Doing Philosophy as Poetry: Reading Perloff Reading Wittgenstein

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Abstract: This article is both a reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein and a tribute to the monumental work of the late Marjorie Perloff, a towering figure in contemporary poetry criticism, who has arguably been the most ardent and eloquent explicator of what she calls the "Wittgensteinian poetics." Tapping into the wellspring of Perloff's critical oeuvre, this article reassesses Wittgenstein as a conceptual poet by interpreting some of the most salient features of his philosophical poetics.
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> But our lives are not whole, and we have, so to say, philosophical and poetic responsibilities; one will not necessarily acquit the other.
>
> —Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream* (167)

While poetry has always enjoyed its prestige on a par with philosophy in the Chinese tradition—thanks in part to the deep roots of Confucianism, which defines poetry as an expression of one's thoughts (诗言志 , "Poetry says the mind"), in the West the battle between poetry and philosophy has been raging on for centuries. Ever since Plato's infamous attack on poetry, the subgenre of *Apologia* has boasted many sequels, with each epoch feeling the need to defend poetry by restaging the Greek drama, rehearsing all the hue and cry, ending invariably, often unconvincingly, with a Pyrrhic victory for poetry. Like an instance of domestic disturbance, whenever the authority is called and arrives on the scene, it is often the victim, the weaker, that would feel apologetic, if not right away, then later. From Aristotle to Longinus, from Philip Sidney to Percy

Bysshe Shelley, every apologist has tried to elevate poetry to the height of philosophy rather than the other way around—with Sidney, for instance, pushing the "sublime" like elixir pills, or Shelley extolling poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Few, if any, have thought about calling philosophy back to the jungle, the forms and textures of life, which is the domain of poetry. Among contemporary philosophers, Martin Heidegger probably stands out as a theorist who ardently tries to bridge the ancient gap between poetry and philosophy, and he does so by welding together epistemology and ontology, conceptualizing language as the "house of Being." But the person who really flips the script, so to speak, of and on the Greek drama is none other than Ludwig Wittgenstein, the eccentric Cambridge-trained, Austro-Jewish thinker, who declares, somewhat enigmatically, that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition."

In fact, as a philosopher addressing primarily the analytic philosophical community and as someone who expressed little interest in contemporary literature, art, or music, Wittgenstein might seem like an unlikely candidate for being an advocate for poetry. Not only did he not self-consciously write in the genre of poetry as conventionally conceived, but he also repeatedly admitted that he did not understand or appreciate the work of the poets of his own time, such as Rainer Maria Rilke or Georg Trakl. In other words, he never saw himself as a practitioner in the art of writing, whether poetry or prose. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein acknowledged with much candor that "Just as I cannot write verse, so too my ability to write prose extends only *so far*, and no farther. There is a quite definite limit to the prose I can write and I can no more overstep *that* than I can write a poem. *This* is the nature of my equipment; and it is the only equipment I have. It is as though someone were to say: In this game I can only attain *such and such* a degree of perfection, I can't go *beyond* it" (59). In a slightly earlier entry in the same volume, Wittgenstein went even so far as to say that "If I were to write a good sentence which by accident turned out to consist of two rhyming lines, that would be a blunder" (58).

All these facts and disclaimers notwithstanding, Wittgenstein has become sort of a patron saint for contemporary poets and artists, especially those with an avant-garde bent. While Stanley Cavell, arguably the heir apparent of Wittgensteinian philosophy in the United States, has rearticulated, in *The Claim of Reason* (1979) and other works, the significance of Wittgenstein's conception of the affinity between philosopher and poetry, it is Marjorie Perloff, a towering figure in contemporary poetry and criticism, who has remained the most ardent and eloquent explicator of Wittgenstein's paradoxical dictum of "doing philosophy as poetry."

Beginning with *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (1996), followed by numerous books and essays as well as her own translational work, culminating in *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics* (2021), Perloff has presented a full picture and delineated a vibrant genealogy of what she calls a "distinctively Wittgensteinian poetics" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* xiv). In this essay, by tapping into the deep wellspring of Perloff's scholarship, I will discuss some of the most salient features of Wittgensteinian poetics, as understood by her and others, and reassess the ways in which we may conceive the exiled Austrian philosopher as a conceptual poet. Or, as David Antin puts it, "If Socrates was a poet, Wittgenstein is a poet" (161).

I. Tractatus

The first and only book published in the author's lifetime, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has drawn an inordinate amount of attention from scholars interested in mining the poetic potentials of Wittgenstein's writing. Originally intended as the thesis for the fulfillment of his degree at Cambridge University, the *Tractatus* is, in the words of Antin, "a queer work all the way through" (151). It consists of a curiously numbered set of paragraphs exploring the nature and limitations of logic and language. For Antin, the numeric eccentricity, which gives the *Tractatus* the appearance of a philosophical treatise, is a telltale sign that there is more than meets the eye. Formatted like a logician's metaphysical litany, it is structurally akin to Bertrand Russell's mathematical philosophy—the kind of work that had brought Wittgenstein to Cambridge in the first place:

> 1. The world is everything there is.
> 1.1 The world is the sum total of all facts, not all things.
> 1.11 The world is defined by these facts, and by their being *all* the facts.
> 1.12 For all these facts determine both everything there is and everything there isn't.[1]

As Wittgenstein explains in a footnote, the decimal-numbering system appears to "show with the utmost clarity the relations among the paragraphs": "The numbering

1 Rather than the standard edition of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus translated by C. K. Ogden, which has been long in use and which also provided the basis for David Antin's article under discussion, I am quoting from the new translation by Damion Searls, an edition championed by Marjorie Perloff, who wrote the Foreword to the book. Also, quotes from the main texts of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and Philosophical Investigations are usually identified by passage numbers rather than page numbers, a practice I will follow in this article.

of each proposition on the following pages indicates the logical weight of that proposition, or in other words, the emphasis I place upon it in my presentation. Propositions n.1, n.2, n.3, etc. are remarks on proposition number n; propositions n.m.1, n.m.2, n.m.3, etc. are remarks on proposition number n.m.; and so on" (7). But as Antin points out in his review essay "Wittgenstein Among the Poets," the numerical system does not really proceed in any logical way upon close reading. The *Tractatus*, Antin observes, "circles and repeats itself over and over, correcting itself and elaborating on its original pronouncements and sometimes apparently cancelling them out." More a method of meditation than a mathematical or logical system, the decimal system is, in fact, "a pathway leading into Alice's looking glass." The numbers are merely markers along a spiral staircase—Wittgenstein's ladder—that does not lead to a logical conclusion, but a "luminous void," which may be comprehended in wordless silence, via repeated meditation (152).

Antin's insight into the meditative nature of the *Tractatus* is, in fact, indebted to Perloff—he was, after all, reviewing Perloff's foundational work when he made the remarks quoted above. As he readily acknowledged, "It is one of the great virtues of *Wittgenstein's Ladder* that it makes clear how much of a meditation the *Tractatus* is" (153). Indeed, among all the critics trying to mine the poetic potentials of Wittgenstein's writings, Perloff is unique in her ability to call attention to the striking discontinuities that mark the transitions from a technical discourse to a humanist discourse. Perloff takes us back to the watershed moment in philosopher-poet's life, when he turned his attention to a close reading of the Gospels, which would have a profound impact on his worldview and work. As we know, Wittgenstein had begun his work on the *Tractatus* when the Great War broke out. Judging by the extant earlier version of the manuscript—the so-called "Proto Tractatus"—Wittgenstein had originally conceived it as "a treatise on the nature of logic written under the sign of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell" (*Edge* 155). After he joined the war by volunteering as a common soldier and was engaged in active combat on the Russian Front in 1916, close brushes with death on a daily basis and his absorption in Leo Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief*, a book he had found by chance, pushed his work in the direction of a quasi-mystical meditation on the meaning of life. A week after he had won his first decoration for bravery in the war, Wittgenstein wrote in his diary entries that would be rephrased in or directly added to the *Tractatus*:

> What do I know about God and the purpose of life?
> I know that this world exists.

> That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.
> That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.
> That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it.
> That my life is the world […]
> To pray is to think about the meaning of life.
> I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will:
> I am completely powerless. (*Notebooks* 72-74)

This last sentence, as Perloff reminds us, was rephrased in a proposition included in the *Tractatus*: "The world is independent of my will" (#6.373). Or, the entries about meaning not lying in the world but outside it were to be repeated almost verbatim in the *Tractatus*, followed by the sentences "In the world, everything is how it is and happens how it happens—there is no value *in* it, and if there were, that value would have no value" (#6.41). In Perloff's reading, it is in the transition from the technical and logical to the humanist and ethical, or rather, the fracture between these two discourses, that we find, as far as the *Tractatus* is concerned, Wittgenstein's poetry. When the *Tractatus* reaches its end after a spiraling set of meditative passages about death, God, mysticism, and so on, the striking last entry "About things we cannot speak of we must keep silent" (#7) is, to quote Antin again, "a conclusion somewhat likelier for a poet than a logician" (152). For Perloff, such a gesture toward reticence or silence is not only a philosophical acknowledgement of the limit of language, but it also brings Wittgenstein closer to what John Keats has termed "Negative Capability," "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason"—a mental state closely allied to the moment of poetry (26). The seeming failure of the *Tractatus* to articulate the inner connection of the propositions is, then, paradoxically "the source of its strength, its poetic power" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 47).

Biographical facts would also bear out Perloff's critical acumen. Having made the crucial transition, or what we may call a poetic breakthrough, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein, upon release from the Italian POW jail after the war, tried to publish the work in a literary journal *Der Brenner*. In a letter to the editor Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein wrote, "The work is strictly philosophical and at the same time literary" (Monk 177). Later in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein would also speak of the "poetic mode" he constantly experienced in his supposedly philosophical work: "In a letter (to Goethe I think) Schiller writes of a 'poetic mood.' I think I know what he meant. I believe I am familiar with it myself. It is a mood of receptivity to nature in which one's thoughts seem as vivid as nature itself" (65-66). Such a poetic

mode would, as we will see, have other manifestations in the philosopher's work.

II. Philosophical Investigations

In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein explains his initial idea for the book: "I have written down all these thoughts as *remarks*, short paragraphs, of which there is sometimes a fairly long chain about the same subject, while I sometimes make a sudden change, jumping from one topic to another.—It was my intention at first to bring all this together in a book whose form I pictured differently at different times. But the essential thing was that the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks" (ix). In other words, he had conceived the book in the same way a philosophical work is done conventionally, following a linear argument by relying on logic and rationality, not so different from the way he had originally conceived the *Tractatus* by imposing a numeric system for the sake of structural coherence. But just as the decimal system actually defies the very logic it claims to put forward in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein encounters a similar compositional dilemma in *Philosophical Investigations*. He further explains, "After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination." As a result, the book became a compendium of remarks that crisscross in multiple directions. Wittgenstein himself saw the book as "an album," with each item maintaining a paratactic relationship with each other (ix).

Such a paratactic structure provides the basis for Perloff to examine the poetics of *Philosophical Investigations*. In the second chapter of *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, aptly entitled "The 'Synopsis of Trivialities': The Art of the *Philosophical Investigations*," she zeroes in on Wittgenstein's seeming mundane obsessions with ordinary language and teases out the fundamental significance of grammar for both philosophy and poetry. For Wittgenstein, philosophers misuse language to pursue truth or essence, mistaking one language game for the other. Like flies in a fly-bottle, they are trapped by the grammar of their language. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein writes:

> People say again and again that philosophy doesn't really progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. But people who say this don't understand why it has to be so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same

> questions. As long as there continues to be a verb 'to be' that looks as if it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to think,' as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical,' 'true,' 'false,' 'possible,' as long as we continue to talk of a river of time, of an expanse of space, etc. etc., people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up. (15)

His aim as a philosopher, Wittgenstein quips, is to "show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (*PI* #309).

Following Wittgenstein, Perloff argues that the same goes for poets seeking truth or essence by prioritizing a particular use of language. She explains that while the distinction between the practical language of the everyday and the autonomous language of poetry has been the article of faith for most poets, Wittgenstein has showed us that language has no essence; instead, "it is a complex cultural construction, whose variables are articulated according to one's particular intersection with it" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 71). These variables are what Wittgenstein calls language games, which bear a family resemblance with each other rather than cohere into an organic whole. Homeric epics, Shakespearean sonnets, Li Po's *jueju*, and Japanese haiku are all language games. Trying to claim some universal essence in all of these would be futile or misleading, because, as Wittgenstein once said, "In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living" (*Lectures* 11). The form of life is the living grammar that defines the meanings or aesthetics of these poetic works.

Consequently, as Perloff argues elsewhere, for both philosophy and poetry, "invention is the key word" (*Differentials* 70). Philosophy to Wittgenstein is a form of continual reinvention of ways of seeing the world. Rather than uncover some hidden or metaphysical truths, he sees his own work as that of a poet. "What I invent are new similes," he writes in *Culture and Value* (19). Or, in *Philosophical Investigations*, "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (#127). These new similes or newly assembled reminders are perspectives or framing devices that initiate us into a new view of things. "Make it new," Ezra Pound said. Or, "to begin again and again," as Gertrude Stein insisted. Identifying the affinity between the philosopher and the modernist poets, however, Perloff is also quick to draw a distinction in case each member of the family should lose their own individuality: "Wittgenstein's paratactic structures are not metonymically organized, as are, say, Ezra Pound's lyric sequences in the *Cantos*." In *Philosophical Investigations*, Perloff argues, quoting Herman Rapaport,

parataxis is a matter of negative serialization: "Two and two is four" is a simple sentence, as is "The rose is red," but there is nothing in the first sentence to make the second follow. "In each sentence," as Rapaport puts it, "there is compulsory connectivity. But in thinking of the sentences serially, the question of reciprocity becomes vexed. In short, despite appearances, they are Other to one another" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 67). In this space of negative seriality, of vexed reciprocity, Perloff finds the quintessential poetics of *Philosophical Investigations*, what she calls the "inherent provisionality of the text." For what is poetic for the philosopher is "not a question of heightening, of removing language from its everyday use by means of appropriate troping or rhetorical device. Rather, what makes philosophy poetic is its potential for invention, its status as what we now call conceptual art" (*Differentials* 70). Once we understand that, the significance of the unique compositional method of *Philosophical Investigations* becomes clear, as Perloff states: "It becomes incumbent on the philosopher-poet to produce not a coherent treatise but, as Wittgenstein puts it in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, a series of remarks, 'short paragraphs […] sometimes jumping, in quick change, from one area to another'" (*Edge* 168).

III. Aphorism

As a genre of philosophical discourse, aphorism, like the bevy of its cousins—proverb, maxim, adage, epigram, axiom, dictum, eclogue—is meant to achieve the greatest meaning with the fewest words. Civilizations were founded on the cornerstones laid by great thinkers whose doctrines have been distilled into a body of memorable sayings. Whether it is Heraclitus's "You cannot step twice into the same river" or Confucius's "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous" (学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆), aphorism supposedly serves to crystalize the tenet of a philosophical system. Francis Bacon, for instance, writes specifically of aphoristic virtue:

> The writing in aphorisms hath many excellent virtues, whereto the writing in Method doth not approach. For first, it trieth the writer, whether he be superficial or solid: for aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of connection and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off. So there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorisms but some good quantity of observation: and therefore no man can suffice, nor in reason will attempt to write aphorisms but he that is sound and

grounded. (142)

Bacon's notion exemplifies the traditional belief that behind the seeming fragmentation of aphorisms lies a larger truth. And such a mother ship of truth guarantees the integrity of these adorable, spattering babies of wisdom.

Known for his penchant for aphorisms, Wittgenstein, however, epitomizes a different kind of aphoristic practice. Notably, his works are full of terse and often gnomic utterances, such as "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," "Death is not part of life," "The face is the soul of the body," and so on. But Wittgenstein appeared to have turned to aphoristic writing for a purpose quite different from those articulated by Bacon and others.

Indeed, Wittgenstein was fully aware of his own predilection for aphorisms, seemingly modeled after those of Heraclitus and Schopenhauer. In *Culture and Value*, he used a simile to think through the tricky relation between aphorisms and the larger conceptual projects he was working on: "Raisins may be the best part of a cake; but a bag of raisins is not better than a cake; and someone who is in a position to give us a bag full of raisins still can't bake a cake with them, let alone doing something better. I am thinking of Kraus and his aphorisms, but of myself too and my philosophical remarks. A cake—that isn't as it were: thinned-out raisins" (66). If a large project like the *Tractatus* or *Philosophical Investigations* is like a cake, the best part of it is the raisins baked into the cake, but they are not the cake itself. Or, as Perloff suggests, "Aphorisms, so central to the *Tractatus* and earlier work, cannot in themselves make a poetic-philosophical discourse. If they remain discrete, like so many separate raisins in a bag, they fail to cohere into a fully formed 'cake'" ("Writing Philosophy" 726) In his book-length study of the genre, Andrew Hui astutely points out that aphorism is "at times an ancestor, at times an ally, and at times an antagonist to systematic philosophy […] As such, it oscillates between the fragment and the system" (7). It is especially so in the writings of Wittgenstein, who has resorted to aphorisms because of his suspicion of philosophy as dogmas or of science as systematic truths. In other words, unlike other philosophers such as Heraclitus and Schopenhauer or even essayists like Montaigne, who employ aphorisms to illustrate a larger point, Wittgenstein, in Perloff's words, embedded his into "a network of 'dry' logical and mathematical propositions of the sort 'If p follows q, the sense of 'p' is contained in that of 'q.'" The question for us, Perloff suggests, is "How to reconcile these two seemingly unlike modes of discourse?" ("Writing Philosophy" 716).

As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein has answered that question himself: the

two cannot and do not go together. In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, we already encounter his candid acknowledgement of the difficulties in welding together his various remarks into an organic whole. In another telling entry in *Culture and Value*, he reconfirms such a fact: "The relations between these concepts form a landscape which language presents us with in countless fragments; piecing them together is too hard for me. I can make only a very imperfect job of it" (78). By virtue of what they regard as a structural deficiency in Wittgenstein's work, some professional philosophers, such as Alain Badiou, have dismissed him for having reduced philosophy to "a series of esoteric aphorisms and meaningless propositions." But as Perloff has cogently argued, "What Badiou called his 'esoteric aphorisms' and 'meaningless propositions' can be seen from another angle as precisely the stuff that the poetic, as we have come to understand it in our own time, is made of" (*Edge* 167). The greatest virtue of aphorisms, as Wittgenstein employed them, is their refusal to be corralled into the systematic enclosure. Therefore, an aphorism, to quote Hui again, is "a mark of our finitude, ever approaching the receding horizon, always visible yet never tangible" (16). Wittgenstein's thinking is predicated on the notion that the language we use sets the trap but also the limit for our knowing. By resorting to the aphoristic, Wittgenstein in some sense draws the very boundary of thinking itself.

Indeed, as Perloff shows, one needs to take Wittgenstein for his word when he says "Philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition." What makes Wittgenstein's writing poetic, she argues, is partly "his use of homilies and proverbs animated by metaphors of charming and almost childlike simplicity" (*Differentials* 69). For example, "Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest?" (*PI* #250), "If someone is merely ahead of his time, it will catch him up one day" (*CV* 8), or "A new word is like a fresh seed sewn on the ground of the discussion" (*CV* 2). In almost all of his writings, Wittgenstein avoided "all conventional argument or plotting—beginning, middle, and end—and rely on aphorisms, anecdote, conceit, collage, and fragment," stylistic choices that are in Perloff's reading reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp, the French avant-garde artist known for his conceptual work as well as aphoristic, enigmatic statements ("Introduction" 4). Indeed, "Unlike traditional aphorisms," Perloff writes, "Wittgenstein's short propositions don't really 'say' anything. Or, to put it another way, what they 'say' is enigmatic [...] Wittgenstein's sentences are thus characterized, not by their metaphorical force or their use of the rhetorical figures like antithesis and parallelism, but by what would be called their *opaque literalism*. The sentences say just what they say—no difficult words to look up!—but they remain mysterious, endlessly puzzling, enigmatic."

In fact, she compares Wittgenstein's opaque literalism to the kind of Objective poetics embodied, say, by William Carlos Williams's famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow": "So much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow/glazed with rain/water/ beside the white/chickens" ("Writing Philosophy" 719).

In addition to opaque literalism, Perloff sees another way Wittgenstein's aphoristic writing is akin to modernist poetics—in this case, Ezra Pound's notion of poetry as condensation. The key in Wittgenstein's statement "Philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition" is the German word for poetry, *dichten*. Etymologically, Perloff points out, the verb *dichten* comes from the adjective *dicht* (thick, dense, packed): "*Dichten* originally meant 'to make airtight, watertight; to seal the cracks (in a window, roof, etc.)'—in other words, something like the Zen phrase 'to thicken the plot'" ("Writing Philosophy" 725). In *ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound equates the German word *dichten* with the Italian word *condensare*, followed by a footnote that reads, "A Japanese student in America, on being asked the difference between prose and poetry, said: Poetry consists of gists and piths" (92). Elsewhere, Pound also said, very famously, "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (*Literary Essays* 23). One of the ways for Wittgenstein to do philosophy poetically, then, is to resort to the verbal density and resonance of aphorisms, those terse, gnomic utterances that give his text its poetic edge. In her foreword to the new translation of the *Tractatus* published by Liveright in 2024, Perloff insists that we recognize Wittgenstein's aphorisms not only as elements of philosophical analysis, but also as poetic koans (xix), echoing her earlier proposition to treat the numeric anomaly of the *Tractatus* "as a kind of clinamen, a bend or swerve where logic gives way to mystery" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 42).

IV. Infrathin

In another Zen koan-like quip, Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, "But isn't at least *the same* the same?" (#215). In a conversation with his students, Wittgenstein also said, "Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different" (Drury 171). He was critical of philosophy's search for identity, essence, or the absolute by collapsing differences or, in his term, mistaking one language game for another. As he observes, "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words" (*PI* #122). In this regard, philosophy certainly shares with poetry a fundamental concern with the use of language. Unwittingly echoing Wittgenstein,

Ezra Pound once said, "The function of poetry is to debunk by lucidity" (*Sayings* 16).

Earlier in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Perloff has employed Wittgenstein's philosophical insights to read Gertrude Stein, demonstrating that these two Jewish exiles—one American-born living in France and the other Austrian-born living in England—caught between languages as forms of life, hypersensitive to linguistic minutiae, were actively exploring the frontiers of meaning. Wittgenstein repeatedly ponders, for instance, how the "have" in "I have a pain" differs from the "have" in "I have a book"; or, why one's right hand cannot "give" one's left hand money. Grammar, he observes, "only describes and in no way explains the use of signs" (*PI* #496). Likewise, for Stein, poetry is not a naming game, contrary to Emerson's belief that poets are namers looking for the universal that underlies everything. Instead, she explores what Perloff calls "grammar in use," fluid meanings that elude the confinement of labels or fixed names (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 90).

In *Infrathin*, her last scholarly monograph, Perloff tackles again the kinship between Wittgenstein and Stein, this time adding to the duet Marcel Duchamp, the French avant-garde artist from whom she has taken the title word for her book. Infrathin (*inframince* in French) was used by Duchamp to playfully describe the most minute shade of difference between things that seem to be the same or identical. In fact, he declared that one cannot define the infrathin but can only give examples, such as the tobacco smoke smells also of the mouth which exhales it, the separation between the detonation noise of a gun and the apparition of the bullet hole in the target, or the same object after a one-second interval (*Infrathin* 2-3). These examples, Perloff suggests, recall Gertrude Stein's sentence in *Tender Buttons*: "The difference is spreading," or her even more famous line "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." As Stein shows us in her endlessly complex iterative prose, Perloff states, "the slightest repetition or shift in context changes the valence and meaning of any word or word group. A rose is a rose is a rose. And by the third enunciation, it is already something else" (3).

In the same vein, Duchamp's infrathin is also reminiscent of Wittgenstein's question, "But isn't at least *the same* the same?" Both Duchamp and Wittgenstein, Perloff assures us, would have answered no to the question, as would Stein, known for her poetry of repetition with a difference. "'A thing is identical with itself.'—There is no finer example of a useless proposition, which yet is connected with a certain play of the imagination," Wittgenstein mused. "It is as if in imagination we put a thing into its own shape and saw that it fitted" (*PI* #216). To paraphrase Charles Bernstein in his reading of Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, to seek

identity this way is "to construct a grammatical fiction" (172).

Rather than identity, the infrathin defines the poetic, the language of repetition, to "make it new" (Pound), or to "begin again and again" (Stein). Wittgenstein would have fully understood such a poetics of the infrathin. In *Culture and Value,* he admits, "Each of the sentences I write is trying to say the whole thing, i.e., the same thing over and over again; it is as though they were all simply views of one object from different angles" (7). This is called conceptualism or Cubism in poetry and art, looking at the same object from different angles—or, in that case, is it still the same object? Somewhere Wittgenstein said, "The only way to do philosophy is to do everything twice" (qtd. in Perloff, "Introduction" 7). Twice does not just mean two times, but more than once, the necessity of doing over, repeatedly, slowly. "In philosophy," Wittgenstein also said, "the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last" (*CV* 34). He sometimes regarded his own writing as "nothing but 'stuttering'" (*CV* 18), and he insisted that "My sentences are all supposed to be read slowly" (*CV* 57), in part because they are in some sense repetitions of each other with a crucial, infrathin difference. He told us that he often used copious punctuation marks in his writing to slow down the tempo of reading, because he believed "I should like to be read slowly" (*CV* 68). In other words, he wanted his texts to be read in the way we appreciate a poem, in which case, as Perloff reminds us, "The attention to difference, to the infrathin, is especially important [...] Every letter stroke, every space, matters" (*Infrathin* 26).

Here in his insistence on repetition and slowness, his attention to tempo and punctuation, the philosopher finally meets the poet. Thanks to Perloff and others, we have come to understand how Wittgenstein's two signature statements on doing philosophy converge: "Philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition" and "The only way to do philosophy is to do everything twice." This is not, to quote Bernstein again, "to make philosophy literature but to call philosophy back to its sources of judgment" (168). Directly or indirectly refuting Plato's age-old jeremiad, Wittgenstein became what Antin succinctly calls "a poet of nearly pure cognition," that is, he is not a poet of any particular language, German or English, but "a poet of thinking through language" (163).

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