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On Eager Tenterhooks

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On Eager Tenterhooks

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
A. Rose Levi

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

For everyone who has been—or will be—stupendously, splendidly mistaken. You give us our world.

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About Punctuation

So often the conventions of punctuation resist our attempts to express expression itself. For the sake of clarity, I am laying out my conventions here. Double quotation marks are used only for quotations and for direct speech. In speaking about words as words or phrases as phrases, I employ small capital letters; and in speaking about words as signs, I mark them in small capital letters with the clarifying superscript: ^{SIGN}. Sparingly I capitalize the first letter of a word to set it apart as philosophically charged; and, when needed, emphasize the difference between a word in an ordinary or in a philosophically charged context by underlining its capitalized or not capitalized first letter. Occasionally, I italicize important or philosophically charged words, but mostly I will italicize in the usual fashion—for emphasis. At times, too, I use single quotation marks for skeptical emphasis.

Preface

There is a purpose, I promise, to the strange, unorthodox arrangement of this project. I find that meaning is not the sort of thing that is straightforward. Rather, we encounter and develop meaning (and our instincts for it) in multifold ways constantly. This project needs to be strange to effectively get at meaning. If it were not strange, I am not sure it would be meaning.

I have cobbled a mosaic. I wish I could lay it out for you in glass pieces until we had panes to view the world through, but I am still learning glasswork, and this is the best I have yet. So, these are the fragments and tesserae that I have furnaced over the past four years carefully gathered together for you into this kaleidoscope.

This mosaic I present to you comes out of the writing I have been doing over the past four years. There is a utility to expressing my ideas in relief against another's, in drawing out richness and tension and connection. There is also a utility to speaking the way I want, leaving behind how other's ideas chafe against mine in favor of the salve of soliloquy. I aim to do both in this project: to converse with the thinkers who shape me but also to shed the traditions that have no place in the life I want to live.

On Eager Tenterhooks*

Introduction

“If [words] prejudice philosophy, they contain philosophy.”¹ Do they really prejudice? Yes, if words shape, influence, and guide philosophy (which they do), then they also contain philosophy. However, the word PREJUDICE implies that there is a pure practice possible. I do not think philosophy is possible without words, so I do not understand why we would portray words as invasive to philosophy. They cannot be removed. But this portrayal suggests an essence, or pure form of philosophy, that words do invade, even as they mediate. The notion of pure philosophy is partly the product of the formalizing instinct, which leans towards the singular and set. What I resist is how this formalizing instinct arbitrarily prioritizes essences and pure forms in our examinations of language simply because essences and pure forms are conveniently singular and set. What I seek is a tapestry of language and meaning that is untethered from these presumptions. The challenge I am raising to the traditional approach lies in its overwhelming preoccupation with plain language. I resist a dominant approach in philosophy of language, which attempts to formalize language and prefers the singular and set. My resistance to this approach, of course, does not mean I oppose close examination of language. I will weave my assumptions throughout the project, so that hopefully we may view this tapestry of meaning when we are finished.

So, now, let us talk about meaning. The noun MEANING and verb MEAN[†] (which I am regarding as two embodiments of the same word) have a variety of uses in common speech. We find a painting meaningful. We ask a partner if they really meant it when they said “I love you” for the first time by accident. We check the meaning of an unknown word in the dictionary. But what do I mean by MEANING? Throughout this project when I use MEANING and MEAN I am speaking commonly. While I will develop a more detailed definition of MEANING, there should be no part of this project where you should need to disregard the extant use of MEANING to understand my use of it. When I more carefully define MEANING it will be to clarify, ratify, and unify how we already speak about meaning, not to undermine or limit public use. I simply wish to call to attention the kinship between the various contexts in which we speak of meaning, so that we do not isolate the painting from the partner or the

* My title plays on the idiom ON TENTERHOOKS, which suggests “a state of painful suspense” in reference to cloth stretched and held in place by the hooks on tenter frames. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “tenterhook, *n.*,” March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199236>.

† At times I will also use the gerundive passive participle MEANING adjectivally or adverbially.

partner from the dictionary. The meaning I am speaking of happens in art, literature, and comedy the same as in arguments, blushes, gestures, and winks.

Approach I

“The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.”² (As strange as it is to speak this way, it is apt. We understand it perfectly.) So too, meaning and language course along in much the same way that most else doesn’t. The marvel of meaning and language—that sound waves, ink, and all our other methods actually give us a world beyond atomic matter—is the only faith I have. Just as the marvel that atoms cling across empty space and give me form is the only faith I have. These are the same faith. It is faith that I cannot bear to doubt.

Approach II

And this faith comes only when we let it—when we let ourselves be ourselves, speak with ourselves and each other the way we would, the way we want to. I seek a certain clarity but more so a certain faith. Because when I spend my time over-enunciating and tiptoeing through careful syntax, syntax and enunciation appear the defining parts, rather than what I am doing with them and through them. If I talk to you the way I would talk to someone, the way I would speak in poetry, in laughter, in prose – if I speak to you how I wish to, I trust you will understand. I cannot bear to not trust. But even if and when you do not understand, mine will not be vain trust.

Ours will not be vain trust. Please test your faith as I test my weight on mine. Test your faith with me and trust that we succeed even when we worry we may not. Perhaps we do not need to obsess so mightily over the accuracy we cling to in fear. Ask me questions and I will answer, and somewhere through conversation we will reach an understanding, I hope. And I think what we need right now is the faith that we may speak together and ask and answer, and *all* we know and rely upon will not crumble as yet we anticipate reaching our synthesis.

It is faith I am trying to instill in us, so I will talk in the ways that prove faith is warranted: in the ways that are not so clear that we come to look mostly at syntax. I will speak in the ways that feel as intuitive as inhalation and as much your birthright as breath.

Approach III

Remember this is a conversation: it is between us. I do not think I am overstating it if I say that we have tucked into the crevices of language our understanding that in conversation we attempt to

navigate our lives together and how we shall share a place.* Good conversations are generous, honest, appropriately coarse *and* gentle; and I think we converse best when we do not believe or doubt too easily. Please, be generous with me: I know I do not always get this right or use words precisely how I would like to. I shall do my best to be generous, too—clear in the ways I can be and reassuring when the going is difficult, but this too I may not do as well as I hope I do. So, go conversations. So, goes living together.

Reapproach

I keep reapproaching the phenomenon of meaning because there is no single way to get at it, no right way to get at it. Even as my fingers brush its surface and form, it is changing, moving, dancing with me; and I can only keep trying to keep some amount of contact, grasp—some sense of connection. I am trying to get at meaning briefly and fleetingly. It does not stay still long enough for me to keep it, but it plays and cooperates with me:† lets me anticipate and lets me be surprised.‡ It lets me spur others to anticipate and into surprise. And I wonder if this is how a bird feels on air currents, with something it knows so well yet which can shift at any moment.

* Conversation comes from the Latin verb *conversare*, “to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, pass one’s life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “converse, *v.*,” March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40763>.

† It teases me too, mischievous and stubborn thing.

‡ As does language. Both meaning and language play, cooperate, tease; both let me anticipate and be surprised. I need to speak loosely, with at least a little lead, to make sure I speak honestly of both meaning and language. It is Cadmean to razor meaning from language. Although they are not the same, I have never known one separate from the other. I do not think you have either. How blessed are we, then, to live so richly.

I

What is it that holds together a theory of meaning? What is it expressed against? What questions underpin it?

II

Is it enough of an answer to ask: What holds the world together? What is it expressed against? What questions underpin it?

III

The ever-present question facing us philosophers of language is not new: How do I start an examination into the medium of my examination? How do I begin looking at language? At meaning? Understanding our understanding? Do I start from the grammar? From twisting, turning etymologies? Do I ask the poets? Or data-glutted translation software? How do I go about documenting, accounting, expressing the richness of our language—in its multiplicity—and of the world—in all its plurality—language provides us with? How do I go about examining meaning when I have never not been amidst it?

Contemplating the role of language by hypothesizing upon its absence is akin to examining earthly life processes by sucking all oxygen from the room—the examiner winds up killing the specimen and gasping for air themselves. So, I will try not to imagine what would be otherwise if we did not have language; rather I will try to pay careful attention to the functioning of language—its internal workings, its place in our lives, its outer and central most faculties.

Let us dispose of the over-analysis, false impartiality, and ten-foot-pole approach towards language. We should not be squeamish about language: we should get hands-dirty in language's complexity and confusion. And let us wholly *enjoy* this sort of play.

IV

You philosophers, may I scream my loud frustrations when you give me your definitions and accompanying equations? I come to your library aisles as close as I do to any sanctuary; so, know that when I curse your names it is out of devotion to the questions we all love. My dear Gottlob, Bertrand, Ludwig, Donald, Saul,* and all your colleagues, you have inscribed well in all of us that language is a

* Respectively: Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson, and Saul Kripke.

medium in which we seek to communicate truths about the world to each other with as little interference as possible. My trusted mentors, you are *very* funny. And your inscriptions prevail, ironies on walls that are read missing the humor you didn't intend. I find you very, very funny.

Perhaps I do not catch your meaning or listen poorly or mistake you. But I must say: Bertrand, I do not think I hear you wrong. You are so eager to get to talk about those true propositions and denoting phrases, yes? So, eager to find this Scott who wrote *Waverley*.³ Gottlob, excellent mathematician you are, do you not adore fitting all your words into equations?⁴ Saul, you toil on Pierre's behalf to amend his lacking geography.⁵ Donald, you dissect our malapropisms humorlessly.⁶ And even you, Ludwig, want to know—*really know*—the rules for construction workers.⁷

See, I believe I do hear you. I am listening. I do understand.

And, my mentors, you are so stubborn. I see your dedication to this *plainer language*, how you deny yourselves the elation—utter *fun*—of *playful language*, and I do respect how you resist its temptation. But do you ever consider you are neglecting it? Perhaps it is lonely. (I think things like this can get lonely.)

I worry that your careful work on lasting inscriptions of plain sentences and stubborn neglect of the rest may very well have misled us to our current conclusions and intuitions regarding meaning. Are you sure that you have not kept busy giving consideration only to a sliver of language use and not to the full scope? Are we sure we want to form our conclusions about language and meaning after examining only these plain phrases?

V

Are we sure we want to pursue truth?

For this is what you are after, is it not? You ask if the present King of France is bald.⁸ You want to know if the Moon is the same through a telescope and if it is indeed smaller than Earth; if five is a prime number.⁹ You wonder if Nixon is automaton or flesh and blood.¹⁰ You ask if metaphors are true.¹¹ Isn't that right, Donald?

You all go after truth as you attempt to find ways to represent our world. It is so important to you that we represent it accurately. I, too, would prefer to know where the cliffs are so I may avoid long falls, but my instinct is that I do not need to pursue truth for this. Meaning and truth are not the same. I find that the meaning we make and engrain in the ways we navigate the world very usually keep me on solid ground rather than any precise coordinates. And, most, I find that for whatever your important motivations may be, you are unwilling to play or indulge others in play.

I do not think it is a coincidence that children—who are us at the very beginnings of our being creatures—play. How else ought we learn to navigate our world than by doing so joyfully and curiously? Children play so curiously: asking questions, touching sticky hands to everything they can get hold of, loving objects so tenderly. Children endear the world to themselves, and themselves to it.

My mentors, I cannot forsake play. I will not. Rather than truth, I want meaning; I want to follow after what will let me make our world, not merely represent it.

I recall the story you tell, Jorge Luis:^{*}

... In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupies the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of the Province. In time those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, which coincided point for point with it.¹²

Truth may be the map, may be the natural scientist's ground survey, but meaning is choreography for our open-air dancing. And this hunt for the best ground surveys, for the bend of each blade of grass only obscures the grass: prevents our dancing.

Are we sure we want to pursue truth? Do we follow after shallow truths or after the richness of our lives?

VI

Of course, *playful language* and truthful language are not incompatible, let alone dichotomous; they often go walking hand-in-hand.[†] Even so, we ought to remember that meaning is not the same as truth.

The assumption that language is a medium of truth fundamentally undermines its playful capacities because it radically changes how we look at and into language. We begin to search obsessively for truth values and referents in speech,[‡] rather than the intentions or successes of speakers and speech. We ought really to be deliberate about what it is we are after, pursuing, and what shall

* Jorge Luis Borges.

† I think the more pertinent distinction lies between *playful language* and *plainer language*, a distinction which enables us to set aside the question of truth from our considerations at least temporarily.

‡ Speech, here, is inclusive of all language use, whether verbal, written, or gesticulated—as in any comprehensive sign language.

give us satisfaction when we come upon it, unearth it, or (perhaps) erect it. I do not know what it is that, when I find it, will satisfy me.

We are well and truly in a labyrinth of our own making: in language, in this quest we philosophers of language have set ourselves, in meaning. Truth certainly offers us a stable light source to pursue, but I do not believe that it will satisfy us. All it offers is an exit from the windings of our lives.

VII

My mentors, I find myself dissatisfied with so many of your—Gottlob, Bertrand, J.L, and H.P.*—approaches towards examining meaning and language. I long not to dissect each sentence and phrase in hunt of passive, unimportant solutions that care not whether we understand each other. You look for objective falsities and designations of truth, as though they can reward our effort with the affection we so crave. I long to ask questions, to deal with language in a way that offers important, active solutions: ones that we can use in our own lives. I grow frustrated with you, and I yearn for the possibilities offered by an alternative approach.

This, of course, is not fair to you. It does not take you on your own terms. (I wonder if this is part of the issue.) But to enter into the discussions and dissections that you pursue I already must accept your focus on particular subject matter and must (to some extent) neglect the matters you neglected. It is a labyrinth to follow your string while all the while wondering if we are missing something, if there is a better path, if we ought not to chase escape. Yet, although I wonder, I am hesitant to stray for fear of becoming lost.

VIII

I hope that meaning and language never become less richly convoluted than we are, for then how would we cope with ourselves?

IX

When we appeal to language, we appeal to ourselves and the many ways we have used and are using language. So, let us not suppose false divinity to language. It is us.

* New: J.L. Austin and H.P. Grice.

Many of you philosophers of language have attempted to hug a porcupine without getting pricked. My mentors, you have feared being touched by language even as you yet tried to hug it. I want to hug language and to stop imagining it has spines. So, I shall hug it, and I do. I think that our philosophy of language will be more successful if this is how we go forward: with open arms.

Language is us, and we are situated in it. As is, and as we are in, meaning. The sooner we can run headlong into language and meaning's embrace without bemoaning our participation, the sooner we will actually be able to meet them. The sooner we will be able to meet ourselves.

X

If I have not yet made it clear: I am not interested in Truth.*

As I wrestle with our world—in order to understand it, cope with it, and live in it—I embrace a strain of radical subjectivity. Together, we hold this world in tension upon the warp and weft of our language, practices, meaning, and faith. Each of us engages in the world we hold, and each of us participates in holding our world and reality.

It is our wrestling that we are moving on to and attempting to understand—our wrestling and us wrestlers. So, perhaps, we now begin with our own impetus. Maybe rise, stretch your legs now. Let us begin to wrestle when you return.

XI

As far as we understand—and as far as we may perhaps ever understand—we are alive. This experience, thus far in our understanding, is inseparable from any attempt to understand. Natality, the inception of something—experienced by each of us as that inseparable be-ing of ourself—is intrinsic to any understanding we can hope to garner.

Yet, to be alive is not passive; to be alive is active. Instead: As far as we understand—and as far as we may perhaps ever understand—we live. So, we experience living inseparably from any attempt we make to understand our lives. Our natal inception is intrinsic to the understanding we garner. (Sometimes I wonder if understanding the transformation of our passivity to activity, the transformation of us from our passiveness to activeness, is the human pursuit.)

* By TRUTH I mean the philosophical sort of Truth and the practices that prioritize it, not mere honesty.

XII

Meaning is both bestowed and stowed in our world. We cannot hope to speak of meaning without the world or the world without meaning, much less understand either.

So, we need to conceive of our existence in the world to understand what it is we are assuming. Hannah,* you do this so well when you speak of the conditions for the lives—*vita activa*¹³ and *vita contemplativa*¹⁴—we lead. We do not lead lives that are just reasoned, rather we lead lives that are experienced. The commonalities between our lives are not proven *quod erat demonstratum* (Q.E.D) but are adopted, taken, gathered from our own collected, remembered troves of experiences and then gathered back into our own troves of experience. To conceive of our existence in the world we assume.†

XIII

Assume, please, first: There is a world in which—into which—we are born and in which—out of which—we die.

This is the basic condition of natality, from which we have not yet been able to rid ourselves, and from which we should not. (When I say WE, I refer to that sapiens species among whom we, people, humans, folks, guys, generally speak of.)

XIV

If you would, assume second: There are fellow alike and unlike beings—creatures and individuals—with whom we together share this world.

Although I speak of WE, we are—as is obvious to any who have lived in this world—only one of many other beings who are also born and who also die in this world; and from whom we should not be too quick to distinguish ourselves. This is the basic condition of plurality.

XV

The world men are born into contains many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal, all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard,

* Hannah Arendt.

† Etymologically: “*ad* to + *sumere* to take.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “assume, *v.*,” March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/12036>.

touched, tastes, and smelled, to be perceived ~~by sentient creatures~~
~~endowed with the appropriate sense organs.~~¹⁵

*by sentient, sensing creatures endowed with the capacity to engage in this world.**

(Hannah, I think that is what you meant.)†

XVI

Yes: “The world men are born into contains many things.”¹⁶

Men are *born*: Natality. The world contains *many* things: Plurality. These are the physical, stubborn properties intrinsic in our existence. And, further, they establish the parameters as well as the means by which we grasp our external world, internal worlds, and our selves. And these are integrally social parameters. Plurality and Natality are the fundamental conditions of our human existence.^{17, 18}

XVII

Assume, please, third: All life that we have thus far come across, and whom we can, thus, speak of, exists inside these parameters—Natality and Plurality.

XVIII

Assume, please, fourth: By nature of embodiment, all life exists in a form by which it is able to appear and engage.

* I am doing my best to balance the variety of expression with the bodily expression of language and meaning. Speech, speaking, talking, saying all reference the movements many of us make with our mouths; and these bodily ties are useful to us—insistent upon the ways meaning is bound to the vessels and conditions of our experience. Yet, these references are harmful and deceptive if taken as requisite. Speech occurs in gesture, on the page, in too many ways to name. And though meaning and language are virtually inseparable, neither exists in our lives as a mere descendant from perfunctory premises. Please recognize in the bright plumage around you that disability is as much a part of the diversity of this earth as color. Language permeates, diversely, all of our lives because we live among (enough) fellow language users that we get habituated into a linguistic world. Meaning permeates, diversely, all of our lives because we live among (enough) fellow *meaning* beings that we get habituated into a meaningful world. We need not assume our experiences with language or meaning are singular to recognize that they touch all of us. I pity the jealous who try to convince us that language and meaning are exclusionary beasts.

† Hannah, you extend a remarkable sort of generosity to your interlocutors when you paraphrase them so we may hear what they meant. I hope to extend you the same trust. Going forward, all subsequent italic interruptions of and notes on quoted passages are my own.

XIX

In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*. ... Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular: everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet.¹⁹

XX or XXII

I have a favor to ask of you: please read the next two sections before this one. If you need, I can tell you why now but, if you would, please do me this favor before I tell you why. If you are willing, please read the next two sections before finishing this one.

René,* it is not a kind request to ask us to sever ourselves from nerve endings, select which neurons we trust, set aside the chores and commitments of our lives.²⁰ It is not kind to ask us to abdicate the beings we are. I refuse to do this. Not only can I not (and I cannot) but I will not; for to do so misleads me and misleads us. We are fully in our bodies and in our manifold relation to the world. These two conditions most remarkably situate us as active and acting creatures. We have a gut understanding: a gut urge.

Have you stayed or are you returning? The favor I ask is for you to imagine a landscape and yourself in it, so that you may go forward into it and explore as you wish. As you imagine this landscape, do you deny yourself your nerve endings? And, if you did, would you also be denying yourself the joys of living? Are you willing to deny yourself the joys of living?

XXI or XX

Do me a favor, please? Do me a favor, will you? In a moment, close your eyes and bring this landscape to view in your mind:

Beneath the Flammarion-sphered[†] sky, you stand on one gentle swell of hilltop, among many. Over the ground as far as you can see, the softest spring grass glistens in breezes. You stand in a macrocosm of a meadow. You see, on nearby surrounding hills just like yours, figures; some you recognize—an old friend, a neighbor, a sibling—but many others are strangers to you. Each face is

* René Descartes.

† A wood engraving that depicts a man at the edge of the Earth's firmament as he peeks his head through into the celestial spheres. Wikipedia, s.v. "Flammarion engraving," last modified March 22, 2021, 03:57 UTC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flammarion_engraving.

confused, a reflection of your own questions: Why are we here? Does anyone else—do *you*—know what is happening? Is that – um, what’s their name again? As you watch similar surprise and wonder and confusion bud on each brow, you feel how the wind rustling the grass brushes the hairs on your arms as well. You feel the morning coolness of the grass against your bare feet. You smell the petrichor of damp soil. And you feel the pull of muscles as you blink, pass a warming hand over goosebumps, turn your head. It comes into consciousness that you can move: you *are already* moving. This place is not static. You can go to whomever you wish, speak with whomever you want. Wherever you wish to go, you can go, explore. You see this same understanding budding in those around you, on their hills. And some have stepped forward, heading towards friends or strangers. Someone is crouching to touch an unknown wildflower. Someone laughs, rolling down their hill. Your body feels fully alive.

Let this place come into your mind and give it your attention for a minute or so—for a little while let it be yours entirely. Please, close your eyes. Now, close your eyes.

XXII or XXI

When you have let this place dissipate, would you be willing to tell me about it? I would like to hear which pebbles you pocketed, familiar faces you sought, which trees you passed as you talked with a stranger. I ask because that goosebump sensation attunes us to our own capabilities and efficacy. Your raised hairs make you deeply aware of your own skin, arms, and body, so that you are fully aware of your ability to move and manipulate them as you wish. In seeing ourselves among others, our curiosity morphs into choice and action.

Do you second-guess that you engage in the world as you engage in the world? I ask because I want to know if you hesitate to believe yourself active when let loose in such a wondrous, verdant place.

XXIII

Assume, please, fifth: Embodiment, corporeality makes us unable to be coterminous with others; so, all life occupies a unique vantage point.

XXIV

We have a constellation of words to get at some gut understanding: ABILITY, ABLE, ACT, ACTION, ACTIVE, ACTIVITY, AGENCY, AGENT, AUTONOMY, CAPABILITY, CAPABLE, CAPACITY, POTENCE, POTENCY, POTENT, POWER, POWERFUL. When we get at this gut understanding with these words,

what is it that we are getting at? Distinctions exist between these words, of course, but so does commonality. And there *is* something there, some gut understanding that we attempt to fit into syllables.

XXV

Our words for this gut understanding can tell us about what nourishes it—what it springs from, where it exerts itself, how we feel it. To thoroughly present how our intuitions are carried in our words, I am laying out these etymologies in full, but please feel free to skim as you like; I will gather the pertinent themes together in the next section.

First, our pair ABILITY²¹ and ABLE^{22,23} come—by different routes—from the Latin *habilis*, from *habere*²⁴ “to hold, possess, have, handle,” which goes all the way back to the same hypothesized Proto-Indo-European root, **ghabh-* (“to give or receive”), that gives us HABIT, HABITABLE, and HABITANT.²⁵

Second, our cluster ACT,^{26,27} ACTION,²⁸ ACTIVE,²⁹ and ACTIVITY³⁰ descend through various routes from the Latin *actus*, from *agere*, which has an impressive range of meanings: foremost “to drive” but also “to come, to go, ... to urge, ... to do something, ... to be busy, to work, to stage (a play), to take part in (a play), to perform (a part) in a play, ... to strive for, ... to celebrate, observe, to spend (time), to experience, enjoy, to live.”³¹ Going back, the Proto-Indo-European ancestor of *agere* is **ag-* (“to drive, draw, move”).³² As well, AGENCY³³ and AGENT³⁴ come from *agere*, going back to **ag-*.^{35,36}

Third, AUTONOMY³⁷ borrows the Greek *autonomiā*,³⁸ from *autonomos*,³⁹ a compound of *auto-* (“self, one’s own, by oneself, independently”)⁴⁰ and *nomos* (“usage, custom, law, melody, composition”).⁴¹ Of these, *nomos* goes back to the Proto-Indo-European root **nem-*, “to assign, allot; also to take.”⁴²

Fourth, our pair CAPABILITY⁴³ and CAPABLE⁴⁴ derive—by way of French—from the Latin *capabilis*,⁴⁵ from *capere* “to take, seize, catch,” which goes back to the Proto-Indo-European root **kap-* “to grasp.”⁴⁶ Relatedly, CAPACITY⁴⁷ derives, also through the French, from the Latin *capacitāt-em*, from *capāx*, *capāci-* (“able to take in”),⁴⁸ from *capēre* (“to take”).⁴⁹ And *capēre* then goes back to the Proto-Indo-European **kap-*.⁵⁰ As well, CAPACIOUS is related to CAPACITY through the Latin,^{51,52} indicating that CAPACITY loosely deals with spaciousness; that is, capacity has a root spatial sense.

Fifth, our cluster POTENCE,⁵³ POTENCY,⁵⁴ and POTENT⁵⁵ descend through multiple routes from the Latin *potēns*,⁵⁶ from *posse*, “to be able, to be possible, to have power to avail,” which is a compound of *potis* (“having the power, able”) and *esse* (“to be”).^{57,58} Further, *potis* comes from **poti-* (“powerful; lord”),⁵⁹ and *esse* comes from **es* (“to be”).^{60,61} Note that the Gothic *brūth-faths* (“bridegroom”),

Sanskrit *pati* (“master”), and Greek *posis* (“husband”) all resemble the Latin *potis*.^{62,63} As well, POWER⁶⁴ and POWERFUL⁶⁵ derive from *posse*, going back to **poti-*.^{66,67}

XXVI

Gathering together the intuitions within our etymological vivisection, we can see the conditions that give rise to this gut understanding at the center of our constellation. This constellation of words invokes territorial claims and interpersonal relations. That is, this constellation invokes the material and meaningful conditions of our lives: the dirt, matter, and territory that we occupy as well as the linguistic, loving, intangible—*meaningful*—lives we lead together.

ABILITY, ABLE, CAPABILITY, CAPABLE, and CAPACITY all reference the immediate tangibility that is most clear as the sensation of weight in your palm or of your fingers’ grip. This grasping is not unconnected to the sense of spatial occupation that CAPACITY carries in its relation to CAPACIOUS. This grasping is not unconnected to the basic existence asserted by the roots *esse* and **es-* in POTENCE, POTENCY, and POTENT. Nor is this grasping unconnected to the sense of territory referenced by the roots *potis* **poti-* in POTENCE, POTENCY, POTENT, POWER, and POWERFUL; as *potis* and **poti-* both get at the base sense of power, they reference those people and positions which own and occupy physical territory and matter: lord, master, husband, and bridegroom. As well, AUTONOMY’s root **nem-* specifically references material allocation or taking.

ACT, ACTION, ACTIVE, ACTIVITY, AGENCY, AND AGENT get at the sense of impetus and momentum, which we experience as we move ourselves through this world. The verb implicit in ABILITY and ABLE’s root **ghabh-*, “to give or receive;”⁶⁸ in CAPABILITY, CAPABLE, and CAPACITY’s root **kap-*, “to grasp;”⁶⁹ and in AUTONOMY’s root **nem-*, “to assign, allot; or to take;”⁷⁰ all reference our motions through this world and interaction with and among others.

To get at this gut understanding we reference the tangible and we reference our touching of the tangible. We do not owe our gut understanding to sterile impartiality or proud objectivity. We are powerful, we are agent, are alive, we are us because we are bound to limited material vantage points and we reach out to the rest of the world from these vantages.

XXVII

Please assume, sixth: Living beings have all developed faculties for existing and for prolonging their existence. From prokaryotes we have become eukaryotes and grown ourselves into centenarian tortoises, millenarian redwoods, and opposably-thumbed bipeds.

XXVIII

Assume, please, seventh: Through a variety of faculties, beings sense and engage with fellow life—and matter—from their unique vantage points.

XXIX

We are tasked not only to be active agents—ourselves the beginnings of rippling chains of action and reaction—but also to contend* with and among like members of our species.

XXX

Our tangible vantage and motion sets the parameters for our engagement in the world. Courage is inherent in a willingness to act, in a willingness to engage with and in the world.

The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own.⁷¹

This courage is the courage of a particular, individuated form willing to set into motion unanticipated possibilities—to risk, or choose, ramifications. Were we not individuated beings tenuously existing, appearing, engaging, *surviving* amidst other and fellow individuated beings also existing, appearing, engaging, *surviving* – well, perhaps then this would not be courage. But we are individuated beings tenuously existing, appearing, engaging, *surviving* amidst other and fellow individuated beings also existing, appearing, engaging, *surviving*. So, we are courageous.

We see not only that our gut understanding results from our uniquely embodied vantage, but that it is our uniquely embodied vantage that makes us vulnerable, significant, courageous. We are limited. And everything becomes important in limitation.

And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's own private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self.⁷²

We require embodied, imperfect, self-protective ties to an anchoring form and vantage point to be able to reveal or risk anything. Action is intrinsically courageous not only in this self-revelation

* Etymologically: “*con-* + *tendere* to stretch, strain, strive.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “contend, *v.*,” March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40136>.

but in self-revelation among others. In being among others when we reveal ourselves there is a boundless potentiality of reaction and ramification. While courage does not require us to be willing to suffer the consequences, it requires us to be willing to create consequences—that is, to enter and impact the world even though we cannot fully anticipate the effects of our entrance or of our efforts. We are able to take this leap of courage because we do not know what will happen. Not knowing makes it courage.

Action requires grounded-ness in a particular form and perspective. Action has unanticipated—un-anticipable—consequences. In acting we set into motion new and never-before-seen chains of reaction. In action we are liable to mistakes. Action requires its actor to be grounded in a specific time and place, with a certain level of self-perspective (both self-knowledge, and self-interest), and to—from that point—possess the courage to act in a world of un-anticipable consequences.

XXXI

Assume, please, eighth: As beings exist in their embodied forms, they navigate space and milieu uniquely.

As we navigate, the conditions of our forms and of our environment press upon us.

XXXII

It is these conditions of the world and our lives that we respond to constantly—conditions which we, of course, shape deeply.

XXXIII

Natality and Plurality, the conditions of the world, give birth to the conditions of our lives: Being and Appearing. In Being we are alive and alike: “If this inside were to appear, we would all look alike.”⁷³ Yet, our bodies are separate, unable to be coterminous; they establish each of us in our own individuated vantage point. In Appearing we distinguish and are distinguishable: “The outside shapes are infinitely varied and highly differentiated; among the higher animals we can usually tell one individual from another.”⁷⁴ Yet, in appearing (and witnessing), we are all “never mere subjects”⁷⁵ but are always simultaneously both objects and subject, and we are all participating and witnessing our

exchanging of these positions.* We must consider the phenomenal—in both senses of the word†—nature of the world: we are embodied and sensing. This is all but irrevocable.

XXXIV

In watching our individuated, appearing bodies navigate through the world, we recognize ourselves amongst others, and we can begin to recognize how it is that our world, and reality, appear to and are held by us. Once again:

Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator. In other words, nothing, that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody.⁷⁶

In this way, we do not get a choice to be among others. To be as we are—to be ourselves—we must be among others.‡ We do not get to doubt our plural existence unless we fully doubt it in our hearts, in our deeds. But I admit that I cannot: it is too much for me to doubt. I do not want to be lonely. I do not say this by way of confession, but by way of reassurance that we do not face mass exodus: I am not willing to doubt plurality in my heart. Are you? Do you know anyone willing?

XXXV

Could it not be that appearances are not there for the sake of the life process but, on the contrary, that the life process is there for the sake of appearances? Since we live in an *appearing* world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface?⁷⁷

XXXVI

And even if surgeries and wounds bring forth sudden internal appearances, it is the authentic appearances, which delight in appearing and commit to our lasting gazing, that are the stuff of our world. Though our insides and electrical impulses are neither identical nor the same, it is through our

* Here I want to point to a theme, perhaps the thesis of this project: conflict and tension are valuable—not in every instance, not in many—but they are valuable and intrinsic to our existence.

† PHENOMENONAL refers to both the marvelous patterns of our world as well as to that which is known sensorily.

Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “phenomenal, *adj.* and *n.*,” March 2021,
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/142340>.

‡ As an aside, this strongly parallels Ludwig’s argument against private language and for common language.

authentically appearing outsides that we can lastingly differentiate between one another. It is how we have evolved to interact and to survive: I cannot bare my liver to you casually. (I—we— have an urge to preserve ourselves as alive creatures.)

XXXVII

Assume, please, ninth: As we navigate, we have an urge not only to sustain and prolong our existence but to enjoy it.

We crave the shelter and warmth of dens, yes, but also the breezes as we run rampant through fields with the sun hot on our shoulders, laughter loud. Our joys are as varied as we are: girls in flower crowns and tulip-dwelling harvest mice. Some of us like the best berries, others adrenaline thrills.

XXXVIII

Assume, please, tenth: We are pressed upon to behave as is effective for our existence and for our engagement with others.

That is, the whole of life can be expected to tend to behave as is effective for existence and, more individually, creatures can be expected to behave in ways they feel are effective. This is the expectation, not the rule.

XXXIX

... the predominance of outside appearance implies, in addition to the sheer receptivity of our senses, a spontaneous activity: *whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched*. It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has an *urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its “inner self” but itself as an individual. ...

... The expressiveness of an appearance, however, is of a different order; it “expresses” nothing but itself, that is, it exhibits or displays.⁷⁸

XL

Appearance brings meaning to the life-sustaining organs and bodily operations of animals, not the other way around. Would you tell me, in earnest, that my kidney and liver and gall bladder are more

truly—that is, tangibly really, significantly—me than my face? Would you peddle such fallacy? There is no truer form of a thing lying behind its façade, and no absolute truth.

XLI

We so relish our appearing: preening, cawing, flocking as we do. We braid our hair and weave flowers through friends'. We spend hours talking and typing late into the night, our faces or words illuminated bright. We reach towards each other in told and untold ways. Do you not?

XLII

By my mere existing, urged to prolong and enjoy my appearing being, I am forever displaying,* unfurling.

... but the life of our soul is in its very intensity much more adequately expressed in a glance, a sound, a gesture, than in speech. ...

My soul is in glances, sounds (giggles and gasps), gestures. Do you tell me jokes to search out my soul and reassure you it is here?

Unlike thoughts and ideas, feelings, passions, and emotions can no more become part and parcel of the world of appearances than can our inner organs. What appears in the outside world in addition to physical signs is only what we make of them through the operation of thought. Every *show* of anger, as distinct from the anger I feel, already contains a reflection on it, and it is this reflection that gives the emotion the highly individuated form with is meaningful for all surface phenomena. ... In other words, the emotions I feel are no more *meant* to be shown in their unadulterated state than the inner organs by which we live. ...

Hannah, perhaps it is so that my emotions are not meant to be shown, that in life if they are shown they do pass through my consciousness. But I wonder if this is a tandem process or a linear one? And were my infant wails also the product of thought? Or is it rather that the relaying of emotion is for the benefit of others or the benefit of myself through others? Certainly, we presuppose another—at least, and most often others—in our performance of ourselves. But such performance is also for ourselves, enabled by our understanding of what it is to perform and to watch. We can perform for ourselves and for others. So, while

* Etymologically from the Latin *despicere* “to scatter, disperse, (in late and medieval Latin) to unfold.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “display, v.,” March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55051>.

emotion may not be meant to be shown, fear drives us to the safety of guardians and anger propels us forward in defense of loved ones. Emotive beings reach towards each other.

Our mental activities, by contrast, are conceived in speech even before being communicated, but speech is meant to be heard and words are meant to be understood by others who also have the ability to speak ... Thought without speech is inconceivable; “thought and speech anticipate one another. They continually take one another’s place”; they actually take each other for granted.⁷⁹

XLIII

It is no divine thing that speech and thought anticipate each other. Hannah, you say emotions pass through consciousness to be seen, so, say you say these outward expressions of feeling presuppose “reflection.”⁸⁰ I suggest that rather than reflection, expression presupposes others: both in instinct, choice, reaction, and evolution itself. We relish our mates and flocks so affectionately that we have evolved ourselves slowly to imagine ourselves our own fellows whom we keep with us even alone.

Speech and thought anticipate one another only as much as we anticipate that we listen and we express: that is, only as much as we anticipate others. We habituate this anticipation in our conversations and silent monologues.

XLIV

We love preening, cawing, flocking so much we do it with ourselves. We imagine ourselves to ourselves, hum songs for ourselves, narrate our daily movements to ourselves, imagine fellows for ourselves, dialogue with our imagined fellows, monologue for ourselves. We unfurl ourselves even to ourselves, taking joy in our own glances and giggles. In the glimpses we too get of ourselves, we hone our motor skills into precise movements—we learn the differences between our own expressions to lay out our talents for not only our imagined fellows but for the others who surround us.

XLV

In addition to the urge towards self display by which living things fit themselves into a world of appearances, men also *present* themselves in deed and word and thus indicate how they *wish* to appear, what in their opinion is fit to be seen and what is not. This element of deliberate choice in what to show and what to hide seems specifically human. *Up to a point* we can choose how to appear to others, and this appearance

is by no means the outward manifestation of an inner disposition; if it were, we probably would all act and speak alike. ...

... The passions and emotions of our soul are not only body-bound, they seem to have the same life-sustaining and preserving functions as our inner organs ... Such choices are determined by various factors; many of them are predetermined by the culture into which we are born—they are made because we wish to please others. But there are also choices not inspired by our environment; we may make them because we wish to please ourselves or because we wish to set an example, that is, to persuade others to be pleased with what pleases us. Whatever our motives may be, success and failure in the enterprise of self-presentation depend on the consistency and duration of the image thereby presented to the world.

Since appearances always present themselves in the guise of seeming, pretense and willful deception on the part of the performer, error and illusion on the part of the spectator are, inevitably, among the inherent potentialities. Self-preservation is distinguished from self-display by the active and conscious choice of the image shown; self-display has no choice but to show whatever properties a living being possesses. ... When I make such a decision, I am not merely reacting to whatever qualities may be given to me; I am making an act of deliberate choice among the various potentialities of conduct with which the world has presented me. ... Obviously, self-presentation and the sheer thereness of existence are not the same.⁸¹

(Hannah, is it really that the world presents potentialities to me? Do I sit so passively?

Await?)

XLVI

Another favor, please?

In the meadow you spend your time as you please and watch others do the same. Your afternoon strolls take you to the places that have grown dear and to places you have not yet been. Into the grass, you tread worn your desire paths.* You tread your own and follow those that others have worn real. As you make them, there are becoming ways to move through this meadow. But no matter the habits and routes, you may go where you like through the thigh-high grasses.

* A desire path is “an unplanned route or path (such as one worn into a grassy surface by repeated foot traffic) that is used by pedestrians in preference to or in absence of a designated alternative.” *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “desire line, *n.*,” accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desire%20line>.

You shape this place as do others and, going where you wish, you trust that together you are attempting a place that pleases you all. Even when you wander and wind up far from where you meant, it is somewhere someone loves. You trust this as long as you trust that others are earnest in where they go.

We need these to be paths of earnest desire so that they do not lead us astray.

XLVII

Assume, please, eleventh: Our own unique vantages, faculties, and navigation of the world, give rise to semblances* that distort our appearances and our interaction, engaging.

XLVIII

Our meadow is beneath the Flammarion-sky:⁸² we are on Earth, orbiting Solaris, orbited ourselves by our Moon, passing in parallel circuits alongside Venus and Mars. Once, we saw ourselves at the center, and remarked how Mars contorted itself in strange retrograde to stay near to us. Semblances abound from our Earthly vantage point and from our vantage points on Earth. Authentically, we will never not see Mars painting flourishes in the night sky like lace scalloping around us—at least not until we part from our planet. Yet, we have amended our vantaged vision, recalibrate ourselves as heliocentric.

XLIX

Since choice as the decisive factor in self-presentation has to do with appearances, and since appearance has the double function of concealing some interior and revealing some “surface” ... there is always the possibility that what appears may by disappearing turn out finally to be a mere *semblance*. Because of the gap between inside and outside, between the ground of appearance and appearance—or to put it differently, no matter how different and individualized we appear and how deliberately we have chosen this individuality—it always remains true that “inside we are all alike,” ... Hence, there is always an element of semblance in all appearance: the ground itself does not appear. From this it does not follow that all appearances are mere semblances. Semblances are possible only in the midst of appearances; they presuppose appearance as error presupposes truth. Error is the price we pay for truth, and semblance is the price we pay for the

* Hannah, you distinguish between authentic and inauthentic semblances—the distortion bound up in being ourselves in our bodies and the distortion that we might remedy. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 28–29.

wonders of appearance. Error and semblance are closely connected phenomena; they correspond with each other.

Semblance is inherent in a world ruled by the twofold law of appearing to a plurality of sensitive creatures each equipped with the faculties of perception. Nothing that appears manifests itself to a single viewer capable of perceiving it under all its inherent aspects. The world appears in the mode of it-seems-to-me, depending on particular perspectives determined by location in the world as well as by particular organs of perception. This mode not only produces error, which I can correct by changing my location, drawing closer to what appears, or by improving my organs of perception with the help of tools and implements, or by using my imagination to take other perspectives into account; it also gives birth to true semblances, that is, to deceptive appearance, which I cannot correct like an error since they are caused by my permanent location on the earth and remain bound up with my own existence as one of the earth's appearances.⁸³

L

Again, in the meadow you stand on your grassy hillock and look out at the disparate crowd surrounding you. It is as if intense heat warps the air, or as if moisture hanging heavy pulls not only the horizon but the figure of nearby things out of shape. Or perhaps this place is melting and dancing. You find that, between blinks, a withered tree is not the woman you believed it. You catch sight of a bird in your periphery and realize the bird never was. The sky is clear until it goes star-speckled.

And yet, though the scene wavers as if the whole field were on fire, the air remains cool and dew-slicked. You feel, deep in your stomach, that these miraged illusions are not visible to those standing around you. Not to anyone else. And you believe, deep in your stomach, that different phantasma appear to each person standing in this place.

Amid this rippling environ, your balance is not so steady, nor your trust. Any step might find you upon a quaking bog. Goosebumps and grass between your toes reassure you this is no hallucination, but false steps and this fluctuating world caution you that you may not bear accurate witness.

LI

We are alive briefly, on this particular orb in the cosmos, for this particular span of time, and inside of this particular flesh and blood incarnation. Everything that we see and engage with – *everything* is

filtered through the unique lens of the body and the world we have been born into. Semblances result from the fixedness of our form, our material existence: the first gift of our natality: material existence.

The paradox of Being is that, as our innards are alike, our inhabitation of our bodies roots us in individuated perspectives. The criterion for a living thing—“the relatively short time span of its full appearance, its epiphany”⁸⁴—forms our optic lens, as does our living form, so: “authentic illusions . . . are by no means the same for each species but connected with the form and mode of their specific life-process.”⁸⁵ Not only this, but our individual perspective alters, even just slightly, how the light strikes and how the world of appearances appears to us. So, too, the paradox of Appearing is that who and what appears to me fluctuates and who I appear to be fluctuates across time and between spectators.

LII

Upon the quaking bogs we are amidst the living chaos of simultaneous authentic and inauthentic distortion. Some of the rippling haze and mirage before me is bound up in me-in-my-body, some is simply fatigue, hunger, cataracts, and some is that I am looking the wrong way to find the bird I heard call out in the distance. So, the chaos of the chaos is that authentic and inauthentic distortions do not differentiate themselves for us. In fact, they mix—not separate nor always separable. Shared though some of these mirages may be, I also feel deep in my gut that some of them are mine only. I reach out for hands to grasp and hold me steady as they can upon this rippling underfoot.

LIII

Thomas,* you bring us together and bind us by promise as we flee natural and selfish perils. I share in your faith, for yours is sincerely faith. You see us diversely—muscular *and* slender, cleverer *and* less so⁸⁶—and still you trust us to choose each other and to promise well- and earnest-enough that our promises hold.

But first you give us discrepant innards and perceptions. You recognize that we do not navigate the world identically. You constitute us as both deeply mechanistic and inconsistent:

The cause of Sense, is the Externall Body, or Object, which presseth the organ . . . which pressure, . . . continued inwards to the Brain, and the Heart, causeth there a resistance, or counter-pressure, or

* Thomas Hobbes.

endeavour of the heart to deliver it self: which endeavour, because *Outward* seemeth to be some matter without.⁸⁷

Yet, in this you give us important embodied variety physically and cognitively: “there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind then another.”⁸⁸ Yet, this does not diminish the value of any one of us, for:

Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind then another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himselfe any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.⁸⁹

This diversity of our forms and abilities does not produce a hierarchy, rather an equality. You give each one of us value in inhabiting our own vantage with our individuated limitations.

For such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent, or more learned; Yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves: For they see their own wit at hand, and other mens at a distance. But this proveth rather that men are in that point equall, than unequall. For there is not ordinarily a greater signe of the equall distribution of any thing, than that every man is contented with his share. From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends.⁹⁰

And so, you recognize that our gut understanding and motion hails from our embodied existence and display. In all of this, you give us (tentative) cooperation—“confederacy.”⁹¹ You give us common words and syntax for all our endeavors⁹² (and soon for our promises).

And then, courageously, you put your faith in us—in these sorts of beings we are.

LIV

Assume, please, twelfth: By nature of behaving in a plural world, we sense fluctuating functional agreement amidst our engagement with the world and each other.

LV

I like to distinguish, sometimes, between the formal agreement—a logical, reasoned, and intelligible argument for why, despite the discrepancies of mental and sensory experience, we might trust reality without a doubt—and functional agreement, which simply suffices. Functional agreement is simply

how we interact with things and one another, and it very often gives us the trust we need to live our lives. My mentors and fellow philosophers, I want to hold your hands and reassure ourselves that we need not fear formal doubt.

LVI

Our own engagement in the world—navigation through it—and others' calls our attention to the world. My friend takes me down a street I never noticed was there. Lightning strikes and I ask: "Did you see that?" Thunder rolls in: "Did you hear that?" We turn and reach to others so we may call to their attention the world that we see and feel before us. And we turn and reach to others so they may call to our attention the world they see and feel before them. In the moments when semblances ripple across our senses, stirring doubt in our hearts, we reach out. Sleep-deprived as I currently am, I cannot assure myself into satisfaction that the cup of water next to me is indeed really beside me. So, I look to my others to gauge if they can drink from it, if it appears mere apparition to them too.

And my mentors, this affirmation—agreement—we seek from others is not reassurance to remedy the shallow formal doubts we hypothesize for academic papers. This affirmation we seek is for heartfelt doubt. So, it has no easy logical, premise-able solution. It is agreement that requires us to ask, to reach out. Forgive me if I seem at all like I am speaking of Truth if I go on to say "confidence" or "functional agreement" too formally. This agreement is no formal thing. Any confidence we have is that same sort as the confidence we walk into a room with. Any functional agreement we have is the same sort we get when double checking that, yes, we are still good for lunch at two. This agreement is a promise: not static or stable but better. This agreement is trustworthy.

LVII

We can affirm our confidence in reality through sensory terms, not rational ones (Q.E.D.). Reality is not a certainty we come by but is an assurance with which we engage in the world. Reality is an agreement we have with others. It is enough to accept that the ways we interact with each other and with the world demonstrate sufficient agreement upon shared reality.

Even if we were unable to reach formal agreement, would you act as though a projectile hurtling at your head was mere apparition? Or would you dodge? If you are unsure, may I suggest you ask someone nearby to aid you in a material demonstration? You might, if you would like, observe your actions when the stakes are made explicit (perhaps with arrows and an apple).

Once again, this is the sort of doubt that is not ours to have easily. It is doubt that we only get to have when we fully doubt in our hearts, in our actions. Remember in this, that life is never safe from real pressure, from the urge to prolong your existence. You do not get to put your doubt in padded walls. It is not significant doubt if it does not withstand the real stakes of our lives.

Still, even if a given individual does not duck, if you muster significant doubt, our agreement on reality lies not between the individual and the projectile. It lies between us and our fellows. Crucial as our agreement is, it is not so fragile that you on your own may rend it. Commonly and collectively, we dodge, and we expect others to dodge. So, functional agreement upon reality exists and is preserved in the ways we interact with one another and our surroundings as though they are real *and* as though others are also experiencing them.* Reality is fundamentally physical and sensory. Reality becomes a sixth sense, a common sense, *sensus communis*† which is constantly reinforced by our interaction with and among others, because we cannot help but be members of a social species.

LVIII

On your grassy hillock, the landscape is not always so dizzying. Sometimes, it is as still as a breezeless day and hardly a leaf quakes. Sometimes, you cannot find a leaf that stays still long enough for you to see it as one among all the others. Always fluctuating, you can breathe and navigate your way—expecting and correcting stumbles as well as misconceptions. And each stroll forward, whether clumsy or not, convinces your heartbeat that this changing world is no extraordinary peril. Springtime strolls delight you with both material and iridescent flux: both the matter, the hillsides of daffodils that open with the dawn or sway with the breezes, and the iridescent meaning, a brief sunlit dazed moment somehow stretches, to your surprise, into full hours of the afternoon. The flux is jarring as it is joyous.

LIX

How then, do we trust ourselves to navigate through the world amidst a riotous cacophony of competing semblances? How do we establish any sense of surety?

* René, I think this resolves your dream conundrum. We do not consistently—before, during, *and* after dreaming—act as though the dream is experienced as real by others. And if we were to act this way, it may not be so much a misunderstanding of reality, but an actual change and evolution of reality.

† “What ... we call common sense, the *sensus communis*, is a kind of sixth sense needed to keep my five senses together and guarantee that it is the same object that I see, touch, taste, smell, and hear ...” Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 50.

LX

Assume, if you would, thirteenth: At the point of convergence of behavior and agreement, therein lies reality.

LXI

Sight—our eyes' sensory mechanism—forces us to reconcile two images into one, yet we experience fluctuations. (Close one eye, then open it and close the other; the world before you shifts ever so slightly.) The common sense we have for reality forces us to reconcile the interactions of our fellows within our common surroundings with our own experiences of those surroundings.

We hold the world in common in tension, trusting ourselves to sense when reality is not so easy to trust or when our fibrous connections fray. Though the reality of the world may flicker—just as our vision does, when switching from one eye closed to the other—the inconsistency demonstrates the tension inherent in our *sensus communis*. Without these flickers, we would have no indication that our sense of reality was indeed only our own individual sense, rooted in our own vantage.

The very contention between perspectives guarantees the firmness of their alignment; the flickering of our agreed-upon reality is the prickling of hairs along the spine that assures me I have not gone numb. When I wake from my dream and readjust to the world around me, I am given new confidence in the reality of the world. Flickers make us even more sure of our agreement—that: that we agree and what we agree upon. We need a natal world to give each of us fixedness in a form, from which authentic semblances then stem. We need a plural world to make us appear, and to make all appear to us—wherein emerges the contention integral to the *sensus communis*. And through the *sensus communis* we ground reality in mutuality.

LXII

Interaction within a plurality guarantees reality. Not only do semblances explain discrepancy, they justify our trust of reality. Semblances predispose us to engage with the world and each other differently, so the commonalities amidst this vast variation of individuals indicate a firmness—that we are all being similarly impacted. Whereas thinking—that meaning-bound apparatus—need not

correspond to reality, we sense that where our engagement aligns, we find validity.* Reality, by nature of this ever-shifting convergence, is always in flux. But is also always shared.

LXIII

Reality is “the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence.”⁹³ Reality is a reciprocal relationship.

The worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else who guarantees its “objective” reality.⁹⁴

Both claiming and guaranteed, reality attracts and demands attention; *we*, in paying attention, guarantee reality to the surrounding world of appearances. As in any paradox, there is a tension within reality. Reality requires reciprocity but continually imposes upon and challenges us. In the desert, sand caught up by the wind chafes your cheeks, sun blisters your skin, and a glistening oasis—perhaps mirage—draws you nearer to it. Within the world of appearances there may not be any route to the clear and unshakable reality philosophers have quested after for so long. And this is fine. We do not need it.

LXIV

Reality is held in tension—hung on myriad thin strings between us. Yet, when one string unravels many more are there to hold the fabric while any individual spinster repairs their thread. This is how we get surety in reality, in the world, in worldly things.

LXV

But we are in the world. Are we also tied to this warp and weft?

LXVI

I imagine this fabric of reality in surreal vivid imagery. The expanse of the infinite, inky-dark universe it all around, scattered celestial bodies at the peripheries of our vision. But the foreground, midground, background of this space is occupied by glowing, neon-fuchsia interwoven threads of light. We are small enough amidst this loose weave to duck our way between the threads. Although they are loose,

* Meaning and knowledge of reality are, of course, two entirely different faculties: the distinction between reason and intellect “coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning ... and cognition.” Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 14.

they are firm. This fabric extends everywhere. Positioned between its fibers it is near impossible to doubt that it will hold. It goes on everywhere.

But also, it is near impossible to doubt because, around my waist, I am lassoed by a thread all my own. I am an astronaut tethered to the fabric of our reality, and my movements do tug and shift the weft of the common cloth. I am untethered, unattached in open space if I cut myself loose of my cord. I feel deep in my gut that if I doubt, I shall slice through this protection connection. How then, will I breathe?

I am tethered to this common cloth the same as my fellows. In this, I know I promise to them that I shall keep it intact. I shall not endanger their tethers nor my own.

LXVII

Thomas, the crux of your trust in us to make lasting promises lies in the faith produced by the stakes and diversity of our common condition. Because we cannot bear to be without this promise, we make it. It is not the freest of our choices, but choice still. In possession of our gut understanding, we may all move ourselves close and bind together in our urge to prolong and enjoy our navigation of the world.

Thomas, you say that it is mutual forfeit—“mutuall transferring of Right”⁹⁵—that guards this promise.⁹⁶ I must say more, that it is a mutual prolonged farewell. We cannot bear to relinquish the meaningful world, so we earnestly hold the strings of it as best we can. We hold in our own hands the tender threads, tender tethers between us and our loves. And with weight beneath our fingertips and in our palms, isn’t it hard to doubt?

LXVIII

We hold not only the world but all meaning in tension, for we live meaningfully* in a *meaning*† world. This is reality.

LXIX

My title ON EAGER TENTERHOOKS plays upon the idiom ON TENTERHOOKS, which suggests “a state of painful suspense” in reference to cloth stretched and held in place by the hooks on tenter frames.⁹⁷

* Fully, in that we make meaning.

† That is, in a world that means. Here I use MEANING as a gerundive, or present participle.

Like fabric stretched firm for safe-drying, reality is held in tension; as is meaning. These threads in our hands—of this fabric—are the same tethers keeping us together.

LXX

We have been traversing the celestial orbits of our existence, but now we must come back to the soil of our planet, because it is no geocentric or heliocentric argument that occupies my day-to-day. It is errands and emails and dead car batteries making me late for work.

Meaning is important in our arguments over grocery lists and in our attempts at a more equitable and just world. Meaning asserts its gravity in the small and large impasses of our lives.

LXXI

Sometimes, my trusted mentors, when I hear you speak, I hear quavers in your voices that make me wonder how well you trust in your own abilities to speak and be understood. This doubt is, of course, understandable. Trust comes with doubt. Language *is* indeed a marvel. How do squiggles, sound waves, and muscle contractions enrich our world in the ways that they do?

I think, in a certain way, that yours is not as simple as heartfelt doubt that you may speak and be understood but that is an even greater heartfelt doubt in how we are to live together.

You see, already in the quavers of your voices you doubt in your own meaning, and meaning is what we make that underlies *all* we do. But your doubt is not to be gotten rid of. Remember that you doubt because we yearn to trust meaning and crave trust in how we are to live together. But do not indulge the doubt that can never fully be in our hearts. It is only shallow doubt until you hesitate to mean and to live among others; and if you do let it become deep doubt and let yourself retreat from the courageous endeavor of living, then it will be deep doubt because you have let it be in your deeds. In rejection of shallow doubt, let us embrace deep faith.

LXXII

My father mixes our names with the dogs'. My mother mangles even malaprops. My family interrupts one another so often it is past funny. We skip words, mishear, half-say sentences, and remind each other of whole stories with a mumbled word. It is our language. It matters. We mean it all.

Do your loved ones and you do the same?

LXXIII

I have a deep intuition that understanding the ways in which we form meaning is crucial to understanding how we are to live together—where to go for lunch, who to embrace, which values to hold. In this light, meaning fabricates our very ability to live with and among one another.

LXXIV

Now is the moment to stretch. Come back to your body and your nerve endings, the rumble of hunger, any scraping parchedness. And, when you are ready, we shall reorient and resume.

I hope you are well again, refreshed. Let us move on to a different sort of wrestling. So far we have wrestled with our metaphysics, but let us get into play—into wrestling that handles our things, actions, words, doubt, and faith in the ways they shape the lives we live. Let us turn our attention to our *meaning** and material lives.

LXXV

How do we tend to our things? For in this world, we have made many and beautiful things for ourselves, and we have made ourselves many and beautiful things.

LXXVI

Take your hand and close it upon a nearby solidness: upon some matter. Close your fingers around this matter so that in your hand there is weight. What is it? What is it when you call it by its thingly name? Please tell me.

LXXVII

We frequently encounter multiple views, names for the same matter. Faced with 🐦 (*bedeutung*, that is, reference) I can call it ANIMAL, CREATURE, BIRD, WATERFOWL (all signs with *sinn*, or sense) as easily as I might call it DUCK.⁹⁸ Suffice to say, 🐦 has no single correct name or meaning; it does not *necessarily* connect to any word or meaning. Perhaps with the exception of onomatopoeia, no reference *necessarily* connects to any name or meaning. This is the disconnect: the rift. At a basic level, this rift arises from the fact that BIRD^{SIGN} and the flying animal, i.e., 🐦, are not one and the same. Here we must differentiate between a bird and 🐦, or the thing that we would call a BIRD. Though genetically

* I use MEANING as a gerundive.

identical, a bird (identified as such) already carries with it a connection between sign, *bedeutung*, and *sinn* while ♡ does not.

LXXVIII

We are nimble and generous name-givers. We convene for our naming ceremonies. We *see as* manifoldly.* And I imagine our recipients of our glances blush under our affections. At least, I hope they do. (*I blush under our affections.*)

LXXIX

Ludwig,[†] you say you see a duck as a rabbit and a rabbit as a duck.⁹⁹ I hope I am clear that I am not saying the same when I say that I move in the world, make myself draw lines on a page, and see my markings as duck and as rabbit. But even so I *see as* myself, *see as* drawing, *see as* lines, *see as* a page. Is this clear enough? It is difficult to say, for in speech we make and share our choices of vantage and in speech we tend to the things that we make into things. Matter *is*, without words. Meaning is always our doing: always doing, always active.

This is not so easy to grasp as mere arbitrary symbolism. This is not merely ♡ and DUCK, though it is that too. This is, at the core, thing-hood. At a point, the matter we call grass was not grass, it was only tangible. In language I attempt to press it into your palm by saying it was living matter. But it simply was. And the conditions of life gave faculties to living things by which patterns linger in memory and nutrients get species. The brains we've gotten for ourselves (and so many other creatures for themselves) produce things as things. Birds *and* biologists know which berries not to eat. Not us[‡] alone but life came to recognize the matter of our world as things, came to live in a world of things. And still in all of this, life moved matter, formed it. Moves it, forms it. Not only do we engage with matter as things (that is, not only do we engage with things) but we handle it too, reifying things in our[§] handling of them. So, we reify reality—the material and *meaning*^{**} world we hold in tension. Not only do we handle matter as things (that is, not only do we handle things) but we also build matter into things. HOUSE may technically be our arbitrary (or at least flexible) thingly name for its matter;

* *Seeing as* or aspect seeing is the phenomenon where we contextualize objects and ideas differently in different contexts.

† Ludwig Wittgenstein.

‡ Sapiens.

§ Living beings.

** As material the world is uninterested in us—is carbon atoms—but as *meaning* the world is interested in us, in itself: birds have their favorite trees and us our favorite birds. (I use MEANING as a gerundive.)

however, someone built its matter into a house. Someone not only made it a house by name, but someone made themselves a house.

LXXX

What we realize as we get at (near) meaning is how our thinking, action, living—*vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*—are guided by the *meaning* and material world we live in. When simultaneously certain matter is and things are, we can grasp that our lived experience takes place as much in the material medium as in the medium of meaning. In loving examination and engagement with meaning we can appreciate also that *we* make meaning, inexorably shaping this medium of our world even as we carve tunnels through hillsides. Again, I say: When we appeal to language or meaning we appeal to ourselves and the many ways we've meant and we mean, the many ways we've used and are using language. So, let us not suppose false divinity to language. It is us.

LXXXI

The matter of our world, its material condition, does not ask us to deny ourselves the joy that we engage in a world of things, merely asks us to be proud that we make them so.

So, you encounter a rock. Why is that collection of matter a rock? Why not a boulder? Pebble? Why not a shard of a mountain? I say this not to have you doubt your way through the world. I say this to bring you back to your gut understanding.

LXXXII

We see matter in a new light: we see, and we *see as*. And in this gut urge of ours to see the very same matter as a thing and *as* two different things (that is, to see a thing and to see a thing *as* multiple things) is our very urge towards play. Please, do not deprive yourself of playful elation.

LXXXIII

Ludwig, you ask: “Do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way?”¹⁰⁰ And you answer: “I’m inclined to say the former ... To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state.”^{101,*} But I ask: Is seeing really not doing? Is seeing really passive? Must

* May I observe, Ludwig, that your phrasing implies to “only” interpret is somehow less valuable than to “really” see, which implicitly suggests that being more real makes them more valuable. So, the attachment you have to the

the passive be separate from the active? And I answer: What we make or do is not separate from what is given to us.

Matter is all that is given to us. All beyond matter we* make. Ludwig, you say we see “something,”¹⁰² by which you get about as close as linguistically possible to pointing at the matter of the thing. But this thing is yet matter. Matter is all that is given to us to fumble, play with, build. Ludwig, you make it seem as though we have not managed to see the very same collection of atoms as a thing (that is, that we have not managed to see a thing), let alone that we have managed to *see it as* two different things. Beyond matter, we† make. Seeing is active: it is doing something. Seeing is not an implicitly passive state.

LXXXIV

How can an account of *seeing as* be successful if it fails to recognize precisely what makes *seeing as* remarkable?

While it is not rare that the same matter can be seen as two different things—this happens all the time in life—Ludwig, you approach the phenomenon of *seeing as* with such an utter lack of surprise that you miss how remarkable seeing‡ is itself. You miss how remarkable it is that we can make meaning. But without surprise, Ludwig, how do you nourish your amazement? *Do* you nourish your amazement? It is amazement that sustains me, sustains my gut urge so that I do not forget I am an agile and ardent maker of meaning. If it is not amazement that we nourish, what will be the impetus for us to remember that the atoms themselves are not suddenly different *and* to remember that those atoms have a contingent, and not necessary, link to the thing we see and the things we *see them as*. Do we want to make it so *very* easy for us to forget such vital deeds?

pursuit of tangible things leads you to have reflexive esteem for seeing real things and reflexive disregard for interpretation. I find this worrisome, for it surrenders the acknowledgement of our agency and imagination in order to strengthen the idea of objective or tangible reality. Also, I do recognize that we may read DIFFERENT as modifier of either SOMETHING or SEE. However, given your use of ONLY and REALLY, I feel I can safely read DIFFERENT as modifying SOMETHING.

* Here, WE is living beings.

† Living beings.

‡ Of course, regardless of sighted capacity this sort of seeing is available to all—it is metaphorically our capacity for meaning.

LXXXV

Ludwig, may I say that you seem afraid that if we let ourselves recognize that seeing and *seeing as* are things that we actively do—perhaps even that we choose—then we may forsake our shared world? Afraid that if these glimpses, flashes, lights of *seeing as* are not passive but instead active, then we may recognize our own gut understanding and choose a particular incandescent hue, isolating ourselves in those shadows away from others.

It frightens me too (and we can hold hands if it helps) but I take courage that this is the risk of living and being alive. In being, in being appearing creatures, and in being appearing creatures among fellows within a world warped by semblances – in living, we are courageous. The courage is because of the risk. And I do not know what good it will do us to pretend that there is no risk, that we are passive. I do not think any game of pretend will insure us against arrogant or timid choices, against fearful exodus. Why not, then, tell ourselves what it is that we do so well?

It is not the thing that changes with the flitting of the light. We do not look at matter and have things appear to us while we are in a state of *seeing as*. It is not simply that we are all subject to unpredictable changes of light, so share in the same medium. It is not that when light changes with no concern for our behest, we have a shared language, even if it is haphazard. It is not that we must—by way of shared language—be among others.

LXXXVI

Ludwig, we *are* among others. No linguistic premise keeps us among others. We make that choice. And no linguistic premise will prevent those who cannot bear the risk of a plural life, one that demands courage, from secluding themselves. There is no logical or simple solution to our human, our living, condition. There is only the important solution: that we must foster courage, bind ourselves to one another in the tethers that last. Ludwig, we *are* among others, and it is so wonderful. We have theaters and concert halls, and we collect birthday cards from our mailboxes.

Ludwig, we *are* among others. And we do not get to doubt that we are among others unless we doubt it with our whole hearts, our every deed. To doubt that we are among others is to give up birthday cards and Beyonce. Who do you know who is willing to do this? But even for those so willing, no easy solution can protect our meaningful world, can keep us among others. We require an important solution.

LXXXVII

But, first, let us applaud what we do so well: We look at matter and see things and then *see as* other things. We create and choose particular ways of seeing in the ways we habitually navigate our world. We make that world, we make ourselves and each other, we fill that world with plentiful items.

LXXXVIII

Seeing is active. Of course, activity and passivity sometimes meld—action can still be influenced by predisposition—but this does not prevent us from recognizing the active nuance present in all our seeing, in all our meaning.

Children so well fashion themselves their dolls houses out of whatever is at hand.¹⁰³ And us older, more wearied people see a child crouched over their wooden chest, immersed in imagination as they move twined cornhusks as treasured friends. Through the child's play we come to *see as*, though they are seeing. A parent, focused upon getting dinner onto the table and, in the meantime, finishing folding and putting away yesterday's laundry might struggle more than us to *see as*, might resist this childish seeing. Perhaps midway through the (inevitable) argument that the toys *need* to move because *that's* where the towels go, the parent might get a flashing glimpse of the chest *as* a dollhouse in full turreted, Victorian glory. Perhaps.

This, I think, is not a reason to drag our heels in further that seeing, mean-ing, is passive. This prompts us to realize how neglecting our gut urge—forgetting that we have such a gut understanding—ennervates it.

LXXXIX

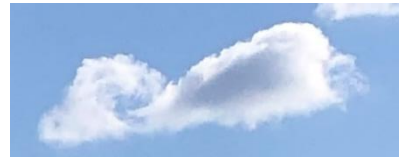
In any given moment, seeing and *seeing as* may not involve the sort of exercise of gut understanding, urge—the feeling of doing something—that we are accustomed to having when we move our fingers or legs. It may feel easy, like no effort at all. But I have practiced *years* for this ease. As have you, Ludwig. As have all of us. I have babbled, put words and names to my world, learned a language, grown my vocabulary, played with riddles, had my words and pronunciation and grammar corrected, I have imbibed my alphabet, refined my motor skills, internalized my mother syntax and punctuation: I have spent years speaking and living. I am not new at this. I have learned that my mother is not yours and that we call her, think of her, by different names. The ease I feel proves my practice. I flick between visions not because they are restless before me. I can flick between visions because I have looked out at the world from hundreds of vantages, mistakenly *seen as* or not *seen as* more times and

ways than I can count, and finally honed my reflexes into lightning acuity. In the given moment when I feel at utter ease, let me remember the stubborn tears I shed not wanting to learn to read.

XC

Still sometimes, while I am cloud watching I feel that I see a whale *unmistakably*. I feel that. this. cloud. is. a. whale. with. out. room. for. ar. gu. ment. Look. See?¹⁰⁴

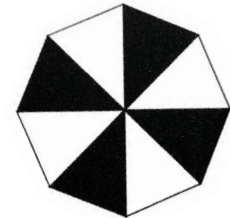
In these moments, things feel given. In these moments I forget that this cheerful whale swimming in the blue sky is the fruit of my efforts. (And the evolutionary efforts of many more beings than I.)



XCI

Take the double cross¹⁰⁵—an octagon divided by lines, which bisect each of its angles and converge at its center, into triangles that are alternately shaded black and white.¹⁰⁶

Ludwig, you say that this figure can be *seen as* a black cross on a white background or *as* a white cross on a black background; you say this can switch.¹⁰⁷ Still you present *seeing as* as a sort of either/or. Either we see it as the black cross, or we see it as the white cross.



XCII

But, Ludwig, when I look at the double cross, I see a bird's-eye view of an umbrella. If I want, I can see the black cross, and if I want, I can see the white. I can even switch rapidly back and forth between the black cross and the white cross. Yet, I am not inclined to do so; I would *much* rather settle upon seeing a bird's-eye picture of an umbrella. Switching between the two crosses does not produce the umbrella, like some sort of compromise; in fact, before I saw the figure as either cross, I first saw it as an umbrella. However, switching between the crosses does highlight my desire to see the figure as I wish because I remember that I do not need to make any switch at all. I *can* flip back and forth, or I can see all of it ... just somewhat differently. In seeing the umbrella, I get to include both the black and white crosses as positive figures rather than relegate one or the other to being left out in the rain. I get to: I choose to. I do. We cannot deny that we *do*, in fact, shape how we see things; we are not completely at the mercy of shifting light. Indeed, we are not at the mercy of the shifting light.

XCIII

Earlier I asked: Do we want to make it so *very* easy for us to forget such vital deeds? Now, I ask: Do we want to account for our ability to see an umbrella even when we are expected to see crosses?

Of course, we are constrained by the things we have yet encountered others make and the things we have made, but we possess our gut understanding, urge as we determine the patterns and habits of seeing that we wish to have. Sometimes someone else may point out the white cross before we see it, but that does not diminish our imaginative capacity to stray from normative vision. This seems, to me, the point. This is what we should not let ourselves forget. In fact, remembering our gut urge will help us also remember that it is not the references that shift, but rather us, as we choose which things to see and draw contingent links between atoms and meaningful language.

XCIV

Ludwig, I know we disagree. You say:

(The temptation is to say ‘I see it like *this*’, pointing to the same thing for ‘it’ and ‘this’.) Always get rid of the idea of the private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you don’t notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you.¹⁰⁸

While I understand why you approach *seeing as* in this way, I disagree that distrust (of ourselves and the inner thoughts we may deceive ourselves of) is the solution. It can be easy to regard an intangible sight as private—as a harbinger of exodus—but this in itself ought not make us wary of the intangible. Ludwig, I think you are missing the point. Your focus on preventing even the slightest possibility of private exodus leads you to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Is it *so* vital that there be absolutely, positively, utterly no crevice for private language to survive? Are we willing to neglect our gut urge as meaning makers and users of language?

Certainly, I am not.

XCV

My inclination is that meaning and attention are intimately connected. We hold reality—*meaning** and material—by our interaction, by engaging. We cultivate meaning in how we tend to the world. Remember: reality is the claim on our thinking attention. We create realness in the very act of our attending to our surroundings.

* I use MEANING as a gerundive.

XCVI

Meaning is bound up in how we make our way, navigate through the world. A thing's meaning—that is, the meaning we give a thing—is bound up in how we interact with it: how we use it.

Donald,* you distinguish between the meaning of language and its use. Metaphor, you say, deals only with use.¹⁰⁹ Other ways of speaking, plain ways, assemble their meanings 'truthfully' but metaphor and ways like it are 'merely' about interaction. But I disagree. Does—or can—meaning persist without interaction? Donald, do the defined meanings of the words stay obediently in place the way you say they do?

I ask: What is a thing's meaning other than what the thing[†] strictly is? What is the meaning of certain matter other than what the matter is?

XCVII

Let me, as best I can, summarize Troika's 2013 sculpture *Squaring the Circle* by way of approaching this question:¹¹⁰

Bent steel tubes wrapped in black, light-absorbent flock flannel are seamlessly interconnected to form the contour of a continuous three-dimensional polygon; this figure is suspended mid-air by nearly invisible wires.¹¹¹ Stand facing the sculpture head-on from one side and it appears that an impeccably even and perpendicular square floats several feet off the floor. Walk to the opposite side of the sculpture and face it head-on; now a perfectly round circle appears to hover in the same place. All trace of the square has vanished. Stop halfway between the two vantage points and face the sculpture. From here, a three-dimensional polygon appears, which traces the edges of the sort of shape that a ship's sail would make if it was pinned by each of its four corners and caught full of wind; that is, two horizontal parabolas meet two perpendicular, sideways-vertical parabolas to intersect in four points that mark the corners of a square on an invisible vertical plane.¹¹²



* Donald Davidson.

† Thinghood is, of course, already bound up in meaning, I use THING to get at what is not literally tangible in speech: matter.

(At this point, we have not yet given any bearing to the title SQUARING THE CIRCLE. But if we do allow the matter this name, then we connect this matter with the idiom TO SQUARE THE CIRCLE, meaning to do the impossible, that developed out of the unsolvable geometrical problem.)¹¹³

XCVIII

The matter of *Squaring the Circle* (its physical, tangible form) is best seen from the halfway vantage point, for its skeleton is fully visible.* Neither the image of a square nor of a circle communicates what hangs before the viewer. Even though no part of the sculpture is exactly hidden when it appears as a circle or appears as a square, both the square and the circle are, in a sense, illusory. Yet, the sculpture's form visible at the halfway vantage has little to do with *Squaring the Circle*. Rather, *Squaring the Circle* is almost entirely concerned with the two opposite shapes of a circle and a square.

Squaring the Circle's physical form has significant relevance to the meaning of the sculpture only how the sculpture accomplishes what it does without changing—it remains fixed. The meaning of *Squaring the Circle* is beyond what it is beneath our palms, is beyond the matter. The meaning is that: what the sculpture is urges us to place ourselves in multiple vantage points, reconcile each perspective, and to, from there, consider the reconciliation of this plurality. *Squaring the Circle* demonstrates the effort we exert when we make meaning.

XCIX

I could not see *Squaring the Circle* as a circle without physically positioning myself, that is, choosing to pursue that sight. Nor could I see it as square without moving myself to that vantage point. Nor could I appreciate the genius of the sculpture—that it is one seamless, static form—without choosing to stand in the right spot. When we *see as*, we exercise an amazing capacity, gut urge. Unrelated to atomic changes in our matter, we construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct new and different contexts in which to see and find meaning in the same physical matter. This gut urge exists only in the intangible, shared, *meaning*[†] world we have made together. When we understand how much of our lives depend on being, moving, speaking together, how much can any of us really desire an exodus into private language? How seriously are we willing to take this threat that some might desire private language?

* I say SKELETON here not to falsely prioritize the innards over appearance, but to convey the shape and matter of *Squaring the Circle*.

† I use MEANING as a gerundive.

Indulging this fear in the way you do, Ludwig, entertaining this desire to eradicate the possibility of private language leads us to forget our gut urge and to ignore the ways we make and remake the mutual (although intangible) world we construct together. Ludwig, remember that we get no initial choice to be among others. This choice is only possible if we choose wholeheartedly to relinquish our plurality with all its gifts; and, even then, I am not certain that such a choice is not death. Tell me, do you bake all your own bread? Do you live your life honestly without company, companions?*

C

Seeing as is among the jeweled crowning capacities of shared meaning. For there would be no opportunity to *see* anything *as* something without there first being mutually habituated patterns of seeing. Plural as we are, our engagement with others shapes our approach to understanding and seeing the world—it makes different worlds out of the same matter. We are not passive in any of this nor should we pretend to be. I fear that if we do, we encourage some misanthropic malcontents among us to choose to isolate themselves so that they need not contend with the implications and courage of their own intrinsically plural existence.

CI

What is meaning? My working idea is that meaning is a process of reconciliation. The Latin word *reconcilare*, from which RECONCILE and RECONCILIATION derive,^{114, 115} is constructed of *re-* (“back,” “backwards,” and “again”)¹¹⁶ and *concilare* (“to combine, unite physically in thought or feeling, ... to cause to meet”)¹¹⁷ from *concilium* (“convocation”), a compound of *con-* (“together”) and *cal-* (“to call”).¹¹⁸ All put together, *reconcilare* is “to bring back into friendship or agreement, to bring back into harmony, to win back, re-establish, restore.”¹¹⁹ Drawing upon Proto-Indo-European roots, RECONCILE roughly suggests: to bend back and call near again.¹²⁰ Whatever rhyme or reason there may have been for an initial assembly, to reconcile is to summon that gathering for the time being. This, I think, speaks to the experiential evolution of language—how sounds and symbols attach to meanings and objects only through patterned usage, and how (at least that we know) these patterns may grow out of coincidence. I use the term RECONCILIATION to identify the process or act that removes disconnect between two (or more) things that are intimately, but arbitrarily, related. To

* Etymologically: with bread—as in someone with whom you eat. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “companion, *n.*,” March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37402>.

reconcile is to enact this process. With this definition, I use RECONCILIATION much in the same way we ordinarily do.

CII

Please forgive for the repetition, but once more:

We frequently encounter multiple views, names for the same matter. Faced with ♡ (*bedeutung*) I can call it ANIMAL, CREATURE, BIRD, WATERFOWL (all signs with *sinn*) as easily as I might call it DUCK.¹²¹ Suffice to say, ♡ has no single correct name or meaning; it does not *necessarily* connect to any word or meaning. Perhaps with the exception of onomatopoeia, no reference *necessarily* connects to any name or meaning. This is the disconnect: the rift. At a basic level, this rift arises from the fact that BIRD^{SIGN} and the flying animal, i.e., ♡, are not one and the same. Here we must differentiate between a bird and ♡, or the thing that we would call a BIRD. Though genetically identical, a bird (identified as such) already carries with it a connection between sign, *bedeutung*, and *sinn* while ♡ does not. I use RECONCILE to refer to the establishment of this intimate and arbitrary relationship between things, which are not the same. In the case of ♡, we reconcile BIRD^{SIGN} and the actual ♡.

CIII

Perhaps *the* peculiar challenge of philosophy of language is that language cannot acquaint us with the matter of our world in any satisfactory substitute way to how actually living in the world can. But then, the matter of our world is no satisfactory substitute for the meaningful, linguistic living we do. So, we are constantly reaching, touching things to our lips and words, and extending our hands from lips to our things. Children chase pigeons without regard for feathers in teeth. And we older children reach out to let flying things, butterflies and hummingbirds, land as near to us as they are willing. We reconcile urgently.

CIV

George,* you have the piercing insight that IS is immediate, but you have it the wrong way round when you make IS principally an insistence upon identity rather than existence. You say: “I may discover that XI is eleven, or that 11 is 7 + 4. Evidently such identifications do not intend to identify two terms in their immediacy.”¹²² I would say that such identifications *exactly* intend to identify two terms in their

* George Santayana.

immediacy. Perhaps I am confusing semantics, but immediacy strikes me as the most basic impulse of these identifications. Almost as though we are placing counters in someone's hand and pressing them close to help communicate that these four marbles and these seven marbles *are* eleven marbles. (My reader, how I wish I was near you, able to press a marble into your palm.)

And, George, you say:

The identity is that of John with himself, an intended and existing object. The sound of his name and his image to sight are converging symbols, both signifying the same living person ... This term posited as identical with itself, is removed from immediacy and belongs to a plane of being believed in by me, which if my animal faith misleads me need not exist at all.¹²³

Again, is it not immediacy?

CV

My reader, I ask: "Where's John?" You respond by pointing him out to me. The expressions of pure demonstratives—pointed fingers, gestured waves—embody immediacy. In your response you are trying to get me closer, you are literally reaching towards John.

CVI

George, you say: "the immediate is always with us."¹²⁴ But you say this to explain that we have such interest in the choices we make between equivalent things because we experience equivalent things and words differently. True—absolutely true. Fahrenheit orients me to our bodies where Celsius orients me to the water I live off. However, it *is* immediacy that we are trying to grasp when we fumble over these metric-to-imperial conversions. In some way, we are still pressing marbles into palms and hoping that our meaning is made. We are touching, reconciling. These are tangible acts.

Even our word here, IMMEDIATE, conveys our meaning; it derives from the Latin *immediātus*, which carries the sense: to not in the middle.^{125, 126} We cross the middle by our touches and reaches and make there no middle.

CVII

George, you insist essences are not existence because they do not occupy space in the natural world¹²⁷ and because essence is given-to-us—singular and set—while existence is in "the flux of nature."¹²⁸ (Of course, essences here are the rigid sort of things we can never get our hands on.) By this, you say

meaning is not in existence. *And* by this, you say meaning is rigid, unchanging, and outside of “the flux of nature.”¹²⁹ So, you describe approaching a thing:

Its hidden nature, whatever it may be, is embodied in existence, and turned from an eternal essence into a fact when it is caught somewhere in the net of time, space, evolution, derivation, and association. Lying myself in the same context, I can turn to it by groping; and on coming into material contact with it, I may have rapid and varied intuitions supplying me with various notes, in the terms of my personal senses and emotions, which are my comment on it; perhaps it appears to be something small, black, rapidly moving, and unpleasant. . . . But since I have only my chance intuitions by which to describe that object, I am tempted to assign existence, for the nonce to this accidental description, as if it were the true essence of the thing.¹³⁰

How beautifully you phrase this gripping process by which we, in the fluctuating world that we always occupy, grapple and fumble with our surroundings. But then, George, you dismiss our grappling account as well as our temptation to find existence in things which we touch and things which impress and leave impressions upon us. You dismiss our temptation as though temptation is simply something to resist. George, do you honestly want us alienated from our instinct towards immediacy as we wrestle meaningfully?

CVIII

Our temptation to attribute existence to the things with which we grapple articulates the primacy of tangible things, of immediacy. We desire to get close to the world around us and we reassure ourselves of the world in touches and reaches and in pressing our discoveries into our palms to explore and compare them. Although meaning is not matter, meaning is embodied in material gestures. Meaning is indeed made.

CIX

Immediacy is not only a fundamental impulse—gut urge—but is also the means by which we make meaning and engage linguistically. Expressions of pure demonstratives—pointed fingers, gestured waves—convey immediacy and embody IS. If you are trying to tell me that the morning star is the evening star, Hesperus is Phosphorous,¹³¹ is there any sentence more effective and apt than a pointed finger extended either to sky or to star chart? It is more than mere emphasis that explains why we point when we ask: “What’s that?” I am coming to think that our pointing may not only get at THAT

but also at the contracted IS in our question. In our gestures, in our urge to gesture, we are doing our best to reassure ourselves and our listeners that we are speaking about reality. Thus, we are referencing continually back to existence—not in order to place stationary counters on fluctuating things but rather to remind ourselves that the flux of our meanings entwines with the flux of existence such that we cannot feasibly distinguish or separate either from the other. Each shapes the other. We navigate meaning and existence by proximity and handholds.

CX

In making tangible meaning and meaning of tangible things, we are not limited to mere self-reference. We are creative creatures. Much of the meaning we make involves simultaneous immediacy and juxtaposition, juxtaposition and immediacy. We put a caterpillar next to a butterfly, we point between a newborn and a stomach, and then we verbalize these same gestures in increasingly complex ways.

CXI

In language, though we are often touching, we are also so often pointing.

CXII

Again, under the Flammarion-sky¹³² you stand on grass, a rocky chasm before you at the tips of your toes, so wide you are not certain you can leap to the opposite bank. It is wide enough you could not materially cross it. Standing beside you, you have your interlocutor with you. You know precisely the bit on the opposite bank to which you want to get your interlocutor and yourself. But you cannot safely get yourselves there materially. The rift is wide. So, by gesture, you get at that place, drawing on all you have done yet alive. You cast towards the other bank so that your interlocutor may get there with you. You cast without any thrown projectile: gesture and motion only. And you trust that your gesture will be enough.

CXIII

Our pointing seems the theme, my mentors, of your problems and cases.

To answer these questions of identity, which in life we resolve tangibly, you devoted philosophers search for lasting mathematical equations. But equations enervate our basic gut urge. Stable equations lure us into passivity as though we may sit by and let the symbols and syntax sort themselves out. Mathematics is not life. And these hiccups in language that you labor over, my

mentors, these hiccups are not the problems you treat them as. You struggle with the tenuous link between the linguistic and the material world because the world is linguistic *and* material. It resists your easy solutions. We do not live by equations, by Q.E.D. In life, an equals sign cannot fix the referencetangibly. Rather, we call out to one another, pen our names, change them even, remind ourselves where the oft-misplaced keys go, and baptize our children, gifting them names they can be proud to wear. We point out each other. We engage plurally. Saul,* do we not?¹³³

These problems you—we—labor over require lived solutions, important fixes not Q.E.D. ones. I think it is time we pull Pierre out of his misery and tell him about London.¹³⁴

CXIV

Hiccups are not problems. I say this so you may prepare to see that which so trouble you, not at problems and mistakes but rather as opportunities.

CXV

We cast and point in strange and generous ways. As we wander and navigate the world with varied interlocutors and companions beside us, we encounter unfamiliar places and return to even familiar places anew, by myriad approach and reapproach. We become habituated but are always novitiates. The successes of our pointing come from our resilience and persistence, not from safe attempts.

CXVI

You stand on grass, overlooking a rocky chasm. Beside you stands your interlocutor. And you know precisely the spot on the opposite bank to which you want to get your interlocutor and yourself. So you cast.

Now sometimes the chasm you attempt to cross is hardly noticeable—a crack—and sometimes is a canyon. Sometimes you cast six different ways, triangulating twice between the surroundings to get at your sought spot on the other bank. Other times your arc lands precisely and your interlocutor and you find that your lob has flung both of you, with it, to where you were pointing. We cast in exacting and missed arcs. You smile, your feet firm upon fresh, untrodden grass.

* Saul Kripke.

CXVII

I admit, my mentors, that this pointing and casting business is tricky and we may get some gestures wrong. I promise we will. This business of identity, immediacy, and reconciliation is tricky too. I promise you we will get some names wrong. But again, this is the endeavor of living. These are the risks we take.

From this it does not follow that all appearances are mere semblances. Semblances are possible only in the midst of appearances; they presuppose appearance as error presupposes truth. Error is the price we pay for truth, and semblance is the price we pay for the wonders of appearance. Error and semblance are closely connected phenomena; they correspond with each other.¹³⁵

Error, semblances, mistakes, feeble throws, and missteps onto our quaking bogs abound. They always will.

CXVIII

Error, semblances, mistakes, feeble throws, and missteps abound and trouble us philosophers of language deeply. My mentors, sometimes I hear quavers in your voices that make me wonder how well you trust in your own abilities to speak and be understood. My mentors, sometimes I worry that you do not contend well with such missteps. You turn to your scribblings, equations, and your maps. So occupied are you—are we—with finding a steady, lasting solution that we often overlook the important fix.

CXIX

My mentors, I said at the beginning that you have inscribed well in all of us that language is a medium in which we seek to communicate truths about the world to each other with as little interference as possible. You have inscribed this so well in yourselves. My mentors, I watch you searching for the objects of meaning and language: for meaning and language as objects. You think they stay in place. And again, I recall the story you tell, Jorge Luis:^{*}

... In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupies the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of the Province. In time those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers

* Jorge Luis Borges.

Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, which coincided point for point with it.¹³⁶

My mentors, not only does this map obscure the grass and prevent our dancing but it will forever miss its mark. For the blades of grass move with the wind and beneath our feet; and, when we take a breath from this metaphor, we must admit we know ourselves too well to think the stubborn and precocious among us will not lift up the corners of our cartography and insist on dancing.

CXX

And yet, my mentors, you commission ambitious cartography. I watch you do this, and I wonder what you are after, what will finally satisfy you. Do you even know?

George, set yourself after a near-fanatical search and survey, which I fear could fatigue even the indefatigable. You say:

Whether the claim to existence made on behalf of any object is just or not is a question that can never be decided by analyzing the given description of what is said to exist, but only by exploring the flux of nature, by experience or testimony, until the region in which the existing thing is alleged to lie (for if it exists it must lie somewhere) is thoroughly explored, and I can judge whether my original description, granting my terms and my circumstances, was a fair description of what actually lies there.¹³⁷

And that:

A very inadequate designation of the object ... may be perfectly correct and sufficient for human purposes; but the places and times ... in which the existence of such an object would be unmistakably manifested must be definitely fixed; otherwise the *existence* of the object, the very point in question, would not be broached at all; for it is idle to say that a thing does or does not exist; if I do not say when or where it is to be met with in the world of action.¹³⁸

Yes, the claim to existence is not decided by analysis. But George, the claim to existence relies on trust—faith—rather than upon complete and comprehensive cross-checking of descriptions and data. The life you ask of us is not one I can abide. And, yes, partial designations do suffice for us. But, George, we do not require exacting instruction and explanation to find our way to the things in our world. I get most places I intend to go just fine. George, where do you seek to go that you get so lost? That you cling to maps so strongly?

CXXI

My mentors, you set yourselves after highly demanding surveys, catalogs, and then revisions of our existent and linguistic lives. I cannot abide the life you ask of me, for I get where I am going too well to muster the doubt you have. More, I worry about the obsessive revision your conclusions seem to demand.

I think that we can get trust in existing things without first needing dictionary- or encyclopedia-ready accounts of them. My simple engagement and closeness—my immediacy—with things most often suffices. In life, we do not require the formal agreement we sometimes prefer in our philosophy for its comfort it brings us. In life, functional agreement—how we interact with things and one another—very often gives us the trust we need.

CXXII

If it is not cartography or equations we consult, how then do we trust ourselves with meaning, with language? How do we muster our faith? If it is all so tenuous, how do we sustain our courage for this faith?

CXXIII

You stand on grass and cast across the chasm with only the faith that you will make your meaning and that if you do not—as you may not—you may still attempt anew.

CXXIV

We cast with only the faith that we will make our meaning and that, if we do not, we may attempt anew. We warrant out faith through practice and through misstep.

CXXV

My mentors, I hear the quiet quavers in your voices. I am sorry to wrest you from your certainty and stability. Please know, I do this because it is important. It is important, first, that you love yourselves proudly for all that you do. It is important that we all recognize what we do so we may love ourselves proudly for all that we do. But also, it is important because your doubt is not only about your words. Your doubt, my mentors, is about how we are to live together. This is why we must forge forward onto quaking bogs, courageous without certainty.

CXXVI

My mentors, I must ask you to relinquish your equals signs and to honestly and openly delve into meaning. Let us not begin where you are comfortable. *Plain language* has got its due many times over.

Though we cast always—*plainly* and *playfully*—we are so accustomed to the narrow hurdles we hop that we usually do not notice our own leaping. *Playful language* refuses to be ignored, demands our attending, insists we take pride in our own agility. Let us look at *playful language* so we must contend with our casting. In the material and meaning world we occupy, *playful language* points and touches no differently than we do. We are looking at nothing else but ourselves.

CXXVII

Donald, you ask: “If metaphor has special cognitive content why should it be so difficult or impossible to set it out?”¹³⁹ And I can only laugh.

I laugh, Donald, because you think that meaning is different from use. You say that metaphor continues to refer to the ordinary meanings of its words.¹⁴⁰ You say that metaphor has a force that outlasts the sheer intrigue of ambiguity.¹⁴¹ You say metaphor requires a change to how its words are taken.¹⁴² You say that metaphor cannot be too apparent.¹⁴³ You say that metaphor has no *one* concrete interpretation attached to it, but rather intimates many. You say that metaphor operates via the same conventions as ordinary (*plainer*) language.¹⁴⁴ So, metaphor has no special railways built for it. But then, Donald, you go and say that metaphor ought to be evaluated as true or false.¹⁴⁵ And so you say that: “What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use.”¹⁴⁶ I laugh because you are mistaking meaning.

CXXVIII

You ask, Donald: “If metaphor has special cognitive content why should it be so difficult or impossible to set it out?”¹⁴⁷ Then you ask: “why should it be that when we try to get explicit about what it means, the effect is so much weaker?”¹⁴⁸ And you follow these with a third question: “Finally, if words in metaphor bear a coded meaning, how can this meaning differ from the meaning those same words bear in the case where the metaphor *dies*—that is, when it comes to be part of the language?”¹⁴⁹

To your first question: The fact that something is hard to do *is not* a strong enough reason to conclude that it cannot be done. To both your first and second questions: Is it really *that* important to precisely parse whatever it is that metaphor communicates? You presume that if there is a special cognitive content of metaphor, then you should be able to set it out explicitly. In a certain way, I think

this points to fundamental aspects of human curiosity. We want to see and grasp the objects of our interest. It is frustrating when we cannot. Nevertheless, in another way, your presumption points to philosophy of language's logical roots. Roots that, unless we challenge them, predispose us to expect that the objects of our thoughts will (and should) possess singularity, permanence, and stasis. To your third question, my reply is much the same: Language is flexible. Philosophers of language cannot deny this, and we actually have a responsibility to account for this elasticity.

CXXIX

Donald, you say: "as much of metaphor as can be explained in terms of meaning may, and indeed must, be explained by appeal to literal meanings of words."¹⁵⁰ You say this the way I would say: As much of meaning—the engagement we do—is inexorable from our appeals to the matter of our world. But, you see, Donald, we do not say the same.

Meaning is not fixed and is not any literal object. You say that we use meaning—that meaning is different than use—because you see meaning as an object. Donald, do you not make appeals to literal meaning? And you too, George? You say: "Words ... are wise men's counters."¹⁵¹ And also: "Language is a by-product of animal life which may eventually serve as a record or as an instrument."¹⁵² You think they stay in place. You think they lie await for you somewhere, if only you can find them.

CXXX

My mentors, I watch you searching for the objects of meaning and language: for meaning and language as objects. You think that if you search enough, survey correctly, then you shall find these bejeweled meanings lying in wait for you, scattered to the ends of the Earth. Donald, George, my mentors, you will never be satisfied.

My trusted, trusted mentors, you make these appeals to literal meaning and language. You see language and meaning as things of the sorts of things that stay put where we place them. In my experience meaning rarely stays put. Still, I sympathize with your impulse. How lovely to imagine that beautiful set, given-to-me treasure lies hidden for me to dig it up. Alas, it is not so.

CXXXI

I laugh again, Donald, when you say: "intimation is not meaning."¹⁵³ How is it that you have so little faith in us?

CXXXII

Donald you struggle to explain how metaphor manages to get recognized as a different sort of usage and to carry a special “force.”¹⁵⁴ It being difficult, you resort to your tried and traditional truth values. So, you propose that: “Generally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implication.”¹⁵⁵ However, “patent truth” sometimes also joins “patent falsity” in this.¹⁵⁶ Thus: “Absurdity or contradiction in a metaphorical sentence guarantees we won’t believe it and invites us, under proper circumstances, to take the sentence metaphorically.”¹⁵⁷ Oh-so-generously, Donald, you do not deny us metaphorical truth, only deny that sentences have metaphorical truth¹⁵⁸ You grant us this leeway, however, only because you find “no reason ... not to say” metaphor leads us to notice things that are true or false.¹⁵⁹

Donald, I am very puzzled by you. Have you read Emily Dickinson? Laughed at Shakespeare’s innuendos? You must have felt the elation—utter *fun*—of play and *playful language*. And still, you maintain your desire to contextualize all language use within a valuative system?

You tell us that if a metaphor can be found true or false in the ordinary sense, “then it is clear that it is usually false.”¹⁶⁰ You say, I think, cavalierly, that in the ordinary sense “all similes are true and most metaphors are false.”¹⁶¹ Yes, lest we spoil it, the out-of-the-ordinary significance, if not special meaning of metaphor cannot be made “all too obvious and accessible.”¹⁶² Yes, to reduce metaphor to merely similarities trivializes it, since “everything is alike, and in endless ways,”¹⁶³ And yes, metaphors must be more than newly-coined definitions so that it does not become the case that “to make a metaphor is to murder it.”¹⁶⁴ Yes, metaphor carries a special force.¹⁶⁵ But, *no!* It is not patent falsity, or patent truth that makes us take a phrase as a metaphor.

CXXXIII

“The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.”¹⁶⁶ And, Donald, would you tell me that this is mere patent truth—so obvious we know to not take it as truth? Because I want to tell you that so much more is happening here.

CXXXIV

You search for this special force in stable, singular and set objects: in words alone, without even our exertion of inhalation, exhalation. Donald, you lack faith in us.

CXXXV

It is not a matter of interpretation that makes us take a sentence as a metaphor. There is not a hidden, special meaning *in* the words of a metaphor; for words are not the literal objects that you appeal to, Donald. Instead, we are cued to extraordinary context. So, what is it that cues us?

I think it is a markedly different thing to say that we are cued to metaphorical (or *playful*) context than it is to say that we take something as metaphorical. Donald, in being cued for the extraordinary, our sense of surprise persists—I can know something special is happening, but this does not give me over to any formula for interpretation nor to any singular and set determination on what is happening. I can yet discover a metaphor, then rediscover it as a pun, then rediscover it again, and again. Contrastly, hunting out the hidden directs us to take a ruthlessly analytic approach to interpreting the metaphor. Donald, extraordinary is not the same as either falsity or obviousness. Sure, patent falsity or patent truth¹⁶⁷ may cue us but they are not the only things that can do so. Plenty of statements still invite us to be playful even though they are neither false nor so obviously true as: Hesperus = Hesperus.

CXXXVI

Rather than interpretation it is anticipation that cues us to not only *playful language* but also *plainer language* and meaning itself. Donald, I laughed because intimation *is* meaning.

CXXXVII

Donald, you are right when you say: “When we try to say what a metaphor ‘means,’ we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention.”¹⁶⁸ You scoff at the notion that “with a metaphor is a is a cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message.”¹⁶⁹ But you say this all wrong, as though associated non-literal meaning produces a THE automatically.

This does need not be an impasse, Donald, and you need not “give up the idea that metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning).”¹⁷⁰ Donald, you need not banish the poets.

CXXXVIII

Donald, you deny the existence of any hidden message in metaphor on the basis that “it is so hard to decide ... exactly what the content is supposed to be.”¹⁷¹ You prize so highly the truth values of your

words that you place additional tax upon language for its playfulness. Because language that plays is more difficult to evaluate, you let the intricacy of its success go unacknowledged and unappreciated, as you do the effort of its audience.

CXXXIX

It is *precisely* the existence of a hidden meaning and the difficulty in discerning it, that leads me to believe that metaphor, humor, and *playful language* as a whole have a hidden complexity.

No, this is not to say that there is necessarily a single hidden message to be grasped in order for the listener to understand the ‘real’ meaning of *playful language*.^{*} In fact, there is no *the* real meaning. Rather, this is to say that there is *something* hidden. Yet, THING is the wrong term. There is not a message to be read; and we should not unnecessarily assume singularity nor set concreteness. Perhaps the better way to say it might be: There is some hiddenness. Or: There is some opportunity for uncovering.[†] Even better: We have an opportunity to uncover.

CXL

Either confusion or surprise or even the vague feeling that something is up, something is happening—think: mulling over a joke and getting it five minutes after—cues us to notice the rift and find a way to reconcile it. In our casting and pointing, we cue.

CXLI

You have no faith, my mentors, in this pointing.

George, you say: “Words ... mark some gain or wager of thought.”¹⁷² And: “Significant speech is a lasso thrown into the air, lucky if it catches some living thing by a leg or by a horn.”¹⁷³ Is it lucky that a poet, dedicated to their craft, plucks at their audience’s soul? Is it lucky that I—more than two decades practiced at this linguistic capacity I evolved for, and which evolved for me—get my meaning across in words? I do not think this is luck. Like me, you recognize the tenuous success of language, but are you not also somewhat waiting for these bets to fall through? Although I too notice when our linguistic hopes do not match up, I do not see fallen bets as failures.

^{*} There is no singular or set meaning.

[†] Uncovering is not limited, as discovery is, to one the first experience. Rather, uncovering allows for continuous discovery and rediscovery.

All speech, meaning, language—not just the significant—involves casting into open air. But in *playful language* we notice our movements for we move differently. We move in ways that ask to be noticed if our cast is to aim well. Please, do not forget that *plain language* is tenuous too. Unless you relinquish the richness of your life gifted by *playful language*, you do not get to trust one and not the other. We honor no shallow doubt.

CXLII

You have no faith, my mentors, in our casting. Without faith, you are right: it is presumptuous for any poet—given all the variability of word use—to anticipate how their audience will receive a metaphor.

Without faith, how does *Squaring the Circle*, imbued with only fabric and metal and (if we allow it) a nice title, manage to so routinely evoke curiosity and synthesis in its audience? There is nothing in what the sculpture *is*—the matter—that does this. The answer, I think, is that the meaning of a thing—thinghood itself, really—cannot be separated from its use and our interaction with it. In this case, meaning is something more than the flat features of words or materials or mere convention—something more than the literal. Meaning is something beyond what the thing strictly is. Use cannot be cleaved from meaning.

CXLIII

Donald, you miss what Ludwig sees: that meaning is bound up in use, that meaning is not singular and set. But you, too, Ludwig, fail to free us from passivity, from meanings given-to-us.

Ludwig, you describe how, on one playing of a minuet, you could “get a lot out of it,” and on another playing of the same minuet, you could “get nothing out of it.”¹⁷⁴ You observe that this effect upon the listener (or even performer) need not be distinct from the thing itself: “it doesn’t follow that what you get out of it [the minuet] is then independent of the minuet.”¹⁷⁵ Meaning need not remain consistent, meaning may rise in tandem with use. As such, meaning is linked with use, context, effect. Meaning, interaction, and reaction are all related. But still, you say they are changing before you:

(The temptation is to say ‘I see it like *this*’, pointing to the same thing for ‘it’ and ‘this’.) Always get rid of the idea of the private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you don’t notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you.¹⁷⁶

Ludwig, you keep us passive.

CXLIV

Ludwig, your contributions should not content us with passive analysis, the eager pointing at the details of our cases and contexts. It ought to pound agency—gut understanding—into our bones as we reckon with the world we are part of. If truth is what we are after, then perhaps we slink back to you, Donald. But as we realize we have spoken our world and its pillars into existence, then perhaps we ought to consider that our faculties and deeds are indeed where our focus should be. We attend to the world and shape it.

CXLV

You stand on grass, your interlocutor beside you. You cast as you look out at the rocky chasm before you. You cast and get your interlocutor and yourself onto the opposite bank. But remember that this is a fabric place and your casts *do* shape it as well, changing everything including that very position on the opposite bank which you were aiming at.

CXLVI

The falling out of our casting, pointing meaning – its tenuous success should not shake our faith that casting and point may launch us across the chasms we face. The successes of meaning affirm our faith as do failures, for they assure us that it is faith.

CXLVII

I believe the difference between simile and metaphor is the difference between meaning and Meaning. I propose that there is a difference between ordinary meaning (lowercase meaning) and specialized Meaning (uppercase meaning). All language requires reconciliation, but *playful language* requires an out-of-the-ordinary reconciliation.

Even in your framework, Gottlob,* language is still a symbolic medium that requires us to reliably connect *sinn* to its sign and to connect both sign and *sinn* to their correspondent *bedeutung*. (If I want to speak about the moon on a cloudy night, I have no demonstratum¹⁷⁷ visible to the naked eye to which I can appeal; I rely on a connective bond between sign, sense, and reference.)

In *plainer language* we develop expectations for how we should reconcile unconnected (or, not obviously connected) words, meanings, and things. These expectations are flexible and in constant

* Gottlob Frege.

flux, but they retain a certain durability, aided by social conventions, linguistic habits, and formal grammatical systems. However, sometimes—deliberately or inadvertently—our use of language defies and/or evades our expectations. At these times, in order to reconcile the rift in language, we begin to examine the systems that we typically rely upon to ease the struggle of meaning-making. This reconciliation and the extensive examination that it requires us to engage in may be, in part, what allows humor (a kind of *playful language*) to function so effectively as a weapon against hypocrisy and dogma. Doubt and reevaluation of ingrained expectations become tools to feed our hunger for reconciled meaning.

CXLVIII

I propose, Donald, that we exchange your term SPECIAL COGNITIVE CONTENT for SPECIAL COGNITIVE EFFORT so we may refocus our attention on what is actually happening in metaphor—in all *playful language*. *Playful language* asks us to make a special type of reconciliation; it requests we exert ourselves, make special cognitive effort, before it will be made sense of. And this special effort is that we notice we are making the extra effort. Just as it becomes harder to walk or ride a bike when we notice and think about what we are doing as we do it, it takes special effort to make meaning while also noticing and thinking about how we are making that meaning. To clarify, *playful language* does not so much *cause* us to make this special effort as *playful language* is the sort of language whose meaning-making begs to be noticed and who thrives only with our attention.

Donald, you want to know what is uncovered, you want to find the special cognitive content. I want to feel, emphasize the rooting, digging, delving; so SPECIAL COGNITIVE EFFORT emphasizes that we exert effort to uncover. It is the uncovering that is important. Let us, then, acknowledge and appreciate our *effort*. Special cognitive effort translates into how expectations are formed, maintained, and challenged, and then what emerges from that challenge.

CXLIX

A. M.,* you argue that making sense of language is not only a matter of interpretation but also a matter of expectation. You say:

In the natural use of language words do not stand for precise meanings, but only offer hints which a hearer must interpret by intelligent guesswork. Somebody utters a sentence and we seek to understand

* A. M. MacIver.

what he means by it; knowledge of the conventions of the language tells us ... only that in a large range of possible meanings there is an order of preference ... out of all the possible meanings we have to guess which the speaker intended to use by the evidence at our disposal. Commonly we do this immediately, for commonly we know what sort of thing a speaker wants to say even before he says it.¹⁷⁸

Expectation, built through experience, supports all meaning. Even more, it demonstrates how, at heart, meaning requires our participation; meaning and use can never be separate. We have expectations all the time, and all the time we exert ordinary effort in order to make sense of the language we encounter. So, it goes for *plainer language*. For *playful language* we engage in special cognitive effort and notice our own effort: creation, frustration, perspiration.

CL

There is a story told about the artist Agnes Martin that I like, which illustrates how attention gives rise to meaning:

The little girl [Isobel] was holding onto a rose ... Agnes Martin took the rose and said to the girl, “Is this rose really beautiful?” And Isobel said yes. And then Agnes Martin hid the rose behind her back and said, “Is the rose still beautiful?” “Yes,” said Isobel. And then Agnes Martin said, “You see, Isobel. Beauty is in your mind, not in the rose.”¹⁷⁹

Agnes, you insist upon giving us agency. The rose is what it is, and it is intimately-related to the meaning we make—this meaning is part of it. But *we* make the meaning. Our attention, sensation, and memory drive any act of meaning-making.

CLI

Hannah, you reference Gertrude Stein’s line: “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.”¹⁸⁰ And you say: “Something smells *like* a rose, tastes *like* pea soup, feels *like* velvet, that is as far as we can go. ‘A rose is a rose is a rose.’”¹⁸¹ You speak about language’s limited ability to directly express the actual character of things, even as our senses immediately understand the feeling of a rose petal, its vivid color, its rich scent. Nonetheless, “rose is a rose is a rose” gets exactly at the issue of meaning beyond the thing itself.

Gottlob, you talk of Hesperus and Phosphorous.¹⁸² Is there any clearer assertion of identity or meaning than $A = A = A = A$? “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.”¹⁸³ But I think that in skilled hands $A = A = A = A$ tells us as much as $A \neq A = A \neq A$. Nimble fingers or tongues can turn this seeming

equivalence on its head and make it suddenly speak about the duality of being (and meaning)—at the same time—both more than a rose and only a rose. One way to understand “a rose is a rose” is to acknowledge that even the roses sprouting from the most florid sonnets are merely blossoms of prickly shrubs. But “a rose is a rose is a rose” suggests something different; it says, that despite the romance about it, a rose is a flower on a thorn bush; *then* it reminds us that the literal rose on a thorn bush is still a *rose*, which continues to hold onto its glorified and romanticized context.

CLII

We can neither describe what something is without appealing directly to that thing, but since a thing exists in the larger context of the world, we cannot speak about its meaning without appealing to the ways in which our interaction with it (and use of it) forms its meanings. There is no Truth to the thing for anyone to grasp. We can only make its meaning through interacting with it.

CLIII

Ludwig, you recount your experience reading Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s poetry. Upon finally *getting* what it was Friedrich was doing, you say: “when I read it in this particular way, intensely, I smiled, said: ‘This is *grand*,’ etc. But I might not have said anything. The important fact was that I read it again and again.”¹⁸⁴ This is an incredible statement: “The important fact was that I read it again and again.” In saying this, you assert that the most authentic affirmation of value is not in our statements but in the dedication of our attention, if not other resources such as time and money, to it. You follow up on this claim when you introduce the term APPRECIATION¹⁸⁵ as a way of speaking about all manner of unqualified and qualified aesthetic judgments. We convey appreciation in giving time and attention to the object of our appreciation.

CLIV

Meaning relates not simply *in parallel* but in connection with the effect of art. Ludwig, you say: “One asks such a question as ‘What does this remind me of?’ ... Various things are suggested; one thing, as you say, clicks.”¹⁸⁶ I think that perhaps the most common experience of this *click* comes in that moment when that flash of insight causes you to finally seize upon the evasive word that had been at the tip of your tongue. This *click* is the sign of satisfaction that indicated “the right thing has happened.”¹⁸⁷ So, there is an intuitive sense of aesthetic satisfaction that we recognize. Aesthetic *reactions* lie along the path to this satisfaction. Aesthetic *discontent* is expressed as: “Make it higher ...

too low! ... do something to this.”¹⁸⁸ In this way, aesthetic discontent prompts us into action with the aim of that *click!*—it is the need to “do something to this.” By contrast, aesthetic *discomfort* refers more to feeling dissatisfaction with something, rather than the need to create satisfaction.

Aesthetic discontent prompts us to try to find a resolution—to achieve the *click*. I think that curiosity may be akin to discontent, and that is precisely what gives *Squaring the Circle* its force in prompting us to walk the whole way around it. It is what urges us to place ourselves in multiple vantage points, to reconcile each perspective, and from there to consider the reconciliation of the plurality of vantages. The sculpture *and* what happens around it—what we do, how we interact—comprise the meaning of *Squaring the Circle*. Its meaning extends beyond what it strictly is. Meaning emerges as we tend to our world.

CLV

Though often translated as IMITATION, *mimēsis* has no true English equivalent; in order to get at *mimēsis*, we must understand action and our capacity for meaning-making. Aryeh,^{*} you differentiate between mimesis and the sort of ordinary meaning-making that occurs in everyday language use:¹⁸⁹ “poetic activity ... is founded on more than the concern with the arbitrarily signifying powers of language. The more ... is iconic imitation, mimesis.”¹⁹⁰ Mimesis is not mere 🐞 and DUCK (though it is that too).

Aristotle, you acknowledge that the preconditions of poetry, our propensity for mimesis and our pleasure at recognizing mimetic objects—are the reasons why we bother to write at all.¹⁹¹ We require an initial familiarity with an object to allow us to later grant it the status of mimetic object; without such familiarity we can only derive pleasure from craftsmanship, color, or the like, but not from mimetic recognition.¹⁹² It would seem to follow that the satisfaction of recognition—reconciliation—is what gives us pleasure. Is mimesis merely symbolic recognition? (For example, the knowledge that although *ceci n'est pas une pipe*,¹⁹³ it is precisely that.) If so, the pleasure of mimesis ought to be possible in all instances of recognition. Certainly, when recognition is new to us (such as the first time a kindergartener reads and comprehends on their own), we do derive pleasure from our accomplishment. However, over time, as such recognition becomes commonplace, this pleasure fades. It is more, then, that mimesis is even as it is intertwined with our instinct for symbolism.

Rather, than symbolism, the loosely-termed imitation of a word to its reference, mimesis gets at imitation as an active capacity: to imitate.

* Aryeh Kosman.

CLVI

Aristotle, you tell us: “mimetic artists portray people in action.”¹⁹⁴ You apply MIMESIS broadly, but you linger on its poetic utility.¹⁹⁵ So, already, you assume that mimesis operates in a fictive sphere. This is crucial. Not only does a fictive sphere separate mimesis from ordinary symbolism, it sets the parameters for the way in which mimesis is active. Mimesis as action is essentially linked to the fictive sphere.

Aristotle, you say mimesis is at its most perfect form in tragedy, when it is mimetic poetry that represents a serious and a complete action that provokes *katharsis* of pity and fear.¹⁹⁶ At its most perfect, Aristotle, you see *mimēsis* urging us towards *katharsis*. No single line of dialogue nor even a heart-wrenching soliloquy elicits catharsis; the whole tragedy, as a complete and unified action,¹⁹⁷ must generate catharsis. It is the action that moves us, not simply pretty words.

CLVII

Of course, action on stage is not the same action that any of us take in our daily lives. We view tragic action only through a “small fixed window”¹⁹⁸ into an invented world, but still we are still genuinely moved and shaken. Perhaps mimesis is the fictional duplication of real-world action that maintains its emotional magnitude throughout this conversion, but I am inclined to say it is something else.

Rather than converting real-world action to fictional action (while preserving its poignance), mimesis produces original fictive action. If we think of the poet as a child, we should not look for mimesis in the accuracy of the invented world. Dolls need not have the miniaturized dexterity of a person for them to mimetically grasp the hilt of the sword and slay the dragon; and the dragon need not imitate any real species in our known world for it, inside of child’s play, to truly breathe fire. Instead, the poet imbues their craft with mimetic action through their act of creation. As with toys, the actual action figures have little to do with the plot or with the meaning of the play; in make-believe a cornhusk might as effectively be the heroine as a perfectly-proportioned animatron.

CLVIII

Mimesis concerns a fictional world related to our world by agency—gut urge—rather than by duplication.¹⁹⁹ So, Aryeh, you invoke the poet Marianne Moore: “The poet creates an imitation speaker who makes real speeches in the imitative world, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them,’ ... not

imaginary toads in gardens that are real.”^{200, 201} As such, the real character of mimesis (and structured storytelling) is the consistent condition of agency throughout the action.

CLIV

Within this context, catharsis is something else than emotional release. Tragedy forces us to examine unexpected, unintended consequences of action, and—even more—unexpected, unintended actions. By means of reversal and recognition, suddenly Oedipus has bedded his mother. What is done is already in the past, but it takes on changed meaning. This is daunting because it fundamentally challenges the assumption of agency we carry throughout our lives. While typically thought of as purgative, Aryeh, you stress the lustrative purpose of catharsis.²⁰² Of course this is not to say catharsis cannot be purgative, but that purgation is not its primary aim. For catharsis to occur, a tragedy must elicit fear and pity in its audience, but this is not the specific fear that we too will bed our parents, nor is it pity for Oedipus’s exploits in this area. Rather, it is the general fear that “goodness of character and goodness of deliberation can lead, not simply to disastrous *consequences*, but to disastrous *actions* on the part of the agent.”²⁰³ And it is pity that the characters, like us, have this same lot.

CLV

In normal everyday activity we rely upon a belief in our own agency: that we are capable of action, that we are in control of our own actions, that we can understand our actions, and that we can direct our actions effectively towards our own aims. We have faith in our gut urge. That is, we have a need to trust in our ability to expect the consequences of our actions. Within fictive worlds, internal plot necessity and basic causal chains establish expected consequences. It is the strata of unexpected consequences that we grapple with when we consider reversal, recognition, and catharsis. Reversal is the mutation by which the action itself changes in character; and recognition is the character’s realization of this. Through reversal and recognition, we recognize that action has changed, and must reconcile the multiple characters of action to make sense of it. Of course, in our day-to-day experiences we accept a certain level of mishap—misreading the roadmap, missing the right highway exit—and we handle such mishaps with varying levels of success. But the utter failure of human agency that tragedy aims to depict is something we rarely are willing to confront in our own lives.

CLVI

How do we cope with the continual possibility for an action to radically change in character, and consequences? How do we live knowing the frailty of our relationship to virtue?

Tragedy provides us an opportunity to notice fracture in our understanding of agency and to respond to it. Aryeh, you suggest that art, and particularly tragic poetry, might be usefully thought of as ritualistic: “contexts of sanctuary in which dangerous activities of such intensification and [re]ordering can be carried out.”²⁰⁴ Catharsis, then, restores our faith in our own gut urge. The danger to the intensification and reordering that occurs in tragedy is that it can paralyze us from acting in real life. Seeing the feebleness of our own agency can instill mistrust in the value of agency. In a tragedy we are able to acknowledge ambiguity, mistake, and human limitation, and to forgive these. Catharsis is the means by which tragedy gets us to accept the ambiguity of our agency and returns our faith in it; catharsis is forgiveness.

CLVII

While we unavoidably draw symbolic connections (aka meaning) between signs, ideas, events, and objects, this category of recognition—reconciliation—often becomes habituated, such that once we develop the appropriate cognitive muscles, we dedicate less effort to making these connections—which makes it easier to navigate daily tasks and relationships. But mimetic connections (aka Meaning) help us bridge entirely different rifts in our experience. In viewing a tragedy, we bear witness to the utter frailty of agency and the inescapable ambiguity of action. Meaning deals with the instances of recognition—reconciliation—where habit has little power. When we form Meaning, we do so across visible rifts. In other words, to form Meaning, we must first see the rift; in tragedy mimetic action allows us to recognize the rift and catharsis enables us to come to terms with it.

CLXVI

Our concern with identity, my mentors, deals with the cathartic grappling we do. Not only may the objects of our world be fluid, fluctuating, and different than we trust, but so may our actions and deeds—so may who we trust ourselves to be. And wouldn't stability be a comfort? But these are the risks we take in the endeavor of living. To pretend otherwise is to deny ourselves full pride in our own courage. I hear the quavers in your voices, my mentors, and I know that your doubt is not only doubt in language's marvel but also doubt in how we are to live together.

CLXVII

Hannah, you wrestle with this cathartic grappling as you seek to understand you we are—how we may be known.

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without the activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of “who” ... can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose ... it is more than likely that the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimōn* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.²⁰⁵

Hannah, you search on our behalf to understand who are, as we live together. Remember, at the heart of this, we are attempting to trust ourselves to live together. We are attempting to trust ourselves good enough for one another.

CLXVIII

The fundamental condition of meaning is earnestness. Alas, we can not hope to measure earnestness for that would, I think, destroy it.

CLXIX

Meaning relies upon our honest commitment to live with and among others. But as you know well, my mentors—as we all know well—not all of us are earnest. Not all of us are earnest all the time.

Hannah, you say:

Error is the price we pay for truth, and semblance is the price we pay for the wonders of appearance. Error and semblance are closely connected phenomena; they correspond with each other.²⁰⁶

Likewise, the price we pay for earnestness is unearnestness. Even the most earnest among us are at times inconsistent, fickle beings. We cannot expect of ourselves that we will not be. My mentors the solution we must seek is not an easy one, able to come by in Q.E.D. efforts; for earnestness dies when we seek to measure it. We must seek the important fix: we must cultivate and foster earnestness. So, run freely Ludwig and Donald in fields of wildflowers. Strengthen the bonds that

we love because they tenderly tether us to one another. And in the ways you look upon the world, see earnestly. Doubt only in your hearts.

CLXX

We live in a plural world filled with the error, misstep, and diversity of myriad vantages. Embrace it. It embraces us.

CLXXI

Partingly, I say: Language is the thorn stalk in between us and handfuls of ripening berries. It is this in the ways we touch it, in what it does, but not by any cellular truth. It bears the fruit we seek and navigates our progress.

We critique the thorn for the way it pricks our finger and ignore what it does for itself. Language is no born thing. It has no DNA. It is use. Its barbs are not Fibonacci-predictable. So, it is less the thorn stalk of blackberries and more the fragment of thorn stalk in the cardinal's nest that may or may not support the weight of hatchling birds.

CLXXII

If I told you this was all a poem,* would I still have your attention? Would you mistake my words?

* Poetry is perhaps *playful language* at its purest.

Conclusion

I see philosophy as a way of grappling not with arguments for the sake of arguments. I see philosophy as a way of grappling with how we are to live together.

It is this question of what we are willing sacrifice to live among others that is my assumptive desire throughout this project. I will ask then: Do you want to live among others? If not, why? If so, do you want to live among others in their full multiform variation or only among a select few decided by you? (And YOU in all of this, if it was not otherwise clear, is singular. I am not asking if *you* in the plural—somehow entailing those others with whom you feel comfortable identifying—want to live among others. I am asking if you, limited to your lonely body, want to live among others.) So, do you?

If you do not want to live among others and are content with your blood and bone body, then this project may not be for you. Likewise, if you are so fond of some feature or another that you possess, such that you have decided it shall be the basis for how you select the others you wish to live among, then, again, this project may not be for you. I am not interested in the honest misanthrope nor in the bigot, emboldened by the swell of hatred without any prickle of conscience; and I will admit that half of my uninterest lies in my view that there are relatively few of either sort. Instead, I am interested in those who share an earnest desire to live among others and who struggle (complexly) with how to do so; this project is for us.

STRUGGLE is, perhaps, too generous a term to use. STRUGGLE does not address hundreds of years of American slavery and decades more of prison practices that are little different. It is hard to think of the our inability (as of yet) to live among each other as merely STRUGGLE; somehow that seems to diminish the horrors of what has been done, what has been suffered. Perhaps, then, I should say that I am interested in the miserable failures of action and sentiment, the delusions that have shaped how we live together, and the glimmering aspiration that persists for those who earnestly desire to live among others.

Yet I *am* interested in the struggle, struggles: the process itself, processes themselves, of those who earnestly desire to live among others. I cannot help but trace STRUGGLE to its contested roots: thought either as descendant from the Old Norse for “ill will” (from which comes the Swedish for “contention, strife, reluctance,” the Norwegian for “refractory,” and the Danish for “reluctantly”) or a cognate of the German “to stumble.”²⁰⁷ And, in light of these senses of *struggle*, the word does seem apt. We have willed wrong. We—at least too many of us—continue to be damningly reluctant. We have stumbled and do. Particularly this metaphorical stumble seems fitting, not to diminish the genocides, oppression, exploitation that have been the consequences but to illustrate that we are far

from where we want to be and that our progress toward this is certainly not linear nor direct. STRUGGLE is the best word I can find. I want to live among others—complex, confusing, kindred people—and I have little hope that I can unless you and I—we—give proper attention to how we struggle to do so.

I say this now, to tell you why it matters that we, our world, and meaning are held in tension. The very fluctuations, semblances, errors, mistakes that occur in the engaging ways we move and interact are what reassures us of our successes. We know we cast well and true because we notice when we do not. So, these mistakes are not problems but opportunities for us to choose how we want to be, how we want to be with each other. I began this project in the hope that I could offer a defense for mistakes, for such a sorely undervalued strata of action. I have not had time for that yet.

What I hope I have managed to do is provide a tapestry of meaning that embrace *playful language* and mistake such that it values and loves both. As flux and flickers give us our world, reality, and meaning, so too do mistakes. We learn not rules which we follow. Rather we do in many ways and notice the successes and failures until we establish habits. I speak to you now so well because I have spoken so ineffectively so many times before.

I find in poetry a place for the genuine, where I may cast as strangely as I like and grin as I make contact. What I hope we will seek in the future is a place for the genuine as we grapple with meaning and mistake, with the tension of living among others but in different bodies. Marianne you say so well:

I too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.²⁰⁸

This place for the genuine, and the genuine strikes me. It strikes at the core of something—though I don't know what. It strikes very close to what I am beginning to think is the implicit condition and conduit of language. Somehow, we connect creatively and vivaciously, particularly when our language tests the habits of strict convention—that is, in *playful language*. Please, my reader, go out and cultivate earnestness.

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