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Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder

Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig, 1889–1921, by Brian McGuinness, *University of California Press*.

The World As I Found It, by Bruce Duffy, *Ticknor & Fields*.

The first installment of Brian McGuinness's *Wittgenstein, A Life* has finally appeared, and, in many ways, it has been well worth the wait. *Young Ludwig, 1889–1921* is, above all, a monumental piece of scholarship. The sheer quality and diversity of facts copiously culled, judiciously selected, and painstakingly placed within its covers are staggering. Both Wittgenstein's life and his thought remain subjects of an ongoing, often bitter, though intermittently fruitful, controversy. This controversy has been waged largely by professional philosophers — out to sink or sanctify Wittgenstein's intellectual standing once and for all — usually in the pages of some nonprofessional literary review. This book will quickly be dragged into the fray. Hence it will inevitably, and not always unjustifiably, be both widely and loudly denounced.

Whatever the shortcomings of his book, it should therefore be stated at the outset that, by dint of indefatigable patience and industry, McGuinness has rendered an important service to anyone with a serious interest in either the life or the thought of this enigmatic philosopher. Having sifted through a mass of primary materials and secondary sources, McGuinness soberly and unobtrusively fits many of the pieces together to form a relatively smooth and consecutive chronological narrative of the first half of the philosopher's life. He unveils some scholarly nuggets along the way. The historian of logic will be interested to learn of the discovery of evidence showing that one of Wittgenstein's central technical innovations (namely, the use of the schematic device of the truth-table as a means of symbolizing a proposition) first occurred to him much earlier than had hitherto been suspected. The historian of ideas (and anyone who has followed

Stanley Cavell's recent work) will be fascinated to learn that Wittgenstein studied and admired Emerson's *Essays*.

Despite these heartfelt opening words of praise, this review continues the increasingly familiar spectacle of one Wittgenstein scholar complaining about the efforts of another. I am not concerned, however, simply to vilify or sanctify Wittgenstein's name, but rather to gain some perspective on the controversy by attempting to diagnose some of the sources of the dissatisfaction that an intellectual biography such as the one McGuinness offers will inevitably occasion. McGuinness's project is to illuminate fundamental issues in Wittgenstein's thought through an examination of his life. The ninth and final chapter of the book offers an interpretation of Wittgenstein's famously cryptic early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Throughout the first eight chapters of the book, which are devoted to chronicling Wittgenstein's life, McGuinness keeps his reader's eye on the final exegetical chapter — apparently with good reason, for "the *Tractatus* was an attempt to make use of everything of value that had occurred to" Wittgenstein earlier in his life. Hence McGuinness resorts to variations on the words "in the *Tractatus*, as we shall see later . . ." countless times. On one of the final pages, McGuinness concludes: "it was a *tour de force* to combine in the book all the problems of his philosophic life — and say so much that reflected and bore on the helpless and hopeless situation of an Austrian officer in a war that was bound to be lost."

A central strategy of *Young Ludwig*, then, is to draw on biographical details and Wittgenstein's assorted unpublished notebooks and diaries to illuminate what McGuinness refers to as "the hidden content" of Wittgenstein's epoch-making little book. The eight earlier biographical chapters prepare us, in particular, for two claims: first, that the hidden teaching of the *Tractatus* is not expressed in the work itself, because it is inherently inexpressible; and second, that there is consequently something strange about the manner in which this work imparts its doctrine to the reader. McGuinness cautions his reader repeatedly: "We shall see, in connexion with the *Tractatus*, that the very novelty

of Wittgenstein's standpoint demanded a different form of expression from conventional treatises." For its teaching "can only be communicated in a special way, shown or manifested but not said." It is the intrinsic peculiarity of Wittgenstein's subject matter that engenders the peculiar literary form of his work, and "not, therefore, either incapacity or disinclination that made his own philosophical work, whether in lectures or in writing, much harder to follow or see the point of." And when McGuinness finally turns to discussing the *Tractatus* itself, he warns again: "We are being told, by the literary form and its contrast with the content, that things are, and are not, as simple as they seem in this presentation." Throughout the body of his book, however, McGuinness leaves his reader rather in the dark as to what this extraordinary mode of presentation consists of. Instead he concentrates on the biographer's task of tracking down the sources of its inspiration.

The eight biographical chapters focus intensively on questions revolving around what authors Wittgenstein read and what impression they made upon him. We are treated throughout to specific passages drawn from the works of authors ranging from Goethe and Schiller, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche — passages, we are told, that particularly captured Wittgenstein's attention. In the process, specific patterns of intellectual proclivity and preoccupation emerge. Central among these, McGuinness is concerned to show, is the overarching preoccupation with "what can be shown but cannot be said." McGuinness glosses this theme variously as an interest in what can "only be indirectly communicated" (which he tells us became a central idea of the *Tractatus*) and as "the belief that anything worth saying is in principle incapable of being directly communicated." In the final exegetical chapter, the payoff of this first volume comes when we learn that "to give the real message of the book [the *Tractatus*] . . . can, of course, only be done by indirectation." Through these earlier examples McGuinness therefore hopes to demonstrate that his biographical and exegetical aims

prove in the end mutually illuminating. Wittgenstein's carefully documented literary and philosophical interests provide the key to McGuinness's interpretation of Wittgenstein's notoriously enigmatic early treatise. The problematic of indirection, however, as well as the terminology of indirect communication versus direct communication, are not to be found, in so many words, in the works of any of the authors whom McGuinness invokes as primary influences on Wittgenstein's early thought. These terms, nonetheless, certainly express a problematic that Wittgenstein finds in these authors, latently pervading the works he most admires.

Its explicit formulation, in precisely the terms McGuinness employs, is most famously to be found in the writings of Sören Kierkegaard — an author whom we know Wittgenstein carefully studied and ardently admired. Indeed, Wittgenstein observed that Kierkegaard was "by far the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century," and he once wrote to a friend that what he himself had been trying to say had already been said by Kierkegaard. A number of scholars have suggested that Kierkegaard was a (some have thought *the*) central influence on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. One wonders how McGuinness happens to neglect to mention that Kierkegaard's work had been urged on Wittgenstein at an early age, directly by his older sister and indirectly by his adolescent idol, Karl Kraus — Kierkegaard was a favorite author of both. It is mystifying that in a work in which we are informed about Wittgenstein's relation to such relatively influential figures as Paul Ernst, Franz Grillparzer, and Wilhelm von Kügelgen, the reader only learns that Wittgenstein even read Kierkegaard through a letter of Bertrand Russell's that McGuinness happens to quote for other reasons. Yet when McGuinness gropes for words that "might alone express Wittgenstein's ideal," he summarizes the ideal, paraphrasing a remark of Wittgenstein's (from *Culture and Value*), as "the commonplace filled with significance," not hearing the echo here of the formulation of Kierkegaard's ideal in *Fear and Trembling* as the expression of "the sublime in the pedestrian." As Kierkegaard continued to

exercise a diminished influence on some of Wittgenstein's later writing, one may hope that McGuinness's second volume will redress this puzzling omission in volume 1.

The most striking parallel between the early Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is that each wrote works that self-avowedly self-destruct, works that culminate by retracting themselves. Indeed, it is above all in the self-effacing structure of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works that one can find a genuine predecessor and probable source of inspiration for the extraordinary mode of presentation of the *Tractatus*. In this regard, for all McGuinness's emphasis on the peculiarity of the literary form of the work, it is still more curious that neither in his final exegetical chapter nor anywhere else does McGuinness bother to quote the commentary the *Tractatus* offers of itself in 6.54, its pivotal penultimate section:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them — as steps — to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

I find McGuinness's failure to quote this passage symptomatic of his reluctance to heed its request fully — a reluctance to part with certain portions of the book that he, as its reader, is being asked to throw away. That passage is followed by the notorious concluding section of the *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." McGuinness glosses this conclusion as "a mystical adjuration to silence in the face of the ineffable, as it were a form of negative theology." Wittgenstein's words about "seeing the world aright" are understood by McGuinness to be asking us to see it from a point of view from which certain things that lie beyond the pale of words will nevertheless become manifest. For McGuinness, the hiddenness of the doctrine is a function of its ineffability. This, of course, raises troubling questions. If the doctrine of the work cannot be stated and we cannot hope to seek enlightenment by attending to what the words of

the book "say" (since they are self-avowedly nonsensical), how then does McGuinness himself happen to know what the hidden teaching is? McGuinness's answer to this question seems to be primarily grounded on evidence drawn from his eight biographical chapters documenting the details of Wittgenstein's ethical and mystical preoccupations, the assumption apparently being that we can see from an examination of how Wittgenstein lived what he most cared about and hence what he wished the closing silence of his book to guard.

Part of McGuinness's motivation here no doubt is to display the intimacy of the connection between the philosopher's life and his work. This interweaving of biography and exegesis, however, appears also to be necessitated in his view by the very character of Wittgenstein's text. The hiddenness of the ethical teaching encoded in the work can only be decoded with confidence once we supplement a knowledge of the text with a general knowledge of the man and of what he would have wanted to teach. In the remainder of this essay, I hope to show that McGuinness's reliance on his knowledge of the philosopher's life in certain ways narrows his vision of the text, leaving him unable either to make sense of it or to notice its own instructions concerning how to read it.

McGuinness sees a partial analogy between the project of the early Wittgenstein and that of Kant:

Now there was indeed a parallel between Wittgenstein's aim and Kant's: the one wanted to abolish reason to make room for faith, the other to remove the whole of ethics and religion from the area of speculation into that of the inexpressible.

Kant's aim was hardly to abolish reason but rather to exhibit its limits. But, more important, what it might mean to attribute to Wittgenstein the ambition of removing "the whole of ethics" into the "area" of "the inexpressible" is far from clear; it is also far from clear that this was indeed Wittgenstein's aim. One can, nonetheless, sympathize with McGuinness's burning conviction that there must be some connection between the moral intensity and aesthetic austerity so pervasively characteristic of Wittgenstein's

life and the intensity and austerity characteristic of his highly condensed philosophical prose. Indeed, Wittgenstein's charisma as an author can be attributed in part to a moral or spiritual fervor that informs almost all of his writing, most markedly his later writing. It is a pathos that is often as distinctive as it is difficult to characterize. McGuinness speaks in this connection of a quest for purity and of the struggle "to embody a moral ideal," one that is continuously guided by an aspiration to perfection. McGuinness is fascinated by the puzzling question of how one should understand the relation between this ethical dimension of Wittgenstein's interests and his philosophical interests in formal logic and the foundations of mathematics.

Perhaps half of all that he [Wittgenstein] wrote was concerned with mathematics. . . . These problems . . . seem to be quite different from his other preoccupations. He was a musician. He read passionately works of literature that "said something to him"—something, that is, about human life. He brooded over his own defects and difficulties. He was a fierce critic of failings, especially those of honesty, in others. He came to write a book whose main point (he said himself) was an ethical one. What had the foundations of mathematics in common with propensities like these?

This question is the expression of a confused feeling that not everything fits. An answer can be attempted at various levels.

For McGuinness, the final answer to this question rests upon his explication of the teaching of the *Tractatus* in which he gives pride of place to a doctrine of showing. Hence in the final exegetical chapter he introduces his discussion of Wittgenstein's book by saying:

One aspect of its literary character is that, like a poem, it is not an indifferent vehicle for something expressible in other ways but shows or conveys something unique by its own form of expression. In Wittgenstein's own terms, it shows or manifests something.

The work's capacity for showing is a feature of its literary character. It is typical of Wittgenstein's admirers within the analytic tradition of philosophy to explicate their sense of the power of Wittgenstein's prose to show something, over and above what

it merely appears to say, through an appeal to its traffic with the literary. McGuinness writes:

Wittgenstein's whole approach, his literary style, has as part of its aim to tell us that he may be only seeming to be uttering straightforward propositions, about palpable objects.

One wonders what reader of the *Tractatus*, even upon a cursory perusal, could come away with the impression that the work seems to be uttering straightforward propositions, let alone propositions about palpable objects? More important, what sort of work is the appeal to literary style supposed to do here? Throughout his book, McGuinness operates with roughly the following equivalence: (in)expressible = (un)literal = (in)direct. It is worth confirming just how questionable each of the three pairs of equivalences contained in this equation actually is. His reading of the *Tractatus* involves the further claim that one can treat all of these as equivalent to what the work calls the (non)sensical. McGuinness also seems at times to be tempted by the conclusion that a general feature for Wittgenstein of literary/nonliteral/ethical/indirect discourse is that it does not assert anything. This provides him with a tidy threefold analogy between the literary, the ethical, and the logical.

McGuinness finds the connection between logic and ethics in his understanding of how Wittgenstein's philosophy of logic allows him to formulate a sufficiently rigorous distinction between saying and showing—logic offers a perspicuous paradigmatic instance of how language can embody ineffable truth:

The point was to show that logical statements too (the best that philosophy could aspire to) said nothing. Logic therefore did not present us with a set of truths independent of experience: it was in this like ethics. . . . Logic is thus the paradigm of the inexpressible: there is something to be seen but nothing to be said.

On McGuinness's reading of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein propounds the view that certain conditions must obtain in order for language to be able to refer to the world at all, and, further, that these conditions are shown by the pseudopropositions of logic. Furthermore, we cannot resort to well-formed proposi-

tions of language to say, that is, to assert, that these conditions obtain: "These conditions, which make propositions possible, are not themselves expressible in propositions." If we nevertheless try to frame propositions which assert that these conditions do obtain, it will be possible to show that what we have produced are not meaningful propositions at all but rather only meaningless sentencelike linguistic strings, which are neither true nor false. However, these nonsensical utterances can serve a purpose: they can impart from the utterer to the listener an insight into what cannot be expressed in a meaningful proposition. As McGuinness puts the point in an earlier article, "The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*": "The logical properties of the world also [like the truths of ethics and mysticism] were shown or manifested: they too could not be expressed."

It is by no means as clear as McGuinness makes out how this doctrine can be extrapolated to sentencelike strings of nonsense that aspire to show something concerning "the nature of ethics" or "the meaning of life." If "all the value of the world lies in the inexpressible," then how can nonsensical language even so much as get a grip on it? If *nonsensical* simply means figurative (non-literal, literary), as McGuinness often suggests, then we do have some idea of how such language gets a grip on its object—but then what it expresses is not inexpressible either. The analogy between logic and ethics appears to give out before it illuminates the central puzzle. McGuinness first offers us the following two cases: (1) The pseudopropositions of logic, which, by dint of their own internal logical structure, perspicuously reveal something about the structure of all language. (2) Propositions which (unsuccessfully) attempt to formulate the conditions of the possibility of sense and thereby (allegedly) reveal something about the limits of meaningful language through the manner in which they violate the permissible boundaries of the logical syntax of language. In each of these two cases (however problematic they may otherwise be), at least the doctrine of showing is restricted to the relatively modest claim that a piece of nonsense that fails to say anything can, through the nature of its failure, nonetheless succeed in showing something about the nature of language. The

picture here is that nonsense can reveal the limits of sense: infelicitous uses of language can exhibit the conditions that govern the possibility of felicitously making sense. It remains utterly mysterious how this paradigm, however, can illustrate how something that by hypothesis lies ineffably well outside the limits of language (for example, the nature of ethics) is supposed to manifest itself in a piece of nonsense.

The doctrine that nonsense can make ineffable truths manifest is in any case a problematic one. How compelled one will feel to saddle the *Tractatus* with this doctrine will depend on how seriously one takes Wittgenstein's exhortation to his reader at the end of the book to throw away the ladder once he has climbed up it—once he has surmounted the illusion that the sentences in the book are in any sense propositions (intended to express thoughts)—that is, once he has come to see that all the sentences in the book are truly and completely nonsensical. What, then, is one left with once one has thrown away the ladder? Nothing. Isn't this what the final sentence of the work declares: "Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent"? But this last remark does not assert anything either. It, too, is nonsensical. The idea that we are left with nothing must also be thrown away. In seeing that the solution of the problem lies in the vanishing of the problem, we may feel that we are deprived of everything we wanted; we may feel we are left with nothing. Then the answer to the question, "What are we left with once we have thrown away the ladder?" is: our own sense of deprivation. (The contrapositive of the final sentence is perhaps more self-evidently equally tautologous: Whereof we can speak, thereof we can speak. Or: What we can say is what we can say. This does not debar us from anything unsayable. But it does not deprive us of anything sayable either. Here lies one of the crucial points of continuity throughout Wittgenstein's work: "What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards"—you are never deprived of anything you ever had or could have had.)

The answer McGuinness endorses is that we are left with a battery of ineffable truths—truths about the nature of ethics, the meaning of life, and the like. McGuinness's reading of the *Trac-*

tatus here is a relatively standard one. It appears to have the drawback, however, of attributing to the *Tractatus* an incoherent view. Cora Diamond's colorful label for such a view is "chickening out." She writes in her article "Throwing Away the Ladder":

So it looks as if there is this whatever-it-is . . . some essential feature of reality, which reality has all right, but which we cannot say or think that it has. What exactly is supposed to be left of that, after we have thrown away the ladder? Are we going to keep the idea that there is something or other in reality that we gesture at, however badly . . . so that *it, what we are gesturing at, is there* but cannot be expressed in words? *That is what I want to call chickening out.* . . .

To chicken out is to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it.

McGuinness is clearly sensitive in places to the problem of chickening out (certainly far more so than most commentators on the *Tractatus*) and is worried about it. He sees that certain portions of the book are best read as not surviving their own nonsensicality—they are in the end meant to be thrown away. He speaks of "self-refuting" moments in the book, of the "insubstantiality" of the text, and of "plenty of internal indications that its propositions are not to be taken quite *au pied de la lettre*." McGuinness is attuned to the fact that the work undercuts some of its own theses, and he justifiably chides some of his colleagues for neglecting the ways in which the doctrines of the *Tractatus* come apart in the course of their exposition within the work itself:

The fact is, however, that a direct description of its doctrines (which many of my predecessors have attempted — *vestigia terreni*) often leads to surprise at the sudden turn in the argument by which those doctrines are themselves invalidated.

Indeed, in his article "The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*," McGuinness argues that the ontological view Wittgenstein appears to erect in the *Tractatus* eventually collapses—and was designed to collapse—in on itself:

It is a kind of ontological myth that he wants to give us to show us the nature of language. . . . One of the chief results of the view of language so attained is the rejection of all such myths.

McGuinness is thus willing to throw away the ladder partially: he accepts that some of the doctrines of the work are designed to crumble in upon themselves and hence that part of the aim of the work is to reveal how the philosophical projects of enunciating such doctrines (concerning, for example, the relation between language and the world) result in nonsense. Yet even in the above passage McGuinness speaks of Wittgenstein as wanting "to show us the nature of language." For McGuinness, even after the edifice of explicit doctrine crumbles, a hidden ghost of ineffable doctrine remains hovering over the debris. On this reading, the very character of the failure of Wittgenstein's doctrinal pronouncements proves to be revelatory of something further though unsayable. The manner in which the exoteric teaching of the work collapses leaves a trace that exhibits the real esoteric message of the work. McGuinness reads the work as exhorting us not to throw away this message but rather to cherish it privately in wordless silence.

Remarkably, whenever McGuinness turns to the task of revealing what the work shows us, the alleged inexpressibility of the hidden content doesn't seem to present much of an obstacle for him. In his efforts to tell us what the work shows, he invariably resorts to quoting exactly what the work *says*. Yet if these remarks drawn from the *Tractatus* are in the end to be unmasked as bits of nonsense, how can simply repeating their words bring us—McGuinness's uninitiated readers—any closer to a comprehension of what can be shown but not said? McGuinness's exegetical practice here appears to be constantly at odds with his interpretation of the work. If the work did show the various things he simply *tells* us at various points that it is meant to show, then wouldn't that prove that, in some sense, these things can, after all, be said? McGuinness's constant practice of attempting to tell us what is inexpressible would appear to be patently self-defeating. Furthermore, this practice presupposes the possibility of intelligible nonsense. Yet Wittgenstein is quite firm in his view that nonsense is unintelligible—indeed, that is what it is for something to be nonsense for Wittgenstein. This point can be stated in terms that McGuinness himself helps to provide. He

argues that, for Wittgenstein, the limits of meaningful language represent the limits of thought, and hence "nonsense cannot be thought." Only what can be said can be thought. The pseudopositions of the *Tractatus* are pieces of nonsense that say nothing. Yet, McGuinness persists, somehow they show something—something that, it now turns out, not only cannot be expressed in words but cannot be thought. But what does it mean, then, to speak here of grasping what these pseudopositions show if "it" lies beyond the limits of what can be grasped? The idea that nonsensical sentences can embody a content comes apart on us. And it is meant to. The doctrine of ineffable content represents one of the rungs of the ladder the reader of the *Tractatus* must ascend and surmount—and (along with the rest of the ladder of which it forms an integral part), in the end, throw away.

McGuinness occasionally registers an awareness of the excommunicating awkwardness of claiming, on the one hand, that the nonsense sentences of the *Tractatus* cannot communicate thoughts, and of wishing to insist, on the other hand, that they can impart insight to the reader. The pinch of this dilemma generates formulations such as the following: "In the pseudopositions of the *Tractatus*, we see how things really are and are intellectually satisfied, though we cannot explain why." McGuinness avoids the internal incoherence that threatens to undermine a doctrine of showing here by retreating to a formulation that says virtually nothing: not only is the ineffable content of the work left necessarily opaque, but now our cognitive (or noncognitive) relation to "it" becomes equally shrouded in darkness. This is, of course, roughly what the positivists thought about the kind of insight or satisfaction poetical or ethical statements might impart—but they would also have denied that such statements have any intellectual or cognitive content. Their conception of the literary went hand in hand with their impoverished conception of the nonliterary. What is peculiar about McGuinness is that he appears to wish to preserve the sharpness and roughly the structure of the positivists' distinction between the literary and the nonliterary while discarding their hostility toward the idea of

traffic on the part of philosophy with the literary. Although this compromise allows him to celebrate evident qualities of Wittgenstein's prose that the positivists were loath to accommodate, it does so at too high a cost.

The appeal to an inexplicable form of intellectual satisfaction to characterize the sense in which the reader can be said to grasp what is shown by ethical nonsense would appear to all but abandon McGuinness's earlier idea that logic provides a perspicuous paradigm intended to illustrate how mystical and ethical truths can be shown but not said. On the reading of the *Tractatus* that I am inclined to favor, to genuinely throw away the whole of the ladder requires completely relinquishing the idea of an "it" that cannot be put into words but can still show itself. This idea itself also turns out to be nonsense. Further, I agree here with Cora Diamond: To read Wittgenstein as not chickening out means taking seriously the notion that by *nonsense* here he does not mean deep nonsense that harbors an inexpressible mystical residue. The *Tractatus* does not delimit profound but unstatable truths—it aspires to unmask the pseudoprofundity of the "truths" of philosophy.

McGuinness takes Wittgenstein's declaration at the end of the *Tractatus*—that all his preceding remarks are nonsensical—to impugn only the expressibility of the thoughts (expressed?) in the book, not their "incontestable truth." McGuinness accurately observes that (given his reading) how the work can hope to claim to "give expression to thoughts" that are "incontestably true" is "the real riddle of the *Tractatus*." Yet, regrettably, as he proceeds, McGuinness tends to treat the problem less as a riddle to be puzzled over and more as an anomaly to be brushed aside. In particular, McGuinness's reading (falling back in line with standard commentaries on the text) seems implicitly to commit the *Tractatus* to a distinction between two kinds of nonsense: (1) mere gibberish—unintelligible strings of linguistic marks that could be given a sense, and (2) deep nonsense—intrinsically nonsensical linguistic strings that through the very manner of their construction flout the conditions of sense and through their defiance of these conditions show what cannot otherwise be expressed. Yet in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explicitly repudiates

such a distinction (and the conception of deep nonsense that it entails) when he writes in section 5.4732: "We cannot give a sign the wrong sense." (The "cannot" in this remark can, of course, be given a metaphysical inflection, inviting us to picture the impossibility in question as one that we could coherently overcome if only we were not debarred from the possibility by the structure of our language.) In Wittgenstein's view, there is no such thing as an irreducibly nonsensical string of signs. All nonsense is in search of a sense and capable of being given one. For Wittgenstein there are no logically ill-formed propositions:

If a sign is *possible*, then it is also capable of signifying. Whatever is possible in logic is also permitted. . . . [W]e cannot make mistakes in logic.

The idea that there can be irreducibly nonsensical sentences arises through the idea that we can combine discrete logical components in ways that violate the logical syntax of our language. For the early Wittgenstein, however, it is only within the context of a meaningful proposition that a logical sign has a life.

Hence Wittgenstein continues:

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 constituent parts.

McGuinness at one point seems to be on to this problem when he argues that Wittgenstein interprets Frege's context principle ("only in the context of a proposition does a name have a reference") as meaning that "reference cannot be determined independently of how we settle or understand sense." I agree. Yet if it is in fact "a fundamental idea of the *Tractatus*," as McGuinness concedes, that one cannot secure the reference of a sign prior to grasping the logical role which that sign plays within some proposition, then this would appear to vitiate a fundamental presupposition of McGuinness's interpretive practice. For McGuinness apparently assumes that whenever he quotes remarks from the *Tractatus* that contain words such as "the limits of language" or "the mystical" or "the ethical," he does know the reference of these signs. Even though he thinks what these remarks

"mean" amounts to nothing but nonsense, he does think he continues to retain some general grasp of these remarks. He just wants to throw away what the remarks say, not the idea that he knows what they're about. Or, more precisely, he believes he knows what these remarks fail to be about. But genuinely to throw away the ladder requires overcoming this temptation to think that we have a secure handle on what these remarks are about. This is part of what Wittgenstein aspires to teach: nonsense cannot even so much as fail to be about anything in particular. How does he teach this?

In section 4.112 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes the conception of philosophy the work itself exemplifies:

Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

The *Tractatus* does not put forth a doctrine but only an example of an activity. McGuinness wishes to link this notion of philosophy as an activity with the idea of showing what cannot be said: Philosophy . . . is the activity of making clear the limits of language, which are identical with the limits of thought. It is a pointing to, or an attempt to make clear, something that cannot be stated directly.

This inevitably reintroduces the idea that the *Tractatus* does have a doctrine after all — only it is one that cannot be directly communicated. Indeed, throughout his book McGuinness allows himself to talk of the "doctrines," "position," "account of the nature [of ethics, language, and so on]" of the *Tractatus*. This also forces McGuinness to interpret the notion of elucidation mentioned in section 4.112, not as a description of the activity of philosophy mentioned in the preceding sentence, but rather as something over and above what he takes to be the primary activity of philosophy (that is, the project of showing the unsayable):

4.112 seems to ascribe to philosophy not only the task of setting limits to what can be thought but also that of elucidating (presumably by correct analysis) the propositions of science.

Nowhere does the *Tractatus* suggest that what is meant by the idea of philosophy as elucidation should be equated with

the analysis of the propositions of science. This interpretation of the *Tractatus* stems from the Vienna Circle, but it is in no way supported by the text. Rather, in the penultimate section it becomes clear that the entire body of the book is meant to be an example of what the notion of elucidation comes to: "My propositions serve as *elucidations* in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them — as steps — to climb up beyond them." It is significant that Wittgenstein speaks here of "anyone who understands *me*": we cannot understand his propositions (for they are nonsense), but we can understand the author and the activity he is engaged in — one of showing that we suffer from the illusion of thinking we mean something when we mean nothing. The aim therefore is to undo our attraction to various grammatically well-formed strings of words that resonate with the aura of sense. The silence the book wishes to leave us in at the end is one in which nothing has been said and there is nothing to say (of the sort that we imagined there to be). It is the silence represented by the book as a whole. To recognize it as a silence requires recognizing that this book does not aspire to say anything. It is the silence produced by an attempt to assert philosophical truths. It is not a silence that is marked by the conclusion of philosophical discourse. The silence is itself a symptom of philosophical discourse. It is therefore not a silence the work itself confers upon us, but rather one in which it discovers us — one that we are attracted to in our attraction to words that fail to assert anything. That we are subject to such attractions is what the work hopes to show. It hopes to provide a mirror in which we can recognize our own philosophical inclinations. The silence we are left with is not the pregnant silence that comes with a censorious posture of guarding the sanctity of the ineffable. (The standard Pears and McGuinness translation of the final passage — "What we cannot speak about we must *pass over* in silence" — with its implication that there is something to pass over, loads the text in favor of a notion of pregnant silence.) One can call this activity of unmasking nonsense a kind of "showing," as long as one remains clear that there is no "it" (which cannot

be said) that is shown. One piece of nonsense may or may not show that another less self-evidently nonsensical piece of nonsense is nonsense — and that is all nonsense can show. This is the assumption upon which the construction of the ladder is based. It is an insight into the emptiness of its predecessors that each successive rung of the *Tractatus* hopes to trigger about the sentences put forward in each of the rungs that comes before it.

The preface and the conclusion of the *Tractatus* provide directions for how to read the book. In the preface, Wittgenstein first tells us that what lies beyond the limit of what can be said is *unsinnig* — simply nonsense. The preface begins with the following words:

This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it — or similar thoughts. It is not a work of doctrine. Its purpose would be achieved if it affords satisfaction to someone who reads it with understanding. (*My translation*)

The first sentence is initially puzzling, for what we learn by the conclusion is that the book contains no thoughts — no thoughts are expressed in it. But the point here is not that it contains thinkable thoughts that one could share with the author, but that one must share (or have shared) with the author the experience of mistaking its (pseudo-)propositions for thoughts that one takes oneself to be thinking. So the implicit distinction in the penultimate section of the *Tractatus* — between understanding the propositions of the book (which is impossible) and understanding the author (by recognizing his propositions to be nonsensical) — parallels the implicit distinction in the first sentence of the preface between understanding what one reads in the book (which turns out to be nonsense) and understanding the book (by grasping its point: that in the end we have to throw it away). This parallel is recapitulated in the third sentence of the preface in the implicit distinction between someone who reads the book and imagines himself or herself to be understanding what it says (in which case its purpose would not be achieved) and someone who reads it with understanding.

This distinction rests upon the idea that, although there is no

such thing as understanding the propositions in the book, there is such a thing as the illusion of understanding them. The guiding assumption of the *Tractatus* is that the philosopher typically suffers from an illusion of understanding, from the projection of an illusory sense onto a (pseudo-)proposition which has not yet been given a clear sense. The task, therefore, is not to disagree with what he thinks, but to undo his illusion that there is *something* which he is thinking — to show that what he imagines himself to be thinking fails to amount to a thought (that there isn't a "what" there for him to think). The method of the *Tractatus* relies upon the thought that under such circumstances the only procedure that will prove genuinely elucidatory is one that attempts to enter into the philosopher's illusion of understanding and explode it from within. In this respect, Wittgenstein's description of his method in the *Philosophical Investigations* applies equally well to the *Tractatus*: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense." The distinction implicitly drawn in section 6.54 between understanding the propositions in the book (which we are not asked to do) and understanding the author of the book (which we are asked to do) depends on this idea: although we cannot understand what an utterer of nonsense says, we can understand the utterer — that is, we can imaginatively enter into the point of view from which this piece of nonsense appears to say something. The criterion of our having successfully performed this act of imaginative identification with the utterer of nonsense is that we are able to go on successfully on our own and correctly anticipate the (apparent) logical relations that he will imagine obtain between the nonsensical string in question and other (pseudo-)propositions. Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* is to lead the philosopher from the original "disguised" piece of nonsense (to which he — and, indeed, the philosopher in each of us — is attracted) through this network of (apparent) logical relations to some more patently nonsensical (pseudo-)consequence. The criterion of our having reached the moment when we have understood the author of the *Tractatus*, our having both grasped

his elucidatory strategy and worked through the consequences of his pseudodoctrines — our having climbed, that is, all the way up the ladder — is, as he says, that we will "eventually" recognize his "propositions" as nonsensical and throw them away. Some such distinction between understanding the author of the work and understanding what he says is essential to illuminating the central exegetical puzzle of the *Tractatus*: in what sense can the reader be called upon to "understand" the work, if it consists entirely of nonsense? It is equally essential to illuminating the related puzzle: in what sense can the "propositions" of the work be said to form the structure of a ladder? how can one piece of nonsense follow from, or entail, another?

Although McGuinness never trusts the text far enough to discover such distinctions in it, he does occasionally interpret the notion of showing in terms consistent with such a reading. For example, he writes:

There are no truths in this area, and hence there is no subject-matter here either. . . . Philosophy is not a natural science, or indeed a science or doctrine of any kind. Distinct from the utterance of truths, there is another activity of understanding and making clear. It is to this realm, the realm of *showing* as opposed to *saying*, that philosophy belongs.

The description of Wittgenstein's conception of the activity of philosophy as a quest for clarity is apt — and, indeed, one that Wittgenstein avails himself of both early and late. For both early and late (from the *Tractatus* on), Wittgenstein's philosophical writing supplies a record of his own internal struggles with the forms of intellectual temptation and confusion that exercised him most. McGuinness's biography does an excellent job of documenting the young Wittgenstein's spiritual fantasies: a desire for completeness, absolute saintliness, and perfection in every area. Falling prey to the biographer's temptation to romanticize his subject, however, McGuinness tends to underscore the extent to which Wittgenstein's philosophical writing embodies a struggle to free himself from the fantasies of his adolescence. It is difficult to imagine the Wittgenstein that emerges from the pages of *Young Ludwig* capable of recognizing that a desire for

saintliness and perfection can itself be a form of evasion. (Wittgenstein's intellectual kinship with and admiration for Freud represent, in this connection, another notable omission that one can only presume McGuinness plans to rectify in volume 2.) At the heart of all Wittgenstein's philosophical writing—as Stanley Cavell has emphasized on a number of occasions—stands the idea that there is nothing more human than the wish to deny one's humanity. McGuinness's Wittgenstein is obsessed by and broods over the ways he falls short of his romantic ideals. Yet one misses in him the capacity to question the wellsprings of his obsessions. The taste of self-knowledge seems, on the whole, too bitter for him. One misses precisely what is so impressive about the Wittgenstein that we know from his philosophical writing: his ability to know when to suspect the attractiveness of an ideal, his patience in hunting down the roots of his own deepest temptations, his capacity to diagnose the sources of intellectual fixation, and his responsiveness in identifying the pathology of his own desires. (The shortcomings of McGuinness's book in this regard assume nightmarish proportions in Bruce Duffy's portrait of Wittgenstein. Duffy's Wittgenstein lacks both the requisite intelligence and humility, not to mention the courage and patience, for a life of self-examination. Duffy even manages to find such disjointed ways of stringing together things Wittgenstein actually said or wrote as to create the impression of a man seldom capable of a moment of lucidity, let alone originality or subtlety.)

Not only does McGuinness tend to overrate the extent to which attending to Wittgenstein's life (rather than to the book itself) will furnish the key to interpreting his carefully composed early work, he also undervalues the degree to which carefully attending to the work might shed light on the character of the man and his life. McGuinness inclines toward representing the spiritual struggle of the young Wittgenstein as one that is defined by the twin poles of, on the one hand, an impatient hunger to be more than merely human and, on the other, the inevitable ensuing disappointment with the fact of his mere humanity. There is no reason to doubt the faithfulness of McGuinness's

portrait in this regard—indeed, it is to be applauded for the richness and accuracy of its detail. But the question remains whether Wittgenstein was capable of any critical complexity in his relation to even the most rooted of his own fixations. McGuinness's penchant for attempting to employ his portrait of the young Wittgenstein—so much the product of a post-Schopenhauerian Viennese intellectual culture—as the skeleton key for decoding the mysteries of the *Tractatus* leads him to underestimate the depth of Wittgenstein's critique both of that tradition and of himself. For Wittgenstein first finds his own distinctive philosophical voice the moment he begins to regard an attitude of Schopenhauerian disappointment with human finitude as the point of departure rather than as the climax of his spiritual struggle.

The *Tractatus* marks the beginning of the struggle that preoccupied Wittgenstein throughout his mature years—a struggle that oscillates between the poles of the constitutively human temptation to disown one's humanity and the equally human thirst to find peace in an acknowledgment of the fact of one's humanity. Of course, many of the distinctive brush strokes that make up McGuinness's portrait of the young Wittgenstein are unmistakably reflected in the pages of the *Tractatus*. Central among these is the aspiration to an unsullied form of insight too pure and complete to permit itself to be straitjacketed in the confining fabric of human language. Yet that this aspiration is inscribed in the pages of the work is not to be taken as evidence of an endorsement. The authorial strategy of the work is to bring the reader to feel the full strength and deep-rootedness of this fantasy (that thought can outstrip the conditions of sense) by allowing him to experience it himself—to the point of discovering himself to be still drawn by its allure in the teeth of imagining himself to be already fully wise to its emptiness and safe from its seductive powers.

The temptation to imagine that we take up a point of view that surveys language as a whole (and assess what can and cannot be expressed in language) underlies each of the other philosophical temptations Wittgenstein takes up in the *Tractatus*. Many of

Wittgenstein's own earlier philosophical enthusiasms — Russell's logical atomism, Schopenhauer's solipsism, Tolstoy's mysticism — provide the materials out of which the preceding rungs of the ladder of the *Tractatus* are constructed. Not surprisingly, therefore, many sections of the *Tractatus* incorporate material from Wittgenstein's earlier philosophical notebooks. Throughout the first eight chapters of his book, McGuinness frequently quotes remarks from these notebooks and offers brief, sometimes helpful, explications of the doctrines they propound. He also dutifully points out where the counterpart of a particular remark from the notebooks occurs in the *Tractatus* — no doubt partly as further evidence for his claim that "the *Tractatus* was an attempt to make use of everything of value that had occurred" to Wittgenstein. The question remains, however: In what sense does the *Tractatus* "make use" of these materials? McGuinness generally proceeds as if in explicating a remark from the notebook he is also explicating (or at least previewing) the teaching of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus* that all of its remarks are nonsensical does not cause McGuinness, for the most part, to ponder (and in this his book is again representative of the scholarly literature on early Wittgenstein) whether the relation of the author of the *Tractatus* to these remarks drawn from the notebooks has shifted from one of conviction to one of suspicion. I say "for the most part" because McGuinness, as we have seen, does set a salutary example to the scholarly community by arguing, for example, that the ontological doctrine of the *Tractatus* — which can also be found in the notebooks — is designed to come apart. Nevertheless, with respect to the remarks in the notebooks dealing with the nature of ethics and mysticism, McGuinness's assumption seems to be that these ideas have simply been transposed to the handful of closing sections of the *Tractatus* with merely a little spin added to them in the form of the claim that any attempt to say these things should be viewed as nonsense. McGuinness does not seem to think, however, that this bit of additional spin should present a serious impediment to Wittgenstein's sustaining his conviction in the truth of these ideas. McGuinness, against some of his own better instincts, is

sorely tempted to take these latter sections of the *Tractatus* (on ethics and mysticism) as containing the central message of the work in a nutshell. Hence he writes of Wittgenstein:

It is not unfair to see his whole philosophy as a kind of mystic revelation, remembering that the mystic *means* what cannot or should not be spoken. He himself says so.

Leaving aside the mystery in the second sentence as to how Wittgenstein "himself says" what cannot be said, I note briefly the extremity of the equivocation represented by the disjunction in the first sentence: that it "should not be spoken" implies it can be spoken. McGuinness is typical here in succumbing to the temptation to soften the say/show distinction in order to render it coherent though at odds with the text. McGuinness wants to be allowed to read the closing sections of the *Tractatus* as simply telling us what the author really cares about. It is this set of rungs at the top of the ladder that McGuinness is most reluctant to throw away. For he feels Wittgenstein really does care about these matters, and he has drawn on a mass of biographical material to illustrate what these matters are and how much Wittgenstein cares about them.

McGuinness stands as the most distinguished representative to date of a long line of Wittgenstein scholars who have attempted to use the philosopher's life to decipher the ethical teaching that they know on independent grounds must be buried somewhere in his work. The tendency here is to assume that it is the last portion of the text of the *Tractatus* that is about ethics but that the true content of these sections cannot be understood by simply attending to the text itself, and therefore further illumination must be sought outside the text. McGuinness's confidence that the *Tractatus* wishes to educate its readers in ethical matters is no doubt connected to his well-documented claim that Wittgenstein tends to view "all education as moral education." Furthermore, Wittgenstein himself says, in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker — a remark quoted several times by McGuinness — that the point of the book is an ethical one. But if one conceptualizes its ethical point as some single thing (idea, teaching) that

the work embodies, then it becomes quite difficult to see what "it" is. This increases the pressure to remove the central teaching of the text to a point outside the text—a point the text itself can only gesture at. The underlying mistake here is to picture ethics as forming a separate subject with which the text concerns itself. The ethical demand of the *Tractatus* is not separable from the activity of elucidation that the text itself aspires to perform. The ethical moment of the work lies in its relation to its audience. The most fundamental sense in which the *Tractatus* is a work with an ethical point must be a sense which applies to the work as a whole. If there is labor that has an ethical dimension to it that can be done by this book, it has to do with the effect that the book aspires to have on its reader. Wittgenstein is once again following Kierkegaard's lead here. Kierkegaard refers to his pseudonymous authorship as having an ethical purpose. Crudely put, what is ethical about these works is that they aim to change their reader's viewpoint, and hence the reader, and hence the way the reader lives. On the surface, however, many of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works have little or nothing to do with ethics. It is not their content but rather their intent that is ethical. They realize their aim by striving to transform the reader's picture of things and hence to liberate and redirect, in turn, first the imagination, then the attention, and finally the energies of the reader. It is this effort to liberate vision and redirect attention that implicates these texts in matters concerning the cultivation of their readers' moral capacities and hence provides these texts with ethical footing. Insofar as such a labor of liberation and redirection (not toward something in particular but away from a something that is unmasked as nothing in particular) is engaged in by the propositions of the *Tractatus*, it is a labor in which every proposition participates.

The sections that deal explicitly with ethics in the *Tractatus* are concerned primarily to undermine a certain picture of how philosophy might figure in the task of living an ethical life. The impulse to a certain kind of talk is at issue here: namely, the impulse to think that ethics stands in need of words that provide some kind of philosophical account or grounding. Wittgenstein

(echoing Kierkegaard) is inclined to view this kind of talk as an evasion of the ethical, as mere talk, as a kind of saying that obstructs action. On this view, there is no separate subject called Ethics for philosophy to treat of. Here lies the analogy between logic and ethics for Wittgenstein. "Logic must take care of itself," he writes in the *Tractatus*. Neither stands in need of the services of philosophy. "All the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order." There is therefore nothing in Wittgenstein's view that precludes the idea that ethical action can (as it often ordinarily does) take the form of talk. In certain cases, providing (or rejecting, or insisting on) certain words (of comfort, of advice, of caution) can be a form of ethical action. Such words are responses to a given situation. They are not bits of theorizing; they are not pieces of a philosophical account of anything. To insist on a complete banishment of speech from "the realm of the ethical" inevitably kindles the tendency to imagine that there is some mystical residue in Wittgenstein's views on ethics that continues to hover beyond the pale of the sayable. It is important here not to deny that there is a perfectly innocuous philosophical sense in which ethical speech is possible for Wittgenstein, but it is of no real philosophical pertinence to the issues concerning "the expressibility of the ethical" that are under pressure in the *Tractatus*.

McGuinness recounts in a number of places that the very young Wittgenstein apparently used to defend the rather extraordinary view (to Russell, Moore, Keynes, and others) that teaching someone logic and mathematics would make him a better and more honest person. McGuinness by no means suggests that he retained this view for long. But I think an underlying intuition does survive, both in the *Tractatus* and in the *Investigations*: namely, the act of helping someone to achieve genuine clarity can in itself be an ethical activity; further, that, in the most difficult cases, the achievement of such clarity inevitably requires learning how to overcome one's own innermost tendencies to evade such clarity, and this presupposes the attainment of an understanding of the sources and nature of these tendencies themselves. It is a kind of self-knowledge that exacts a high

standard of honesty. In this sense of *ethical*, if any of the *Tractatus* is engaged in an ethical activity, then all of it is. The reason the ethical teaching of the work has eluded its commentators is that they have looked for it somewhere in the text rather than everywhere. They evade the pervasiveness of the ethical demand by attempting to locate it in some particular region of the text. When their externally imposed requirement for a discrete ethical doctrine is frustrated by the text itself, they are forced to flee outside the text into biographical detail.

Throughout his later writing, Wittgenstein continues to view the human animal as entangled in chains of his or her own making — the unavoidable concomitants of the pressure of taking thought. The *Tractatus* represents his first effort to arrive at a form of philosophical authorship that might hold forth the promise of providing genuine satisfaction to its reader — relieving the reader of philosophical perplexity by loosening the grip of the illusion that a particular form of words which attracts him or her has already been invested with a meaning. For all my quarrels with McGuinness, I take some comfort in the discovery that I am here closing on a note of partial agreement. For in depicting Wittgenstein's task here as one of liberating his readers from a form of intellectual bondage, I find myself echoing McGuinness's final description of the upshot of the *Tractatus*: "Philosophy . . . shows that there can be no philosophy, yet the fact that there can be none turns out to be the greatest liberation." I say *partial* agreement because the *Tractatus* also teaches that philosophy shows that there will always be a need for philosophy, a need met in the activity of elucidation that the work itself aspires to exemplify — an activity it calls philosophy.

Postscript: Avoiding an Issue

Some readers of this review will wish to castigate me for avoiding a central issue: Wittgenstein's homosexuality. Some of these same readers will no doubt applaud Bruce Duffy's novel for what they view as a forthright treatment of the matter. One reason for removing any discussion of this issue to a separate postscript is

annoyance at how, on occasion, it has been permitted to eclipse every other feature of Wittgenstein's biography. Certainly, one can sympathize with how McGuinness must feel when reviewers devote their energy to lambasting his carefully researched book on account of its treatment of a single issue. Inevitably, half the world wants to know about Wittgenstein's sex life. Such curiosity is not necessarily a reflection of a debased character, as some admirers of Wittgenstein have insinuated. It can stem from an interest in the whole of the life of this genuinely fascinating man. By jealously guarding Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* and generally attempting to discourage the prevalent assumption that this remarkable mind was once attached to a body, Wittgenstein's literary executors unwittingly, though predictably, fanned the flames of natural human curiosity.

McGuinness's otherwise fantastically exhaustive account for the most part observes the official boycott of the issue. This omission is regrettable in part simply because it will be some time before the shrillest complaints concerning the book will cease to be directed against its almost complete avoidance of the topic of Wittgenstein's erotic life.

The most widely read biography of Wittgenstein to date, *Wittgenstein*, by W. W. Bartley III, attempts to establish the eye-opening claim that an obsessive, guilt-ridden preoccupation with his own homosexual desires and his unbridled youthful sexual exploits formed the central organizing axis of Wittgenstein's life. McGuinness apparently does not buy any of Bartley's account. Duffy eats up every word of it. Bartley's book is admittedly remarkable for both the poverty of its standards of scholarship and the depravity of its appetite for scandal. Nonetheless, McGuinness, through his silence, continues a trend on the part of an increasingly long lineage of Wittgenstein's admirers to lend credence implicitly to Bartley's sordid version of the story through their unwavering reluctance to face the issue frankly.

Bruce Duffy's novel bases itself uncritically on Bartley's rendition of the facts. The question of Duffy's accountability for his irresponsible selection of sources is complicated by the perplexing matter of how we are supposed to understand the rela-

tion between his book and the historical facts on which it is based. He says in his preface that "the book follows the basic outlines of Ludwig Wittgenstein's life and character" but that "it makes no attempt at a faithful or congruent portrayal." (One suspects there is more truth in this than the author intended insofar as even some of the basic outlines of Wittgenstein's character are concerned.) "Fiction cannot," the preface tells us further, "be completely or historically accurate"; it then goes on to explain how, in order to satisfy "fiction's inherent need for narrative compression," the author has decided, for example, to have Wittgenstein meet Bertrand Russell one year later, have one less sister, and so on. Here one has the fleeting impression that Duffy does, after all, have some conception of faithfulness to his historical subject matter. If so, fiction can, the naive reader is apt to think, be more or less responsible in its treatment of a historically complex and sensitive issue, such as the question of Wittgenstein's homosexuality. In response, Duffy may wish to hide behind the closing words of his preface, which ask the reader not to mistake his book for "anything but what it is — fiction." It is difficult, however, not to be distracted by the wealth of historical detail he has incorporated to guarantee that his Ludwig Wittgenstein will inevitably be confused with the real Ludwig Wittgenstein. Despite his disclaimers, Duffy has broken the silence that McGuinness scrupulously observes and has given a graphic picture of someone at least named Wittgenstein as a homosexual — someone oppressed and tormented by both the character and the insistence of his sexual desires.

When McGuinness first broaches the subject — in marked contrast to Duffy — he touches upon it so delicately that even the careful reader will probably only discover when he reaches a footnote on page 197 that the issue "whether Wittgenstein was generally regarded as a homosexual" has not only been raised but apparently fully addressed back on page 150. McGuinness, to his credit, does at least take a tiny step toward breaking the prevailing hegemony of the two false alternatives of either insisting that Wittgenstein's erotic proclivities form the single most pertinent fact for illuminating the course of his life and

thought or of expressing indignation at the very suggestion that such a matter could be of any pertinence whatsoever. McGuinness does allow himself oblique remarks, for example, indicating both that feelings of sensuality occasionally plagued Wittgenstein during the war and that Wittgenstein often tended instinctively to recoil and subsequently withdraw when his relations with women became too intimate. Nevertheless, in a book that ponderously weighs competing sources of testimony for adjudicating questions such as when exactly Wittgenstein first visited Norway, it is noteworthy that the only two explicit remarks about the lengthy allegations made in Bartley's book both occur in brief footnotes. The bearing of the first of these, which overtly concerns "life amid the moral temptations of Vienna," can only be decoded by the informed reader. The second footnote is appended to a meditation on the possible sources of Wittgenstein's recurring flirtation with the thought of suicide. McGuinness dismisses Bartley's hypothesis (invoking feelings of guilt due to homosexual episodes) on the ground that

it is above all an unnecessary one, as I hope to have shown, and it is in fact totally incompatible with the frank discussion of Wittgenstein's difficulties which I, for one, have had with close friends of his from that time.

The effect of this passage upon most readers will almost certainly be to undermine their confidence in the author. (McGuinness's own counterhypothesis primarily satisfies itself with invoking Wittgenstein's "awareness that he was not by nature suited to be perfect.") The most McGuinness's delicate handling of the topic can be said to establish is that the centrality Bartley wishes to ascribe to his hypothesis (concerning the role played by feelings of homosexual guilt) appears to involve some distortion in that it neglects a multitude of other factors of equal pertinence. It is more than plausible that most of Bartley's specific allegations are both unfounded and gratuitous. One can perhaps sympathize with McGuinness's wish not to dignify some of Bartley's more irresponsible conjectures with a rebuttal. However, having systematically evaded the issue of Wittgenstein's homoeroticism, McGuinness is in no position to claim "to have shown" that an

understanding of Wittgenstein's relation to his own sexuality is "above all" "unnecessary" to an understanding of his attraction to the thought of suicide (or any other aspect of his life).

Admittedly, most of Bartley's original "evidence" rests upon private conversations with witnesses who he says insisted upon remaining anonymous. At the crucial junctures in his book, we are asked simply to take Bartley's word for everything. Yet, when it comes to addressing Bartley's claim, in this case in a work that otherwise refrains from paraphrase, always scrupulously and laboriously quoting and specifying its sources, McGuinness, having postponed this unignorable issue until the penultimate page of the final biographical chapter of the book, suddenly chooses to appeal baldly to "the frank discussion of Wittgenstein's difficulties which I for one have had with close friends of his." How could a scholar as conscientious as McGuinness be driven to resort to the feeble stratagem of attempting to rebut Bartley's claims by means of Bartley's methods? Why does McGuinness handle so obviously explosive an issue in such a clumsy fashion? One widely circulated explanation is that he is afraid of it. Another popular explanation is that he is probably not at liberty to explore the matter. The reasons for this will be felt by some to be perfectly evident. One aspect of the importance of his book certainly lies in the simple fact that he has been permitted to quote passages from Wittgenstein's personal notebooks and diaries that have not previously been made public. These privileges may have been granted under specific conditions. It is unfortunate that the work will inevitably arouse such speculation, for, with regard to at least one not insignificant aspect of this or any human life, the reader is left to draw the wiseful conclusion that the definitive biography of at least the first half of Wittgenstein's life has yet to be written — as well as left to hope that the consequently thunderous dissatisfaction with which volume 1 will be greeted in some quarters will help to thaw the freeze, paving the way for a less taciturn sequel to the narrative in volume 2.

One can only hope that McGuinness's dismissive footnote is not asking us to accept the idea that an understanding of Witt-

genstein's relation to his own sexuality can be of simply no relevance to an understanding of his intellectual formulation. This is not to say that the question of the relevance of these matters to one another is easily posed. One of the many discouraging features of Bartley's book is the ease with which he imagines the question can be not only formulated but also answered. Unfortunately, this assumption is mirrored by McGuinness's sense that the integrity of the question can be challenged and dismissed with the same ease. McGuinness concludes his hasty discussion of Bartley in a footnote with the following words: "For the best refutation, however, see Rush Rhees and J. J. Stenborough (a nephew) in *The Human World*, 1972." Yet, in contrast to McGuinness's book, one of the many excellent features of Rhees's meticulous and scathing critique of Bartley (which actually appeared in the February 1974 issue of *The Human World*) is the patience and care with which it takes up the problem — both acknowledging that there is some question worth posing here (invoking a remark of Wittgenstein's: "My own problems appear in what I write in philosophy") and insisting that it can only begin to be properly posed through a consideration of how the work illuminates the life as well as the other way around: "Unless you know what his work means to him and what he tries hardest to bring into his work — and unless you know what other features of his living and his relations to other people he counts important — you cannot say whether some sexual desire or 'practice' is significant or rather insignificant in his character and his life."

McGuinness tells us that Wittgenstein was fond of explaining his reasons for doing something by saying that it was "for internal as well as external reasons." Although he reverts to this formula a number of times in the course of the biography, McGuinness passes up an opportunity to extend his own line of thought here. As we have seen, he reads the *Tractatus* as embodying an ethical content but one that it holds to be unspeakable, unutterable, and inexpressible. How much should one make here of the fact that there is also something about Wittgenstein's life that McGuinness finds unspeakable — something that he feels needs to be

passed over in silence? How are these modes of the unspeakable related? (What kind of question is this?) At one point in his narrative, in need of a sufficiently vivid and textured description of the discussion societies that flourished in the Cambridge of Wittgenstein's day, McGuinness quotes a beautiful long passage from E. M. Forster on the subject. Forster also wrote a novel, *Maurice*, that is set in the Cambridge of precisely the years when Wittgenstein studied there and that focuses on a subject which we learn was universally referred to at the time as simply the "unspeakable" or "unmentionable," or "the only subject absolutely beyond the limit." At two junctures in the novel, the sheer unmentionability of the subject does prove capable of slight further qualification: once as "the unspeakable vice of the Greeks" and once as that which is "not to be mentioned among Christians." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her excellent book on homophobia in nineteenth-century England, *Between Men*, writes:

Sexuality between men had, throughout the Judaeo-Christian tradition, been famous among those who knew about it at all precisely for having no name—"unspeakable," "unmentionable," "not to be named among Christian men" are among the terms recorded.

In a later article ("The Beast in the Closet"), Sedgwick argues that in the literature of this period a "male-homosexual thematic" expresses itself as a "thematics of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech." The trope of unspeakability is derived from the centuries-long historical chain of substantive uses of space-clearing negatives to raid and at the same time to underline the possibility of male homosexual genitality. The rhetorical name for this figure is *pre-iteration*. Unspeakable, unmentionable, *nefandem libidinem*, "that sin which should be neither named nor committed," . . . "the love that dare not speak its name,"—such *were* the speakable nonmedical terms, in Christian tradition, of the homosexual possibility for men.

Sedgwick's further characterizations of this preteritive figure are also strikingly reminiscent of the paradoxical problematic of giving expression to the inexpressible that pervades McGuinness's reading of the *Tractatus*. She goes on to gloss that figure as a "quasi-nominative, quasi-obliterate structure" and as "the articulated-denial-of-articulability." If one follows the instruc-

tions in her essay for reading literature of this period, one may be tempted to conclude that insofar as the ineffable secret of a work such as the *Tractatus* "has a content, that content is homosexual," that is, an expression of the author's homophobic reaction to male homoerotic potentiality. On her reading, therefore, preoccupation with a preteritive thematics of ineffability is a displaced expression of male homosexual panic. It is no part of my intention in this essay to encourage such reductionism. Not least among my reasons for refusing to endorse this view is that Wittgenstein, on my reading, wishes to expose the gesture of an "articulated-denial-of-articulability" as an empty one—one that philosophy drives us to, as if nothing less than this gesture could express what we want to say, if only it could be said. As if only a gesture that self-avowedly refrains from saying anything is equal to the plenitude of our philosophical thought.

Stanley Cavell, in a now-famous early essay, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," observes that Wittgenstein's philosophical prose enacts an ongoing dialogue between two antagonistic voices: a voice of temptation and a voice of correctness. Certainly each of these voices is not exactly not Wittgenstein's: they represent the voices of two figures, the philosopher and the antiphilosopher, that he spies within himself and also within each of us. Beyond the interplay between these two voices, there is a further perspective to which Wittgenstein aspires—a perspective that Cavell describes (in his essay "To Whom It May Concern") as one that declines to take sides with either of these voices, recognizing that each feeds on and sustains the other. With respect to the issue of Wittgenstein's relation to his own sexuality, Duffy and McGuinness invite us to picture Wittgenstein as primarily at the mercy of one of these voices and unable to respond to the other—in both cases fully oblivious to the possibility of a further perspective that refuses sides in their dialectic of insistence and evasion. Both picture the role of philosophy in his life as a means of evading the insistence. Duffy's Wittgenstein is ravaged and buffeted by the engine of his own temptations, whereas McGuinness's young Ludwig is portrayed as too pure to wish to succumb to humanly natural inclinations. Each of

these portraits has some piece of the truth. Each of these figures animates the pages of Wittgenstein's writing. What is left out is the moment that Wittgenstein aspires to in his philosophical writing, both early and late: the moment that brings him peace, in which neither of these voices has the last word. That aspiration has both its internal and its external reasons.

The final representative of the voice of temptation in the *Tractatus* is the mystic. His counterpart — the voice of correctness — is represented by the positivist. The helplessness of Duffy's Wittgenstein in the face of his own desire is equaled only by the dizzy incoherence of his mystical ravings. Young Ludwig's unblemished chasteness and saintliness complement the absence of a therapeutic moment in his philosophical undertaking. Neither is able to view the impulses natural to him as merely natural, and hence each is incapable of a stable affirmation of his own inclination — one that would hold forth the promise of peace and satisfaction. Just before we are asked to throw away the ladder, in section 6.53 of the *Tractatus*, we find this:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science — i.e., something that has nothing to do with philosophy — and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person — he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy — *this* method would be the only strictly correct one.

Here is the last rung of the ladder we are asked to throw away. Many commentators have failed to notice that the above passage does not describe the method of philosophy that the *Tractatus* itself exemplifies and implicitly endorses. For the practitioner of the method described above does not wish to soil himself by speaking nonsense. The *Tractatus* does nothing but speak nonsense. McGuinness does notice this but then concludes that here "Wittgenstein seems to condemn the method of his own book." This has things inside out: Wittgenstein through "the method of his own book" condemns "the strictly correct method." On what grounds? "This method would be unsatisfying to the other." Sec-

tion 6.53 begins: "The correct method . . . would . . . be the following." Then follows 6.54, which begins: "*My* propositions serve as elucidations in the following way." Wittgenstein's method is being *opposed* to the strictly correct method here. His method elucidates; it holds forth the promise of illumination. It aspires to be "satisfying to the other." (The etymological sense of the German *befriedigend* is pacifying, peace-bringing.) Here lies the complaint against the practitioner of this (or any) "strictly correct method": You are too preoccupied with your own purity. Your words are uttered only for your own benefit, not for the benefit of the person to whom they are addressed. Unlike mine, they lack an ethical point. Indeed, they have no point. His — the other's — words may be meaningless, but yours are pointless. (Which is the more serious charge?) Your procedures fail to take *him* seriously. He cannot learn anything from your words. He will not "have the feeling that we were teaching him." *My* propositions have this advantage over yours: "He who understands me finally recognizes them [and hence also his own similar utterances] as nonsensical" — he will feel he has learned something.

The proponent of the strictly correct method and the metaphysical mystic of the *Tractatus* have a great deal in common: They both imagine that there can be intrinsically nonsensical sentences in which a sign has been given a wrong use. They both imagine that it is possible to distinguish clearly between those linguistic strings that are innocuously meaningful and those that are irredeemably nonsensical. They both entertain the fantasy of being able to occupy a position from which one is always able to recognize nonsense immediately as nonsense. The proponent of the correct method's quest for purity depends upon the very same premise of being able to survey the totality of meaningful language that the mystic also trades on in his aspiration for purity (which he imagines is only attainable in a place outside that totality). To give up the mystic's quest for a standpoint beyond the limits of meaningful language means abandoning the very notion of limits on which it feeds. It also means giving up the metaphysical antimetaphysician's quest for a way always to recognize the limit of meaningful language as *the* limit, and

hence giving up his goal of finding a foolproof way to immunize himself against the possibility of ever straying beyond the limit. It requires giving up the idea that there is a mechanism that produces nonsense—and with it the fantasy that philosophy (and hence the need for philosophical elucidation) can be brought to an end, eradicated once and for all. That fantasy is itself a moment within philosophy. This is the final temptation a reader of the *Tiactatus* must overcome. Then one has truly come to appreciate, in the words of the preface, “how little has been done when these problems have been solved.”

The fantasy of the voice of correctness (that one can immunize oneself against the voice of temptation) is itself a form of temptation, a further way of avoiding the issue—both the internal and the external one. Duffy's excesses and McGuinness's evasions leave a portrait of a Wittgenstein whose unresponsiveness to his own need for therapy left him torn between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-punishment. Much in this portrait is no doubt accurate. Insofar, however, as the vocation of philosophy, as Wittgenstein practices it, calls for self-examination and spurns understanding unaccompanied by inner change, this portrait omits much of his achievement as a philosopher. It omits the ethical point of his work, leaving it too much of a mystery why Wittgenstein should be remembered (as both Duffy and McGuinness would have us remember him) as someone who asked both himself and others: “What is the good of philosophy if it does not make me a better human being?”