Cubes, Clouds & Reading the *Philosophical Investigations*

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When someone says the word 'cube' to me,
for example, I know what it means (Wittgenstein 46).

The *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* is filled with gestures of pulling-apart: word from meaning, meaning from object, object from identity, picture from use. From the start, the sustainability of the scenario in which every word has a meaning—the object for which the word stands—is surely in great trouble, as Wittgenstein threatens to snip the flimsy cord tying the object to its apparent companions. Though the tirelessness of these acts of pulling us away from the temptations of meaning-as-object seems point to the inevitability of total disintegration, the equally forceful gestures of bringing-back to use land us instead in the zone of reconfiguration. The acts of separation in the *PI* are neither complete nor final: Wittgenstein's terrain is not marked by discrete forms whose livelihoods are dependent on supreme boundaries, but rather by newly formed connections, collisions between former bedfellows.

The *PI* is difficult to speak and write back to, owing to its style and to the particular density of what Wittgenstein himself calls a "landscape." As Stanley Cavell observes, Wittgenstein doesn't report on his findings about language ("he *writes*…he does not write up results") (70). Nor is it likely that we as his readers want to report. Perhaps, instead, one can find a speaking place *after* "discipleship" (where, as Cavell notes, the reader becomes student to Wittgenstein as master, a paradoxical position given the anti-authoritarian spirit of the text) or, alternately, after integration and *before* discipleship (71). Further, it seems desirable to play with the tensions that arise as one searches for a readerly mobility that's distinct from the motions of the text—for instance between the desire to jump out to patches of more familiar content and discourse (such as psychoanalysis, values and the spirit) and the fear that one is leading oneself astray with these excursions.

For these reasons and others, I want to investigate the *PI* by means of two words, two concepts, two pictures: cube and cloud. They emerged in response to the pointed need for holding mechanisms given the challenges and the irregular rhythms of picture-use collisions as they reveal themselves across an unwieldy landscape. The invocation of "cube" and "cloud" allows me to both temporarily pin down a passing sense without the burden of betrayal (of the spirit of the *PI*) that might accompany more conventional acts of naming and fixing and to let attention to use be tinged by a willingness to harness the intuitability of words that Wittgenstein recognizes. Further, a strong aura of potential picture-use collision hovers around each.

'Cube' and 'cloud' are approachable from numerous angles in the "labyrinth" of language ("You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about") (Wittgenstein 69). A cube might function as or conjure perfection, an ongoing present, something solid or two rhombi (depending on one's vantage vis-à-vis a schematic drawing), an emblem of the perfection of identity that results from sameness in angle and length, a picture of meaning as discrete and handle-able, a form with clear boundaries, a goal and destination, the ultimate object.

Clouds hover between earth and heaven; they seem to get in the way of clear vision; they block the sun; they filter the sunlight; they disappear over time; they disappear on approach; they are not still; they cannot be contained; they are not solid—and yet their profiles can appear so distinct that we are inclined to compare them to unlike things. Perhaps they are emblems of confusion, or the fact of their insecure borders reminds us of something archaic—a hazy state of ego-affairs between self and other.

But this *variety* of uses and connotations does not justify my approach. It is instead the possibility of their relationships to the following that lends 'cube' and 'cloud' such a great range of movement:

The evolution of…man, and the awakening of consciousness…The picture is something like this: Though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light.

What this language primarily describes is a picture. What is to be done with this picture, how it is to be used, is still obscure. Quite clearly, however, it must be explored if we want to understand the sense of what we are saying. But the picture seems to spare us this work: it already points to a particular use. This is how it takes us in (Wittgenstein 157).

A picture-fantasy of blindness giving way to vision rears its head without name, prematurely and forcefully, in many forms of philosophical inquiry. Given an apparent closeness, we can see why concepts of clarity and cloudiness can be so difficult to extricate from association with this ubiquitous schema. But this difficulty does *not* dissolve the possibility that Wittgenstein is authentically invested in clearing away confusion and promoting the resulting clarity, in "resolv[ing] philosophical paradoxes"; indeed, the urgency of these activities is undeniable in the *PI* (63). Hence we must try to know when *pictures* of cloudiness and clarity collide with their livelihoods.

Clouds and cubes stand in pseudo-opposition to each other, not perfectly polarized nor crystallized with connotations of "good" and "bad" but capable of taking on roles associated with the other. As certainty is dislodged from its old haunts in the *PI*, it does not simply die; rather, it gets dispersed. Following this dispersal via a mobile constellation of clouds and cubes will, I hope, help chart the paths where un-doing is not total, where needs remain, where identity is not lost but spread out among a new set of connections, where independence unfolds irregularly with respect to authority, and where the value of self-knowledge does not stand in paralyzing opposition to the tricks played by pictorial phantoms of clarity and confusion.

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"Cloud" and "cube" are not absent from Wittgenstein's own language, and I neither want to proceed as if their presence were simply my contribution nor concentrate exclusively on their literal appearances in Wittgenstein's text. "Cloud" (in addition to a number of words that play pictorial foil to forms of clarity such as "haze," "gaseous medium," "fog," and "atmosphere") appears less frequently than

"cube," but makes a number of striking appearances, including as early as Wittgenstein's reference in his introductory remarks to the entire work itself as "precipitate," suggesting cloudy origins (ix). Borrowing from his own *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he describes the requirements of orderly logic as follows, rhetorically positioning himself as observing the function of an ideal: "…no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it.—It must rather be of the purest crystal…as the most concrete, as it were the *hardest* thing there is" (38).

However, this opposition undergoes a reversal when Wittgenstein describes the effects of blind allegiance to "meaning" in its one-to-one correspondence sense:

> …this general notion of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible. It disperses the fog to study the phenomenon of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words (3).

A desire for something definite—the attempt to externalize and concretize an ideal of thought and meaning—in fact generates quite the opposite: fog. I think of Wittgenstein's "slab" as the ambassador of this repeating notion: the object whose undoing we witness first in the *PI*: a hard, simple, utilitarian form which both easily embodies the dream of one-to-one correspondence and then gets split from its meaning-companion. As Wittgenstein articulates a vision of Augustinian training—a child's attention is directed to a slab as an adult points to it and simultaneously utters "slab"—he introduces the fragility of this education. "But if the ostensive teaching has this effect,--am I to say that it effects an understanding of the word?" (4). "[I]s the call "Slab!" a sentence or a word?" (7).

This introduction to the formation of clouds in the path of dispersal of objects comes in the first pages of the *PI*. As reading continues, how does the rhetorical angle of these processes shift? What kind of responsibility do we as readers take for them? To clarify, I'll turn to an example involving William James, whose presence by name is striking in a work so devoid of proper names. In remarks 412-420, a stretch of text turning over the notion of perceiving one's own consciousness, Wittgenstein tours us across divergent planes of this multi-faceted quandary, letting each one find favor with the light before shifting positions. Owing to the tension between piece and continuity that runs throughout the entire work, I had turned to James and his "stream of thought" for help before the name "William James" finally appeared in the text. My initial delight—I had been on the right track!—came from treating "William James" as what in my reading short-hand I'd call a "cube"—a resting place, an affirming point of orientation, and a name of familiarity sufficient enough to produce some atmospherics that might carry me for a spell. The carrying was short-lived, however, as James is quickly followed by a picture of the empty loom ("You think that…you must be weaving a piece of cloth: because you are sitting at a loom") and a picture of announcing one's consciousness ("Is it identical with being conscious? To whom might we state this fact?") and then a picture of authority ("Surely we can't have a chief without consciousness!") (106). The morphology of change here –where landing points turn to air and fuzziness gives way to a picture of authority—is a back and forth not only between *pictures* of solidity and lostness but among readerly perches and falls.

When Wittgenstein warns against the refusal to let function and role lead us through grammar, he's saying: do not transport circumstance or a range of possible uses to an imagined halo around a word:

> "You understand this expression, don't you? Well then— I am using it in the sense you are familiar with."—As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application (41).

Surely we can imagine such a halo, but can we handle the pressure this remark places on the rest of our reading? Must we reject each gesture (such as pushing to materialize something we can't recall or letting atmospheres leftover from our previous investigations lead us) that reminds us of ones whose undoing Wittgenstein has called for? Can we afford to forget about pictures when the call of intuition sounds?

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On several occasions, Wittgenstein makes use of the flexibility of a two-dimensional representation of a cube:

> You could imagine the illustration appearing in several places in a book…something different is in question every time: here a glass cube, there an inverted open box, there a wire frame of that shape, there three boards forming a solid angle (165).

In describing the effect of different interpretations of a schematic drawing on carrying out an order, the key distinction is between seeing the drawing as representing two- or three-dimensional space. The slanted lines that allow a possible reading of a drawn form as three-dimensional come from the convention of perspectival drawing; they mark the achievement of overcoming the confines of two-dimensional space. When Wittgenstein asks, "Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails laid to infinity?" he pushes potential expectations about the forward motion of reading, thought and comprehension up against a picture of thrusting forward into space (72). After all, the slanted parallel lines of the schematic cube would go on infinitely if it weren't for the stopping action of the cube's back plane, serving to turn lines that suggest direction into a reassuring and discrete form.

Elsewhere, Wittgenstein uses "cube" to pose questions about the promise of an identifiable present and what he calls a "flash":

> When someone says the word cube to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it in this way? … Can what we grasp *in a flash* accord with a use, fit or fail to fit in? … What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word?—Isn't it something like a picture? (46-7)

Such questions about the temporal and spatial limits of cube-comprehension must be asked about "picture" itself. Wittgenstein grounds us in part by his own use of picture-words—slabs, chess pieces, photographs, drawings, color samples—forcing us both to confront the ease with which we want meaning and object to slide into partnership at the very moment he's prying them apart, and to acknowledge that a "photograph" is not necessarily a "picture." For in order to quell the unproductive function of pictures, Wittgenstein increases their presence in the *PI*. Paintings, portraits, sketches, schematic drawings: all serve to dramatize our dependence, to draw us into a unfamiliar space where our attachment to meaning-as-object is harnessed as it is undone.

Pictures come in all sizes here: the entire work, he tells us in his introduction, is a "landscape," a "series of sketches"—a reminder, it seems, that Wittgenstein *means it* when he says: "And the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the application of the picture goes" (99). And between the "slab" and the entire *PI*-as-sketch, are, of course, the many medium-sized acts of drawing-up pictures to firm up a developing sense:

> Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle" (85).

> If someone were to draw up a sharp boundary, I could not acknowledge it as the one that I too always wanted to draw…His concept may then be said to be…akin [to mine]. The kinship is that of two pictures, one of which consists of colour patches with vague contours, and the other of patches similarly shaped…but with clear contours (31).

On many occasions, as I followed a given picture-as-bait deeper and deeper into its sense, relieved for the aid of a visual schema, I would suddenly find myself jerked awake by a question: am I in the midst of a figurative space? And if I'm not, what do I call this understanding-language-by-way-of-a-beetle box?

The pictures play roles of temptation too: that of quick access to the finish line. Wittgenstein often poses questions revolving around overlap, boundary and separation, buoying them up urgently to the surface by way of the law of identity, the knot of conflation between existence and sameness:

> To say "This combination of words makes no sense" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language….If I surround an area with a fence of a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary…So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for (117-8).

What to do with the auras or clouds of association that begin to circulate for the reader, the ones that point to a correlation between shared grammatical terrain and psychic boundaries or identity itself? Where did this idea *come from*? Will it be detrimental, against-the-grain, to hope to tease it out as reading continues?

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For me, a tension develops between the drives to articulate two kinds of notions about my reading of the *PI*. I could say I gathered the following:

• Meaning in language must be followed along paths of use

• Various uses of the same word can be seen to connect via "family resemblance"

• The rules of language games can be definite, indefinite and can change

And I could also say these things:

• The absence of an explicit discourse on metaphor in the *PI* comes from a tacit challenge to place seeing-as *before* figuration—to see figuration before we name it that

• A question about likeness to the human body is quietly fueling our figurative uses of language, and an unac-

knowledged search to match up body and mind serves to determine the directions we point to with language

• Broadening the notion of tension away from the gathering place of *libido* and toward a larger body of spatial relationships to language forms is worthwhile

• Questions attempted to be resolved though attention to innerness are not to be disregarded but re-focused on grammar; sensitivity to excess material, or atmosphere, will re-pose the questions in healthier forms

This second kind of list, one that admits findings larger than one might be able to rationally argue out from the text, could be the result of the dreaded "imaginative misunderstandings" that David Pears discusses (4). But they may also constitute one piece of a way to articulate what *it's like* to read the *PI*.

In the spirit of this uncertainty about handling the clouds that can structure an encounter with the *PI*—for that's one way I see fruitful readerly interaction occurring: by bringing auras to the text, and letting them flourish, harden, disintegrate, etc.—I'm struck by the ease with which remarks on the *PI's* kinship to psychoanalysis have been folded into critical thinking on Wittgenstein. For Pears,

> [the] treatment of the mistakes…of other philosophers is often called 'therapeutic.' For there is an obvious analogy between the origin and correction of these involuntary misunderstandings and the origin of emotional disorders and their cure by psycho-therapy (4).

According to Cavell:

> Wittgenstein['s] writing is deeply practical and negative, the way Freud's is. And like Freud's therapy, it wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. Both of them are intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of…fantasies ("pictures") which we cannot escape (72).

My point is not that psychoanalysis is absent from the *PI* nor that I did not struggle with an "irresistibl[e] inclin[ation]" to shuttle over to Freud during my reading (Wittgenstein 86). It's to ask whether we can admit to the difficulty of simultaneously holding our desire for something primitive and our need to use certain discursive forms to guide us along the path that first desire irregularly carves. Psychoanalysis can play a cubic role; outside of the therapeutic space it *can't help* but play such a role, and is thus almost always bound up with the dawning light/out-of-the-cave picture.

For me, quiet cries inhabit the *PI*—living not *in* the text but through it—cries such as:

• I want an identity

• The fantasy of one-to-one correspondence is powerful

• I want my body and my mind to know each other

• It is difficult to know one's own objects

• I want to imagine physical objects in the place of other ones

• I don't know what direction I'm pointing toward

• I want to find health via language

• I miss God

Despite their apparent kinship to those we associate with the generic analysand, I don't hear these cries as Oedipal

ones. Are they *like* Oedipal cries? Surely, but doesn't Wittgenstein show us that we often don't know the difference between pictorial and figurative space?

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Wittgenstein opens his *PI* with Augustine's narration of the acquisition of language. It's a familiar tale of point-and-learn, object and meaning. But equally important, it's a tale of the development of identity and the articulation of desire: "I gradually learned to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form theses signs, I used them to express my own desires" (2). It's a classic instance of the running-together of 'identity' as sameness and particular being, and a reminder that fantasies of correspondence and consolidation have as much to do with the unity of meaning and object as with individual identity itself.

I agree with Stanley Cavell that 'self-knowledge' is an imperative in this work. However, I see this self-knowledge as primarily related to the ability to *expect and hold forms* rather than as the result of therapeutic intervention. I think we would do well to consider ourselves the creators as well as the receivers of the darkness-giving-way-to-light picture of the arrival of wakefulness and vision, and to slightly dim the bright lights of consciousness, and quietly lighten a corner of the cave. This might allow us to spend more time where we know life exists, and to begin to speak about the shapes that float in the middle of language, between the oppressive and imagined extremes. Our language has a being beyond us; it will not submit to our searches, and I see the *PI* as knowing and enacting that.

Literature

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