Must We Show What We Cannot Say?

James Conant

Harvard University

Priest: What's wrong with Johannes?
Mikkel: We don't like talking about it up here, but I don't mind telling you . . . it's something that happened.
Priest: Was it . . . love?
Mikkel: No, no, it was from reading Søren Kierkegaard.
—From the film *Ordet*, directed by Carl Dreyer

MY original intention was to contribute to this volume an article on Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. More specifically, I had hoped to elucidate certain affinities in the work of these two philosophers. The article proved exceedingly difficult to write. I somehow found myself fated to writing endless preliminaries to my main point without ever feeling that I had arrived at what I really wanted to say. As I was at last reaching the point of completing the article once and for all, I suddenly realized that nothing in the world could induce me to publish it. The fantasy that I was working on an article that I was prepared to publish disintegrated on me. I was left with the realization that I had been participating, and possibly forcing others[1] unwittingly to participate, in a charade. In the face of this epiphany I found myself confronted with two alternatives: submit nothing and come clean about my failure or fulfill my obligation (to others and to myself) by writing something else. After deciding to opt for the latter alternative, it was suggested to me[2] that I try to write about the one topic I could now write about with the full pathos of conviction. Therefore, rather than submitting the originally intended article, I have already begun to offer you its obituary instead. The article and its obituary share an important topic: namely, that of silence. Only the article was to be about a silence that is born of

illumination and serves as an expression of satisfaction. The obituary is about a silence that is born of dissatisfaction and is the response to an inability to illuminate. Both of them (the obituary and the article) are concerned with the danger of confusing these two kinds of silence. But before I tell you why I wanted to write an article about such matters, I need to tell you why I want to write its obituary.

The presumption underlying this exercise is that my failure to write this particular article provides a sufficiently representative example of the struggle of a certain kind of philosophical writing to itself constitute an important topic for philosophical reflection. I do not mean to excuse myself by suggesting that the task I had presented myself with involved insuperable difficulties. I mean only to suggest that on this occasion the difficulties in the end overwhelmed me and that such difficulties can prove overwhelming. I have in mind two distinct but intimately related forms of difficulty: first, that of writing out of a faithfulness to a certain understanding of either Kierkegaard's or Wittgenstein's work and the pressures that mount when the task at hand is to write explicitly about their work; second, that of trying to write in such a way that one's own philosophical output remains no less exoteric than one's conception of philosophy permits. But I anticipate myself.

An obituary should begin with a description of the deceased. My article fell into three parts. Each part resisted my attempts to write in slightly different ways. The first part of the article was to explore my dissatisfactions with a variety of commentators—commentators on Kierkegaard, commentators on the work of the early Wittgenstein, and especially commentators who had attempted to align Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.[3] I, too, wished to propose such an alignment, so naturally first I had to point out where they had failed and where I would allegedly succeed. This last group of commentators believed they noticed the following five similarities between these two famous works: (1) both were concerned to draw a distinction between sense and nonsense (or between what can and cannot be objectively comprehended) and to relegate matters of importance (ethics, religion) to a realm beyond the limits of sense; (2) both works draw a distinction between what can be said (or directly communicated) and what can only be shown (or indirectly communicated); (3) both works attempt to show what cannot be said (or thought) by drawing limits to what can be said (or thought); (4) both works consistently

climax in a final moment of self-destruction in which we are asked to throw out the ladder we have just climbed up (or to throw away the work of the pseudonym named Johannes Climacus or John of the Ladder); (5) both works end with a proclamation of silence and with the implication that silence *is* the only correct form that an answer to their questions could take.

To be honest, I have never seen anyone perspicuously lay out these five similarities as clearly as I believe this obituary has just done. I take no pride in this since I regard the impetus behind so aligning these two works to be itself deeply misguided. Nevertheless, I believe one or another of these similarities I have just noted is what has moved previous commentators to couple the names of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein.[4] I do believe that these apparent parallels are symptomatic of deeper affinities between the writings of these two authors. What exactly those deeper affinities are is one of the many things my article never arrived at a satisfactory formulation of. My dissatisfaction with all of these commentators lies in their mutual perception of there being some particular thing (or things) that cannot be said. I wanted to instruct them to read these texts in a different light and to say to them: there is no particular *thing* that cannot be said. The "what" in "what cannot be said" refers to nothing. These works end as they do because beyond what can be said there is nothing more to say or offer: except more silence. But I knew this suggestion of mine would meet with various forms of resistance. On one way of understanding the reading I seemed to be proposing, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein would become indistinguishable from Carnap. Indeed, this is precisely the reading of the *Tractatus* these commentators had hoped to leave behind. On their view, Wittgenstein only agrees with Carnap insofar as he holds that the propositions of ethics and religion are nonsense. However, for the *Tractatus* they are supposed to be deep and significant forms of nonsense whereas for Positivism they are void of any cognitive content whatsoever. My article had here hoped to be able to dig in its heels and avoid ceding further ground: nonsensical yet significant? meaningless but not void of cognitive content? Can we make sense of such conjunctions? But my interlocutory commentators threatened to respond: "what kind of sense do you wish to make here?" They were willing only to concede that these conjunctions were, strictly speaking, nonsensical. Nevertheless, they would say, they were not incoherent; admittedly, they could not be coherently expressed, but they were not unintelligible. Indeed, for these

commentators, it was the possibility of making such conjunctions intelligible that it was the singular achievement of such works as the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* to have delimited. It is at roughly this point that my head began to spin. I could see no way to have the last word in this exchange. Yet I was not prepared to settle for anything less than the last word.

In short, I was at this juncture dissatisfied with my article for the following reason: I did not see a way to communicate my original dissatisfaction with the work of these commentators to these commentators themselves. I wanted to make what was transparently inadequate about their views to me transparent to them. Yet as I read over what I had written I felt only certain readers would be willing to follow me. I found myself reaching a point already here in the first part of my article where I felt like insisting: what I have written will only be intelligible to someone who already shares my dissatisfactions with these commentators. My hope was to derive some comfort from the following opening words of the *Tractatus*:

> This book will perhaps only be understood by those who themselves have had the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts.[5]

An amorphous temptation was proposing itself to my article. Wittgenstein himself declares his book to be intelligible only to insiders. Surely it is a mark of the authenticity of my fledgling article on the *Tractatus* that it inherits this feature from the work it is about. Many remarks of Kierkegaard's invite a similar temptation, as does the epigraph from Lichtenberg that both of these authors applied to their own writings:

> My works are like mirrors—if an ape looks into them an apostle cannot look back out.[6]

One should be suspicious of the comfort such remarks can appear to offer. What comfort could it really offer me? I meant to be writing about my dissatisfactions with the work of certain commentators. Yet I found I could not make my criticisms about what they had written compelling *to them*. But then *who* was I writing for and why was I writing *about them*? Indeed, if Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are only writing for readers who "already understand" then why do they bother? Further worries obtrude: what does it mean to claim for a work of philosophy that it divides its audience into those who do and those who simply do not understand? What would it mean to claim such a thing for an

author such as Kierkegaard or Wittgenstein?[7] In my article, I was tempted at this juncture to quote the following aphorism from Cavell:

> If philosophy is esoteric, that is not because a few men guard its knowledge, but because most men guard themselves against it.[8]

Both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein are authors who are famous for their ability to keep the ordinary, the everyday, the domestic as a constant theme of their philosophizing. Philosophy is about what is open to everyone's view and concerns each person equally. How, writing from such a conception of their vocation, could they produce works that split their readership into those who do and those who do not have access to the truths they espouse? Shouldn't we conclude, if their writings prove in the end to be in principle inaccessible to certain kinds of readers, that they have simply failed as authors. You respond, "In fact, has it not been amply documented that at least Wittgenstein's (if not also Kierkegaard's) work just *is* impenetrable to many of his readers?" Should we conclude from this that he has failed? How has this been documented? "Well, they tried to read his books and couldn't get anywhere." How hard did they try? "They tried for years." How *hard* did they try? Do we really know how to distribute the blame here? Is it the works that are esoteric or our relation to that which we imagine to be most exoteric? But now you ask of me: "Haven't you just immunized these works from all possible criticism?" I want to respond "No" here. But what has now become of my article?

Fortunately, I am only trying to write its obituary. In my article, I imagined one of my interlocutory commentators responding to my preceding remarks concerning Wittgenstein by urging the following scholarly consideration upon me: was I not attending insufficiently to the discrepancies between the work of the early and that of the later Wittgenstein? I now wanted to take up this issue and insist upon a greater continuity in his work than most previous commentators had allowed for. Indeed, I believed that this would be one of the principle upshots of my entire article. We need to reconceive the entire relation between the early and the later Wittgenstein. For if my reading of the early Wittgenstein is well founded and it proves in various ways to be almost indistinguishable from a standard portrait of the later Wittgenstein, then the question is inevitably forced: where do we want to locate the decisive break that reputedly occurred between his early and his

later work? I wanted to maintain that as long as we stick to questions of the same level of generality as "where do the early Wittgenstein's philosophical (or metaphilosophical) views differ from those of his later work," then the break would forever remain invisible to us. I believed that, on the whole, the metaphilosophical slogans of the *Tractatus*[9] all applied as aptly to the *Philosophical Investigations* as they did to the early work. I wanted to locate the break elsewhere, namely in his developing conception of how one should *write* a philosophical work.[10] What would the composition of such a work have to be in order to provide *genuine* satisfaction from the questions that our philosophical moods engender? I believed that it was in the face of such a question that Wittgenstein came first to worry whether a self-annihilating Kierkegaardian format of the sort that the *Tractatus* embodied might not in the end run the risk of only affording therapy to those who had already helped themselves.[11] Yet I could hardly allow myself to pursue such a line of enquiry in any depth. I was already branching massively from the main thrust of my article. (Is this perhaps inevitable? I have noticed how some of the best writing on both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard often seems to sometimes consist of nothing but an endless series of digressions, each interrupting the next.)[12]

What was the main thrust of my article? Oh yes, I was telling you about my dissatisfactions with those commentators. Let me first sketch for you how they read the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's distinction between sense and nonsense marks not only the boundary between sense and mere nonsense; much more importantly it also marks the line between mere sense and *profound nonsense*. (How can this be the same boundary?) Admittedly, some commentators are more explicit about this than others. Nevertheless, almost all of them want to maintain that for the *Tractatus* the propositions of ethics and religion—as well as either all or only the most important propositions of the *Tractatus* itself—are both nonsensical and deeply significant. Their significance is reputed to lie either in the fact that they do, or at least that they attempt to, show the unsayable, exhibit the ineffable. This requires a conception of language as possessing capacities for exhibiting meaning over and beyond its ordinary capacities for conveying the sense of a proposition. Such a conception is required even if one only wants to maintain that Wittgenstein's deeply nonsensical propositions are only *trying* (but failing) to say something that cannot be said. For one needs an account of how one can so much as recognize what it is that a piece of nonsense is even just trying to say. That one

might think that a particular piece of nonsense fails to say a very particular thing is by no means an unusual or foolish view. It is the view that underlies the traditional philosophical analysis of what goes wrong, for example, in category mistakes.[13] It is probably the most natural view to hold concerning nonsense. These commentators, however, not only ascribe to Wittgenstein the view that there are different kinds of nonsense (intelligible nonsense as opposed to mere gibberish); they also go further and attribute to him the view that certain forms of intelligible nonsense, certain ways of transgressing the syntax of our language, are deeply revelatory of the nature of certain matters that lie beyond the scope of language. Which matters such transgressions are revelatory of depends upon which set of commentators you listen to. For one set the stronger emphasis comes on matters such as the nature of the structure of language, the structure of the world, and the relationship that obtains between language and the world.[14] For others the accent is on the revelation of the "fact" that the world exists, the possibility of mystical experience, and of the status of ethical, aesthetic, and religious truths.[15] Both readers I believe mistake attempts to elicit a diagnosis for certain philosophical problems for attempts to provide a cure for those problems. So they tend to mistake the views that are under scrutiny in the *Tractatus* for the views the author wishes to espouse.[16] Both sets of commentators occur in the conclusion that the early Wittgenstein draws limits to language in order to point to the ineffable truths beyond language (that can only be indicated with the aid of language but can never be embodied in language). The final silence of the book bears witness to the impossibility of such embodiment.

This is how the counterparts of these commentators read the *Postscript:* Kierkegaard draws a distinction between objective truths and subjective truths. The preeminent examples of subjective truths are those of ethics and religion. These cannot be successfully embodied in the universal medium of language but rather only in the "existential" context of an individual's life. The doctrine of Christianity represents the extremest possible form of subjective truth. It is not only inexpressible in language and indigestible to reason, it represents the purest antithesis of what is rationally comprehensible. It presents us with the extremest form of nonsense. (Notice again the importance here of ascribing, in this case to Kierkegaard, an underlying conception of a hierarchy of nonsense.)[17] The ultimate form of nonsense, the absolute paradox of Christian doctrine, is not merely incomprehensible, it can

be identified as *the* paradox precisely because it is *absolutely* incomprehensible. Such a paradox presents the ultimate spur to faith, for in its attempt to assimilate the paradox the understanding will recurrently crucify itself and momentarily liberate us from any interference on its part in our relation to God. Although the paradox cannot be directly stated, the possibility of its existence can be indirectly indicated by demarcating the scope of the understanding and delineating its ultimate limits. The interest of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, in drawing such limits is to point beyond them. What lies beyond the limits of the directly communicable can therefore be indirectly conveyed through the artistic medium of a religiously motivated pseudonymous author. The point of the pseudonymity of the work is to remain faithful to the insight that Kierkegaard himself cannot directly *say* anything of meaningful religious import to us. Nor can any author. Hence the pseudonym, Climacus, at the climax of the work, revokes his claim to an authorial voice and jettisons the entire structure he has previously constructed, leaving us with a silence in which we are allegedly supposed to be able to discern the distilled content of his project to indirectly communicate to us the nature of the truth of Christianity.

It is roughly here that both the exhilaration and the anguish of my original article truly began. These commentators wish to maintain that these two works proclaim that silence is the only correct form of answer to their questions. Yet the works themselves, on their reading, seem to provide absolutely essential preliminary noise. The conclusions of these two works, on this reading, it would seem, should be considerably more elaborate than they actually are and should run approximately as follows: "After we have said enough to show what cannot be said, *then* we should shut up and whereof nothing can be said thereof *now* we should simply remain silent." Against this, in my article I wanted to urge that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein envisioned no alternatives to silence except the following three: those of (1) plain ordinary effable speech, (2) unintelligible though apparently intelligible chatter, and (3) mere gibberish. The latter two alternatives differ only in their psychological import: one offers the illusion of sense where the other does not. Cognitively, they are equally vacuous. My interlocutory commentators, on the other hand, insist on a fourth alternative: the possibility of speech that lacks sense while still being able to convey volumes.

What would I need to do to make my claims acceptable to one of my interlocutors? It is hard to see how any single sentence could

succeed in *showing* them what I wanted them to see. Well, let's be more generous and take all the sentences addressing this matter up until now throughout the preceding pages of this obituary for my article. Are these sentences, taken together, sufficient to show *some* individual that he is trying to draw a distinction where there is no distinction to be drawn? Well, some individual perhaps. On the other hand, you might feel that the problem is that altogether too many of my sentences confine themselves to simply just *saying* that there is no such distinction to be drawn. Certainly, someone who disagrees with me about this will still be able to understand what these sentences *say*, won't he? He will simply reject them as false. And in his case I should simply conclude that *these* sentences have failed to show *him* anything. Nevertheless, these same sentences might be able to nudge someone else toward the insight I want to trigger in him. So my sentences seem to be able to show some people something but not others. An earlier temptation now reinsinuates itself in the guise of the following formulation: these sentences will only show something to someone who is already on the verge of grasping what it is that they want to show. Both sorts of readers—those to whom something is shown and those to whom nothing is shown—understand what my remarks *say* (namely that no distinction can be drawn here), but only one reader comes to see that there is something that cannot be done here.

It is important to notice that this way of summarizing my procedures suffers from precisely the malady it undertook to diagnose and cure. I am imagining there is some particular *something* that my preceding sentences can show to some readers and not others, something it can show to certain readers over and above what it says to all reasonably competent readers. I have, as it were, reified the nonexistence of the undrawable distinction. Two important lessons can be extracted from this embarrassment. First, holding onto such insights is a devilishly tricky matter. Second, the illusion that one has completely mastered the insight is easily maintained in the teeth of being mastered by the illusion.

Holding on to what insights? Well, in my article I originally wanted to claim that the aforementioned commentators failed to draw any distinction whatsoever. However, as I attempted to make this out I started to speak as if there were some particular distinction which was *the* distinction that they had failed to draw. Catching oneself in the act of slipping like this is part of the secret of learning to write fruitfully about such matters. There is no substitute for the excruciating experience of discovering that one

has let the correct formulation of such an insight (and therefore the insight itself) slip from one's grasp, and then resuming the struggle of forcing the insight back into focus again. With the belated discovery that one has indeed allowed such an insight to slip from one's grasp can (I have recently learned) come a sudden gestalt-switch in which an entire piece of one's writing threatens to completely disintegrate before one's eyes. Yet a heightened respect for the fragility and infinite slipperiness of such insights poses its own peculiar kind of threat. For with the cultivation of an inner voice imbued with a sensitivity to such matters comes the age-old philosophical predicament of the possibility of an overdeveloped intellectual conscience. The cost of such a hypercultivation of one's conscience is the fate of living by the impossible standards generated by a fantasy of perfect self-vigilance. One of the dangers of working on either Kierkegaard or Wittgenstein is that one will end up as one more casualty to the peculiar lure of such a fantasy. Even when one succeeds in writing, one may not be able to live (I have also recently learned) with the ugliness, the clumsiness, the sloppiness of one's own words. It is not helpful in such a situation to advise someone simply to switch off their critical faculties. What their critical faculties require is the subtlest of readjustments. Once such a faculty has become hyperextended it does not heal easily.

Indeed, if I thought philosophy were a science, I would propose the following experiment—only to be performed under sufficiently controlled conditions, of course: propose to a reflective and philosophically inclined individual that he or she first read and then try to write about either Kierkegaard or Wittgenstein (or both), and then sit back and watch as the task gradually yet completely paralyzes his or her ability to write—in some cases, for life. You may contend that my experiment has already been performed countless times and my prediction resoundingly disconfirmed. Hundreds have churned out books on both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard.[18] Do I wish to suggest that these individuals should be dismissed as second-rate philosophers simply in virtue of the fact that they *succeeded* in writing about these authors—i.e., that it is a mark of one's authenticity as a philosopher that one's ability to write be paralyzed in the face of these texts? I will turn to these worries in my concluding remarks.

During our last glimpse of my article we had caught me blundering from the claim that my interlocutors were imagining a distinction (where no distinction could be drawn) to a significantly less coherent claim (concerning some particular yet undrawable

distinction they had failed to draw). Now that my blunder has been corrected, however, I am still left with one of the central dilemmas of my article: how on earth am I going to convince my interlocutors of the incoherence of their views. What am I going to *say* to them? How about this: "You are deeply moved by Kierkegaard's and/or Wittgenstein's (early) work because you believe it illuminates for you a profound and subtle distinction between different kinds of truth. The problem here is that you are deriving a strong sense of intellectual satisfaction and profit from a distinction the coherence of which you have completely hallucinated." I ask you: *now* who is going to accuse whom of being incoherent?

Let me summarize for you what would have formed some of the conclusions of the first part of my article. I would have asked you to notice how all five of the similarities that excited my interlocutory commentators each involve a dubious suppressed distinction: (1) a distinction between mere, incomprehensible nonsense and another higher kind of nonsense; (2) a distinction between saying something *in* language and communicating *through* the medium of language precisely by flouting the normal conditions under which language felicitously conveys sense; (3) a distinction between two different lines of demarcation of the boundary between sense and nonsense, one marking off linguistic jumbles that just say nothing and the other delimiting those propositions that *show* what no piece of language can *say;* (4) a distinction between a work that revokes itself and leaves the reader empty-handed, and one that has been written precisely in order to be revoked and hence leaves in its wake a distilled precipitate of ineffable truth; (5) a distinction between a blank and empty silence and a pregnant silence that harbors an inaudible yet discernible content.

In my article I wanted to try to make compelling that these five distinctions were simply five ways of attempting to draw the same undrawable distinction. Nevertheless, I wanted to be responsive to the way in which each of these apparent distinctions could prove immensely seductive. I wanted to write witnessing both their incoherence and their irresistibility. My descriptions of the commentators' impulses to insist on the integrity of these distinctions had to be vivid enough to elicit a recognition, on the part of these commentators, of themselves in my prose. Yet my unmasking of these distinctions had to be supple enough to render their incoherence palpable to their most ardent advocates. The burden I was placing on my writing here was nothing more or less than what I took to be the burden shouldered by many of the works of

philosophy that I admire most. Nevertheless, it is a burden under which I have (once again recently) discovered that one's prose can easily crack.

The first step in such writing is the sympathetic attempt to identify the source of the impulse that fuels one's philosophical interlocutor's utterances. Even this obituary has found itself obligated to provide at least a rough sketch of the character of such a temptation. The temptation here is to imagine, first, that there is some particular thing that these avowedly nonsensical sentences fail to say and, second, that one can comprehend what that particular thing is precisely through the way in which the sentence in question fails to succeed in saying *it*—in its failure to say *it,* the sentence can mutely gesture, as it were, toward *it.* Now this is where the hard labor that is the essence of such philosophical writing should begin. I wanted in my article to make it manifest that no such wedge could be driven between the alternatives of being able to make ordinary sense of and simply not being able to make *any* sense of a particular stretch of linguistic phenomena.[19] I tried in my article to close the distance between myself and my interlocutors by struggling to make compelling what I take to be the actual teaching concerning nonsense set forth in both the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript:* namely that there are no *kinds* of nonsense.[20] All the nonsense there is is old-fashioned, straightforward, garden variety, completely incomprehensible gibberish.[21] I wanted to move from this claim to an attempt to link the following three claims: (1) these commentators propound a completely unstable position and designate it as the intended teaching of these two authors; (2) these commentators fail to provide a compelling reading of what these authors might mean when they conclude by telling us that their works should self-annihilate; (3) these two works really mean it when they call upon us to reach a perspective from which we can in the end throw them away and classify them as nonsense.[22] They mean throw the work *away,* and by "nonsense" they mean simple, old, garden variety *nonsense.* What each of these authors knows is that in the end *this* is a much harder teaching to accept than even the most unacceptable offerings of some incomprehensible brand of mysticism. Each of these works attempts to reduce its readers' options to only the one remaining alternative of the sheerest form of mysticism as its final refuge from the prospect of apparent eternal confinement within the limits of what can only be said. Each of these works then turns to the temptations of mysticism as its central penultimate topic.[23]

In order to succeed, my article would need not only to have

somehow made the three claims listed above compelling. Ultimately it would also have needed to make clear that even the very perception of the limits of language as somehow *confining* one and *debarring* one from one's search for truth is something that lies at the very core of the philosophical illusion that these works harbor the hope of exorcising. In the end the limits vanish—that is, the idea that there are limits here confining one is the central idea that one needs to learn how to throw away.[24] Such a vision of confinement invites the false hope that philosophy holds out a promise of being able to offer us liberation and with it some hitherto obstructed possibility for (perhaps even ethical or religious) advancement. Nothing is more human according to the vision of ourselves that these works urge upon us than the inclination to evade the weary and messy details of the task of attempting to make progress in the problems of life by substituting for them the problems of philosophy. Philosophy can instill a fantasy of progress in which the tasks of life appear only to require the application of a purely intellectual form of effort. It is, I believe, against the background of such a vision of us in flight from our lives (and hence ourselves) that one should first attempt to understand what Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard each might have meant by the claim that what he had written was a work of ethics.[25]

In order to round out my obituary, however, I should now begin to reflect on the demise of the latter portions of my article. The second part began by happily conceding a guiding intuition that various scholars have shared, namely that certain pages of the *Postscript* are forever echoing certain other pages of the *Tractatus* and vice versa. The problem with this concession was that I had already accused these same scholars of having projected incoherent views onto each of these two works. My solution was to suggest that they were misreading these two books in perfectly parallel ways. Indeed, that they had in fact succeeded in reading these works almost exactly inside out by attributing to them the very distinctions they wished to undermine. That one *can* indeed genuinely imagine that one grasps a distinction where none has been drawn—that a projection of false necessities, beneath or beyond the conditions upon which our mastery of language rests, can prove mysteriously irresistible and gratifying—*this* is what these two books are, above all, about.[26]

A former scholarly worry resurfaces: am I not here illegitimately projecting the teaching of the *Philosophical Investigations* onto (now both of) these earlier works? It had, I confess,

actually been one of the more fervent hopes of my article to at least make plausible the claim that this is not an illegitimate projection. I wanted to argue that the insight that we can and do imagine we mean something where we mean nothing is one that is no less central to the teaching of both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*. Each of these works has its own method of enforcing its teaching: Kierkegaard calls his "the qualitative dialectic," Wittgenstein refers to his as "the logical analysis of the proposition." My article was tempted to go on at much too great a length about these matters. This obituary cannot afford to. I will restrict myself here to a single example of the sorts of procedures guiding each of them.

In the case of my discussion of Kierkegaard I took my point of departure from two articles by Stanley Cavell[27] in which he explores a set of procedures that he refers to as Kierkegaard's "grammatical investigations." The example requiring such procedures that I will confine myself to here involves the mistaking of a conceptual question for an empirical one. On Kierkegaard's view, it is symptomatic of the confusion of our age, and the extent of our obliviousness to the loss of certain of our concepts, that we tend to diagnose our every uncertainty as having the form of an empirical uncertainty. Where faith is lacking, we leap to fill the void with knowledge. We assume that what we need is further information or more evidence. Where no evidence is forthcoming we take ourselves to have arrived at an empirical discovery. This is characteristic of the confusion that is engendered by a remark such as the following: "A revelation cannot be proven by evidence."[28] Kierkegaard offers this as a grammatical remark. We, on the other hand, take it to be the answer to the question: "Can a revelation be proven by evidence?" We then hear this question as allowing for two possible answers and we conclude that the correct one is "no" rather than "yes." We then take ourselves to have arrived at the following fact about revelations: they cannot be proven. To say that Kierkegaard intends his original statement as a grammatical remark is to say he is offering it to us as a criterion of what it is for something to count as a genuine revelation. If we do not understand this much about revelations then, by his lights, we do not know what a genuine religious revelation is. Yet we continue to employ the word "revelation" in purportedly religious contexts without realizing that we mean nothing by it. We do not realize that we have failed to give it any sense in such a context for we are not aware that we have lost our hold on any sense it might once have been able to have for us here. It might be that in *our*

lives we will never have a use for such a concept. (This is what Kierkegaard suspects.)

In our age of reflection, Kierkegaard sees us as endlessly distracted by the temptation to intellectualize even our most practical problems. His various attempts to instruct us in this regard will themselves be absorbed by us as further data for reflection.[29] We will thank him for having taught us to think more clearly about the nature of the religious life and will proceed, in the light of what we have learned from him, to reflect further on these matters. However, to have a purely intellectual relation to the religious life is for Kierkegaard not to have a religious life at all. Hence it can come about in our age of reflection that it is the traditional vocabulary of the religious life that we are most inclined to inflect emptily. This particularly comes about when we attempt to enlist the services of philosophy in our efforts to answer the questions that inevitably ensue from our puzzlement over what we do mean when we employ such vocabulary. Philosophy, on Kierkegaard's view, can only appear comic in its attempts to fill the vacuum created by the fact that these words have been drained of their meaning for us—drained by the lives we lead, lives in which such words no longer have a use. The inability of these words to signify for us is not a consequence of a property peculiar to this sort of language—i.e., that it points to something ineffable—rather it is a consequence of how we live and what that entails for what these words *can* mean for us.

It would also be a mistake to understand Kierkegaard as saying here that religious terms, such as "revelation," cannot possibly have any sense for us. What he says is that they cannot have a religious sense for us *now* as our lives stand. That does not render this vocabulary irreversibly unintelligible to us. It only delimits the kinds of use we can now put such vocabulary to. For example, we can use the term "revelation" simply to mean "a disclosure of knowledge." Indeed, the fact that we can understand such vocabulary in other contexts (ethical, aesthetic, scientific, etc.) is not incidental to the fact that when we project such words into a purportedly religious context we retain the conviction that we are still masters of our words.

The tendency of most commentators is to try to save both Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein from Positivism's claim that "religious language can have no cognitive meaning" by helping them to reserve for such language the capacity to point beyond the merely meaningful to something "higher." Yet for both of these thinkers, in a way the Positivist claim marks a decisive step

forward: we no longer imagine we mean something where we mean nothing. However, the Positivist mistakes for a discovery about the nature of a certain kind of language what for them is ultimately a truth about our lives as they stand. For Kierkegaard, a second decisive step forward he would like to see our age take (a step toward the possibility of a genuine relation to the Christian teaching) is one that requires the complete abolition of Christendom. His attack here on the organized church is not out of loyalty to some ideal of religious institutional reform: it is simply a call for us to end our collective acts of hypocrisy and confess we no longer know what it would *mean* for someone today to call himself Christian. (Against such a demand, Nietzsche's attack on Christendom can come to seem comparatively affable.)

Before going on to discuss the *Tractatus*, I should say that the exercise of writing the preceding pages on Kierkegaard came rather easily for me. This should comprise as significant a datum for a meditation on the difficulties of writing philosophy as any of my previously registered moments of paralysis, anguish, or faintheartedness. The ease with which these pages came is certainly not unrelated to the extreme level of generality at which the discussion permits itself to remain. I spare myself the difficulty of engaging a genuinely conceivable interlocutor and attempting to take his struggles with understanding the import of religious language seriously. This omission in turn spares me the requirement of having to exemplify the particular philosophical tendency I claim it is Kierkegaard's achievement to have pinpointed. I got so far as to provide something like an illusion of an example, for instance, when I discuss Kierkegaard's remark that "a revelation cannot be proved by evidence." To make this a genuine example I would have to do (at least) the following two things: (1) inquire into what makes the empirical reading of this remark as seductive as it is—this would require exploring its analogies with other statements of a similar form which are more readily intelligible to us; (2) attempt to write about the temptation to give an empirical reading to this remark in such a way that someone might actually be able to catch himself in the act of succumbing to this temptation and be able to identify for himself how it was that he was led astray here.[30] Generally, the greater the extent to which a piece of philosophical writing spares itself the rigors of such a task, the easier it will be to execute—and the less it will be likely to achieve. A further related weakness of these pages that made them relatively easy to write is the distance with which I was operating from any particular one of Kierkegaard's texts. I wrote about his writ-

ings without ever having to show how my interpretation could be made to stick to actual passages in those texts.

My preceding pages on Kierkegaard certainly derived some of their semblance of substance from the strategem of borrowing from Cavell a term of description, namely that of "a grammatical investigation," which he in turn borrows from the later Wittgenstein. My reliance on this term might appear to obstruct any further alignment I would now like to propose between the procedures of Kierkegaard's "qualitative dialectic" and those of the *Tractatus*. For, according to a reasonably standard history of the development of Wittgenstein's thought, "grammar" is precisely what is supposed to replace "logic" as one moves from the early work to the later. The usual way of picturing the history of these matters is to assume that the early Wittgenstein—given the philosophical centrality he attributes to the Frege-Russell formalism—would be hostilely disposed to his later conception of "grammar." As I have already indicated in a previous remark, I am inclined to think a great deal is lost if one underrates the continuities here.[31] Part of the role of the Frege-Russell formalism in the *Tractatus* is to (1) show that a proposition that appears to be grammatically well-formed, in fact, has no logically well-formed counterpart (unless we give at least one of its terms a new signification); and therefore to (2) show that certain (apparent) thoughts that naturally arise and (apparently) allow themselves to be expressed in ordinary language cannot, as they stand, be rendered in the symbolism. The point here being not that such ill-formed thoughts transcend the limits of language, but that without further resolution—as they stand—they are not, properly speaking, thoughts at all. For the symbolism offers us a medium in which we can perspicuously discern when we have and have not succeeded in successfully imparting sense to some stretch of language. The logical symbolism devised by Frege and Russell in the hands of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* becomes an instrument of philosophical therapy: it helps to identify and alleviate the grip of some piece of language which appears to have a sense although we have yet to give it any. The difficulty in writing about this aspect of the early Wittgenstein's views is avoiding the danger of having his position appear to collapse into that of the Positivists. The possibility of this danger is something that haunts my interlocutory commentators and drives them to want to save the *Tractatus* from any position which equates the nonsensicality of a proposition with its utter cognitive vacuity. Indeed, remarks from the *Tractatus* such as the following can ring of incurable Positivism:

> I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constitutional parts.
>
> (Even if we believe that we have done so.)
>
> Thus "Socrates is identical" says nothing because we have given *no* meaning to the word "identical" as adjective.[32]

The phrase "we have given *no* meaning to the word" can smack of the verificationism of the Vienna Circle, and certainly it is not a mere historical accident—though it is certainly a tremendous historical irony—that the members of the Vienna Circle could have believed for a time that they had found their sacred scripture in the pages of the *Tractatus*. Yet Wittgenstein's point here is in no way dependent upon verificationist strictures. His point is that we don't know how to render the sentence "Socrates is identical" into the symbolism because, as it stands, we don't know what sentence (if any) it is. Nor can we conclude it is unverifiable—for we do not know what claim it is that we should now go out and try to verify. We can render "Socrates is identical to the teacher of Plato" in the formalism because here the logical role of the word "identical" corresponds to that of the equality sign in our symbolism. We know how to logically segment such a statement and hence how to render it in the notation of Frege's *Begriffschrift*. "Socrates is identical," however, as it stands, is not a statement that readily admits of *any* logical segmentation. We can no longer construe the word "identical" as playing the role of the equality sign since the syntax of that sign requires that there be some object that Socrates is identical to. However, our sentence suggests no candidate for such an object. Perhaps the most natural way to segment the sentence (or perhaps I should say the proto-sentence) is to construe "identical" as an adjective here ascribing some attribute to Socrates. However, we still do not understand the (proto-) sentence since "identical" lacks (for us, right now) an adjectival meaning. Wittgenstein points out: we can simply stipulate something adjectival for the word "identical" to mean here. Then we will have succeeded in giving our original string of words a meaning.

Notice the difference here between the views standardly attributed (though often quite unfairly) to the Positivists and those I am attributing to the *Tractatus*. According to the former, certain propositions can be irreducibly nonsensical and therefore hopelessly metaphysical. We know what proposition it is. We try to verify it and find we cannot. Hence we conclude that *that* proposition is nonsensical. Its unverifiability shows that *it* failed to make the claim that *it* wanted to make. Such a view shares ironically with

the view of my antipositivist commentators a conception of a hierarchy of nonsense in which certin nonsensical propositions fail to say some particular thing. The positivists deplore such propositions, my friends the commentators glory in them—both parties imagine such nonsensical propositions to be discernible from mere strings of gibberish. The *Tractatus* has no room for such a distinction. If we do not know how to give a proposition sense, then we do not even know how to parse it. In "Socrates is identical" we don't know if we are faced with the "is" of the copula or the "is" of identity. We don't know if we are faced with the "identical" of the equality sign or the "identical" of some already familiar or hitherto unencountered concept. We don't really know how to begin to read the linguistic string we have been presented with. On the Tractarian view all nonsense is in principle unreadable in this sense and hence logically indistinguishable from gibberish. We may, however, *imagine* that we are able to understand the phrase "Socrates is identical" even before we have given it a sense. We do not recognize it as gibberish because of its superficial similarity to other sentences which we do know how to segment.[33] The only distinction between deep nonsense and mere nonsense, therefore, that the *Tractatus* allows is between pieces of gibberish that appear to have sense and those that don't. In neither case does the book countenance the possibility of a piece of irreducible, irreversible nonsense. The *Tractatus,* however, like the *Postscript,* does hold that we can always breathe life into a piece of language by finding a use for it in our lives.

Will the preceding exegesis of the Tractarian conception of nonsense sway my interlocutors? Probably only if I can convince them that such a conception is really internal to the teaching of the *Tractatus*. The key to success here in the end will hinge on my being able to make good on my earlier claim: namely that the temptation—exemplified by the voice of my commentators (in what was to have been the first part of my article)—to distinguish between two different levels of nonsense is precisely the temptation under scrutiny and targeted for exposure in both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*. This requires showing how their interpretations do have a hold on certain pieces of these texts, but that they are holding them the wrong way round. To really show this, however, requires making clear how my interpretation does hold the whole of each of these texts the right way round. All of this requires saying a great deal about each of these texts at a level of detail from which this obituary has excused itself—but not exempted itself.

I have at least provided an example of a passage in the *Tractatus* upon which I might want to begin to build a case for my earlier claims. In connection with the *Postscript,* my article might appear to have more insurmountable difficulties. Is it not the widespread consensus of the scholarly community that Kierkegaard is the apologist par excellence for the possibility of some category of higher nonsense? Everything will hinge here on what, in the end, one takes Climacus's endless dialectical manipulations of the category of "the absolute paradox" to be in service of. My article would have tried to make the most of passages such as the following, in which Climacus writes of the Christian believer:

> Nonsense therefore he cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and will prevent him from believing it, but he makes so much of the understanding that he becomes aware of the incomprehensible, and then holds to this, believing against the understanding.[34]

The crucial question that Climacus gradually urges the reader up the work's dialectical ladder toward is the following: if the paradox is only objectively identifiable in virtue of the fact that it represents the utmost pitch of incomprehensibility, how are we to distinguish it from other extreme forms of incomprehensibility? How could it be any less comprehensible than a stretch of gibberish? The passage quoted above suggests, as do many others, that it is through the offices of the understanding that we will be able to recognize the distinction between mere incomprehensibility and the supreme incomprehensibility of the paradox. Yet little comfort can be derived from this since the paradox, like any good self-respecting subjective truth, should be utterly opaque to the understanding. In case this does not worry us sufficiently, we are told further that the assimilation of the paradox, in particular, involves the crucifixion of the understanding. The humor of Climacus's doctrine is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn.[35] Its ultimate irony lies in the way that most of his readers seem to be utterly undisconcerted by this fact. Of course, it is unlikely that the preceding paragraph will incline any Kierkegaard scholar to relent in his reading of the work. First it will need to be made out to him where his reading is inadequate and where mine is not: (1) by showing that his reading is internally unstable; (2) by showing that he continues to treat it as if it were a direct communication—he takes its words at face value (he doesn't want to throw them

away); (3) by showing that the very instability of his reading holds the key to understanding how this work is supposed to self-destruct.

I will close with some very brief remarks about the final portion of my unwritten article. It took its point of departure from the following insight: both the *Postscript* and *Tractatus* are at pains to employ a method of engaging their reader by apparently offering him exactly what he wants. Philosophy promises to deliver unto him the most sublime and transcendental of truths so long as he be willing only to acknowledge that its fruits will lie beyond the limits of what can be meaningfully said. As the implications of this single concession are followed out, by the work's close, the reader is left (optimally) with the realization that there was nothing of the original form that he had imagined for philosophy to deliver unto him.[36] All there is for a proposition to do is to say what we can say. "Whereof we cannot speak thereof we *must* remain silent" is a tautology. The "must" is idling here. *All* of the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense—that includes this one. (It, too, has to be thrown away.) Its contrapositive reads: Whereof we can speak, thereof we can speak. Or: What we can say is what we can say. We are not debarred from anything unsayable—we simply can't talk about what we can't talk about.[37] Each of the several preceding propositions is utterly vacuous and yet potentially illuminating. Did I say "potentially illuminating"? But then nonsense *can* show something. Wait! Isn't that all my friends the commentators ever asked us to believe about these works, namely that they could be nonsensical and yet able to illuminate? Isn't this what the Positivists denied? We now seem to be agreeing on the crucial point. I concede: it was really quite unfair of me to have wanted (in the earlier parts of my article) to criticize my friends the commentators for simply having *misread* these works. I should at least have acknowledged: there is a reason internal to the structure of these works themselves that such readings as theirs recurrently resurface. They represent the very temptations these texts wish to engage. They represent a dialectical moment in the unfolding of the therapeutic strategy of these texts. These works exhibit certain nonsensical (yet apparently innocent) propositions and build on them until the point at which their full nonsensicality will (hopefully) become transparently visible. A direct communication says something. A noncommunication says nothing. An indirect communication wishes to show that something that appears to be a communication is actually a noncommunication.

Here, as Johannes Climacus explains, "the art of *communication* at last becomes the art of *taking away*, of luring something away from someone."[38] It would seem then that the meaningless propositions of these works, in the end, do show something positive after all. Well, not something *positive*. Something negative? Well, not some *thing*. What one nonsensical proposition may (or may not) be able to show is that some other less evidently incoherent proposition is also nonsensical. There lies the secret underlying the construction of these ladders. And that is the only way in which language that does not say anything *can* show.[39]

It occurs to me that some parts of the preceding paragraph might have served well in the concluding paragraph of the article I am still insisting is not the one that I am presently writing. Why insist on such a thing? At least, why insist on such a thing even to *oneself*? Am I not simply pretending not to be writing my article? No. I am definitely not presently writing *the* article. What article? The one I am here only writing about, the one I wanted to write, the one I have to believe I can write. How does it differ from this one? It's better. It convinces where this only suggests. It arrives at the points this one only gestures at. It quotes and explicates and compels its reading of endless passages from both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* that are only present in this one insofar as they are somewhere in the back of my mind. Could I write such an article right now, today, instead of writing what I am writing? Well, I could start now—who knows when I would finish. But am I then not, nevertheless, pretending that this is a substitute for something else that could have been here instead? Even if I am, I still feel like defending my reasons for wanting to pretend such a thing.

There are a surprising number of reasons for pretending here. One fantasy peculiar to philosophers has to do with the dream that some day, presuming all one leaves to posterity is self-censored articles and unpublished papers, someone will bring them all together, organize them all, and posterity will understand any shortcomings of the ensuing volume. You will not be remembered for what you merely wrote, but for what you *thought*. You will be remembered as the philosopher you really were—one whose achievement is only hinted at in posthumous writings. The example of Wittgenstein can seem to serve here as a treacherous incitement and enticement. The underlying alibi can endure in fantasies of other forms. For example, there is the fantasy of writing *the* book. (*It* will do what one's attempts to write articles never could do.) One's achievement will not really be accessible

until *the* book is completed. No handful of pages will be able to stand independently.[40] It is only in the context of the entire work that their import is clear. The wisdom of this strategy lies in one's appreciation of the following sound advice: when it comes to writing about works like the *Postscript* or the *Tractatus*, either write a fat book or write nothing. Why publicize one's most cherished thoughts in a constricted space where they will be defenseless and will only appear at an awkward angle. If not a book, at least permit them the space of something bigger—a Ph.D. dissertation, a long essay, a series of lectures. (How much space is that?)

One can even pretend to oneself that one is not writing a book or a dissertation as one writes something that becomes a book or a dissertation. But not *the* book! Indeed, philosophy is perhaps the one discipline in which one can be awarded a Ph.D., even from a reputable institution, for writing an obituary for one's allegedly deceased dissertation. (In fact, several of the finest philosophers I know only received their degrees because they were forced at academic gunpoint to mourn out loud on paper in public. It would be wrong to conclude that this is *why* I think they are some of the finest philosophers I know. But that they are so gifted as philosophers is certainly not unrelated to how acutely they feel the inadequacy of their words.) The hope is that in the end such efforts to force one's friends or students to produce at gunpoint can pave the way to a form of writing that proves to be more than just a form of mourning. Yet sometimes for the individual at gunpoint (or with his eye on that teaching position) such transactions will feel more or less indistinguishable from exchanging one's soul for thirty pieces of gold. Yet the future can still offer hope. One of the remarkable facts about the infinite postponability of philosophical writing is that it is completely compatible with an enduring conviction that one is, at this very moment, on the verge of finally overcoming one's philosophical muteness. The predicament of having to live with the fact that one has, as of yet, failed to overcome one's silence in philosophy is a survivable one—but usually only barely. In philosophy it seems that the greater one's gifts are, and the more genuine one's impulse to philosophy is, the greater the danger that one will condemn onself to such an existence of silence. From within such an existence, the feeling is not always one of condemning oneself but sometimes one of having been condemned—fated to live with the feeling of always being ready and eager to explode, but never quite able. As Cavell notes, such an existence of silence will always be possible within philosophy, and indeed possible nowhere

else.[41] It is a form of existence that exacts its own costs. And, as with all forms of virginity, the longer one postpones the moment of truth, the greater the anxiety about facing it—and with anxiety comes impotence. However, virginity is also a symbol of purity. Heidegger captures this feature of the figure of the philosopher in the following remark:

> Socrates did nothing else but place himself in the draft of thinking. . . . This is why he is the purest thinker of the West. This is why he wrote nothing.[42]

One remarkable feature of the philosophical life (that its present form of institutionalization struggles against and has yet, nonetheless, miraculously managed to preserve) is that the option of emulating Socrates always looms before one as a genuinely live possibility. The prospect beckons: for one can remain silent and yet still achieve in philosophy. This represents both philosophy's highest promise and its most insidious temptation.

Both Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein have been frequently portrayed as seeing only the promise here, as if they were immune to such temptations. They are presented as guardians of silence—emulating the Socratic quest for purity—and apostles of privacy—each viewed albeit as advocating his own peculiar form of radical solipsism. Their true doctrines, we are told, are not to be discovered in what they say, but in what they do not and cannot say. The interest of their work must be comprehended in terms of what the work wishes to point to, *beyond* its words. This essay has been trying to discredit such a view of these authors and indicate the possibility of an alternative one—one which acknowledges these thinkers to be attracted to a prospect in which the activity of philosophy culminates in silence; however, not a silence that provides answers to philosophy's questions, but rather one in which philosophy is meant to find peace from its questions. On this reading, their achievement lies not in the execution of a gesture of pointing beyond the publicly intelligible to something private and unsayable, but rather in their having found a way—from within such a condition of impending wordlessness and in the face of such a temptation to point to something beyond—to, nonetheless, *write*.

I have now arrived once again at the subject of my opening remarks. In those remarks, I intimated that my concern would be with two different kinds of silence: one born of an unwillingness on my part to *invoke* my words, the other born of a gesture on the

part of an author to *revoke* his. The former kind of silence is fueled by a reluctance to allow anything to stand for what one's voice can say, the latter is a silence that looms in the wake of the realization that one's voice can speak while saying nothing. How are these two silences related? In my preceding reflections this pair of silences was joined by a third—the pregnant silence of my interlocutors: one that stands guard over what no words can say. I wished to oppose the silence of my interlocutors to the one I found in the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*. But the question now arises: how does what my silence seeks to withhold compare to what is withheld by theirs? Indeed, how can I maintain, in the face of what I have said, that my silence *withholds* anything? Has not the point of the preceding pages been that there is nothing for my silence to be but mere silence? Not all silence is mere silence. There is the silence of mutual understanding, the silence of recognition, the silence of secretiveness, the silence of a landscape, the silence of embarrassment, the silence of deception. But what I seemed to want was a silence preserved by speech, a silence created by what my speech withheld.

I, over and over again, want to say something like this: "Wittgenstein's (or Kierkegaard's) teaching cannot be stated, it can only be shown." Of course, there is much that is captured by such a formation: there is no "it" to state, i.e., no "doctrine" of theirs to expound. Yet one easily slides from here into the position of wanting to excuse one's inability to talk or write fruitfully about these thinkers because of—what one begins representing to oneself as—the unstatability of their teaching. What happens is that one wants to explain why one's project to talk or to write about these thinkers will *inevitably* fail in certain ways. So the focus of attention shifts from the teaching of these thinkers to what is unstatable about their teaching. One's difficulty in being able to show what such a thinker is up to can then gradually cease in any way to lay claim to being a commentary on one's own command of their work. Since one now feels one cannot "state" their teaching, one settles for the preliminary task of saying things *about* the unstatability of their teaching—one has taken the fateful step and yet it can succeed in remaining quite invisible, while proving precipitous in its consequences. For all of one's utterances about Wittgenstein's (or Kierkegaard's) work come to presuppose that there is some "it" underlying their writings that one is unable to state.

I have argued that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein both write from a vision of their readers as engaged in an act of perpetual

evasion. Can I now seriously refrain from asking, How does this speak to the act of evasion I am presently engaged in—the article I have (successfully?) evaded' writing?[43] Doesn't my silence suspiciously mirror that of my interlocutors? We both want the absence of words to harbor the presence of what our words cannot convey. We want the opulence of our silence to compensate for the poverty of our language. My interlocutors say: no words can touch that which their silence enshrines. I say: my words presently do not touch all my words might. I settle for writing an obituary describing what my words would have said if they could have. My interlocutors put the blame on the poverty of language as such. I only put the blame on the poverty of *my* language. (The complaint about my language was that it was not fully explicit: it could not *compel* my interlocutor's assent.) But aren't our visions of how language suffers impoverishment related? We are both attracted to a fantasy that allows for *complete* expressiveness in language. A perception of the failure of language to attain such complete expressiveness is what undergirds our mutual disappointment with language. But isn't this the very disappointment with language I have previously identified and urged was the common goal of both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* to help us overcome?[44]

There now seems to be no way to escape a question that has haunted me throughout: Shouldn't I simply concede that this obituary *is* my article, and what I was calling "my article" was simply the fantasy of an article? Why do I hesitate to relinquish my claim to silence and simply admit that I *am* speaking? What is it about philosophy in particular that engenders the feeling that one has not yet ever quite reached the point of having truly spoken? For it seems that it is, above all, individuals who have devoted their lives to philosophy who feel themselves to be fated to such silence.[45] What could induce them to take arms against their fate and actually break their silence? Often they will tell you: we are *trying* to, as hard as we can. But what could make them decide that there is nothing they are being silent *about*? Can one simply *decide* such a thing? Is all that is required an act of volition? No, no mere exertion of the will can suffice here. Such an outcome of inarticulateness will always be a possible cost of philosophical reflection—the feeling that no words suffice.[46] We have seen that according to the teaching of both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*, the impulse to philosophy is conditioned by the prospect of inarticulate truth beyond the pale of language.[47] The conception of writing philosophy—that is writing against the philosopher in ourselves—that these works bequeath to us is one that requires

both a sensitivity for and a hostility toward this impulse. Such a literary enterprise is inevitably threatened by the outcome of wordlessness. For it is one thing to overcome a dissatisfaction with words as such—and resist the temptation of blaming language—and still yet another to learn to overcome the dissatisfaction one feels with the words one presently has. One feels: no words I can presently deliver myself of can stand for what I want to say. Under such conditions, silence is the least disingenuous option—one feels it is a mark of one's integrity.[48] What would it take for me, right now, to decide that with *these* words I have broken my silence? It would require my finding satisfaction in the words that I can presently write.[49] Do you wish to maintain that I am wrong to be dissatisfied with my words? Surely someone can provide better words than these. Am I not entitled to hope that I might be—or become—such a person? Of course, I am. But what is at issue here is the wish that the silence itself be understood as *standing for* those words that cannot presently be provided.

The narrator of this essay wished to maintain that the *fact* of his understanding of these authors could be exhibited by his ability to detail the difficulties involved in writing about them. Yet he imagines that in doing this he is doing something more than simply exhibiting his understanding of the difficulty of writing about these authors. He wants the act of showing why it is he can't write about these authors to count as showing that he does *understand* everything he wishes to (but cannot) say about them. The striking thing about my narrator—and therefore about me (and therefore about us)—is that he is able to plead his case in the face of a full awareness of the following insight: namely, that it lies at the heart of the teaching of both of these thinkers that any understanding one has that can only be imperfectly expressed (and the essence of which cannot be expressed) in words one could have available to oneself, must in the end be forsaken as only a fantasy of understanding.[50]

Learning to come to terms with the work of each of these thinkers and being able to gradually profit from them requires, above all, learning how to soothe the temptation to believe that one is already prepared in various ways to identify one's own voice with theirs. The cost for the narrator of this essay of realizing how premature such an identification would be is that he be willing to acknowledge the following: that the only kind of "article" he can securely claim to author on such matters, at the moment, is one that might roughly resemble the one that you have before you.

Does this make the narrator of this essay a pseudonymous

author? (Not if he needs to have a pseudonym in order to be one.) Does it reduce him to the status of a merely interlocutory voice? (Are the voices that populate the *Investigations merely* interlocutory?) What does a real voice sound like? What is the picture at work here, fueling these questions, of what complete immunity from these voices would sound like? (My friends the commentators have an answer: it is the voice of silence.) If we find we cannot acknowledge our implication in the temptations that haunt these voices then Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's texts will have nothing to show us. If these texts are exclusionary—if they seem only to recognize a privileged few among their readers—it is in large part due to the way in which we exclude ourselves in our eagerness to fail to recognize ourselves in the mirrors they offer us. The prerequisite for entering into a conversation with the voices that animate these texts is that we enter into a conversation with ourselves through an acknowledgment of the philosopher that they spy in each and every one of us.[51]

That such a task of acknowledgment can strike one, in certain moods, as utterly trivial—as requiring only the merest of efforts (doesn't my narrator acknowledge as much right at the outset?)—is certainly part of the reason why it can also strike one, in a later mood, as if full acknowledgment here would entail something almost indistinguishable in its consequences from the sacrifice of the very conditions of one's sanity. For both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, the process of liberating oneself from the grip of either of these moods requires an understanding of how each of them feeds on and sustains the other.

We have before us here at least the beginnings of an answer to the question: Why the rhetorical device of the unwritten article? Why the theatrics? Why begin an essay by insisting on the possibility of an article that cannot presently be written, only at the end of the same essay to repudiate the possibility of its existence? My hope was to offer an illustration (one that is hopefully capable of eliciting some degree of active recognition) of the remarkable extent to which a reasonably careful student of either one of these two thinkers can, nonetheless, *betray* through his literary practice the very teaching he is in the midst of attempting to assimilate and expound.[52]

The hope was to provide as flagrant and yet as inconspicuous an example of such an act of literary betrayal in the making as possible. That form and content can come apart in such a manner, that flagrance can achieve inconspicuousness, is something that it is the burden of both Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and Witt-

genstein's interlocutors to exemplify. For them it is often a matter of wishing to capture some one of our numerous strategies of *self*-betrayal in the making. Whereas for my rhetorical device of the unwritten article the burden lay in making perspicuous a particular form of betrayal of *their* literary practice.

Is this the position in which such writing as Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's places a faithful reader? Is this the only genuine mark of one's faithfulness to them: to be haunted by the feeling that their disciples are forever betraying them? How is one to keep such a feeling from collapsing in the end into that other feeling: the reassuring conviction that one's own silence, by its very unbrokenness, guards the true meaning of their thought more faithfully than any competing moment of speech? Can one hope to keep the razor's edge that separates these two feelings at all sharp? Does the spiral of forms of betrayal come to an end somewhere? Not without a willingness to stake one's own understanding on what one is able to commit to words. The spiral can only come to an end through a moment of speech, in a literary act of resolution. The struggle to find a form of writing that can give peace to philosophy's questions, that can provide the impulse to philosophy with satisfaction, is not just a struggle to find a way to stop, but to come to an *end;* to achieve resolution—both in one's writing and in one's self. Words must come to an end somewhere.

Notes

1. The editors of this volume responded to my delinquency with admirable patience. I would particularly like to thank Richard Fleming for allowing me to postpone the deadline for the submission of my article several times.

2. I am indebted to Stanley Cavell for offering me the liberating suggestion in question here. In the end (as will become evident) I found I was unable to accept his helpful suggestion in the spirit it was originally proffered. His influence, however, can be detected in the pages that follow in other ways. The extent of my intellectual obligations to him here are much too pervasive to permit detailed enumeration.

Insofar as this essay recapitulates an outline of my original article it incurs the same debts as the article would have: particularly to conversations with Steven G. Affeldt and Paul Franks, the teaching of Burton Dreben, and the writings of Elizabeth Anscombe and Cora Diamond. Insofar as it is preoccupied with the possibility of philosophical muteness, it owes much to the memory of particular conversations with Rogers Albritton, John McNees, and Lisa Van Alstyne. Its debts to Dan Rosenberg are too various to detail. Finally, insofar as this essay exists at all, Hilary Putnam should be thanked for teaching me the virtues of learning to be less impatient with myself.

3. My intention here was to take issue with virtually all of the secondary literature on both Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein. There are, however, a few exceptions to be noted: among those who have pursued these matters in Kierkegaard, Henry Allison and Stanley Cavell; and among those who worry about the *Tractatus*, Cora Diamond, Rush Rhees, and H. O. Mounce, as well as unpublished work by Warren Goldfarb, John McNees, and Thomas Ricketts. In large part my article hoped simply to be an exercise in bringing to bear the lessons I had learned from the above authors in a criticism of the generally received interpretations of these two works.

4. Among authors who have attempted to align Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein, I suppose I was most exercised by the accounts of their relation suggested by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin in *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973) and James Edwards in *Ethics without Philosophy* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1982). Edwards usefully summarizes the kind of alignment of readings of these two works I have in mind here with the following remark:

> In order that the message really be heard, the message itself is never boldly proclaimed. Instead, silence, doubt, humor, and literary artifice all combine to direct one's attention away from the obvious and to that which is never spoken, to that which lies outside the boundary of what can (at least *now*) be said. . . . Like the author of the *Tractatus*, Kierkegaard put the real point of his efforts firmly into place by being silent about it. [P. 31]

Edwards's passage is typical here in that it flirts with (without making explicit) the insinuation that what is left unsaid is merely withheld—left unvoiced, as it were—rather than in principle unsayable. This tension arises because, on the one hand, explicitly drawing the implication flatly contradicts the texts of the *Tractatus* ("What can be shown *cannot* be said") and the *Postscript* ("Subjective truth *cannot* be directly communicated"); while, on the other hand, coherently writing about a say/show distinction can seem to require softening the distinction along some such lines.

The majority of those who propose some alignment between these two authors tend to be scholars of the *Tractatus* who hope to illuminate the obscurities of that work by turning to the writings of some other philosopher (some commentators invoke passages from Schopenhauer's work) Wittgenstein seems to have consistently spoken of with awe and reverence. However, some Kierkegaard scholars, working in the opposite direction (among others Henry Allison and Ralph Henry Johnson) have also found it helpful to allude to Wittgenstein's work in their attempts to decipher the *Postscript;* while yet a great many more write as if they were proposing some such alignment without ever explicitly invoking Wittgenstein's name. A representative example of this is provided by Louis Mackey who quotes the following passage from Johannes Climacus:

> "When the question cannot be asked the answer need not trouble us, and the difficulty becomes slight indeed."—This does not quite follow: for suppose the difficulty lay in perceiving that one cannot ask such a question. [*Philosophical Fragments*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 111]

Mackey then appends to this quotation the following commentary:

> That perception may be difficult indeed. Whereof one cannot speak one must keep silent. But how else than by speaking may one perceive that whereof one cannot speak? [*Points of View* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), p. 125]

Nothing hinges here on whether Mackey actually intends to be paraphrasing the conclusion of the *Tractatus* or not. The point stands regardless that the standard readings of these two authors tend to echo one another. One way of stating the agenda of both my unwritten article and the present essay is as follows: how does one do full justice to the intuition that these two works do indeed seem to echo one another while, nonetheless, wishing to repudiate the standard readings of each of these texts?

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico–Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 27. Not only have many commentators followed my example here in wishing to derive such comforts from the preface, but many Kierkegaard scholars have wished to derive similar comfort from parallel moments in Kierkegaard. Louis Mackey again provides a startling example of how such commentaries can often recall one another. This is how he asks us to understand the name Kierkegaard selected for one of his pseudonyms:

> Johannes de Silentio seeks an understanding of faith. But he is saying nothing about it that can be understood by those who do not already understand. True to his name, he is keeping silent. [*Points of View*, p. 42]

This can sound like what Wittgenstein meant to be saying in the passage I've just quoted. Mackey makes this remark in the context of an essay on *Fear and Trembling* and his other writings go a long way toward supporting the claim that one could begin to construct analogous (pseudo-Tractarian readings of some of Kierkegaard's other pseudonymous writings—in particular, the book that Climacus's *Postscript* is a postscript to: the *Philosophical Fragments*. Mackey's essay on the *Fragments* opens as follows:

> The *Philosophical Fragments* is obsessed with alterity. In particular with the question, how can language give expression to that which is wholly other than language? Although the ostensible subject of the book is Christianity, it is Christianity as *wholly other* that structures its discourse. Since the other than language cannot be altered, the text of the *Fragments* turns back upon itself and becomes an exploration of the limits of language. [*Points of View*, p. 102]

Mackey's reading of the *Fragments* actually touches on (without necessarily endorsing) all five of the features outlined above in the alleged parallel sketched between the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*: (1) it makes room for a notion of deep nonsense ("since the limit of language is itself the alterity language cannot express, the *Fragments* . . . performs the 'absolute paradox.'" Mackey, *Points of View*, p. 102); (2) it draws a distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown (this is already evident in the previous quotations); (3) it shows what cannot be said by drawing limits to the sayable ("The terms of Climacus' thought-project, affirming the unsayable, merely opens faults in language," p. 108); (4) it climaxes in self-destruction ("the truth communicated by indirect communication is a truth that can only be communicated by not being communicated at all," p. 137); and (5) it also suggests that the final silence is in service of the "unspeakable" (p. 139).

6. I have no idea where in Lichtenberg this aphorism appears. Wittgenstein reportedly considered using it as the opening epigraph of the *Investigations*. It appears in Kierkegaard in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (1939; reprint ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 95n, without reference as follows: "Such works are mirrors: When an ape appears in them, no Apostle can be seen looking out."

7. Wittgenstein, in particular, struggled with the fact that his works smacked of esotericism. He did also genuinely fear that at most only a few people would, for example, understand the *Tractatus*—not, however, because it was intended for an elite, but because in the end he feared only a few would succeed in seeing what the work was up to. I say: this was a consequence he *feared* would be a feature of his work. It was not a *criterion* of the sort of work he wished to write. The work itself does not seek to exclude from its audience any particular group of readers. If in the end only a few readers eventually understand it, it is not because others are in principle debarred from also being able to do so. Its esotericism is simply a function of its difficulty. In this sense every work divides its readership into those who understand it and those who don't. (Admittedly, there are places in Wittgenstein's early corpus which suggest that he conceived of his work as being esoteric in some further sense that I have not allowed for here. See, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980]. pp. 7–8. I feel I should address this worry; however, at present I am too distracted by the issues at hand to do so.)

8. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. xxvii.

9. For example, sections #4.111 and #4.112.

10. The possibility of an alternative form of philosophical writing is presaged in the *Tractatus*, section #6.53: "The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said . . . when someone else wished to say something, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other . . . but it would be the only strictly correct method." I take it as self-evident that this passage does not (although it is remarkable how often commentators assume that it does) describe the actual procedures of the *Tractatus*. This "only strictly correct method" is spurned here presumably both (1) because he imagines that it requires the actual physical presence of an interlocutor who is impelled to express himself metaphysically; (2) because he imagines that such admonitions could not provide his interlocutor with satisfaction. The quest of Wittgenstein's later writing could be viewed without too much distortion as the attempt to overcome both of these apparent limitations on the only possible "strictly correct method" in philosophy.

11. This is the worry being voiced in the opening words of the *Tractatus* that I quoted earlier. That these words articulate such a worry is signaled by the presence of the word "perhaps" here. Most interpretations of the *Tractatus* render the presence of the word "perhaps" incoherent here. For on their reading the book will *necessarily* "only be understood by those who have themselves thought the thoughts which are expressed in it."

12. I am thinking here particularly of the work of O. K. Bouwsma, who—with the exception of Cavell—is the only author I know of who has written illuminatingly on *both* Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein in the same breath.

13. Cora Diamond argues this point persuasively in "What Nonsense Might Be," *Philosophy* 56 (1981). I am here and throughout indebted to this paper.

14. For example, Jaakko and Merril Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 2:

> Thus the gist of this view . . . lies in the thesis of the *ineffability* of *semantics*. . . . the thesis . . . implies primarily the inexpressibility of semantics rather than the impossibility of semantics, in the sense that a believer [of this view] . . . can nevertheless have many and sharp ideas about language-world conections, which are the subject of semantics. However, these relations are inexpressible if one believes in the view.

Admittedly, the Hintikkas are somewhat unrepresentative in their extreme suggestion that there is an entire subject about which we can "have many and sharp ideas" which are nonetheless inexpressible. An example of a more tempered version of this view is to be found in Peter Geach, "Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein," *Essays in Honour of G. H. von Wright*, J. Hintikka, ed., *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 28, p. 30:

> Wittgenstein holds that various features of reality come out, *sich zeigen*, in our language, but we cannot use this language to *say*, assert, that reality has these features: if we try to frame propositions ascribing these features to reality, then it will be possible to show that strictly speaking these are not propositions. . . . All the same, these nonsensical (*unsinning*) structures may be useful; they may serve to convey from speaker to hearer an insight that cannot be put into proper propositions.

15. To complement the pair of quotations in the previous note, I will offer statements both of a delightfully incoherent and of a comparatively sober version of this reading. From Eddy Zemach, *Essays on Wittgenstein's* Tractatus, ed. Irving M. Copi and Robert W. Beard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 363:

> To say that the only *sense* that the world can have is its *form* is to answer the problem of life by the "fact" that the world is precisely the realm of facts, i.e., that which does not admit of such questions. The form of the world is the factuality of facts (not *how* they are but *that* they are as they are). It is the mystical: it shows itself, but, being a formal "fact," is ineffable. By "the factuality of facts" I mean the feature of facts which is not revealed by the specific way in which a fact presents itself, but by the "fact" *that* it is a fact. This former "fact" *shows* itself.

Edwards succeeds in avoiding this spiraling of language (and is in this regard more representative of such commentators) by simply attempting to formulate the general intuition here without trying to unpack it:

> The *Tractatus*, by demonstrating clearly what can and cannot be said, makes it clear how impotent thought (language) is when it comes to the most important things in life. Silence, the silence in which *das Mystische* shows itself, is the paradigmatic response of the enlightened philosopher who has kicked away the ladder of philosophy after he has climbed up it. [*Ethics*, p. 49]

It is my experience that Edwards's remarks are always at their most plausible when they remain this vague. Whenever he tries to fill in what "the most important things in life" that the work shows are supposed to be I find it impossible to avoid the conviction that he is either simply making it up, or else projecting a combination of Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, and several other thinkers' views directly on to the work. Unfortunately, in this respect, his work is also quite representative of the bulk of the literature on Wittgenstein's "ethical views."

16. Against the first set of readers therefore I would want to maintain that the sketch of a picture-theory of language (or the sketch of a theory concerning the limits of what can be stated in the logical syntax of language) is provided precisely in order to show how such a theory comes apart in the very attempt to formulate it. (*Tractatus*, #4.112: "Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.") This leaves us, at the end of the work not with an unstatable theory, but no theory at all. Against the second set of commentators I would urge that the propositions of the *entire* work are to be thrown away as nonsense. The tendency here is to read section #6.54 as telling us to throw out all the propositions up to section #6.4, and then to read the remaining sections #6.4–7 as finally giving us the truth straight from Wittgenstein's mouth. On my reading, the Schopenhauerian views on ethics and aesthetics and the final portrait of the mystic are in this sense all of a piece with the sketch of the Russellian logical atomist doctrines in the earlier parts of the work: they all imagine themselves to be able to occupy a position outside of language from which to grasp certain transcendent truths. Accounting for the genuine *unity* of the *Tractatus* is a matter—not of explaining why Wittgenstein simultaneously espouses these otherwise unrelated logical, solipsistic, and ethico-mystical doctrines, but rather—of explaining how these diverse pseudodoctrines all partake of the same fundamental illusion (of a set of transcendable *limits* to language), and explaining why he thinks they fundamentally all require the same form of therapy.

17. Almost all commentaries on the *Postscript* implicitly assume some distinction between the essentially absurd (i.e., the absolute absurdity of the paradox) and the merely absurd (i.e., the absurdity of ordinary nonsense). The only commentator I know of, however, who

self-consciously reflects on and argues for this presupposition is N. H. Søe, in "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. Howard Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 219:

> Kierkegaard asserts plainly and objectively that there is "no self-contradiction" in the idea that "Christ was God in the guise of a servant." This completely unambiguous statement suffices to show how entirely mistaken it is. . . . to maintain that the paradox represents "a theoretically contradictory conception". . . . Something quite different must be said in the case of the [merely] meaningless, for that is not only "an absurdity," like the genuine paradox, but also "contains a self-contradiction." The latter . . . is pure "twaddle" and therefore *lies on an entirely different plane* [my emphasis] from the paradox of faith. . . . numerous pronouncements by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms prevent the misunderstanding that "the absurd" as the object of faith is the same as "the absurd in the vulgar sense of the word". . . . Climacus is therefore talking very loosely when he says that the paradox wills "the downfall of reason" or that "the paradoxical passion of reason," "without rightly understanding itself," "is bent upon its own downfall" or that "reason yielded itself" or "sets itself aside." If this were taken in the radical sense insisted upon by some scholars, it would be impossible to distinguish between the meaningful paradox of faith and that which is nonsensical or absurd in the vulgar sense of the word.

Søe is to be applauded for frankly drawing the consequences of taking Climacus at his word here, and for realizing that the distinction he wishes to draw requires interpreting a great deal of Climacus's language to be simply extremely loose and misleading talk.

18. I don't feel anything has been disconfirmed here, but then I am not inclined to think of philosophy as a science either. I am rather inclined to point out that most of these hundreds of books probably attribute to both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* a distinction between mere nonsense and deep nonsense—now there is a genuinely empirical claim you can go out and test.

19. This might appear to be an overstatement insofar as it neglects metaphorical or figurative uses of language, on the one hand, as well as uses of language in, what the later Wittgenstein calls, a "secondary sense," on the other. Both of these ways of making sense of words, however, are parasitic on ordinary uses of language. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), chap. 7; and Cora Diamond, "Secondary Sense," *Aristotelian Society Proceedings* (1966–67). Neither of these apparent exceptions therefore provides a helpful foothold for an understanding of how language that is by hypothesis utterly void of an ordinary sense can signify *as* nonsense.

20. In the case of the *Tractatus* most commentaries are explicit about the necessity of drawing a distinction between kinds of nonsense. Curiously, as noted previously, although they rely heavily on some such distinction, most commentaries on the *Postscript* leave its role surprisingly submerged. In a previous note, I applauded N. H. Søe for facing the music here. Let me now specify briefly where my applause gives out and Søe's reading and mine begin to diverge. Against his claim that we should understand Climacus to be talking loosely, I want us to be guided by the assumption that Climacus develops his dialectical categories with razor precision. If this assumption forces us in the end to the conclusion that within the framework of the *Postscript* we are unable to distinguish between mere twaddle and profound nonsense, then we should not shrink from it. The guiding assumption of most commentators is that there is some particular deep truth the work wishes us to arrive at, which speculative philosophy cannot arrive at. This misconstrues the sense in which the *Postscript* is written against speculative philosophy. These commentators read all of the cracks aimed at speculative philosophy in the *Postscript* as textual evidence for the claim that there is a kind of truth beyond the reach of speculative philosophy. Whereas I take it that the *Postscript* wishes to combat the idea here that there is any truth of the relevant kind that (speculative or any other) philosophy even fails to grasp. There is simply

nothing for philosophy to do here. Climacus's goal is not to illuminate the nature of the truth of Christianity but to break the illusion that the task of becoming a Christian is one that can be furthered by means of philosophy. This, I would like to suggest, is the spirit in which Climacus's repeated cracks at speculative philosophy are intended. The following is a representative example: "even if speculative philosophy were so much in the right, it can never be right representing itself as Christianity." *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postcript*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 244.

21. Cora Diamond emphasizes this point in her writings on the *Tractatus*, as does Henry Allison in his work on the *Postscript*.

22. This claim is likely to seem less controversial with respect to the *Tractatus* than with respect to the *Postscript*. I take it that Religiousness B is in the end ultimately indistinguishable from the purest form of mysticism. Most commentators, however, take Religiousness B to provide the final hurdle toward genuine Christianity that the *Postscript* wishes to exhort us over, and hence identify it with (at least) Climacus's (and usually also Kierkegaard's) position. This is to mistake what is for Kierkegaard an attempt to secure for us an unobstructed starting point for the task of becoming a Christian with a description of the conclusion of such a task. It also, as far as I can see, simply neglects the remarks in the work's final appendix, entitled "For an Understanding with the Reader." This is where Climacus says of his book, prefiguring section #6.54 of the *Tractatus:*

> Above all, may heaven preserve the book and me from every appreciative violence which might be done it—that a bellowing partisan might quote it appreciatively and enroll me in the census. . . . I am consistent in desiring no factual proof that I really have no opinion. . . . for I have no opinion and wish to have none . . . what I write contains . . . a piece of information to the effect that everything is so to be understood that it is understood to be revoked. [*Postscript*, pp. 546–47]

Most commentators on the *Postscript* not only proceed as if Climacus did not conclude with these words, they also neglect Kierkegaard's appended "First and Last Declaration" in which he also warns:

> So in the pseudonymous works there is not a single word which is mine. . . . My wish, my prayer, is that, if it might occur to anyone to quote a particular saying from the books, he would do me the favor to cite the name of the respective pseudonymous author. [*Postscript*, pp. 551–52]

23. The end of the *Tractatus* is usually read as *advocating* some form of mysticism. Alexander Maslow voices something he takes to be uncontroversial when he says: "mysticism is an important part of Wittgenstein's view. Mysticism becomes the last refuge for the most cherished things in life, in fact for all values, for all that cannot be discussed and yet is of the utmost importance to us." *A Study in Wittgenstein's* Tractatus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 160. That Wittgenstein views mysticism as some form of "last refuge" and that he has the greatest respect for the impulse to seek such refuge, both strike me as correct perceptions—ones that both Maslow and others have recurrently affirmed. However, that he wishes to condone mysticism *as* a refuge seems to me textually unfounded. What section #6.45 (the primary textual foothold for these claims) says is: "The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling." What is sought here is a *diagnosis* of the source of the mystical experience as Wittgenstein found it described in Russell's work and in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where it is characterized, above all, by its ineffability ("The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression") and its distinctive noetic quality ("Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. . . . unplumbed by the discursive intellect." Both quotes are from James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1935), p. 380. Russell's characterization of mysticism (in, for example, *Mysticism and Logic*) echoes James's. However, Russell views mysticism and scientific philosophy as being the diverging responses of "two very different human impulses." *Mysticism and Logic* (Totowa, N. J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 9. One of the several ironies of the Tractarian working out of Russellian themes is how Wittgenstein turns this claim of his teacher's on its head. For the *Tractatus*, as I read it, teaches that the dream of a scientific philosophy and the refuge of mysticism are two different responses to one and the same impulse.

24. We need a point of view which "satisfies a longing for the transcendent, because in so far as people think they see 'the limits of human understanding,' they believe of course that they can see beyond these." *Culture and Value*, p. 15. This quote from *Culture and Value* I believe points the way for correctly understanding the talk of "the limits of language" in the *Tractatus* insofar as this notion of limits proves in the end to collapse. The original notion gains its force from the idea that the logical syntax of language *prohibits* us from saying certain things—this, however, requires the possibility of definite syntactical violations and hence the possibility of deep, irreducible nonsense. If all nonsense proves to be mere nonsense then an assertion of the claim that there can be limits of language should amount to an assertion of the sort of tautology we find in the final sentence of section #5.61:

> Was wir nicht denken können, das können wir nicht denken; wir können also auch nicht *sagen*, was wir nicht denken können.

That which we cannot think, we cannot (even) think; we therefore also cannot *say* that which we cannot think. Where there is no thought, language will not be able to say anything—not because it runs up against the unsayable—but simply because there is nothing to say. This sentence from #5.61 does not capture a deep truth about the limits of language: the only impossibility it asserts is the impossibility of uttering a nonexistent thought! Its hope is that a revelation of its own emptiness will help to trigger an epiphany into the emptiness of the twin idea that "what we cannot say" does mark a limit, a boundary, which we run up against. The Kantian reading of Wittgenstein that proposes that he wishes to draw "limits" to what we can say—both in order to demarcate what we cannot say and in order to make room for the *Tractatus*'s analogue of faith—seems to me to offer as misguided an angle of entry into the early Wittgenstein as it does into his later work. On the reading I would like to propose, one of the primary targets of the *Tractatus* is Schopenhauer's Kantian picture of "the limits of the world" with its corollary picture of a noumenal realm beyond those limits. From this vantage point, the echoing of Kantian themes in the work is in part a function of the intentionally anti-Kantian strain of its teaching. In this respect, the following meditation of Cavell's, on the differences between Kant's and the *later* Wittgenstein's talk of "limits," is equally germane to a discussion of the relation between Kant and the early Wittgenstein:

> . . . the idea that what happens to the philosophic mind when it attempts speculation beyond its means is that it transgresses something we want to call limits, is an idea that cannot as it stands constitute a serious term of criticism for Wittgenstein but must remain merely a "picture," however significant. Kant, however, really does take the mind as *confined* in what it can know, takes it that there are things beyond the things we know, or something systematic about the things we know, that we cannot know, a realm of things-in-themselves, noumenal, open to reason, not phenomenal, not presentable. When Wittgenstein speaks of "bumps the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language," the very obviousness of figurative language here works to

suggest that thought is not confined *by* language (and its categories) but confined *to* language. [*Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 78]

25. Wittgenstein writes of the *Tractatus* in a letter to Ficker, in C. G. Luckhardt, ed., *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 94, that "the book's point is an ethical one." Kierkegaard sometimes describes his pseudonymous writings as works of ethics. What these authors have in mind here seems to be accurately captured in the claim that they thought of their works as ethical deeds. (Not, however, in the sense of Janik and Toulmin, for instance, when they say: "The *Tractatus* was more than merely a book on ethics, . . .; it was an ethical *deed*, which *showed* the nature of ethics." *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, p. 24.) The vigilance they call upon us to exercise in our use of language (and hence the vigilance with which they ask us to live our lives) can be justifiably termed an ethical demand. Things go awry, however, when commentators ask: how are their works *about* ethics? This soon becomes: what *theory* of ethics does each of them espouse? It is worth noting that every attempt to answer this question in the case of either author fails miserably for three reasons: (1) they tend to rely for information about their "ethical views" heavily on sketchy biographical details about these authors' lives; (2) they are not rooted in the words of the texts; (3) insofar as they are to any degree textually grounded they tend not really to look much like *theories* of ethics in the end after all—unless the exhortation to live authentically or to learn to experience wonder at the sheer existence of the world can be thought of as a theory. My suggestion is that these works have no *isolatable* ethical teaching. The ethical purpose that guides them lies in nothing more and nothing less than their hopes of changing one or another of their readers. (I am influenced in these remarks by Stanley Cavell's paper "Declining Decline—Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," appearing in his forthcoming book: *This New Yet Unapproachable America*.)

26. These works do not *say* that we suffer from an illusion of sense, for it is central to their strategy of illumination that it would be *pointless* to say such a thing. *Telling* someone something he believes he grasps the sense of is nonsense will only embitter him. This needs to be shown to him. Kierkegaard:

> No, an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by an indirect means can it be removed. . . . That is, one must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion . . . A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the prospective captive to set his will in opposition, all is lost. [*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, p. 25]

Wittgenstein:

> Telling someone he does not understand is pointless, even if you add that he will not be able to understand it. [*Culture and Value*, p. 7]

27. Cavell, "Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pp. 163–79; and the third section of "Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy," *Themes Out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), pp. 217–34.

28. Cavell discusses this example in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 169.

29. Kierkegaard makes the following observation in his journal, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Peter Rohde (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), pp. 147–48:

> When I am dead there will be something for the university lecturers to poke into. The abject scoundrels! And yet, what is the use, what is the use? Even though this be printed and read again and again, the lecturers will still make a profit out of me, teach about me,

> maybe adding a comment like this: "the peculiar thing about this is that it cannot be taught."

Where does this leave a footnote that wishes to profit from quoting such an observation? (Should we conclude that it is trying to quote the unquotable?) Such observations (and similar ones in Wittgenstein) can leave one with the haunted feeling that one's efforts have already been anticipated and laughed at by the author in question. Hence one of the difficulties of writing about Kierkegaard (as well as Wittgenstein) is learning to live with the delicate burden of both facing up to and yet not collapsing under the pressure of the following thought: how would *he* respond (if he were now able to rise from the grave) to what I have just written about him?

30. The task is in principle the same as the one I faced in trying to elicit the conviction of my interlocutory commentators some pages previously.

31. This discontinuity I will concede: the early Wittgenstein imagines that the insight that "the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form" (*Tractatus*, #4.0031) holds the key to diagnosing all forms of philosophical illusion. Whereas the *Investigations* teaches that the sources of philosophical entanglement are no less complicated than the human animal himself. All this should suggest that one of the later Wittgenstein's fundamental breaks with his early thought finds its formulation in *Philosophical Investigations* #133 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 51, where he intimates that different therapies must be tailored to each individual form of philosophical confusion. Nevertheless Wittgenstein's remark stands: "My fundamental ideas came to me very early in life." Reported by M. O'C. Drury in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). The difference is that there is in the later view no longer a vaccine against philosophical puzzlement, only an endless host of forms of intellectual hygiene. The inclination of the *Tractatus* to conclude that "the problems have in essentials been finally solved" (p. 29) turns out to be the ultimate philosophical impulse, and one that can never be definitely silenced.

The aphorism (which I owe to Cavell) that "the thought that philosophy can be brought to an end is itself a moment within philosophy" I believe summarizes the insight that marks the later Wittgenstein's point of departure from his earlier work. In the *Investigations*, the task of bringing the philosopher in oneself to a stopping place is one that never comes to an end—one can reach moments of peace, but there is no final peace of the sort that the *Tractatus* seems to hunger for. Individual philosophical problems can be brought to vanish, but the problem of philosophy as such cannot be made to vanish.

32. *Tractatus*, #5.4733. My discussion of this remark rehearses lessons I have learned from Cora Diamond's various writings on these matters; particularly "Frege and Nonsense," *Intention and Intentionality*, ed. Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); "What Does a Concept Script Do?", *Frege: Tradition and Influence*, ed. Crispin Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); "What Nonsense Might Be?" (op. cit.); and "Throwing Away the Ladder" (unpublished).

33. It might appear that Wittgenstein is saying in the passage quoted above that we *do* know how to segment "Socrates is identical," namely just by providing "identical" with an adjectival sense. However, I take it he is simply assuming that the illusion we might have here that we already know how to segment this sentence (and hence that we know what this proposition fails to say) is a consequence of the fact that its surface grammatical form appears simply to be an instance of the grammatical pattern of which "Socrates is happy" and "Socrates is intelligent" are further instances. We therefore have the illusion here that we have already successfully segmented the phrase even before we provide a meaning for the word "identical." But then we are also aware that if we are already able to segment the sentence then we must already know what sort of logical role the term "identical" plays here. So we imagine it is the same word "identical" we are long familiar with from other

well-formed grammatical sentences of an entirely different pattern. This forces us into the view that we have given the word "identical" *a wrong use* here: it clashes with the first part of the sentence—so we conclude: the result is hopeless nonsense. Hence with the view that there are no intrinsically nonsensical sentences goes the claim in section #5.4732: "We cannot give a sign the wrong sense."

34. *Postscript*, p. 504. The ensuing discussion is indebted to Henry Allison's article "Christianity and Nonsense," *The Review of Metaphysics* (March 1967).

35. This, I take it, is the correct point of departure for an understanding of what Climacus means when he describes himself as a "humorist," as well as why he criticizes a review of his previous book for providing an accurate abstract of the argumentative structure of the work while draining it of its humor. To leave out the humor, he claims, is to provide the most misleading possible account of the work:

> The abstract is accurate, and as a whole dialectically reliable, but here is the point: in spite of the accuracy of the abstract, everyone who reads that only is bound to get an entirely false impression of the book. . . . The abstract is doctrinizing, pure, and unadulterated doctrination; the reader will get the impression that the book is also doctrinizing. Now this is in my view the most distorted impression of the book it is possible to have. The contrast of the form . . . and the content: . . . the unwearied incessant activity of the irony; the parody on speculative philosophy involved in the entire plan of the work . . .: of all this the reader of the review gets not the slightest intimation. [*Postscript*, p. 245n]

Surely this remark is meant to apply to the *Postscript* as well, and surely the function of the scholarly footnote that contains it is to provide Climacus with an opportunity within his pseudonymous work to issue an additional warning on how *not* to read such a work.

36. Wittgenstein:

> The solution of philosophical problems can be compared with a gift in a fairy tale: in the magic castle it appears enchanted and if you look at it outside in daylight it is nothing but an ordinary bit of iron. [*Culture and Value*, p. 11]

37. If we feel words are lacking it is because we lack the *right* words. The problem here lies not with the poverty of language but with the poverty of *our* language.

38. *Postscript*, p. 245n. Climacus is here criticizing a review of his previous work, *Philosophical Fragments*. The rest of the passage embroiders on the theme of "taking away" from the reader and continues as follows:

> This seems very strange and ironical, and yet I believe that I have succeeded in expressing precisely what I mean. When a man has his mouth so full of food that he is prevented from eating, and is like to starve in consequence, does giving him food consist in stuffing still more of it in his mouth, or does it consist in taking some of it away, so that he can begin to eat? And so also when a man has much knowledge, and his knowledge has little or no significance for him, does a rational communication consist in giving him more knowledge, even supposing that he is loud in his insistence that this is what he needs, or does it not rather consist in taking some of it away?

39. Kierkegaard remarks in this connection: "It is rather remarkable that one may precisely by talking about something prove that one does not talk about that thing; for it would seem that this could only be proved by not talking about it." And Wittgenstein: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense." The latter remark is from *Investigations* #464, yet I want to maintain that it also describes the aim of the *Tractatus* as stated, for example, in the penultimate section, #6.54: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes

them as *nonsensical*. . . .'"—that is, *finally* recognizes them to be *patently* nonsensical. It is not that we first grasp that these propositions are nonsensical, and then finally see what it is that they show. What we finally grasp is *that* they are nonsensical. For that is the only thing such propositions can show: their own nonsensicality.

40. Wittgenstein:

> Here we come up against a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation: the difficulty—I might say—is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. . . . The difficulty here is: to stop. [*Zettel*, sec. #314]

Kierkegaard:

> Experience has shown that it is by no means difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. But the difficulty, both for philosophy and for philosophers, is to stop." [*Either/Or*, 1:39]

41. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. xxi. The context is also very much to the point and runs as follows:

> I should think every philosopher now has at least one philosophical companion whose philosophical ability *and accomplishment* he has the highest regard for, who seems unable to write philosophy. Were such a person content with silence he would merely be the latest instance of a figure always possible within philosophy, possible indeed nowhere else. (It would make no sense to speak of someone as a gifted novelist who had never written a novel; nor of someone as a scientist who had made no contribution to science.)

Cavell's last claim here may seem exaggerated. However, if one softens it slightly it becomes, I take it, quite uncontroversial: it makes no sense to speak of someone as a *great* novelist who has never written a single novel, or to speak of someone as a *major* scientist who has no known contribution to science. Can there be someone who is a great philosopher and yet has never written a single work of philosophy? Socrates is identical to such a figure.

42. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 17.

43. I am extremely indebted in the pages that address this question to comments by Steven G. Affeldt on an earlier draft of this essay.

44. Most commentators take the *Tractatus* to offer a doctrine *advocating* the possibility of a completely expressive language. This complements their conviction that since this work shows certain things are unsayable in even *this* language (of crystalline logical purity) its aim must be to show that they are inexpressible in any language. One reason for this has to do with the tendency I have already discussed of commentators not to read the theory of language set forth in the work as one that is meant to dissolve in the end, but rather to view it as one that somehow survives its nonsensicality. A further source of evidence that apparently supports their view, however, is the stretch of sections in the *Investigations* (especially #89–110) that takes up Tractarian themes. It is generally assumed that the voice of the interlocutor of these sections can simply be identified with the voice of the author of the *Tractatus*. I am grateful to Warren Goldfarb for teaching me that no such strategy of straightforwardly identifying these two voices can possibly do justice to either the *Tractatus* or the *Investigations*.

45. Certain individuals who devote their lives to poetry also come to mind here. However, this raises larger questions I am not presently prepared to address. I will only note that one intriguing place to embark on such reflections is the following quotation from

Culture and Value (p. 24): "I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*."

46. "So in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound" (*Philosophical Investigations* #261).

47. A further continuity between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* that tends to be neglected in this regard is their joint preoccupation with the theme of inexpressibility. The *Investigations* is every bit as preoccupied with such matters as the *Tractatus*. Here I follow Stanley Cavell in reading the sections on private language as not offering an *argument* against the possibility of such a language but with exploring what occasions the *fantasy* that there is a realm that eludes the grasp of our public language:

> So the fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out . . . to be a fantasy, or fear . . . of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known. [*The Claim of Reason*, p. 351]

The role of the topic of mysticism in the *Tractatus* here parallels the discussion of the possibility of a private language in the *Investigations*. Both explore the impulse to retreat to a space of ineffable facts. Both works wish to diagnose and exorcise the temptation to postulate "the concept of a kind of description that I cannot possibly give." In *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, sec. #1079 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

48. Again I find Cavell's reading of the sections on private language in the *Investigations* hammers at themes that are continuous with what I take to be the preoccupations of the *Tractatus*:

> A fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness would solve a simultaneous set of metaphysical problems: it would relieve me of the responsibility for making myself known to others—as though if I were expressive that would mean continuously betraying my experiences . . . ; it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself . . . ; it would reassure my fears of being known. . .; it would reassure my fears of not being known. [*The Claim of Reason*, p. 351]

49. I find myself in these remarks, and in my last paragraph, echoing the following passage from Cavell's *The World Viewed*, p. 112:

> The failure to close with a work, win or lose, is the point of Kierkegaard's criticism of certain writers as "premise-authors," helpless to draw conclusions. Not that conclusions should always be drawn like morals, but writing requires the moral stamina to conclude, to achieve resolution, in the self and of the self's work.

50. Wittgenstein:

> It is a prevalent notion that we can only imperfectly *exhibit* our understanding; that we can only point to it from afar or come close to it but never lay our hands on it, and that the ultimate thing can never be said. . . . That means, I suppose, an expression with something missing—but the something missing is essentially *inexpressible*, because otherwise I might find a better expression for it. And "essentially inexpressible" means that it makes no sense to talk of a more complete expression. [*Philosophical Grammar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 44–45]

51. Are we already on religious ground here? The truth in the observation that each of these authors is uninterested in occasioning an understanding that is unaccompanied by inner change is, it seems to me, only obscured by the unhelpful formula that their truths are

therefore "religious" or "subjective" ones. More illuminating here I think is some attention to the ways in which each of them has next to no interest in a reader who only wishes to familiarize himself with the philosopher that each of these authors discovered in *himself*. Their works are confessional: each documents a struggle with his own demons (as does mine). But they only offer the occasion of an education to a reader who is able to enter into communication with *his* own.

52. The need for a conclusion to these pages that explicitly formulates the overall strategy of this essay was brought home to me by comments made by Burton Dreben and Paul Franks. I am indebted to them both.