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## "The Brain - is wider than the Sky -" Notes of Life, On Learning and Language

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“The Brain – is wider than the Sky -”  
Notes of Life, On Learning and Language

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

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2018



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## Introduction

The pages of this project have not come easily. So much thought has gone in, and so many other thoughts have been discarded. What I thought I was saying was often not how my words came together; what my words indicated was often not my thinking. I think I have learned one must not impose what one ambiguously thinks one knows on something; matters have a way of finding their point of condensation. Some of what I explore in this project has come together; some of it is painfully and conspicuously still in the clouds, but I am happy to feel moments where I have gotten somewhere concretely. Although this project and the line of thought behind it are surely unfinished, I can say I have experienced what it means to *know* what one *is* saying (at least sometimes).

The concepts of thinking and writing and language are the essential concepts of the project. The ideas I set forwards are concerned, most basically, with what the phenomenon of language *is*: I ask, what is it like to *experience* language? This question plays across considerations of childhood and culture and poetry and politics. In *On Life*, I briefly consider what the experience of growing into language consists of, and I provide a framework for understanding the philosophical scaffolding of the project. In *On Learning*, I explore what it means to have an attachment to something in language, what language imposes on an individual versus what an individual may take ownership of, and I suggest the place of poetry in mediating that relationship. In *On Language*, I explore the ways language is implicated in citizenship, and, again, the value of poetry therein.





## On Life

Stanley Cavell provides some descriptions of children learning words in *The Claim of Reason*. They are relatively inconsequential compared to the immense philosophical terrain he covers over the course of the book (some descriptions are just off-hand remarks), but they have become pivotal to my own understanding of what the experience of having a language is like. They make me wonder, for example, at the extraordinary idea that infants *begin* to recognize faces: at the very beginning of life, one could be passed from person to person with no real recognition of difference. *Nothing* is given in childhood—not even familiarity. But what is the basis for familiarity after all? What is the concept “familiar”? My initial response was to assume that what becomes familiar must have something to do with appearance, but there is so much more to pick up on: life is such a coalescence of senses; there is always seeing, tasting, smelling *and* hearing *and* feeling (and then, once you can do it, remembering and associating and grappling and...). Adults are not conscious of all that we could be, but for an infant who has never before seen nor tasted nor smelled nor heard nor felt any of what he is now sensing, each and every perception but be ineffably vivid. Undoubtedly, all of that sensation or amalgam of senses must take some getting used to—must take some time to become “familiar.” There is so much we don’t remember, and it makes me appreciate how unfamiliar my notion of familiarity is. What was the initial constitution of our recognitions? Do they persist in our current notions? These are critical moments no person has access to; we do not remember them, but they are the foundation upon which experience is built.

(1) The first example of Cavell's that has helped me consider the experience of having language centers on a little girl who mistakenly calls a fur piece "kitty."

It almost goes without saying that one can't give a child who doesn't have language a definition for a word—the child wouldn't understand the language of the explanation. Rather, language must begin (as with most things) *somewhere*, and then a person may take things from there. Cavell observes, "You can't tell a child what a word means when the child has yet to learn what 'asking for a meaning is' (i.e. how to ask for a meaning), in the way you can't lend a rattle to a child who has yet to learn what 'being lent (or borrowing) something' means."<sup>1</sup> What is fascinating about this is that a person's foundation in language—her first words and phrases—are not and apparently do not need to be learned through explanation; because of that, the fact of language itself seems somewhat of a miracle: there is no real rhyme or reason to its acquisition. How, then, we come to share in it? It seems to materialize out of nowhere—what *is* the foundation upon which a person learns language?

Say you point to a kitty, say the word "kitty," and then, following your example, a little girl repeats the word (makes the sound you made) and points to the kitty. Does she then *know* the word "kitty?"—It's unclear because "knowing a word" apparently consists in being able to use it in different situations. The only way to gain any semblance of clarity will be to wait and see.

Undoubtedly it will be a disappointing episode if, some days later, the little girl picks up a fur piece and says "kitty." You will feel she doesn't know the word after all, that she has gotten it wrong and can't see what it is about kitties that the word "kitty" captures for adults. But all is not lost! She has not pointed to a block of cement and said the word—she's picked up a fur piece, smiled at and stroked it, and said "kitty." Even though she apparently does not know the word (i.e., has not shown she can use for it the right thing), and even though it's anything but

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<sup>1</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 171.

apparent what she does know, what is apparent is that she picked up on something about what an adult means by “kitty.” Cavell elaborates: it could be that what she means by “kitty” you mean by “fur,” or “soft,” or “nice to stroke;” or perhaps the “syntax of her performance” can be transcribed as “This is like a kitty,” or “Look at the funny kitty,” or “Aren’t soft things nice,” or “See, I remember how pleased you are when I say “kitty,” or “I like to be petted.”<sup>2</sup> The little girl’s mistake (can a child without language be mistaken in it?) is fascinating and indeterminable: *what* is the content of her recognitions? They are still beyond description, but as children begin to grow responsive in certain ways, they become gradually more intelligible. With this little girl’s mistake, it is possible to consider that she may be noticing something about textures or about showing affection or about how to get attention. Just wondering about her experience reveals *so* much more within our words—like the fact that kitties are pets and that they are soft and they can teach us how to care for something. Language becomes flat and matter-of-fact in its routine use.

If it is clear she has learned *something*, her budding conception of the word “kitty” will depend on nothing else but the responses she gets when she uses the word. Cavell calls this process of showing a child how to use a word “initiation”: “Instead, then, of saying either that we tell beginners what words mean, or that we teach them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world.”<sup>3</sup> When you pointed to a kitty and said “kitty” the first time and the little girl repeated what you said and did, you responded to her with a bright smile and a warm tone of voice—Cavell’s inclination is to say you *accepted* her behavior as something you say and do. When she said “kitty” to the fur piece, however, you frowned slightly, slumped a bit in your

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 178.

posture, and your voice took on a more solemn tone. If she likes a smile better than a frown, these responses—these acceptances or repudiations of what she says and does—will be integral to what she knows she can use the word ‘kitty’ for.

There is a responsiveness that must happen on the adult’s part *and* on the child’s part for learning to take place. To put this idea in Cavell’s words: the ability to learn language depends on nothing more and nothing less than “mutual attunement,” which is a “natural understanding” and a “natural reaction” to our directions and gestures. Adults must model and provide examples for children to learn by: they must initiate them into the world and show them what to do with attention and responsiveness; children must be able to follow naturally, i.e., to look where adults point, pet what adults pet, shudder at what adults shudder at; and children must care about adults’ approval.<sup>4</sup> Upon this basis, whether it is called a mutual responsiveness or a mutual attunement, communication is built. The idea of mutual attunement is not unlike what any other animal does with its young: it is nothing other than natural for young to be guided and sheltered by elders, like the way a plant grows toward the sun. It seems to be as simple—or a tenuous, or as miraculous—as this: If the little girl like a smile better than a frown, if she wants to learn, and if the adults in her life initiate her correctly into what they say and do, she will learn the word “kitty” because that is what she has been shown to do.

Still, it will be hard to say when the little girl has fully learned the word, but Wittgenstein’s picture of “continuing a series” is one way to think of it. The idea is that knowing the meaning of a word is having possession of a concept: “to know the meaning of a word, to have the concept titled by the word, is to be able to go on with it into new contexts—ones we accept as correct for it.”<sup>5</sup> Under this picture, the little girl will know the word “kitty”—that is,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 122.

will have the concept for that word—when she can go to the pet store, or to a friend’s house, or to her Aunt and Uncle’s, and see that they, too, have a kitty. Not only that, but she will be able to look in books and recognize a picture or a drawing of a kitty, she can see that a sticker is in the shape of a kitty, or that the little girl just like her on a movie screen has a kitty just like she does. No one will have needed to sit her down to explain any of that; she will simply get it, as a result of the mutual attunement between herself and the adults in her life. It seems we cannot fail to be tied to one another in our responses, and the initial stages of our acquisition of language reveal that fact in a way we may as adults forget about or overlook or deny or fail to appreciate in whatever way.

(2) The second example is about pumpkins. Cavell writes, “Nor, in saying ‘Pumpkin’ to the child, are we telling the child what a pumpkin is, i.e., the child does not then know what a pumpkin is. For to ‘know what a pumpkin is’ is to know, e.g., that it is a kind of fruit; that it is used to make pies; that it has many forms and sizes and colors; that this one is misshapen and old; that inside every tame pumpkin there is a wild man named Jack, screaming to get out.”<sup>6</sup>

Again, I am reminded of the fact that so much more underlies our words than we tend to consider. *Of course* I know all of what Cavell describes of a pumpkin: I have seen *The Nightmare Before Christmas*; I have carved a pumpkin for Halloween and baked its seeds for a snack; I have seen smashed pumpkins on the side of the road; I have eaten pumpkin pie. All of these notions and experiences are alive in my memory, and they inflect my knowledge of that word in a way that would not happen for a child who cannot even reach the kitchen table nor say the word “pumpkin.”

While it is quite similar to what happened with the little girl and the word “kitty,” this example brings something a bit different to light—namely, the fact that our language is couched

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<sup>6</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 171.

in “forms of life.” To recall, Cavell writes that adults “initiate” children “into the relevant *forms of life* held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world.” The notion of a form of life is originally Wittgenstein’s, and it has to do with the fact that the speaking of language is an activity that humans agree on: “ ‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? —What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.’ ”<sup>7</sup> With this description in mind, “forms of life” delineate what people think of as possible for themselves to do. To give an example, it is part of a form of life that people “make up a story” (about a pumpkin); it is part of a form of life that people “bake” (a pumpkin pie); it is part of a form of life that pumpkins (and a lot of other things) can be “described in terms of its appearance” (i.e., lumpy, smashed, green, etc.); it is part of a form of life that a person could “making a drawing” of a pumpkin. Similarly, “having a pet” is a form of life, etc.<sup>8</sup> These are all activities characterizing human behavior generally, which is why Wittgenstein says that the agreement people have in language is not “in opinions”: no *one* person can choose whether or not people draw or cook or write stories—they are just what people (can) do; some may do them and some may not; moreover, what can be done in a form of life is equally as open-ended as forms of life themselves. When an adult initiates a child into a form of life, he shows a child an example of something that has possibility within forms of life—what people say and do. I want to add, moreover, that what a child is initiated into will inherently be partial, because no adult

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), §241.

<sup>8</sup> Other examples of forms of life that Wittgenstein provides are “Giving orders, and acting on them”; “Reporting an event”; “Speculating about the event”; “Forming and testing a hypothesis”; “Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams”; “Acting in a play”; “Singing rounds”; “Guessing riddles”; “Cracking a joke, telling one”; “Solving a problem in applied arithmetic”; “Translating from one language into another”; “Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

knows everything that is possible within what people say and do. There are many different forms of life, and what adults do within them will depend on their culture and their environment.

While an adult may understand different aspects of different forms of life, Wittgenstein's main stake in the concept of forms of life is to point up that despite whatever different understandings persons may have, it is apparent that *people generally* use language with astonishing ease. Cavell makes a comparison between Wittgenstein's use of the word "criteria" in his philosophical investigations (Wittgenstein calls them grammatical investigations) with the ordinary notion of a criterion that is helpful in articulating Wittgenstein's interest in people's general use of language. From samples of the ordinary use of the word "criterion" Cavell collects, he observes that criteria are "specifications a given person or group sets up on the basis of which (by means of, in terms of which) to judge (assess, settle) whether something has particular status or value."<sup>9</sup>

The first important observation about ordinary criteria Cavell draws out<sup>10</sup> extensively is the difference between criteria and standards: "Criteria, we might say, determine whether an object is (generally) of the right kind, whether it is a relevant candidate at all, whereas standards discriminate the degree to which a candidate satisfies those criteria."<sup>11</sup> What Cavell describes of contests is when he is most clear about this distinction between criteria and standards. Contests are cases when criteria are explicitly granted and emphasis falls wholly upon standards, like diving competitions: "The judge has a more or less clear area of discretion in the application of standards, but none whatever over the set of criteria he is obliged to apply. It is expected that

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<sup>9</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> There are seven elements of ordinary criteria that Cavell extracts: "1) Source of authority; 2) Authority's mode of acceptance; 3) Epistemic goal; 4) Candidate object or phenomenon; 5) Status concept; 6) Epistemic means (specification of criteria); and 7) Degree of satisfaction (standards or tests for applying #6). Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

judges will differ over how well the diver entered the water (such is the point of having judges), but not over whether excellence of entry into water is a criterion of the excellence of a dive.”<sup>12</sup>

What criteria do is to stake out what is at issue, what the thing is to be judged; standards, on the other hand, exist *within* the criteria to determine how well something fulfills them. In the case of diving competitions, entry into the water is something judges look at when they are considering a dive: entry into the water is a criterion of a good dive; standards may then discriminate what is “good” or “bad” about a diver’s entry into the water. If entry into the water were not a criterion of a good dive, then judges would look to a different aspect of diving to apply their standards to—say, quietness of jump on the diving board. If there were no criteria for a good dive, then it would be largely impossible to judge diving because persons would point to different things about the dive to say that it was good. When there are criteria and persons are sufficiently aware of them, however, there can be a question as to how well or to what extent something fulfills them.<sup>13</sup>

From this analysis, Cavell extracts that what is peculiar about Wittgenstein criteria is that they do not involve a separate stage at which a person might explicitly or implicitly apply standards. Wittgenstein’s appeals to criteria, rather, revolve around highly individuated cases in which criteria either do or do not apply, but if they don’t, then the situation is in some way ‘non-standard,’ i.e., unprecedented; something that seems to elicit no decisive criteria. Cavell describes cases where there are no decisive criteria as situations when a person would answer a question with “Yes and No.” For instance, Can you play chess without the queen?; Can machines

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>13</sup> Contests make the distinction between criteria and standards very clear, but Cavell discusses other cases in the use of the ordinary notion of a criterion where the distinction is more ambiguous: sometimes the issue of standards does not arise, sometimes standards are at least as critical as the issue of criteria.



think?<sup>14</sup> Cases where there are no decisive criteria are “unknown territory”: things that have either never happened, are very unlikely to or rarely do happen. Or, I could imagine, have never happened to whom the question is posed. The discovery of America by the Europeans or the idea that earth is round or that it revolves around the sun were all probably such cases with no decisive criteria.

The second disanalogy Cavell notes between ordinary and Wittgensteinian appeals to criteria is that ‘objects’ which are candidates for judgment for the latter, “neither raise nor permit an obvious question of evaluation or competitive status.” Cavell’s survey of the everyday notion of a criterion leads him to claim that the candidate objects for judgment that ordinary criteria assign a certain status because it in some obvious way requires evaluation or assessment, Wittgenstein, however, asks about ‘unspecial’ things in his appeals to criteria. For instance, whether someone has a toothache, is sitting on a chair, is of an opinion, is expecting someone between 4 and 4:30, was able to go on but no longer is; whether someone is reading, thinking, believing, hoping, informing, following a rule; whether it’s raining; whether someone is talking to himself, attending to a shape or a color, whether he means to be doing something, whether what he does is for him a matter of course. The ‘unspecial’ things Wittgenstein asks about in his appeals to criteria, then, are ordinary objects and concepts of the world.<sup>15</sup>

The third observation Cavell makes in his comparison between ordinary and Wittgensteinian criteria is that the source of authority who delineate the criteria never varies from ‘ours.’ While the everyday notion consistently distinguished a person or group (“I”; “Kovalevsky and Marx”; “American society before the Great Depression”), Cavell observes that, “the group which forms Wittgenstein’s ‘authority’ is always, apparently, the human group as

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<sup>14</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

such, the human being generally. When I voice them, I do so, or take myself to do so, as a member of that group, as a representative human.”<sup>16</sup> These aspects of Wittgenstein’s appeals to criteria (they do not contain a separate stage for the application of standards, they ask about ordinary concepts, they are voiced by the ‘human group’) contribute to Cavell’s speculation that the implied claim behind Wittgenstein’s investigations seems to be something like an observation that *everything* people assert or question (or doubt or wonder about...) are governed *fundamentally* by criteria, which carries the suggestion, “that every surmise and each tested conviction depend upon the same structure or background of necessities and agreements that judgments of value explicitly do.” Cavell goes on, “I do not say that, according Wittgenstein, statements of fact are statements of value...The case is rather that, as I wish to put it, both statements of fact and judgments of value rest upon the same capacities of human nature; that, so to speak, only a creature that *can* judge of value *can* state a fact.”<sup>17</sup> Cavell’s idea is that Wittgenstein’s appeals to criteria lay bare the capacity for speech itself.

I think it is an idea related to our mutual attunement—namely, it is simply because we have a natural responsiveness to one another that we come to say and do things together; we learn by following, in other words. Human beings have an intrinsic ability to communicate: no matter what a person says—whether it be nonsensical or gibberish—people must recognize the fact that a being is communicating in some way. Yet, because we have a mutual attunement, this kind of incomprehensibility does not tend to happen. It is because of this innate trait that we can see in what something is for another. For example, we can see—if generally, or ambiguously—in what way something is a kitty or a pumpkin, etc., and therefore we come to talk about things similarly in mutual forms of life. It’s not that people won’t agree—a person *could* fail to see that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

something as “pumpkin.” For example, one might not grant that a smashed thing on the side of the road is one; one might also not grant that someone’s scribbling on a piece of paper in orange marker is a pumpkin. Yet, in general, because we can intrinsically talk and act together, we share in a language and can communicate. Is that really all it is? It seems that so much of my day to day reality rests on nothing more than a force of nature—but that may also be the beauty of it.

(3) The third example is about whether a child could be said to label something, supposing even that he can say <yzir may leybils.>

There is something about the child who sits at a desk and puts little stickers on manila folders that requires a qualification. When we’re asked whether this child is ‘labeling,’ there is a way in which we will want to respond “Yes, but” or “Yes and No” or “Kind of.” What *is* this want for qualification? It is not wrong or incorrect to say that the child is labeling, but there would be a different ‘sense’ in saying so.

For one thing, labeling is related to organization: you have to know how to organize, i.e. in what way/if the material needs organization *and* what strategy will maximize the efficiency organization is meant to achieve. You wouldn’t organize a stack of receipts based on length, for example; they should be organized by month or year, or even by amount, and then ‘labeled’ accordingly (e.g. expenses in June 2015; expenses over \$100). Labeling, in this case, is constituted first by the fact that a stack of receipts has been identified as “messy” or “unorganized,” and then that the purpose of organization is to make it easier to look back at a month’s expenses, or to calculate average expenditures. Furthermore, what *can* be organized is related to what *needs* organization. In other words, you have to *have* to monitor your money (because of taxes or because you’re saving up for something or because you need to budget your spending), but what does a child have to keep track of? The problem is that a child doesn’t yet

know, and therefore isn't able to do, certain things that are involved in the task. It could be that the child doesn't grasp the significance of his behaviors, or maybe he isn't really intending to do what he's doing, but whatever it is the point is that a child's understanding of labeling is not an adult's understanding.

What makes it unclear whether to say a child is or isn't labeling, then, is the notion of having to have a certain cognizance of one's actions. It is not that we don't *believe* a child when he says <yzir may leybils> in the sense that we think he's lying or mistaken. On the contrary, what this child is doing is highly consequential: He *playing at*—and therefore *learning about*—putting labels on things. As Cavell observes, “Nothing is more serious business for a child than knowing it will be an adult—and *wanting to be*, i.e. *wanting to do the things we do*—and knowing that it can't really do them yet” (176). It's like playing house, or pretending to be an astronaut. It's also why grocery stores sometimes have those smaller shopping carts for kids: childhood is preparation for adulthood. Play is not necessarily the making up of fairy-tales and fantastic impossibilities that we tend to think of it as. Rather, play is a child's piecing together and making sense of what he sees adults doing, and the way Cavell's description of initiation highlights the importance of play makes me appreciate all the learning and experimenting that goes into any given concept.

(4) The third example is only an aside: “To what does the child attach the official name <Nyuw York?> The child's world contains no cities.”<sup>18</sup>

A given child's acquisition of a word depends on tactile experience with it. As Cavell's example with the little girl who learns the word “kitty” brings to light, it is not as a child learns a word right off the bat. Rather, a concept takes *experience using it* to become incorporated into a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 77.

child's vocabulary. The problem, I take it, with the child who says <Nyuw York?> is that that child has not had experience using the word—he is just repeating something he's heard. It's has a similarity to the labeling example, too: it shows that there may be certain concepts underlying others. But the idea that language is acquired in levels—that is, that a person would graduate into more and more complex concepts—does not capture the experience of language, for what is the “least complex” type of word? Cavell's basic contention is salient, however: one has to know *certain* things to know others, and while adults may even assert a concept they don't rightly know, it is apparent that there is a certain background of necessities required for the ordinary use of language.

What is intriguing to me about this example is that suggests certain possibilities for a comment Cavell makes about how words are learned. He writes, “We do not learn words in all the contexts in which they could be used, and not every context in which a word is used is one in which the can be learned.”<sup>19</sup> The context Cavell suggests a word may not be learned in is a metaphorical context, but it is apparent from this example of a child saying <Nyuw York> that not every “ordinary” context in which a word is used is one in which it can be learned. For a child, every context is somewhat of an extraordinary context—every word must rather puzzling before you've gotten the hang of it, and this process must lead to some peculiarities in a person's internal relationship to language as she matures. Cavell's question about whether a child learning the word “pumpkin” might make some kind of linguistic connection between “pumpkins” and a person named “Mr. Popkin” captures what I'm trying to suggest: “There may still be something different about the pumpkins in his world; they may, for example, have some unknown relations to pumps (the contrivance or the kind of shoe) and some intimate association with Mr. Popkin

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 169.

(who lives next door), since he obviously has the same name they do. But that probably won't lead to trouble, and one day the person that was that child may, for some reason, remember that he believed these things, had these associations, when he was a child. (And does he then, stop believing them?)<sup>20</sup> I'm not quite sure he does.

With this in mind, I wonder what kind of an experience a child might have with this poem:

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -  
 For - put them side by side -  
 The one the other will include  
 With ease - and You - beside -

The Brain is deeper than the sea -  
 For - hold them - Blue to Blue -  
 The one the other will absorb -  
 As Sponges - Buckets - do -

The Brain is just the weight of God -  
 For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -  
 And they will differ - if they do -  
 As Syllable from Sound - <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>21</sup> Emily Dickinson, "The Brain - is wider than the Sky-," In *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 269.

## On Learning

The description of the learning process set forth in Chapter 1 makes it seem as though we don't have much control over our experience. If learning depends on nothing more than the mutual attunement between human beings, all this reveals is that a person has to *be able* to learn in order to learn, which doesn't indicate that a child has any say in the matter whatsoever.<sup>22</sup> That children don't have a say in what they learn is not a new idea. As Cavell brings to light, we may say children are doing something like shopping for groceries—or writing a poem—when we know they're really playing, and it is wrong not to recognize this.<sup>23</sup> Children don't have a full understanding of their words and actions; they do not know how to act or how to be in the world. What learning seems always, inevitably, and inherently to consist in, then, is only being *shown* what to say and do.

I find myself wanting to dispute that idea. I want to say: Well, no. Children experiment and play and figure things out for themselves, and that shows that they have at least a modicum of autonomy in the learning process; learning is not a *completely* passive phenomenon. Infants and children are *people* (albeit little) after all! Even considering that, however, I find that whatever children may experiment with and whatever they may take away from such experimentation is incontrovertibly not of their creation. If a child plays with a doll, she did not bring that doll into existence; if she learns how to write, that is because she mimicked what she saw adults doing; moreover, she did not invent or discover the practice of writing or the words

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<sup>22</sup> Cavell's writes of mutual attunement: "Our ability to communicate with him depends upon his 'natural understanding,' his 'natural reaction,' to our directions and our gestures. It depends upon our mutual attunement in judgements." *The Claim of Reason*, 115; "...the initiate must be able to follow us, in however rudimentary a way, *naturally*...; and he must *want* to follow us..." *The Claim of Reason*, 178.

<sup>23</sup> "What is wrong is to say what a child is doing as though the child were an adult, and not to recognize that he is still a child playing, above all growing." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 176.

she writes with. Even if she does not learn something, or if she learns something in a peculiar way that makes her exhibit ‘individual’ behavior, this still will not be a result of her own volition: it will be because she had not been shown something, or she had not been shown something completely, or she was not corrected in something, or she had been shown something in a particular way that she has had no reason to change.<sup>24</sup> These considerations make me wonder what is mine—that is, what about myself as a person is truly and singularly my own. What makes me *me*? And then who is ‘somebody else’?

To some extent, I do feel that I cannot choose what I think about, where my mind goes. To give just one example, I have been stuck on this Emily Dickinson poem since I was introduced to it a number of years ago by a high school English teacher:

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -  
 For - put them side by side -  
 The one the other will include  
 With ease - and You - beside -

The Brain is deeper than the sea -  
 For - hold them - Blue to Blue -  
 The one the other will absorb -  
 As Sponges - Buckets - do -

The Brain is just the weight of God -  
 For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -  
 And they will differ - if they do -  
 As Syllable from Sound - <sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sam Harris, “Is Buddhism True?,” *Waking Up With Sam Harris*, March 12, 2018, audio, 2:30, <https://samharris.org/podcasts/is-buddhism-true/>. This idea started becoming salient to me when Harris responded to a question about how intentions can be morally relevant in a universe without free will. He claims to be scientifically and personally convinced that although a person is the ‘conscious witness of his life,’ that person’s thoughts, desires, goals, interests, etc. are not his own because he didn’t invent himself or the world. He says a person’s thoughts are inherently the result of “reasons that a person cannot inspect and didn’t create.”

<sup>25</sup> Emily Dickinson, “The Brain - is wider than the Sky-,” In *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 269.



Whenever I experience or realize anything significant, and whenever I read something in philosophy or in literature—even other poems—the character of my interpretation is always expressed by this poem. In other words, I constantly want to gesture to this poem as a means of articulating what I’ve found the significance in something to be. Dickinson’s words here seem to have impressed somewhat of a universal or eternal meaning upon me, and I wonder if I would be able to articulate—or if I would even have—that meaning without it (are ‘articulating a meaning’ and ‘having a meaning’ the same thing?). Yet still, despite all of that, it is a perennial difficulty for me to say *exactly* what (I think) this poem means (to me). What are you telling me, Emily Dickinson?

This conundrum reminds me of Kant’s remark that poetry has a uniquely strong ability to manifest aesthetic ideas (compared to other forms of art). He writes of an aesthetic idea:

In a word, an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it. Hence it is a presentation that makes us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, but the feeling of which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letter, with spirit.<sup>26</sup>

The suggestion is that poetry mines our pre-existing concepts (which are usually used towards determinate, rational ends)<sup>27</sup> in order to salvage a few of them for a different, unique purpose—namely, a poem. Of course, concepts can be put together in unique or un-ordinary ways and *not* be a poem. This is what Kant means when he indicates that language without spirit would be “mere letter.” I could imagine seeing the words comprising Dickinson’s poem in

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<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), §49.

<sup>27</sup> Imagination is always used in cognition, but there it is under the constraint of the understanding and “is subject to the restriction of adequacy to the understanding’s concept.” Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §49

another order. It would be unlikely, but I could see or hear ‘sponge’ and ‘bucket’ and ‘brain’ and ‘heft,’ etc. together in a context. If I came across this amalgam of language randomly, outside of a poem (what would that context be?), it is likely that the words would not provoke (or incite or invite) my attention in any significant way. I might wonder in an off-hand way about their peculiar arrangement, but I would not think extensively or in any lasting way about their relation to one another, why they happened in that context, what they mean in relation to one another. In a poem, however, I know those words were *intended* to be there, *exactly* how they are arranged, and, for that reason, my interest is attached to the specific form they have assumed.<sup>28</sup> I do not overlook them or remark passively about them—I am *invested* in them; my ‘spirit’ becomes implicated in their structuring so that the poem, as it were, *comes alive*.

Not only is my interest attached, but it is attached indeterminately since the words are not used for ordinary and/or logical ends, i.e., they do not have a definitive conclusion to draw. Effectively, the meaning of a poem is endless, which is why Kant describes the thoughts a poem incites as ‘ineffable.’ In this way, I understand his notion of poetry to imply that a poem exists more in the mind than anywhere else—not even in the poem itself: it takes a mind to bring a poem to life, otherwise it would just be a bunch of words. This happens on both ends of the equation: it takes a certain mindfulness to write a poem<sup>29</sup> (this is why random meshes of words without adequate intention or context aren’t poems), and it takes another mind to re-animate a

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Olson’s notion is that a poem is a ‘high-energy construct’; cf. “Projective Verse.” *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1967), 16.

<sup>29</sup> The kind of mind that can produce ‘fine art’ is genius: “(1) Genius is a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be *originality*. (2) Since nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be *exemplary*; hence, they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge. (3) Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as *nature* that it gives the rule.” *Critique of Judgment*, §46.

poem after it's been written. No matter how profound or universal or urgent a poem's sentiment may be, it will not be understood unless a reader interacts with it in the right way. Maybe this is why I can't seem to shake Dickinson's poem: I've become ineffably attached to it—it makes me think, and so it lives on in my mind endlessly for that reason.

Come to think of it, the idea that a mind can give life to something is one of the many ways I could think to interpret the poem: "The Brain - is wider than the Sky -/For - put them side by side -/ The one the other will include/ With ease - and You - beside." The reading of the poem is shifty—it can seem uncertain what the referent of 'The one' and 'the other' are respectively, but the first line is declarative: "The Brain - *is* wider," and this enables certainty. What the first stanza of Dickinson's poem suggests, then, is that Brain subsumes Sky, and one of the ways I am inclined to paraphrase this is: Brain *thinks*, or makes, Sky. The idea strikes me as a question like, If a tree fell in the forest and no one was around to hear it, would it make a sound?, but reformulated into, If there were no Brain to perceive Sky, would there be Sky? And *that* makes me remember that I had wondered about what kind of control we have over our experience: Outside of what we know—what we have been shown and seen and heard, what *is* there?

Children are not born into a vacuum; inevitably, they come into contact with the world—our world, but this happens so ubiquitously that I think we, as adults, cannot completely conceive of it. It is impossible to access your first moments in life (no one can recollect them): the first moment you saw light, the time when you began to recognize your parents' faces as familiar. What would it be like if you could access those moments? Would there be 'meaning' in an experience unmediated by *anything*? It is hard to express how I think about this experience of newness in childhood, but I am reminded of a time when I saw a father crinkle a leaf in his son's ear. There is so much we take for granted about the world we have come to know—like the fact

that leaves crinkle underfoot, that smelling a buttercup will turn your nose yellow, that the sea is blue, etc., but even those aspects of the world we think of as ‘given’ are not so for children; we have to show them the world, and, as we do that, we show them *language*. To recall what was said in Chapter 1, there is not a clear difference between learning and maturation,<sup>30</sup> which means that children learn language as they’re learning everything else—that is, forms of life. Here is another thing it strikes me as hard to conceive of: How does a child who does not know the word ‘crinkle’ experience the sound a leaf makes when it’s dry and has fallen on the ground? Adults cannot access—and it would raise extreme doubt in me if someone said they could—the first time they realized the meaning of a word. What would it mean for a child learning language to have a realization about a word’s point of application? I find that it is exactly because we didn’t have a language in early childhood that could make our experience known to us that we cannot remember or ‘conceive’ of that time—it is inconceivable.

Undoubtedly, this will give the suggestion that there is not thought outside of language, and that is precisely what I mean to suggest. I have come to think that learning impresses how to think upon a child’s mind: it shapes a person’s mind and carves out specific passageways for thought and behavior. I say that learning impresses ‘how to think’ instead of ‘a way of thinking’ upon a child, moreover, because children do not learn any specific kind of logic or modality of experience; they may fairly soon come to think in some ways as opposed to others because, inevitably, they are initiated into a culture with a world-view and specific forms of life, but I don’t think it makes much sense to say that a child ‘has a culture’ or a ‘world-view’ in the same way it is wrong to say a child is doing something without recognizing she is playing—she isn’t a part of the forms of life she is mimicking and therefore she does not have the words to

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<sup>30</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 171.

understand her actions. Rather, culture is something adults as it were *project onto* children. So what is this ‘how to think’ a child learns? It seems they learn a very ambiguous modality of thought: it is somewhat of a blueprint—a hasty sketch—which becomes augmented and revised as learning continues.

The idea of a blueprint or a hasty sketch has everything to do with Cavell’s notion that we *initiate* beginners; we do not teach them. You can’t throw a child onto Wall Street and expect him to be able to *think through* a strategy of investment, for example. (You couldn’t even do that with me, and I know what money is, although I’m less certain about how investment works.) Moreover, the idea of throwing a child onto Wall Street illustrates something about the way we tend to underestimate the pervasiveness of the ‘logic,’ or ‘logics,’ we’ve learned. The reason you can’t do such a thing is because a person has to learn basic mathematical operations, and then things about economics and business, etc., before he can go on to perform elaborate investment strategies; these are all forms of life with their own attributes, but, at the same time, they have equally essential attributes that overlap with other forms. Before you can learn *any* of that, however, you have to learn *a language*. Language underlies everything. You can’t tell a child what Wall Street is when he has yet to learn that two plus two equals four—or how to *say the word* ‘two,’ let alone what a ‘number’ is.<sup>31</sup> What this brings to light is that children do not come pre-programmed with the meaning of words or even with the ability to count; the things we take

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<sup>31</sup> “You can’t tell a child what a word means when the child has yet to learn what ‘asking for a meaning’ is (i.e., how to ask for a meaning), in the way you can’t lend a rattle to a child who has yet to learn what ‘being lent (or borrowing) something’ means.” Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 170–71.

as ‘given’ are not so for children.<sup>32</sup> Children have to learn a very basic ‘logic’ before they can go on to do anything else.

Because children are not initiate of *any* of the forms of life in which language is held (they do not understand language), adults can only *show* children what to do, and it is through the mutual attunement between child and adult that the child comes to see the relevant ways adults say and do things. Cavell’s notion of initiation is akin to Wittgenstein’s notion of the teaching of a language as a training (not as a teaching) for a ‘language-game’—namely, the practice of the use of language;<sup>33</sup> both notions imply that a child’s acquisition of language is actually an internalized pattern of response which is the result of repeated following and observing. There is no deliberate, conscious reflection on the child’s part about what she is saying or doing: she simply follows, and eventually she ‘learns a word’—she can participate in a language-game—when she goes on with it without having to follow.<sup>34</sup> A child will *not* know a word because she has a definition of it *in any way*; she knows a word, rather, because she has learned a behavior. This is what I meant when I said that ‘learning carves out specific passageways for thought and behavior’ and that learning ‘impresses how to think’ upon a child’s mind: the acquisition of language in childhood makes it so that when a sound is uttered we can instantaneously recognize it as a word and respond accordingly. My idea of an impression is also

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<sup>32</sup> I once happened upon the question, Was math invented or discovered? I wonder how to respond.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), §5.

<sup>34</sup> Cavell’s recapitulation of Wittgenstein’s notion of knowing a word as ‘continuing a series’ is: “to know the meaning of a word, to have the concept titled by the word, is to be able to go on with it into new contexts—ones we accept as correct for it; and you can do this without knowing, so to speak, the formula which determines the fresh occurrence, i.e., without being able to articulate the criteria in terms of which it is applied.” *The Claim of Reason*, 122.

expressed by Wittgenstein's remark, "Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination."<sup>35</sup> Language is like a reflex.

To give a more detailed example of this, Wittgenstein asks, "If I give someone the order 'fetch me a red flower from the meadow,' how is he to know what sort of flower to bring, as I have only given him a *word*?" Someone might respond: Well, he thinks about the color red, and then goes to pick the flower corresponding to that mental image. This is not what apparently happens, however. What does happen is immediate and seemingly thoughtless: the person following the order goes, looks about, walks up to a flower and picks it, without comparing it to anything. The problem with thinking that a mental image must be referenced before the person responds to the order is that "we are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign." Essentially, Wittgenstein wants his reader to see that this business of thinking of a mental image is an extraneous effort, a disposable term in the equation. Signs do not have a meaning separately and irrespective of thought; it is precisely the function of a sign to trigger mental processes, and if a sign could not do that, then it would be "an utterly dead and trivial thing."<sup>36</sup>

The idea that the use of a sign consists in the sign itself as a way of triggering mental processes instead of a co-existent term is another way of putting the phrase, "Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination." Language has to function as a reflex—not as a deliberate effort of consciousness—because you cannot give a child the terms of a language-game (a definition) and then expect them to know its rules. A child who does not know the word 'blue' cannot have a mental image of blue; it is only after a language has been acquired that we can begin to think about the meaning of our words and we can come to have the idea of a

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<sup>35</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §6.

<sup>36</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 3-5.

‘mental image’ corresponding to signs.<sup>37</sup> But because language is emphatically *not* learned with mental images, there is no real sense in conceiving of it that way. Rather, it is through a child’s tangible experience with a word (the attempts she makes at using a word, and the responses she receives in turn) that she begins to think in the first place and to construct a conceptual framework for her experience—*that* is the full extent of Wittgenstein’s idea that signs and thought are inextricable.

What if the word ‘sky’ did not incite thought? What if it laid “an utterly dead and trivial thing?” Certainly, it may for a child who is just walking into language—and does that child *see the sky*? Undoubtedly she does, but she does not know *what* she is experiencing yet. Language is a problem of a chicken and egg: I find myself wanting to ask, Is there still (the object) ‘sky’ irrespective of the word for it? This is essentially the same problem adults have when they try to think back on a time without language—such an experience is inconceivable; we cannot get outside of the concepts we have acquired in language, and even if I could imagine something about a reality without language, I find myself imagining—inherently, inevitably—in *language*. What *is* a non-linguistic thought? It seems we cannot get outside of the conceptual framework we have been initiated into *in language* to the extent that if there is not a sign a thought would be totally absent.<sup>38</sup> Or I might say: if a sign doesn’t exist, the thought doesn’t either, and vice versa.

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<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein explains that the ostensive teaching of words—namely, pointing to an object and saying a word, i.e., how a child is initiated into language—establishes an “associative connection between word and thing.” He conjectures that while this practice may “mean” various things, it is likely that the purpose is to put a mental image into a child’s mind: “One very likely thinks first of all that a picture of the object comes before the child’s mind when it hears the word. But now, if this does happen—is it the purpose of the word?—Yes, it *may* be the purpose.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §6. I wonder if language makes a sort of hologram in the mind?

<sup>38</sup> This is also a question about what *must* be the case—what is intrinsic to the human perception of reality—which is a quandary entirely too vast to address in this project. That said, I am interested in it.



I cannot help to think that the inextricability of sign and thought is a similar phenomenon to the way that a poem is written with a mindfulness, and the way a poem only comes alive again in a reader's mind. It is only with a thought that the sign 'sky' has meaning, and it is only with the sign 'sky' that thought for it occurs: the sky is, so to speak, in the mind; it only has meaning insofar as we accept that sign in our language, insofar as we *use* it. It is as if the sky only exists *because we think it does*, and that strikes me as the full force behind Dickinson's opening line, "The Brain - is wider than the Sky -": Brain *thinks* Sky; the sky exists in our mind; we *make* the sky. I cannot help but notice that there is a kind of intrinsic poiesis to language in this way; after all, it is only in language that sound is syllable.<sup>39</sup>

Such a claim about reality existing in the mind because of language will invite much questioning. For one thing, it implies that what there is language for is the extent of reality, which is incompatible with the idea that a person could *notice* something (new). What about realizations? What about having a new thought? What about discovery and invention, etc.? What about the fact that language as a whole changes and evolves? Moreover, the claim seems deterministic: it is as if we can never get outside of what has been impressed upon us; we can never see outside of the conceptual framework our language imparts to us. What accounts, then, for the fact that people use words differently? If we are inevitably initiated into a language and we cannot think outside of it then it would seem that everyone must have been 'trained' to think the same way, but it is more than apparent that people can—and often do—disagree about the nature of something, about what to call it. Why are we not all linguistic automatons? And what about *poetry*? If we are taught a language and cannot think outside of it, what sense could poetry

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<sup>39</sup> “**-poiesis**, a combining form meaning ‘making, formation,’ used in the formation of compound words.” *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (1987), s.v. “poiesis.”

ever make since it disrupts the way that language is used, i.e., it is not a use of language we have been trained in (or, it would seem, a use of language we *could* be trained in).

In a way, we *are* so-called ‘linguistic automatons.’ No person can choose the language she was initiated into, which means that no person has control over her conceptual framework, the words she has been trained to think with. Moreover, no person really knows *why* she responds to the signs she has concepts for in the way she does—that is, she cannot recollect the nature of her training for our language-game. At no point in time did she ‘realize’ the point of the application for a word because she did not at that time have a concept for ‘the point of an application for a word.’ Because language is a reflex (a behavior we were trained in that we cannot reverse), it is entirely possible (and often is the case) that we do not really know the ‘meaning of our words’; we use language rather mindlessly—in an *automatic* kind of way—and it is only after we have acquired a functional use of language that we can come to think about such a thing as a ‘mental image’ or a ‘definition.’ Indeed, what *makes* us call the sky ‘sky?’ What would the definition of sky be? To say that it is a reflection of the ocean, or that it is our ‘atmosphere’ clearly misses the point; such an explanation is empty, does not get to the impulse behind the question. Language is an impression on our mind, which makes our use of it quite haphazard. All we know when we know a word is how to ‘continue the series,’ and that ability is not contingent upon our knowing “the formula which determines the fresh occurrence.” In this way, we may assert a concept without any cognizance as to the reasons for our use for it whatsoever.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that we can (and often do) use language this way is a direct result of its not being learned through definition—a result of its being a reflex, an impression on the mind. Although as

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<sup>40</sup> “That I know when to assert a concept does not mean that I know why I call it when I do, what the point of its application is.” Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 72.

adults we can be given definitions and explanations in our continuing acquisition of language as we graduate into more advanced forms of life, this does not at all indicate that definitions and explanations are an imperative aspect of the use of language. On the contrary, Wittgenstein demonstrates that language on the whole is emphatically *not* used according to strict rules. In one example, he explains that people answer whether so-and-so is the case sometimes by giving criteria and sometimes by giving symptoms. To say that a person has angina because a doctor found the bacillus so-and-so in his blood is to give the ‘criterion’ for angina’s being the case; to observe that a patient’s throat is inflamed, however, is to give a symptom. The symptom, importantly, may or may not align with the defining criterion for the case at hand: people who have inflamed throats may have angina or they may not. While this example makes it seem like a criterion is a more definitive characteristic of so-and-so’s being the case, Wittgenstein quickly notes that people will easily be persuaded to understand so-and-so’s being the case with what symptoms seem only to indirectly indicate, and this observation leads him to believe that people in practice do not use language according to strict definitions and rules: using criteria or using symptoms to talk about the same thing will not present any immediate problems in comprehensibility because people do not think about the rules of language in practice. Of course there is potential for misdiagnosis, but the issue in language would only arise after the fact; both people *in the moment* can see that they are talking about the same thing—namely, whatever is wrong with someone’s throat—and *how* they choose to talk about it will not change what *is* the case. In practice, people do not (it would be impractical) consult precise rules every single time they use a word; moreover, it’s clear they don’t need to in order to know they are talking about (generally) the same thing.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 25.

If we do reflect on our application of a concept, moreover, we begin to see that all we really know about the application of a word are the explanations we can give of it. Our understanding of a concept is an amalgam of the experiences we've had with it, the ways we understand that it can be applied because we have witnessed it applied that way in *particular* cases. To illustrate this idea, Wittgenstein gives the example of a leaf. He explains that when we are told "This is called a leaf," we get the idea of a shape of in our mind; then he asks, "But what does the picture of a leaf look like when it does not show us a particular shape, but rather 'what is common to all shapes of leaf?' " What he wants his reader to begin to see is that whatever conceptual framework has been impressed on our mind (Wittgenstein's word is a 'schema') is *only* conceptual: an image of 'what is common to all leaves' is a sample of *particular* leaves a person has seen, not a an image of a 'universal leaf.'<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, what does a leaf look like that you had never seen with your eyes? Or a shade of blue you had not encountered? Could you imagine such a thing? The case is, rather, that you can come across a new leaf or a shade of blue, and then call it 'leaf' or call it 'blue' (does your conceptual framework expand when you've encountered new, particular objects you can subsume under a concept? Does it become broader—*wider?*), but you do not know *a priori* what you will call a 'leaf' or what 'blue.' When you apply a concept in a case you're unsure of, you will have to think, Why do I call this 'leaf?' A related question is: When does a leaf turn into a needle? Surely needles are a kind of leaf for an evergreen, so why do we call it differently? And similarly, at what point does blue turn into green on the color wheel? The distinctions between our concepts are ambiguous, and that makes it very hard to circumscribe them. As Wittgenstein explains, "We are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don't

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<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §73.

know their real definition, but because there is no ‘real’ definition to them. To suppose that there must be would be like supposing whenever children play with a ball they play a game according to strict rules.”<sup>43</sup> That said, when we do think about the application of a concept in a particular case, we can come to see in what way it does and not conform to our conceptual framework; in that way, the explanations we can give of our applications of concepts are more revealing as to our knowledge of an object than a ‘universal’ ever could be.<sup>44</sup>

The idea that particular experience reveals a person’s knowledge of her concepts (as opposed to any supposed possession of a universal) indicates that it is not impossible to have a new thought or a realization within a conception of language as a reflex or an impression on the mind; on the contrary, it demonstrates that it is rather *because* language is a reflex that people *do* have new and different thoughts and realizations, that they make discoveries, invent new things, etc. What would a language be like that functioned through strict rules?—*that* would certainly prevent discovery. Maybe humans will have an absolute language when they have experienced everything—when they have seen each and every shade of blue, when they have considered every way in which something is; maybe then our language will be a network of rigid concepts (would it be a complicated or a simple network?). I could imagine that the human organism *as such* could discover and/or experience everything—as a kind of collective mind—but it is

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<sup>43</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> “Once we see that the expression ‘what is common’ has ordinary uses, and that these are different from what universals are meant to cover; and, more importantly, see that concepts do not usually have, and do not need ‘rigid limits,’ so that universals are neither necessary nor even useful in explaining how words and concepts apply to different things; and again, see that the grasping of a universal cannot perform the function it is imagined to have, for a new application of a word or concept will still have to be *made out, explained*, in the particular case, and then the explanations themselves will be sufficient to explain the projection; and see, finally, that I know no more about the application of a word or concept than the explanations I can give, so that no universal or definition would, as it were, *represent* my knowledge.” Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 188.

apparent that individual people have particular experience. What has occurred to one person, then, will not always be exactly what has occurred to another, and this indicates that an individual's experience is inflected in her use of language: how a person applies her concepts is expressive of her experience.

This might happen with colors and/or leaves as much as anything else. Again, our conceptual framework is stamped with what we've had particular experience of, which means that whether or not we will apply a concept will depend on our prior experience: the possibilities we've been shown for our words. I am inclined to think it is entirely possible for a person to come across a very exotic leaf, for example, and not recognize it as a 'leaf' because, so to speak, that possibility for the word was not impressed upon her: only after someone tells her "That is a leaf" would she recognize it as one, and until then she may use a number of other concepts to describe it. In this way, her linguistic response to the leaf is indicative of her experience not only because it betrays her lack of experience with 'leaves,' but also because whatever concepts she applies to the unknown leaf-object will come from her pre-existing conceptual framework.

My idea is not unlike what Wittgenstein describes of a brake-lever. He contends that the ostensive teaching of words—namely, pointing at something and saying a word as an associative training between object and word—effects an understanding only together with a particular kind of instruction, but with different instruction the words might effect a very different understanding. If someone says, "I set the brake up by connecting up rod and lever," then, those words only have meaning within the context of the mechanism of a brake-lever. Wittgenstein writes, "Only in conjunction with that [mechanism] is it a brake-lever, and separated from its support it is not even a lever; it may be anything, or nothing."<sup>45</sup> What this indicates is that certain

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<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §6.

objects have meaning in certain forms of life, but outside of a context in which its meaning is more or less determinate *both* the word and the object could be a great many things—or they may fall to the wayside and be forgotten about, only to be salvaged at a later time. What I want to illustrate is that no person can be initiate of *every* form of life, that people may be initiate of different forms of life to varying degrees, and that *no* person has completely exhausted the possibilities for her concepts even within the forms of life she does have a good understanding of. The implications this observation has for the use of words is...endless.

Here, it is possible to see that there is also inherent potential for disagreement in language. We are ‘linguistic automatons’ to the extent that we have been trained in language (we cannot think outside of language), but we are *not* insofar as each individual has an inherently different experience corresponding to her use of language. In this way, there is *always* the possibility for disagreement in our use of language, and there is *always* the potential that what one person may say could be absolutely and utterly lost on another. That said, Wittgenstein’s appeals to criteria in his investigations<sup>46</sup>, according to Cavell’s interpretation, are intended to bring to light the astonishing extent to which people *do* agree in judgment. Cavell contends that the claim behind Wittgenstein’s investigations is to show that “there is a background of pervasive and systematic agreements among us, which we had not realized, or had not known we realize,” and that recognition is possible because it is not clear in Wittgenstein’s cases what it would mean to alter our criteria.<sup>47</sup> s, what would it mean to alter our criteria for “sky” or for a statement like, “She is looking at the sky?” While it is still true—and inevitable—that people as

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<sup>46</sup> Cavell’s comparison between Wittgenstein’s use “criteria” and the ordinary notion of it led him to observe that Wittgenstein’s appeals had no separate stage at which a person could apply standards, they asked about “unspecial” objects, and the authority who established the criteria were “the human being as such.” These observations led Cavell to claim that Wittgenstein’s intention in his appeals to criteria was to lay bare the capacity for speech itself.

<sup>47</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 30.

a whole will be initiate of many different forms of life, and that fact may cause them to have varying understandings of words on individual or group levels, it is clear that at least *some* part of a person's statement will be comprehensible in however rudimentary a way for people who talk and act together. In other words, people who talk and act together (what human does not do that?) may *always* mean *something* when they talk with one another, even if an individual's remark is completely nonsensical—that violates the use of concepts in an ordinary context.

Still, it is possibly the most recurrent aspect of Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophizing that there can be disagreement between people in their use of language. He explains that Wittgenstein's philosophizing is closely attuned to the problem of skepticism. While some some accounts of Wittgenstein's philosophy hold that his investigations into our ordinary uses of language prove skepticism false, Cavell insists upon the fact that Wittgenstein's investigations do not prove much at all. Even more: they bring the *truth* of skepticism to light—if only a person reinterpret what skepticism is.<sup>48</sup>

Cavell's interest notion of the "truth of skepticism" is a skepticism about other people. It is not so much a doubt as to the existence of other minds, but a doubt as to their ability to make themselves known, to express themselves with adequacy. It also has to do with the inherent separateness between human beings and the way that this separateness plays itself out across our condition and our dealings with one another. The truth of skepticism is a feeling of limitation and isolation—of embodiment itself—that nevertheless is the source of our connection to one another, and it brings forth the irony of language's inability to express that feeling of connection. Essentially, the truth of skepticism is that our words often fail to articulate what we *really* feel and/or mean.

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<sup>48</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 7.



The idea is articulated at length in Cavell's essay "Knowing and Acknowledging," where he describes a situation in which one brother, Second, suffers everything which happens to his other brother, First. The sense Cavell creates is that Second feels pain *because* First feels it, so that there are no longer "two owners of pain." What the example demonstrates is that it is essential to the recognition of another's pain that it be based in one's own, separate pain. First's knowledge of Second's pain, although First knows that Second has it, is too intellectual to be called "knowledge that Second is in pain"; the implication is that separation is intrinsic to our knowledge of other minds. In other words, *directly* feeling what another person is feeling is not what it means to know other people. Knowing another person, rather, consists in *responding* to an *expression* that originates in a separate being. It is a phenomenological fact that people exist with others; other people as it were impinge upon our existence in this way—we know we are not alone—but the problem may be, as Cavell observes, "that the formulation 'inability to feel' tries but fails to capture my experience of separation from others." He goes on, "This does not make it inherently confused, but, one might say, much too weak—as though words are in themselves too weak to record this fact."<sup>49</sup> So how can we find an adequate means of expression for our experience? What words will do in order *to make ourselves known*? Our concepts are not enough, and it is important to emphasize the fact that Cavell's idea of the truth of skepticism concerns the fact that our language as it is does not make ourselves known *to others*. What is missing, then, is an adequate means for people share their experiences with one another—to be *in community* with one another.

This idea—namely, the fact that the language we have inherited is not adequate in vital ways—reminds me of what I described of Kant's notion of an aesthetic idea as it is captured in

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<sup>49</sup> Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 232-40.

poetry. My description had to do with the fact that poetry mines our pre-existing concepts for the different unique purpose that is a poem. I said that not just any ordering of words would do, however: a poet has to have a certain mindfulness of composition, and it is the awareness that the words in a poem were *intended* to be there, in exactly the way they are, that captures a reader's thoughts to make them think more. Upon reflection of the way Wittgenstein's investigations reveal the extent of our agreement in judgment for the use of our ordinary concepts, part of the mindfulness in composing a poem strikes me as awareness of precisely that fact. A poet must have a certain anticipation for the way her words will be read—that is, she must understand what the ordinary uses of her concepts are—and it is with that awareness that she composes a poem that will open itself up for a reader. A poem cannot word if it totally violates the way a language is used, because, if it did, a poem would likely like an “utterly dead and trivial thing”—like the brake-lever in Wittgenstein's example; people wouldn't know what to do with it, and it then it could be anything or nothing. Rather, it is through a delicate and mindfully constructed balance between the ordinary and non-conventional, personal, or otherwise imaginative way a poet uses words that renders a poem into the ineffable experience it can be.

Dickinson does not use any so-called “extraordinary” language in her poem. On the contrary, the words comprising “The Brain – is wider than the Sky -” are all ordinary concepts of the world anyone who uses the English language would know. Yet despite its ordinary word-choice, Dickinson composes the poem with just enough mystery. For example, people do not usually say that “brains” are “wide”—let alone “wider than the Sky,” because obviously they are not: brains must be small compared to the vastness of the sky. Similarly, we do not think of the “Brain” as having depth in the same way the sea has depth, and we certainly cannot hold our brains nor the sea. Furthermore, how does a sponge absorb a bucket? Still, there is a certain way

people could, maybe, say that brains have depth, i.e., in the sense that people have brains, and we say that people have depth. I would like to suggest William Empson's observation that, "The demands of metre allow the poet to say something which is not normal colloquial English, so that the reader thinks of the various colloquial forms which are near to it, and puts them together; weighting their probabilities in proportion to their nearness."<sup>50</sup> It is through the ordinary and yet peculiar arrangement of words in a poem that provokes a reader to consider their relationship to one another. They are, so to speak, just the right amount of peculiar and just the right amount of ordinary so that a reader may go through all the possibilities and valences each word takes on with the words near to it another. In doing so, the poem comes alive in the reader's mind: there is the vague impression of meaning that "means more" for its very ambiguity—it is ineffable.

While it would be an entire to project to draw out all the potential meanings this poem of Emily Dickinson's could have, I would like to end by commenting on just one more—although I am frustrated to have to undercut the richness of the poem in doing so. Consider the possibility I mentioned just earlier about its possible to understand that the brain can have a certain depth because people apparently say that people have depth. It strikes me that this meaning could have something to do with Cavell's notion of the truth of skepticism, i.e., that the words we have available to us do not really capture what we experience. I could, in a certain way, paraphrase that idea with Dickinson's line "The Brain is deeper the sea": human experience is so much more than we can see or know or talk about—people are "deep," and we often cannot see beyond their person or, it seems, *their words*.

Dickinson was a rather reclusive person herself. She spent most of her days alone, writing poems in letters. I am struck by this un-paralleled idiosyncrasy of Dickinson's: she apparently

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<sup>50</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), 28.

shirked communion, but found it in the sheer fact of language itself—that is, language without a body, without the presence of two people. As Vivian R. Pollack and Marianne Noble observe in their biography of the poet, “Ironically, then, Dickinson’s understanding of community was founded on her awareness of difference and was often linked in her poetry to a seemingly personal experience of exclusion from grace, joy, wild nights, freedom, nature, even from life itself.”<sup>51</sup> For me, Dickinson exemplifies how a person might find the words for to articulate herself despite the inadequacy of language, despite the feeling that nothing you’ve been given is really adequate to yourself. Doing so takes a certain vulnerability, and Dickinson faced many pressures from her culture to conform to its conventions and standards. For example, she never married, and her relationship to the Protestant religion was highly ambivalent. Yet, in working with—instead of working against—the language she inherited, i.e., instead of *saying nothing* altogether and refusing to participate in the world, she found her words. She found a way she could be intimate with people while remaining true to herself in poetry.

Writing a poem inherently entails this kind of mediation between the language a person is given with singular experience: it’s a going back and a going forward. You have to think about your individual experience with words, i.e., what you know about the concepts you have, and you have to think about how they’re going to communicate, i.e., in what way you know—or feel confident in thinking—other people will experience those words, too. It’s a give-and-take: you are going out on a limb because you know your words in a poem—more than any other ordinary use of language—could be inherently misconstrued, go unrecognized, etc. At the same time however, you are making an appeal to the language you share in with others: you know it is

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<sup>51</sup> Vivian R. Pollack and Marianne Noble, “Emily Dickinson 1830-1886: A Brief Biography,” in *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Vivian R. Pollack (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), 19.

going to be intelligible in *some* way, if not the right way, because you know you share the same concepts. Poetry is a very serious attempt to know and to commune with others. Not only that, but it is a getting know oneself.

The potential for poetry to be the expression we're missing in ordinary language is a slim chance: poems get overlooked more often than not. But when people do attach to a poem, the connection is *strong*: it is ineffable, maybe even everlasting. I have never met Emily Dickinson, nor will I ever, but I cannot get this poem out of my mind. In that way, I feel I share something with her. I think I know what Emily Dickinson is telling me: she is telling me something about the profound yet intangible bonds people share in language. She is telling me that as much as there is misunderstanding between people, there is equally as much communion. We must always try, therefore, to find our words so that we may understand one another; and that will always entail an individual's re-interpretation as well as an individual's *understanding* of what she inherits. Human experience refracts in particularity: it is a privacy that brings us ourselves, with *you* beside.

## On Language

More recently than when I was recommended Emily Dickinson’s poem—about the time I was starting to think seriously about this project—I was told about a compilation of poems titled *Whereas* by Layli Long Soldier. Following up on the recommendation, I was quickly enthralled with Long Soldier’s poems.

*Whereas* is split into two parts: the first is titled “These Being The Concerns,” which sets the stage for the poem that comprises the entirety of the second part and that is itself entitled “Whereas.” The poem *Whereas* is Long Soldier’s response to the delivery—as well as the language, crafting, and arrangement—of a piece of legislation called the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans. When President Obama signed the Apology on December 19, 2009, no tribal leaders or official representations were invited to witness and receive it on behalf of tribal nations. Five months after its signing, the Apology was read aloud publicly by Senator Sam Brownback to 5 tribal leaders—whereas there are 560 federally recognized tribes in the US—and then it was folded into a larger, unrelated piece of legislation called the 2010 Defense Appropriations Act. Long Soldier explains all of these details in an introduction to the poem “Whereas,” and she concludes her account with this decisive statement: “I am a citizen of the United States and an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, meaning I am a citizen of the Oglala Sioux Nation—and in this dual citizenship, I must work, I must eat, I must art, I must mother, I must friend, I must listen, I must observe, constantly I must live.”<sup>52</sup> Long Soldier has inherited two traditions, and while this statement of hers specifically prefaces

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<sup>52</sup> Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 57.

the poem, the idea of living within two cultures is pervasive throughout the entirety of her compilation.

The poem from Long Soldier's compilation that caught my attention the same way that "The Brain - is wider than the Sky -" did is titled "38." I was especially taken with this poem because I can see that it embodies an idea of Cavell's about Wittgenstein's investigations, which is that the philosophical examination of ordinary language is an endeavor to discover who you are in community with, to whom you make sense. For me, that notion is unquestionably related to Cavell's notion of the truth of skepticism—the pervasive inability of ordinary language to express ourselves adequately. Not only does "38" exemplify the power poetry has to recuperate ordinary language by creating an intimate and personal experience between poet and reader, but it shows that this potential of poetry also manifests itself as a political act. Long Soldier has taken command of the language she's inherited and made it her own, and she has done so in a way not unlike Cavell's re-interpretation of the skeptical position: she shows that persons have not really said what they think they have,<sup>53</sup> but she does so in a way that calls those persons (in this case, that culture) to task for his use of words *politically*.

The most important aspect that I want to develop here of what Cavell finds significant in Wittgenstein's investigations is the way Cavell finds and vulnerability and community to intersect. He writes,

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been

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<sup>53</sup> To address the skeptic's position about whether a person could have the pain of another, Cavell explains, "What you then need to do is show that he has no real use for [the words about having another's pain] either, that their intelligibility is illusory, that he can't really mean them, that he has merely the impression of saying something." Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 229-30.

established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.<sup>54</sup>

We are given a language—that is, we are trained in it; it is impressed upon us. We cannot think outside of it, and language inherently characterizes our thoughts; yet, paradoxically, it this *natural* fact of human existence which alienates us from ourselves. We do not always consider why we assert a concept when we do, and we are something of linguistic automatons because of it. Wittgenstein’s peculiar appeals to criteria reveal the remarkable extent of our agreement in judgment: they show us that we generally use the same concepts for things, and this allows us to communicate with great rapidity. Why question our pervasive agreement in judgment? Even if a person’s use of concepts is inherently particularized by and in specific forms of life, it is apparent that what I mean by “sky” others mean, too. What is the impulse to question such a question? It isolates a person in a certain absurdity: suddenly what I thought was given is nothing more than a habit I have acquired. Why *do* I do such a thing as call something “sky”?

It is precisely this sense of absurdity that is behind Cavell’s statement, “The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.” It is through questioning what one takes as given in language that I might come to know the *reasons* for my actions, and the only way I can do *that* is by comparing what I do with *other person’s* use of concepts. It is apparent that I have not created my reasons for asserting a concept—I have been trained in them; therefore I cannot look *only* to myself to find the reasons for what I do. I must predominantly look to what surrounds me—that is, I must look to what other people say and do—so that I might discover and know more about what I have been trained in. In this way, the making strange of oneself is

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<sup>54</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 20.



simultaneously a looking towards others. Vulnerability and isolation are necessary to furthering my knowledge of myself, and what I then find to be true about myself is also what I find to be true of others. Or, I may also find that what is true of myself—what *I* stand firmly in—is not true of others, and then I will have to part ways with them over certain things.<sup>55</sup> Either way, self-knowledge and knowledge of others are intrinsically related.

As Cavell brings to light, the idea of making strange what a person knows in order for that person to discover more about herself and more about the others who surround her is a basic idea of the social contract. The idea of a social contract is not literally that a person must sign a physical contract in order for the person to consent to government. Rather, social contract theorists teach a person to think about what it means to consent to being a member in a community. Cavell draws out two implications of this teaching: 1) a person who consents recognizes others as having consented to membership in the community as well—people consent to political equality; 2) a person who has consented to a government has adopted that government's laws as her own, meaning that the person is answerable not merely *to* the government *for* but the government. On this last point, Cavell elaborates, “So far then, as I recognize myself to be exercising my responsibility for [the government], my obedience to it is my obedience to my own laws; citizenship in that case is that same as my autonomy; the polis is the field within which I work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political) *freedom*.”<sup>56</sup> Essentially, what Cavell has explained is that a person cannot rightly consent to a government until she has worked out her experience for herself to a certain extent. A child

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<sup>55</sup> Cavell writes on this point: “When my reasons come to an end and I am thrown back on myself, upon my nature as it has so far shown itself, I can, supposing I cannot shift the ground of discussion, either put the pupil out of sight—as though his intellectual reactions are disgusting to me—or I can use the occasion to go over the ground I had hitherto thought foregone.” *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 23.

cannot consent to membership in a polis because a child is still learning—is still being trained in what adults do. A child does not look towards others to find the reasons for her actions. This is also why children are not *free*: they cannot take care of themselves because they do not know what they are doing yet. Freedom, as Cavell wants to emphasize, consists in the ability to discover what one does—to take care of oneself as an *adult*. Therefore, the similarity between finding one's reasons in language (in Wittgenstein's sense of an investigation into it) and social contract theory is that they both are a discovery of what a person does (and says) in relation to what other people do (and say). Moreover, the two things (discovery of oneself and discovery of others) are inextricable from one another.

In “38,” Long Soldier enacts both an investigation into ordinary language and an investigation into her membership in a polis. In doing so, she demonstrates that the two endeavors can be undertaken at the same time: a poetic endeavor *can be* a political effort. Not only that, but she exposes structures of power as they happen in language: she illuminates how an individual's and/or a group's use of language affects others who share in it. We all have a stake in the language we inherit: “human experience refracts in particularity”<sup>57</sup>; the language of a collectivity is also an individual's language.

In the first place, Long Soldier makes herself vulnerable in “38”; she looks to others to help her in her endeavor to discover what her words mean and who she is in community with. Frequently, she uses the pronoun “you,” which implicates the reader directly in her writing. Not only does this establish a conversational tone (two human beings speaking to one another, working something out), but it invites the reader to attach herself—her thoughts, onto the poem so that the poem might be re-animated in another person. It is an intrinsic ability of poetry that it

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<sup>57</sup> See above page 38

be a convening between two minds: the mind who wrote the poem and the mind who reads the poem. Poetry has the potential to do the work of an investigation into language *and* an investigation into political membership as a medium through which people convene.

For example, Long Soldier begins her poem by implicating herself in it through the first-person pronoun, and quickly after she implicates the “reader” (you):

“Here, the sentence will be respected.

I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate.  
For example, all sentences will begin with capital letters.

Likewise, the history of the sentence will be honored by ending each one with appropriate punctuation such as a period or question mark, thus bringing the idea to (momentary) completion.

You may like to know, I do not consider this a ‘creative piece.’ ”<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, she introduces the subject of the Dakota 38 with *dialogue*, and the introduction of her subject is not unlike Cavell’s description of initiation into language in childhood: adults point to an object, say, “This is...,” and children are initiated—that is, shown an instance of—what people do and say. As it will become clear, the introduction of a new object into a person’s world (as a kitty would be introduced into a child’s world) can be read as evidence of Long Soldier’s effort to show persons she finds herself in community with that they do not know something, or do not fully understand what they think they know. In this way, she shows those persons that their knowledge of concepts is lacking while demonstrating her own knowledge. Not only that, but she exemplifies Cavell’s description of the teaching of the social contract—namely, that consenting to membership in a polis means that you are answerable *for* your government. If Long Soldier did *not* find herself to be in a community, she would not

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<sup>58</sup> See Appendix page 59.

bother taking the time to show it the error of its ways. Instead of walking away, however, she acknowledges the shortsightedness of her community:

“You may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38.

If this is the first time you’ve heard of it, you might wonder, ‘What is the Dakota 38?’

The Dakota 38 refers to thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln.

To date, this the largest ‘legal’ mass execution in US history.

The hanging took place on December 26, 1862—the day after Christmas.

This was the *same week* that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

In the preceding sentence, I italicize ‘same week’ for emphasis.

There was a movie titled *Lincoln* about the presidency of Abraham Lincoln.

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was included in the film *Lincoln*; the hanging of the Dakota 38 was not.”<sup>59</sup>

Her conversational tone here allows her, so to speak, to “get in the mind of her reader”: she anticipates a reader’s response to her questions, therefore readers are “thinking with her” as she writes the responses she expects. It is a way of putting another person in one’s own perspective, and vice versa, so that two people may see each other’s point of view without prejudice or preconceived notions—so that they may *work together*. It is also a device that brings out the predictability of her audience. Either way, Long Soldier has gone to painstaking measures to “know” her reader, which is a good rhetorical device: persons are more receptive when you approach things on *their* terms rather than imposing one’s own position upon them.

Another way Long Soldier expresses her vulnerability in “38” besides her adoption of a conversational tone is through straightforward admission of partiality. In order to tell about what

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<sup>59</sup> See Appendix page 59.

happened to the Dakota 38, she must describe an event called the Sioux Uprising because the Dakota 38 were hanged in response to it.

“I want to tell you about the Sioux Uprising, but I don’t know where to begin.

I may jump around and details will not unfold in chronological order.

Keep in mind, I am not a historian.

So I will recount facts as best I can, given limited resources and understanding.”<sup>60</sup>

Long Soldier is no expert in these matters: she has as much access to information as any other ordinary person does. She is just someone trying to piece something together amidst what human limitation will allow her. In admitting partiality with such honesty and forthrightness, moreover, Long Soldier implicitly appeals to her readers’ humanity: she wants them to recognize hers as a function of their own inevitable partiality and limitation. No person knows everything, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t listen to one another.

Long Soldier is partial and limited, which means she is like any human being who has inherited a language within *specific* forms of life. Within her particular experience, she has witnessed and been initiated into *instances* of what people say and do—she has not learned a comprehensive definition of any kind. Accordingly, she has heard and observed things (persons have said and done) in life that she must organize conceptually. No one person or group determines what is possible in a given form of form—the authority in language is anyone’s; it is the human being’s generally. This makes for significant ambiguity as people inevitably say and do things differently; if a person is to figure out the reasons *she* says and does what she says and does, she must look to others in order to figure it out. Long Soldier exemplifies this looking

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<sup>60</sup> See Appendix page 60.

inward and looking outward by offering multiple understandings of a word. She explains, for example:

“Before Minnesota was a state, the Minnesota region, generally speaking, was the traditional homeland for Dakota, Anishinaabeg, and Ho-Chunk people.

During the 1880s, when the US expanded territory, they ‘purchased’ land from the Dakota people as well as the other tribes.

But another way to understand that sort of ‘purchase’ is: Dakota leaders ceded land to the US government in exchange for money or goods, but most importantly, for the safety of their people.

Some say that Dakota leaders did not understand the terms they were entering, or they never would have agreed.

Even others call the entire negotiation ‘trickery.’

But to make whatever-it-was official and binding, the US government drew up an initial treaty.”<sup>61</sup>

The different ways of understanding the word “purchase” represent different voices from instances of her experience. Importantly, she does not give her readers an interpretation of the different inflections of a word; the interpretation is left open to the reader (she refers to it as “whatever-it-was,” ambiguously). Long Soldier merely re-iterates what she’s experienced in her life by prefacing the notions she includes with, “But another way to understand,” “Some say,” and, “Even others.” In offering these experiences, moreover, she demonstrates that she is examining (*investigating*) what she has inherited.

However, it is precisely the language of history—the language that is supposedly the voice of “expertise” and “factual” recording a nation’s past—that is largely to blame for her inability to comprehend the events leading up to the Sioux Uprising. With this admission, the

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<sup>61</sup> See Appendix page 60.

mediation between different “voices” in a language Long Soldier undertakes in “38” becomes salient as one between her Native heritage and her American heritage:

“I’ve had difficulty unraveling the terms of these treaties, given the legal speak and congressional language.

As treaties were abrogated (broken) and new treaties were drafted, one after another, the new treaties often referenced old defunct treaties, and it is a muddy, switchback trail to follow.

Although I often feel lost on this trail, I know I am not alone.”<sup>62</sup>

Throughout the poem Long Soldier uses parentheses to gesture to the mediation between heritages she undertakes, with the alternative understanding suggested for a concept in parenthesis being of her Native heritage. By including the Native understanding in an aside, moreover, Long Song captures the way that American culture has tended to cast *aside* its historical dealings with Native peoples as it enjoys the dominant mode of interpretation. Long Soldier’s writing demonstrates a claim that the US government has historically held the means of *defining what happens*; what the US government says, in other words, is the interpretation that gets noticed—the other stuff isn’t *really* important to the meaning of the sentence, or history itself. Moreover, Long Soldier’s intention is to indicate that the dominant means of expression is not what it says it is, or what it seems to be on its surface: there are dealings which underlie, or have been implicated in the process of acquiring, that authority of expression; the dealings which underlie language in a self-effacing way are exemplified by the inaccessible, self-referential “legal speak” and “congressional language” of the US government. Her point is to show that such a self-serving language cannot, on good faith, “know itself”: that idea is brought to light in the way Long Soldier’s muddy, partial perspective can still see better what the true content of the authoritative language is than that language can see of itself, on its own terms. This idea—

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<sup>62</sup> See Appendix page 60..

namely, that a language can have underlying meanings which are not readily apparent—is a basic tenet of Wittgenstein’s understanding of ordinary language: language is not used according to strict rules and it is an activity in form of life, meaning that a language consists in people’s *use of it*. Language is a result of *people’s dealings with one another*, and the situation between the Dakota people and the US government is no exception.

Yet, despite all of the ambiguous language she mediates within, Long Soldier offers the hopeful insight characteristic of what is true when *anyone* endeavors to truly come to know something (in language and in life): a person’s vulnerability—no matter how confusing and disorienting—does *not* isolate her from all others: “Although I often feel lost on this trail, I know I am not alone.” Long Soldier’s claim is what Cavell understands to be true of Wittgenstein’s appeals to ordinary language *and* what is true of a person’s assuming membership in a polis: when one accepts one’s limits one may be in community with others. Long Soldier knows that by embracing her inherent partiality, she will make discoveries; moreover, she knows others must *also* endure the same confusion if they are themselves to make discoveries.

And make a discovery Long Soldier does. Dealings between the Dakota people and the US grew continually more complicated between 1851-1858; as Long Soldier explains, the Dakota people grew increasing more dependent on money promised for the cession of their land by repeatedly broken and amended treaties. The Dakota people, however, never received the money promised by the treaties, and that failure had dire consequences:

“As you may have guessed by now, the money promised in the turbid treaties did not make it into the hands of the Dakota people.

In addition, local governments traders would not offer credit to ‘Indians’ to purchase food or goods.

Without money, store credit, or rights to hunt beyond their ten-mile tract of land, Dakota people began to starve.



The Dakota people were starving.

The Dakota people starved.

In the preceding sentence, the word ‘starved’ does not need italics for emphasis.

One should read ‘The Dakota people starved’ as a straightforward and plainly stated fact.”<sup>63</sup>

There is *no* ambiguity in Long Soldier’s account here; there is no weighing of different interpretations from either her Native heritage or her American heritage. The Dakota people starved; that is a *fact*. Long Soldier’s tone is no longer vulnerable and admitting of limitation—it is commanding and assured of itself. Furthermore, Long Soldier has switched her pronoun to “One” indicating a more sophisticated, formal tone. This signals a change in the level on which Long Soldier puts herself with the reader. While previously her use of the pronoun “you” put herself and her reader in conversation with one another, the transition to “one” suggests that Long Soldier intends to change her stance with respect to the reader. Her new tone is not disinviting, but it is stern.

Persons and peoples may have different stakes in language. Consider the concept of “race.” In her book *Borderline Americans*, Katherine Benton-Cohen illustrates that race merely functions as something real in *social practice* and *lived experience*—it is not “real” in a strictly biological sense, although it may sometimes seem to be (as a result of what has been passed down in a culture’s concepts). Through a close examination of cultural relations in Cochise County, Arizona, Benton-Cohen shows how corporations and governments exerted control over the creation of racial categories: there was political and economic gain to be had in subjugating a demographic of people through the fabrication of a concept (race) that could function as a kind of convenient decoy to distract others from their true interests. Benton Cohen observes, “Rich

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<sup>63</sup> See Appendix page 61.

and poor, immigrant and native, miner and farmer, manager and worker, man and woman: they all fought over how race would be defined and who would benefit from these definitions. The result was the racial conflict that has often been mistaken as natural or inevitable in the borderlands.”<sup>64</sup> As Benton-Cohen describes them, Long Soldier’s poem enacts an investigation into the interested relations between peoples that are vested in their cultural concepts.

The US government clearly had economic and political interest in the Dakota people’s land, and it is also clear that they used language—namely “legal speak” and “congressional language” in treaty-writing—as a “decoy” to mask the true nature of their dealings with Dakota people. It is not clear the Dakota people understood the language of these treaties; as Long Soldier points up, it is likely they agreed to a treaty in the first place more out of concern for the safety of their people than anything else—that alone speaks volumes as to the nature of US “diplomacy.” Long Soldier implicitly asks, What interest would the Dakota people have had in the money and goods promised by the treaties when they had provided for themselves for many generations—as an independent community of people—with their own resources? Rather, Long Soldier’s implication is that it was through *feigned diplomacy* that the US government effectively enslaved the Dakota people by making them dependent on the US’s economic system and underhandedly forcing them onto reservations in turn. In other words, Long Soldier shows in “38” that the “diplomacy” the US government thinks or says it does is not the diplomacy it practices—she shows that the US has not really said what it thinks it has; in doing so, she calls the government to task for their words, *politically*. Long Soldier has melded an investigation into language with an investigation into citizenship.

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<sup>64</sup> Katherine Benton-Cohen, “Introduction,” in *Borderline Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 13-15.

Long Soldier's investigation into the concept of diplomacy in the US government happens in another way that has to do with remembrance and recognition—with the form of life that is called “historicizing.” As Long Soldier duly illustrates at the start of “38” through her mention of the movie *Lincoln*, is an undeniable aspect of the American cultural imaginary, or what America ordinarily “thinks” about itself. What person who attended American public schools did *not* learn about Abraham Lincoln or the Emancipation Proclamation? Yet, people in America may not know about what happened to the Dakota 38 despite the fact that it happened within the *same week* of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Long Soldier could be asking, What do you need to know about American history in order to be an “American”? Ironically, as one group of people whose relations with the US government have also been “a muddy, switchback trail to follow” were liberated, another group were hanged. Long Soldier points up something similar to Benton-Cohen's intention in studying Cochise County: racial difference in the US has historically been studied on a black-white axis to the neglect of cultural demographics.<sup>65</sup> Along these lines, Long Soldier asks about where *this* event—namely the *legal* execution of thirty-eight Dakota men—stands with respect to American history; she calls history to task for its partiality and its lack of transparency.

With these notions of historicizing and diplomacy established, it is possible to recognize the full significance of Long Soldier's change in tone when she states that Dakota people starved. I would like to suggest her “straightforward and plainly-stated fact” as something ordinary language philosophers do when they assert a concept. Long Soldier effectively states, “*That* is what we call starving.” According to Cavell's explanation, “The demonstrative [in ordinary language philosophy] registers that we are to recollect those very general facts of nature or

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

culture which we all, all who can talk and act together, do (must) in fact be using as criteria; facts we only need to recollect, for we cannot fail to know them in the sense of having never acquired them.”<sup>66</sup> Cavell’s idea is an appeal to the human being as such, and it embodies the command one’s use of language may assume when one is certain of one’s knowledge of a concept. In stating the fact that the Dakota people starved with a shift into a more mature tone, Long Soldier indicates her transition from investigation into citizenship. She is no longer confused by her mediation between heritages—she has found her voice and her conviction that *that* is starving, and nothing else.

Not only that, but her self-discovery carries with it a distinctly political appeal. Long Soldier has found that what she finds true of herself is lacking in other Americans—namely, they did not (and have not yet properly) responded to this starvation despite the fact that they apparently must know what “starving” is. If Long Soldier began “38” with an initiation, here she *demonstrates* what she has initiated her readers into and shown them that they are *lacking* in knowledge and awareness of their own actions, in that they do not know this fact of their heritage—they have failed to examine themselves in the way an individual must whenever she wants to know the reasons for what she says and does, and, therefore, to whom she is in community with. Long Soldier shows her fellow Americans that they apparently must not “really” know themselves, and they have not undertaken the kind of investigation that must be had in order, truly, to be in community with others. Not only that, but, at the same time, she performs a recuperation of language by reminding her readers that the authority anyone has in language is always ours—the human being as such; an *individual* who is partial and limited can call a collectivity to task for its language, and this is precisely because the language of a

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<sup>66</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 73.

collectivity is always also an *individual's*. The poetic endeavor she makes in “38” truly exemplifies the way that poetry can manifest itself as a political act, because it is simultaneously *Long Soldier's* investigation of herself and her community; and through a poetic medium she also puts her reader through the experience of a different (her) subjectivity so that the reader might undertake to consider herself anew as well.

But the fact that the Dakota people starved is not the only point in “38” where Long Soldier employs a certainty of tone that manifests her poetic exemplification of self-investigation and political membership. At a later point in the poem, she explains that she started writing it because she was interested in writing about grasses; there's another event she wants to include. Long Soldier provides an account of one trader in particular who refused the Dakota people what they were promised in the Minnesota treaties, and who contributed the Dakota people's starvation in turn:

“One trader named Andrew Myrick is famous for his refusal to provide credit to the Dakota people by saying, ‘If they are hungry, let them eat grass.’

There are variations of Myrick's words, but they are all something to that effect.

When settlers and traders were killed during the Sioux Uprising, one of the first to be executed by the Dakota was Andrew Myrick.

When Myrick's body was found,

his mouth was stuffed with grass.”<sup>67</sup>

What follows is not a “straightforward and plainly stated fact,” but what Long Soldier finds herself, as an individual, wanting to say. *Despite* its partiality, however, it carries the same air of significance that her statement about the Dakota people's starvation indicated:

“I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem.

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<sup>67</sup> See Appendix page 62.

There's irony in their poem.

There was no text.

*'Real' poems do not 'really' require words.*

I have italicized the previous sentence to indicate inner dialogue, a revealing moment.

But, on second thought, the words 'Let them eat grass' click the gears of the poem into place.

So, we could also say, language and word choice are crucial to the poem's work."<sup>68</sup>

At this moment in the poem, Long Soldier opens up history and language to make it live again through herself—she demonstrates her freedom as an American citizen to exercise her autonomy. As Cavell wrote in his explication of the teaching of the social contract, “the polis is the field within which I work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political freedom),”<sup>69</sup> and that is *because* citizenship is the acceptance of a government's laws as one's own. One cannot consent to government if one has not consciously deliberated the conditions of it; a government who imposes law without such allowance would be tyrannical. What Long Soldier has done here is to have investigated her American heritage on her own terms (she was interested in writing about grasses), and she finds her own way to insert herself into that cultural and political dialogue. She cannot—as a rightful citizen—contribute in any other way, because she would not be doing so on her own terms, upon the basis of her *own* rationality as it is distinct from what she has inadvertently inherited.

Cavell wrote, “One might think of poetry as the second inheritance of language. Or, if learning a first language is thought of as the child's acquiring it, then poetry can be thought of as the adult's acquiring of it, as coming into possession of his or her own language, full

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<sup>68</sup> See Appendix page 63.

<sup>69</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 23.

citizenship.”<sup>70</sup> Long Soldier’s poem “38” is proof of Cavell’s claim: she incorporates her autonomous voice into a cultural dialogue poetically—and with a realization about poetry; in this sense, “38” is doubly exemplary of Cavell’s claim. In other words, a person could undertake the investigation of oneself with respect to what other say and do that is necessary for political consent without also making a claim as to the nature of poetry itself. Long Soldier’s poetic enactment of her autonomy and citizenship, however, is also a claim as to the inherent poeisis of ordinary language.

Language is an activity in form of life, which means that it embodies people’s use of it: language is what *people* make (of) it in their relations with one another. What Long Soldier is “inclined” to call a poem is, I want to say, a result of this fact. There would have been no “poem” to identify if Myrick had not *said*, “If they are hungry, let them eat grass.” Because he did, however, it was possible for the Dakota people to respond by making his words anew: they took him for his *word*, straight from his mouth. In doing so, the Dakota people demonstrated their faithfulness to language in a way Americans never did to the treaties *they* drafted. The “real” poem Long Soldier identifies is a consolidated instance embodying consequences of language—that is, *any* poem takes advantage of language’s ambiguity in an autonomous way. By capturing the Dakota people’s poem within her own poetic practice, moreover, she breathes new life into it so that their poem may continue to affect people by bringing the fact of language as an *activity* in form of life (instead of a static, given word) to light. Simply through an interest in grass, Long Soldier has been able to interject her autonomous voice into a historical discussion.

I would like to conclude by suggesting Heidegger’s capitulation of poetry. He writes, “The linguistic work, originating in the speech of the people, does not refer to this battle; it

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

transforms people's saying so that now every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and what unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what lofty and what flighty, what master and what slave"<sup>71</sup> Layli Long Soldier does not allow language to be accepted as a cold, inaccessible entity whose terms are only manipulated by a singular people. In undertaking an investigation of what has been given to her, Long Soldier exemplifies the way that an investigation into language is also "the wish and search for community" in the sense that membership in a polity requires knowledge of oneself. Not only does she enact her investigation into her own cultural and linguistic inheritance, but she takes readers along in her experience and shows them there is something they do not know—that the language they think they use does not really mean what it appears to mean on the surface. In doing so, "38" exemplifies the way that poetry, as a medium through which minds convene, can be political. Therefore, poetry puts language back into the hands of the people by re-animating it away from an interested elite: poetry originates in the speech of the people, therefore it holds the power to define how language is used in forms of life. "Human experience refracts in particularity;" an individual's words *are* a people's words.

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 42.





## Appendix

“38”

Here, the sentence will be respected.

I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate.

For example, all sentences will begin with capital letters.

Likewise, the history of the sentence will be honored by ending each one with appropriate punctuation such as a period or a question mark, thus bringing the idea to (momentary) completion.

You may like to know, I do not consider this a “creative piece.”

I do not regard this as a poem of great imagination or a work of fiction.

Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an “interesting” read.

Therefore, I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought.

That said, I will begin.

You may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38.

If this is the first time you’ve heard of it, you might wonder, “What is the Dakota 38?”

The Dakota 38 refers to the thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln.

To date, this is the largest “legal” mass execution in US history.

The hanging took place on December 26, 1862—the day after Christmas.

This was the *same week* that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

In the preceding sentence, I italicize “same week” for emphasis.

There was a movie titled *Lincoln* about the presidency of Abraham Lincoln.

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was included in the film *Lincoln*; the hanging of the Dakota 38 was not.

In any case, you might be asking, “Why were thirty-eight Dakota men hung?”

As a side note, the past tense of hang is *hung*, but when referring to the capital punishment of hanging, the correct past tense is *hanged*.

So it's possible that you're asking, "Why were thirty-eight Dakota men hanged?"

They were hanged for the Sioux Uprising.

I want to tell you about the Sioux Uprising, but I don't know where to begin.

I may jump around and details will not unfold in chronological order.

Keep in mind, I am not a historian.

So I will recount facts as best as I can, given limited resources and understanding.

Before Minnesota was a state, the Minnesota region, generally speaking, was the traditional homeland for Dakota, Anishinaabeg, and Ho-Chunk people.

During the 1800s, when the US expanded territory, they "purchased" land from the Dakota people as well as the other tribes.

But another way to understand that sort of "purchase" is: Dakota leaders ceded land to the US government in exchange for money or goods, but most importantly, the safety of their people.

Some say that Dakota leaders did not understand the terms they were entering, or they never would have agreed.

Even others call the entire negotiation "trickery."

But to make whatever-it-was official and binding, the US government drew up an initial treaty.

This treaty was later replaced by another (more convenient) treaty, and then another.

I've had difficulty unraveling the terms of these treaties, given the legal speak and congressional language.

As treaties were abrogated (broken) and new treaties were drafted, one after another, the new treaties often referenced old defunct treaties, and it is a muddy, switchback trail to follow.

Although I often feel lost on this trail, I know I am not alone.

However, as best as I can put the facts together, in 1851, Dakota territory was contained to a twelve-mile by one-hundred-fifty-mile long strip along the Minnesota River.

But just seven years later, in 1858, the northern portion was ceded (taken) and the southern portion was (conveniently) allotted, which reduced Dakota land to a stark ten-mile tract.

These amended and broken treaties are often referred to as the Minnesota Treaties.

The word *Minnesota* comes from *mni*, which means water; and *sota*, which means turbid.

Synonyms for turbid include muddy, unclear, cloudy, confused, and smoky.

Everything is in the language we use.

For example, a treaty is, essentially, a contract between two sovereign nations.

The US treaties with the Dakota Nation were legal contracts that promised money.

It could be said, this money was payment for the land the Dakota ceded; for living within assigned boundaries (a reservation); and for relinquishing rights to their vast hunting territory which, in turn, made Dakota people dependent on other means to survive: money.

The previous sentence is circular, akin to so many aspects of history.

As you may have guessed by now, the money promised in the turbid treaties did not make it into the hands of Dakota people.

In addition, local government traders would not offer credit to “Indians” to purchase food or goods.

Without money, store credit, or rights to hunt beyond their ten-mile tract of land, Dakota people began to starve.

The Dakota people were starving.

The Dakota people starved.

In the preceding sentence, the word “starved” does not need italics for emphasis.

One should read “The Dakota people starved” as a straightforward and plainly stated fact.

As a result—and without other options but to continue to starve—Dakota people retaliated.

Dakota warriors organized, struck out, and killed settlers and traders.

This revolt is called the Sioux Uprising.

Eventually, the US Cavalry came to Minnesota to confront the Uprising.

More than one thousand Dakota people were sent to prison.

As already mentioned, thirty-eight Dakota men were subsequently hanged.

After the hanging, those one thousand Dakota prisoners were released.

However, as further consequence, what remained of Dakota territory in Mnisota was dissolved (stolen).

The Dakota people had no land to return to.

This means they were exiled.

Homeless, the Dakota people of Mnisota were relocated (forced) onto reservations in South Dakota and Nebraska.

Now, every year, a group called the Dakota 38 + 2 Riders conduct a memorial horse ride from Lower Brule, South Dakota, to Mankato, Mnisota.

The Memorial Riders travel 325 miles on horseback for eighteen days, sometimes through sub-zero blizzards.

They conclude their journey on December 26, the day of the hanging.

Memorials help focus our memory on particular people or events.

Often, memorials come in the form of plaques, statues, or gravestones.

The memorial for the Dakota 38 is not an object inscribed with words, but an *act*.

Yet, I started this piece because I was interested in writing about grasses.

So, there is one other event to include, although it's not in chronological order and we must backtrack a little.

When the Dakota people were starving, as you may remember, government traders would not extend store credit to "Indians."

One trader named Andrew Myrick is famous for his refusal to provide credit to Dakota people by saying, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass."

There are variations of Myrick's words, but they are all something to that effect.

When settlers and traders were killed during the Sioux Uprising, one of the first to be executed by the Dakota was Andrew Myrick.

When Myrick's body was found,

his mouth was stuffed with grass.

I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem.

There's irony in their poem.

There was no text.

*"Real" poems do not "really" require words.*

I have italicized the previous sentence to indicate inner dialogue, a revealing moment.

But, on second thought, the words "Let them eat grass" click the gears of the poem into place.

So, we could also say, language and word choice are crucial to the poem's work.

Things are circling back again.

Sometimes, when in a circle, if I wish to exit, I must leap.

And let the body swing.

From the platform.

Out

to the grasses.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Layli Long Soldier, "38," in *Whereas* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 49-53.

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