossible. He who keeps his attention really fixed on this impossibility and acts will do what is good. In the same way all truth contains a contradiction. Contradiction is the point of the pyramid." (GG, 98) Weil is talking about reaching a point where puzzlement has been decreased into an understanding silence. "Thoughts at peace. That is the goal someone who philosophises longs for." (CV, 50) So is Wittgenstein.

Language may only allow us to describe so much until, in Wittgenstein's metaphor, we hit its walls in an attempt to describe the ineffable; but his words must not be carried too far: language is not an actual cage. There is nothing in words to put us behind bars. We are only trapped to the extent that we fill our heads with the wrong questions, or expect words to do more than what they can: relate reality with that which severed it into separateness to begin with. But words can only go so far in expressing the ineffable; the rest is up to a shift in attitude, an evening out of the paradox. Language is more like a web we can get ourselves caught up in if we do not learn how to move about on its surface. Silent knowing is a balance, an equilibrium of forces between a question and an answer. Ashbery's title mimics this in a singular way by presenting itself as both question and answer simultaneously.

"When the attention has revealed the contradiction of something on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place. By persevering in this course we attain detachment." (GG, 98) To overcome contradiction is not simply to run for silence like Max, but to apply a peculiar talent to an object, the use of a special kind of attention: contemplation. "In school / All the thought got combed out" The use of the past simple takes us back

to a time of learning. This school, Ashbery tells us, looks like a place where confusion and ignorance gave way to combed-out, neatly arranged and systematized thought. This takes us in the direction of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy: "The philosopher is someone who has to cure many diseases of the understanding in himself, before he can arrive at the notions of common sense." (CV, 50) Ashbery is telling us that for some time at least he was basically caught up with sifting out mistakes from what is itself outside the world: ideas. Philosophy is a case of cleaning out our tools - words - before work, just as one goes to school to prepare oneself for a fulfilling lifetime occupation. Knots, problems - *doubts* - are what this sifting comb is to be used for, a tool of reason that can help us with specific afflictions: that of being bound by inexistent concepts like time, the soul, truth, reality, God, etc.

"What was left was like a field. / Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around." Now there is no puzzlement anymore, but detachment from the turbulence of passion. This is why reason is often described as cool and passionless - we have moved beyond doubt and confusion into certainty, which is composed of a silent knowing: "We see our thoughts directly in things [and now, I may enhance - be they physical or conceptual]." This is not a case of attaining knowledge through description (as Max would have it with his mathematical representation of the entire universe), but of understanding reality through the silencing of words. This is not writing, but reading.

What is the object of our contemplation, though? "Now open them on a thin vertical path. / It might give us--what?--some flowers soon?" Ashbery looks up for ineffable inspiration and gets a poem. 'Great', he seems to say. 'Now what?' Ashbery is questioning the very purpose of poetry: 'what is supposed to follow from the words I put down'? And here poems and prayer, words and attitudes, collide. Efforts in interpretation have nothing to do with efforts of the self; they are on separate planes. What Ashbery is saying (or what I hope he is saying) is

that if we do not invest ourselves in the meaning of words - putting them to use - nothing is to follow from poetry except "These flowers are very nice, thank you". No kiss, no love, no joy, no song of praise.

"And the hills are girded with joy ... They shout for joy, they also sing." The hills as seen by the psalmist, singing our song of worship. The figure of personification serves to express the attitude the psalmist has towards what he sees, which is transfigured with joy. Similarly, in personifying God one expresses an attitude towards absolutely everything. The powerful expressiveness of "Oh my God!": here are words which can hold the force of overwhelming emotions, i.e., that can effectively describe them. The expression can only save a place for signifying something quite extraordinary, though, if it is reserved for that purpose, instead of being indiscriminately mixed up with other uses. In this sense, taking "the name of the LORD thy God in vain" (Exo 20:7) is a sign of the spiritual loss of our times.

In regards to the above citation of the psalmist, I would like to call your attention to the following point: Singing, the voice, words - these are instances of a special kind, for in using them we are our very own, innate, instrument. I suppose this was the attraction that got Heidegger, whilst thinking of Rilke, to write down allegorical explanations like "To sing the song means to be present in what is present itself. It means: *Dasein*, existence."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the *metaphor* of words ("unspeakable words") is powerful because of the effect of 'having' ideas, i.e., of recognizing things as they are. An idea - a sudden realization - can appear with such force that, although sometimes we may feel as if it did, it need not come out into speech: ("When I saw that expression in his eye, I knew exactly what had happened. I was thunderstruck. Looking back on it, I remember thinking that I had actually screamed out, but my friends told me I froze in awe.") Language floats over the world:

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets For?", in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), p.138

'ideas' can be the silent counterpart of words when there is no need for them to speak, when the idea itself is absolutely certain of itself, i.e., when there is neither need for explanation nor representation.

I have repeatedly stated that poems call for interpretation - they are cases of expression, of figurative exemplification. Philosophy, on the other hand, denotes - attempts to clearly represent an idea by distinguishing it from others. Prayer also denotes in a way (it has a fixed 'object' in mind, God), yet it has no need for distinction since God is everything and beyond that, the Creator of everything. Although religion sometimes offers allegorical representations of God (Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, etc.) those images only fully acquire their meaning when belief is in place, like with prayer. Prayer is *literal exemplification*: its words require belief in order to be exemplified, mean what they mean. Prayer can only signify if we ascribe the words the properties they intend to have.

Finally the distinctions between "prayers" and "poems" can be removed, for words are labels poised on uses: if the attitude towards a text (be it poem or prayer) is that of belief, where one can state that the words mean what we mean in our use of them, and are not an 'as if' to be found, then we can clearly say that we can pray poems, believe in them as valid descriptions of reality. To pray poems is not to read (interpreting), it is to say (or 'sing' if you like). The difference now is that we absolutely need words to pray poems or prayers, but do not to simply pray. Aesthetic attention requires an object, religious contemplation requires none. "Commune with your own hearts on your beds, and be silent."

Yet the talent required for both language-games is identical. "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." (GG, 117) It is that which allows for true inspiration, since receiving gifts is not in our power, only something to rejoice in. The ineffable - grace - can only come if we strip ourselves of everything. "Attention alone - that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears - is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call

'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived." (GG, 118) The beautiful common sense in these words is that in order for everything to appear in full view, nothing, not even 'I' must be in the way. This is why "silence" is always a word to be found both in religious (which has no object) and aesthetic experience. "Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious. The amount of creative genius in any period is strictly in proportion to the amount of extreme attention and thus of authentic religion at that period." (GG, 117)

The poet sets his attention on words, yet is not required to place faith in them. Poets plant their foot in mystery, but do not need to recognize absolute form in the chaos from which they receive their words in order to do what they must - write poems. Faith is on quite a different plane, one the poet might feel he has no place in. Indeed, why should any man? It is only fitting that I include the words of a man who made a case in favor of faith. In his essay "The Will to Believe", William James makes an argument for the purposefulness of belief, which he summarizes as follows: "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision, - just like deciding yes or no, - and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth." (WB, 11) Choosing for, against, or not choosing at all are all options - options involving a man's whole life. What is involved in the religious option? "Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things: First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, [that] 'Perfection is eternal' ... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true." (WB, 25-26) This is a decision of heart, one science cannot touch upon.

The leap of faith comes after intelligence: "Intelligence can never penetrate the mystery, but it, and it alone, can judge the suitability of the words which express it." (GG, 131) For faith to appear, intelligence has to submit to impossible love, which is not a case of 'having' anything, but of accepting - no, *loving* - the unbridgeable distance between us and God. "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link." (GG, 145) The sufferance of distance - the abnegation of possession - is the true mark of love, which sets it apart from desire. The believer must be able to truly desire nothing - to submit himself to the lack of words, even "when from the innermost depths of our being we need a sound which does mean something - when we cry out for an answer and it is not given us - it is then that we touch the silence of God." (GG, 113) This is the real difference between the pain in faith and the joy in poetry, for "God can only be present in creation under the form of absence." (GG, 109) Although the absence of the author in his text mimics the absence of God in the world, we are all aware that someone wrote it, may he be dead or alive at the time we read it; God is not a person to be or have been found in His Creation: His absence is a necessity. "As a rule our imagination puts words into the sounds in the same way as we idly play at making out shapes in wreaths of smoke; but when we are too exhausted, when we no longer have the courage to play, then we must have real words. We cry out for them. The cry tears out our very entrails. All we get is silence. After having gone through that, some begin to talk to themselves like madmen. Whatever they may do afterwards, we must have nothing but pity for them. The others, and they are not numerous, give their whole heart to silence." (GG, 113)

**(And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech)**

J.S. Bach is often rightfully held as a conveyer of divine grace. We can pray with his music much as we can pray with texts. We can do this because what we see represented in his music matches the absolute sense of wonder and humility that we have in ourselves and correctly ascribe to the intentions of his representations. Bach was worshipping God by mimicking the miracle of His Creation in all its splendor. "Stars and blossoming fruit-trees: utter permanence and extreme fragility give an equal sense of eternity." (GG, 108) If someone told me that Bach had unmistakably claimed to be an atheist, (and I believed him) I would be extremely surprised, but that would not really change anything in my praying attitude towards his music. Artistic objects, when held as absolutely good, are untouchable and quite oblivious to belief (they are objects) - the attitude in question is the listener's, not Bach's. Unbelieving artists never relinquish their disquiet for they do not invest belief in an 'it' that might have produced a Thou. Wonder cannot untie itself from puzzlement unless belief is in place. But that is up to them.

There is something special that we can do with art, and for that matter, with studies: they are useful in their training of the talent of attention. The joy that can be present in coming to see beautiful things, understand, and solve problems can serve to positively attract us towards these activities. Solitude is usually involved for it is often the case that when alone we are liable to become less distracted. We must learn to detach all our awareness from ourselves and invest it in the object in order to wait for it to surge in its full light. We know this from practice: we can search and search for answers only to find that when we do not seek, they arrive. The talent of attention is an effort all of our own, and it is an effort only in that we look (for only we can *turn* our attention), not in that we force anything: what comes is beyond our control. But religion places

something else at the center of attention: and since there is no object, our attention must truly have patience. Faith is perseverance and loving trust in the promise that grace will come and that our efforts will be supernaturally rewarded. This is not up to us. "Impossibility is the door of the supernatural. We can but knock at it. It is someone else who opens." (GG, 95)

Although art provides us with objective examples of grace, it is nothing more than labels on the door of God. God is indeed present in truly beautiful art, Weil would say, but for Him to incarnate it, He must come down, and that is beyond the grasp of our bidding ("The snow that came when we wanted it to snow?" - "Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.") But art, I say again, is, as far as religion goes, a preparation of the contemplative attention. Where no object is in place, only the attention remains, still, in an absolute void. Prayer is not a matter of going beyond words, but of stepping down from them.

"True humility is the knowledge that we are nothing in so far as we are human beings as such (creatures). The intelligence plays a great part in this, we have to form a conception of the universal." (GG, 129) Our talent for conceiving abstract ideas can allow us to grasp the sense of the abstract idea of abstract ideas: Oneness. But we can only experience it by learning to truly contemplate beauty, by retreating from the world. That we may write about it afterwards is part of the foam that is left behind in the wake. Not only does faith realize the full extent of the Creation and our departure from it, but is able to love that necessity, placing itself at the tip of the pyramid which will tip the world into explosion, the big bang. This is actually the analogue of common sense ("We live, we die, and death not ends it"<sup>11</sup>) - but to be expressed in our *attitude* towards the universe.

Plato once penned an allegory where we had to leave the cave in order to bathe in the divine light. But this picture is highly misleading. Where would we go? We are creatures, capable of wondrous things, yet living in this world we share, for good

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<sup>11</sup> Jim Morrison, "An American Prayer", p.4

and bad. We cannot step down from words until we have grasped the world through the only means possible: language. Worldmaking comes before self-shaping. Grace is the intelligence of the shaped instinct. The end of Kleist's short story<sup>12</sup> could lose its ironic parody on the 'machine syndrome' if we regard C's "knowledge" as true wisdom: the establishment of silent certainty that follows the diligent pruning of doubt. "The use of reason makes things transparent to the mind. We do not, however, see what is transparent. We see that which is opaque through the transparent - the opaque which was hidden when the transparent was not transparent ... The uncomprehended hides the incomprehensible and should on this account be eliminated." (GG, 132)

We cannot leave the world as long as we live, but only - and *this* is the task of impossible effort - learn to live in it by shaping our attitudes in relation to what it is for a creature to live in the cosmos. We must grasp the notion of our demise, and hence the eternity that stays. It is sinful to desire to escape from (or 'transcend') reality. We must not delude ourselves. "We must prefer true hell to an imaginary paradise." (GG, 53) We cannot leave the cave; we can only prepare its space, in humble decreation, in order for the light to flood in when it is finally time for dawn.

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<sup>12</sup> "Does that mean", I said in some bewilderment, "that we must eat again of the tree of knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?" - "Of course", he said, "but that is the final chapter in the history of the world.", p.6



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