

Cultural Daily

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On Wittgenstein

Robert Wood · Wednesday, January 10th, 2018

Sometimes there is a vision you have, a kind of mythic logic image that, for an instant, becomes real, as real as two-minute noodles or a toy poodle. But that vision, or its shadow, its aura, its ghost, remains in your consciousness and you do not forget it. I had an impression of what I wanted to be when I grew old from a woman in Paris. I was lucky in that growing up I had many great role models – people I could turn to for advice on life and the universe, and not only books. There were my uncles who routinely gathered in the backyard of our family get togethers, talking politics with the romantic nostalgia for where they grew up. There were my teachers at school who would impress upon me the importance of being a student, and many of whom I was fond of and close to. And my parents had friends who were part of our lives, who took an interest in what I was doing and how I was writing and growing in my own life.

But the vision I have, a vision that is an outline, of what it is to grow old with grace and continue to amaze comes from Therese van de Wiele. Therese is an elegant, liberated woman who has lived in Paris for 50 years. She has made her base a small apartment in the heart of Montparnasse in the Passage d'Enfer. She wears blue, she plays solitaire, she is independent. And she travels the world round. At 84 she made it all the way to Australia by herself without fuss or complaint, and simply good will. There is something generous and poetic about her disposition that taught me how to become myself, something about her logic that is 'dreamy.'

I stayed with her for one summer, getting an education at the big cultural institutions of that metropole. I would walk the whole immense city for hours, taking notes and writing poems as I walked, checking in on Matisse, Picasso, Gauguin, Van Gogh, all the suburban hot shots of a time before, on a projection of art that I knew I should know something about. But it was also here that I found the Ludwig Wittgenstein that I love. It was not the Wittgenstein of my teachers but the Wittgenstein I carried close with me. It was here that I saw how he was the Duchamp of language, that all thought was a urinal waiting to be reframed and put in the institution. I started seeing, hearing, reading profundity everywhere. It momentarily killed my filter. If it was all a symptom then what was the cure? If every word led somewhere then what was the adventure? It is all just language – the gesture of the body, the word on the page, the painting on a canvas, an installation, a butcher's display. As he says 'we are struggling with language', which is to say we are struggling with life as the only opposite of the death we are certain of, be they taxes or a hole in the head. I needed to come into an idea of my own languageness, be that English or paint or simply *pain*. It became, after much sorrow and an inability to be critical, a source of great liberation.

What I learned then, however, was the virtue of metaphoric thinking. That is to say, we cannot

only take pleasure in Wittgenstein's particular metaphors, but that we can also think with and through them to change the structure of our thought itself. As he writes 'if this stone won't budge at present, if it is wedged in, first move other stones around it.' Show, don't tell and take that to the limit.

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Over the next few years, I took this to one logical extreme and began to 'write' large paper canvases. I would buy rolls of paper, as large as I could find, and spread them out on the floor. Then I would furiously scribble in white ink whatever came into my head. You could not read this stream of consciousness except on close inspection and over the top of this writing I would make one simple geometric shape with an ink I mixed from the elements of particular country – a triangle in ochre, a line from a poultice of brown leaves or a circle with seaweed that left a trace of the sea itself. I was trying to push language to its edge, drawing on Concrete poetry, Bob Cobbing and Christian Dotremont as much as Wittgenstein in *Culture and Value*. After this phase I picked up the keyboard and began to make poetry only using the symbols that were available to me on this new technology. I also began to seek publication. Five years after I had left Paris, I saw my first poem, 'In the Desert', published as an example of what happens when we do not have 'language' as words on a page. I had made meaning using visual signs as their own type of poetry, which had been done by many more before, but to me it was some sort of beginning.

In getting over that visual turn, in realizing the dialectic of language, I actually turned back to language *within* language and the land that inspired my writing – if Wittgenstein spoke of mountains and plateaus, of living seeds, of apple trees and straw, I ask myself, what about the sea or kangaroo paws? That Therese has lived for so long right in the heart of Paris and weathered the storms of progress, I wanted to ask myself where was my center and what had that meant. Where is my desert island if hers is an apartment in Montparnasse?

In asking that, I knew somehow that I had to work out my relationship to the world. I still must. But in that, to know myself, I had to understand Australia, and within that, I had to understand Western Australia, and within that, I had to understand Noongar country, and within that, I had to understand Redgate, Wembley and Perth, and within that, I had to come to terms with specific memories and stones and locks and rivers and keys and chains and bridges and worms and bees and spines and kidneys and livers that were the very centre of my undefined world.

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