

On Wittgenstein, Lydia Davis, and Other Uncanny Grammarians

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Abstract: What would Wittgensteinian fiction look like? Not fiction overtly about or influenced by him, but rather that resonates with the style and content of his thought? Lydia Davis has avowed, but never explained, her admiration for Wittgenstein. Her fiction is short and fragmentary, and attuned to the way grammar and usage reveal our forms of life. Alongside briefer discussion of the philosophical comedy of Adam Ehrlich Sachs, who references Wittgenstein, and of the experimental fictions of Ben Marcus, which present strange forms of life and their breakdown, I characterize both Wittgenstein and Davis as uncanny grammarians: though we live in language, we are never fully at home in it. Both press on our ordinary language in an extraordinary way, defamiliarizing the familiar to more explicitly understand it.

[Ordinary language philosophy] seems to have uncanny information about our most personal philosophical assumptions.

Stanley Cavell¹

With and following Stanley Cavell, significant work has been done at the intersection between literary studies and Wittgenstein's philosophy. Cavell gave us memorable readings of Beckett and Shakespeare, among others. Charles Altieri, Cora Diamond, Garry Hagberg, Marjorie Perloff, Toril Moi, Bernard Harrison, Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, and other scholars have reinforced these connections while also using Wittgenstein (and Cavell) to read many other literary figures, including Henrik Ibsen, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and other modernists.² Here, I aim to ask a different question. Not how one reads a work—any work—of literature in a Wittgensteinian manner, but rather: What would Wittgensteinian fiction look like? With the exception of Beckett,³ I take it there are no general ties between Wittgenstein and these authors; that they have been fruitfully read through his thought is demonstrative, rather, of the general Wittgensteinian literary theory scholars have developed. What style or mode of fiction, beneath specific thematic overlap, resonates with

Wittgenstein's way of thinking? In what authors does one find a basic sensibility akin to his?

The most famous instance of such a deep overlap of sensibility is probably found in Adorno and Beckett. One can (almost) imagine Adorno writing *Waiting for Godot*, can (almost) imagine Beckett writing *Minima Moralia*. Other familiar pairs include Bergson and Proust, Montaigne and Shakespeare, Bakhtin and Dostoevsky, Vico and Joyce, Nietzsche and Hesse, Foucault and Rousset.⁴ What literary figures might we pair with Wittgenstein in a similar manner, and what would be thereby revealed, both about the workings of Wittgenstein's thought and the related mode of literature?⁵ Or more generally about the relationship between philosophy and literature?

Wittgenstein has had an outsized literary influence. He has inspired a campus satire and, more unexpectedly, a techno-thriller.⁶ Bruce Duffy's *The World as I Found It* novelizes, perhaps too literally, Wittgenstein's life. W. G. Sebald engages with his thought and biography more obliquely in *Austerlitz*, but dissonantly and critically, as Sebald was obsessed with history, whereas Wittgenstein rarely gave it any attention at all. David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System*, and numerous of Thomas Bernhard's works refer, more or less overtly, to Wittgenstein, so some fluency in his thought is certainly helpful in interpreting them—but I don't take the novels to reveal much about the philosophy in turn, and neither the solipsism of Markson's novel, nor Wallace's brand of hyper-self-consciousness, nor Bernhard's misanthropy resonate deeply with Wittgenstein's sensibility, though they each perhaps isolate and distill a strain of it.⁷

Here I pair Wittgenstein, across time and language, more surprisingly with three contemporary American writers: Adam Ehrlich Sachs, Lydia Davis, and Ben Marcus (as well as, much more briefly, a handful of others). Davis, and Sachs and Marcus in their first books, operate in a short—often *very* short—if not necessarily fragmentary style akin to Wittgenstein’s. And all three show an attunement to not only forms of life (what successful fiction writer doesn’t?) but also grammar⁸ and usage and the entwinement of our forms of speaking with the way we live. I begin by focusing on the recurring comic portrayal of philosophers in Sachs’s stories, which reveals how carefully humor is calibrated against our ear for language use. I then turn to Davis, where one finds stretches of prose that could just be mistaken for bits of Wittgenstein. The pathos Davis conveys in her grammatical investigations reveals a paired pathos that, reading in a philosophical mindset, it can be easy to overlook as also present in Wittgenstein. Finally, I conclude by reading Marcus’s early experimental work as portraying the collapse of our current forms of life and their replacement with strange ones, the meaning of which remains just outside of our grasp. Taken together, these writers suggest how pressing in an extraordinary way on our ordinary language can defamiliarize the familiar, such that we can understand it more explicitly, revealing our deepest patterns of thought and life. In all of these writers, we see that, though we live in language, we are never fully at home in it—which is why uncanny moments of language are so revealing.

I. The Philosophical Comedy of Adam Ehrlich Sachs⁹

The subtitle of Adam Ehrlich Sachs’s first collection of fiction, *Inherited Disorders: Stories, Parables and Problems*, is suggestive of its somewhat experimental form: 117 tales,

many only a page or even paragraph in length, of fathers, sons, and their fraught relationships.¹⁰ *Inherited Disorders* is widely peopled with writers, artists, academics, and, in an especially notable manner, philosophers. It includes stories of philosophical decline about both Western and Eastern traditions, as well as ones that invoke the naturalism debate, riff on the unity of the virtues, and imagine a brain in a vat.¹¹ References to Nietzsche, Spinoza, and other philosophers are frequent. Sachs's second book and first novel, *The Organs of Sense*, centers on Leibniz, in a youthful existential crisis, traveling to Bohemia to investigate a blind astronomer. It too is full of philosophical comedy, often in the vein of that most famous send-up of Leibniz, Voltaire's *Candide*. The connections between Sachs's work and Wittgenstein, of whom Sachs avows his admiration in online interviews, are many. "Figments" explicitly calls on Wittgenstein when a convinced solipsist submits bits from *On Certainty*, as well as Hume's *Treatise*, to NYU as his doctoral dissertation, having "realized" that they were not influences, but his own creations (*ID*, pp. 126–127). Sachs's handling and rehandling of one theme—fathers and sons—is itself not un-Wittgensteinian: invoking the image of picking up the same stone over and over, Wittgenstein writes that "Each of the sentences I write is trying to say the whole thing, i.e. the same thing over and over; it is as though they were all simply views of one object from different angles."¹² We might take as a guide to Sachs's work Wittgenstein's claim, reported by Norman Malcolm, that "a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes* (without being facetious)."¹³

In "The Chimney Sweep," the Wittgenstein stand-in Henry Hobson Fowler becomes the Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford in 1919, "his colleagues marvel[ing] openly at his improbable escape from the chimneys of his fathers into the rarefied air of logic and

language.” The tale turns on whether he really has effected such an escape. A few years into his prestigious professorship, Fowler starts to describe his philosophical approach as “a kind of logico-linguistic chimney sweeping,” telling his students that their job “is to shimmy up the flue of logic and language and clear it out.” In subsequent years, he adds greater specificity to the metaphor: “With our brush we sweep away the loose soot, and with our scraper we chip away at the solid soot.” By this point, his students ask on an annual basis “whether Fowler was referring to ‘a real chimney or a logico-linguistic chimney.’” He initially answers: “A philosophical chimney,” but after a few more years of development—he hands out actual brushes and scrapers to his seminar, asking them to raise the appropriate tool for each philosophical point—he answers the call for clarification by saying “that he did not understand the distinction the student was trying to draw.” By 1930, “a number of Fowler’s students complained to the head of the department that most of their seminars were now spent clearing out chimneys around Oxford, work which was dirty, dangerous, and not conspicuously philosophical in nature.” Was Fowler “wielding his past” or “being wielded by it,” “seizing upon a metaphor” or “being seized upon by it”? The story ends: “Both were right. He *did* sweep out some nineteenth-century nonsense from our understanding of logic and language, and he *did* cause the death by suffocation of numerous undergraduate and graduate students.” He dies in 1953, trapped in his own chimney (*ID*, pp. 5–8).

Wittgenstein was of course born not to a London chimney sweep, but into one of the wealthiest families of late imperial Vienna.¹⁴ He was at Cambridge, not Oxford, and died in 1951, not 1953. But he is clearly one of the bases for Sachs’s Fowler—along, perhaps, with A.J. Ayer, that positivist policer of nonsense, and a holder of the actual Wykeham

Professorship.¹⁵ Fowler’s philosophical chimney sweeping is a form of Wittgenstein’s philosophical therapy: philosophical problems are not solved, but dissolved—or, in the specifics of Sachs’s story, chipped and brushed away—leaving a clear passageway for thought. Like Wittgenstein, Fowler sees this task as one of ongoing maintenance: “we mustn’t expect the flue to remain clear ever after. Soon, *with use*, it will fill up with ash and soot once again.” Wittgenstein himself formulates this idea in various ways, among them: “Each morning you have to break through the dead rubble afresh so as to reach the living warm seed” and “Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning, —then it can be put back into circulation” (*CV*, pp. 2, 39). For Wittgenstein, a word’s meaning is (in most cases) its use (*PI*, §43), but the use of language in an ordinary context, in all its richness and ambiguity, accumulates potential confusions. Of course, the comedy of “The Chimney Sweep” comes from the way in which Fowler’s own chosen metaphor—for clearing out the kind of nonsense that bad philosophy can produce—comes to grip him. Among Wittgenstein’s best-known ideas is the way in which we can be held in thrall by certain metaphors, anywhere from the loftiest theoretical realms down to local particularities of usage and grammar: “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and our language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (*PI*, §115). Exactly those ideas closest to us are often the hardest to see because so deeply assumed: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity” (*PI*, §129; see too *CV*, pp. 17, 63).¹⁶ Beneath the comedy of Fowler being gripped by the metaphor of chimney sweeping, the story perhaps suggests more. Wittgenstein sometimes talked about pursuing a more ordinary job—he failed as an elementary school teacher, worked as a gardener and a hospital orderly, and designed a

house in Vienna for his sister—and he tried to steer his students toward practical careers.¹⁷ We should perhaps pause at least momentarily to ask if Fowler is not merely confused by his own metaphor, but trying to steer his students away, albeit absurdly, from his own too rarefied life toward a practical trade, the only one he knew.

Wittgenstein writes: “I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right” (*CV*, p. 18). Sachs’s comedy is one specific way of making explicit the potential confusions of our thinking, speaking, and acting. Consider how our use of analogies relies on the ability to discern certain similarities amidst wider differences, and whether the ratio between the two is sufficient for an analogy to be apt.¹⁸ There’s no rulebook for such discernment, and comedy, by pointing to missteps, is one form of calibration. Wittgenstein writes that his investigation “sheds light on our problem of clearing misunderstanding away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language” (*PI*, §90; see too §118). In Sachs’s “Groundwork,” a philosopher spends forty years “‘clearing the ground’ for a proper philosophy of mind,” and at the same time “clearing a plot of land he’d purchased in northern Vermont.” Following his own life’s work, which is “of an exclusively preparatory nature,” his students will be left to construct a positive philosophy, his sons a summer home. Just before his death, however, he changes his will, leaving his sons to complete his philosophical work, and his students the house (*ID*, pp. 245–247). “Ground clearing” for a philosophical system and for a summer house in Vermont share a certain family resemblance, yet remain far from interchangeable. In “Explanation,” the analogy belongs not to a character, but the very syntax of the story: the son of a “philosopher

famous for his gnomic aphorisms,” himself “a proponent of clear thinking and clear writing,” stabs his father and types up exhaustive notes explaining his father’s aphorisms, “in both cases to death” (*ID*, p. 67).

In “Two Hats,” the main character is another son of a philosopher, “the late philosopher-mystic Perelmann.” Perelmann’s son wears two hats: “that of Perelmann’s son and that of his biographer.” Not merely a metaphor, Perelmann’s son actually dons different hats: a Red Sox cap when grieving, a brown fedora when “trying to understand, to historicize, and, yes, to critique, as dispassionately as possible, his father’s ideas.” Here is a literalization of a figure of speech, and one can imagine, amidst the complexity of life, that it might indeed usefully “serve a purely functional purpose,” as Perelmann’s son says. But it also satirizes the way in which analysis pulls apart the dense weave of a form of life into its disparate threads, which thereby might not be better understood, as intended by the analytic urge, but rendered absurd instead. Perelmann’s son’s hats proliferate and the roles become ever more exotically specific until worried colleagues steal into his apartment while he’s out of town and clear all 128 away. In the end, he dons one final headpiece: a ten-gallon hat. The implication, perhaps, is that he has finally found a hat large enough to encompass the entirety of his relationship to his father (*ID*, pp. 55–59).

Reading Sachs’s fiction with Wittgenstein’s philosophy in mind has brought out certain ideas, and given us memorable images of them: the way metaphors can hold us in thrall, the way pulling apart of a form of life in analysis can render it unintelligible. But what of the inverse, reading Wittgenstein now in light of Sachs? Doing so highlights the unexpected place of comedy in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Just to point to a few moments that I find especially funny, consider: “Why can’t a dog simulate pain? Is he too

honest?” and “Why can’t my right hand give my left hand money?” and “Imagine someone saying: ‘But I know how tall I am!’ and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it” (*PI*, §§25, 268, 279). In each case the joke draws our¹⁹ attention to subterranean assumptions built into our language—by jolting them. And the joke does this work better than any pedantic explanation ever could. Wittgenstein explicitly thematizes the importance of humor, asking “why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*?” Rather than answering, however, he continues “And that is what the depth of philosophy is” (*PI*, §111). The start of his answer would seem to be that his philosophy, like such jokes, is about language, rather than things themselves. He writes that his investigations are directed “not towards phenomena,” but rather toward “statements [...] about phenomena.” “Our investigation,” he concludes, “is therefore a grammatical one” (*PI*, §90). Grammatical investigations only seem to be more shallow than philosophical ones. Whereas “philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*” (*PI*, §38), in contrast “The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*” (*PI*, §111). Philosophical problems, apparently deep, are actually illusory; grammatical problems, apparently shallow, are actually deep. Wittgenstein most succinctly highlights this depth of grammar when he writes that “*Essence* is expressed in grammar” (*PI*, §371). To begin to develop the metaphor of uncanniness at the heart of my argument, in philosophy language is on holiday—that is, not at home, traveling in unfamiliar, unmoored, rarified realms. It is everyday, non-philosophical language that we most often use, yet also constantly misinterpret—the kind of uncanniness which both jokes and Wittgenstein’s form of thought investigate.

I have started with Sachs's fiction because, peopled as it is with philosophers, the connections to Wittgenstein are obvious—perhaps too much so, since what I'm looking for is a deep resonance of sensibility, not surface-level reference. Like all practitioners of page- and paragraph-length fiction, Sachs owes a clear debt to Lydia Davis, the master of that form.²⁰ I progress now to the case of her fiction, in which, despite fewer overt references, the ties to Wittgenstein's sensibility are even deeper.

II. Lydia Davis and the Grammar of Pathos

In addition to claiming that a work of philosophy could be written as a series of jokes—a notion that provides a good guide to Sachs's work—Wittgenstein also suggested that a work of philosophy could be written in the form of a series of questions (Malcolm, pp. 27–28). Rhetorically, it is remarkable how many questions, often unanswered, populate his work. Padgett Powell's *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* goes yet further, consisting of 164 pages of questions and only questions.²¹ The punctuation of its subtitle is telling, however. Expansive as the notion of the novel is, there seems to me no sense in which *The Interrogative Mood* is one, except inasmuch as anything can be made a novel by the fiat of stipulation. One can imagine a novel of questions in which an implied series of events emerged, or a unity of character or at least voice—but this never happens in Powell's work.

Consider the following passage instead:

Now, during the time he is dying, can I say, "This is where he lives"?

If someone asks me, "Where does he live?" should I answer, "Well, right now he is not living, he is dying"?

If someone asks me, "Where does he live?" can I say, "He lives in Vernon Hall"? Or should I say, "He is dying in Vernon Hall"?

When he is dead, I will be able to say, in the past tense, "He lived in Vernon Hall." I will also be able to say, "He died in Vernon Hall."

It seems to me that one could pass these lines off as notes written by Wittgenstein, not just on unsuspecting tourists, but anyone less than a dedicated scholar. Actually, they open Lydia Davis's very short story "Grammar Questions."²² Across five collections, Davis has published over 300 stories; it is no accident, I think, that "Grammar Questions" is among the best-known, so emblematic is it of her recurring and overt interest in the way technical issues of language usage can reveal much more.²³ For instance, in "A Double Negative," a one-sentence-long story, "it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child": against the junior high English teacher's rule that a double negative cancels itself out, it actually encodes a different psychological state than the positive claim (CS, p. 373). "Honoring the Subjunctive," another one-sentence story, observes that the subjunctive case is connected to "what is absolutely desirable and just" (CS, p. 377), but leaves readers to imagine their own examples of sentences like "If only I were...." "Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room" consists, in its entirety, of "Your housekeeper *has been* Shelly" (CS, p. 715). In a situation where one would much more likely expect misspellings or grammatical errors, this sign, through its unusual verb tense, masterfully implies that whereas if one's housekeeper *is* Shelly, it might not yet be time to leave a tip; if one's housekeeper *was* Shelly it is too late (or at least one could tell oneself so in bad faith); but since one's housekeeper *has been* Shelly, then it is appropriate exactly now to acknowledge her efforts.

Whereas Sachs's fiction is first and foremost comic, only secondarily shot through with moments of pathos, Davis's generally flips these two modes, and where I have characterized Sachs's work as a kind of philosophical comedy, I would describe Davis as a (even the) grammarian of pathos. The "of" of Davis's investigations of the grammar of

pathos swings, genitively, both ways: grammar's pathos and pathos's grammar. That is, the rules—some rigid, some flexible—according to which we put words together have certain emotional arcs and valences to them. At the same time, our emotions themselves follow rules of configuration, occurring as they do in certain sets and sequences with different frequencies, ranging from all but unimaginable conjunctions to seemingly necessary ones.

“Grammar Questions” densely encodes numerous of our deepest confusions about life, death, and time, as well as the relation between persons and mere things. It does so primarily by pressing on our sense of the appropriateness of certain uses of language. The questions that open the story, quoted above, quickly reveal that whereas the abstract concepts of life and death might be mutually exclusive, living and dying, both as concepts and actually instantiated activities, are not. But, then, are living and dying activities, something one does, or things that merely happen? Continuing forward, the story asks, “Is he, once he is dead, still ‘he,’ and if so, for how long is he still ‘he’? People may say ‘the body’ and then call it ‘it.’ I will not be able to say ‘the body’ in relation to him because to me he is still not something you would call ‘the body.’” It is not necessarily at the moment of death that a person becomes a mere thing, a “he” transformed into an “it.” Rather, that transition may happen at some indeterminate later time. Furthermore, it might happen at different times from the perspective of different people, the still living. One can imagine a mortician seeing all dead bodies as mere things (indeed, can imagine a mortician who, too early, sees a person as a good or bad potential corpse), but for the narrator it is too soon. The story also points out the strangeness of the phrase “his body,” inasmuch as, now dead, “he is no longer active or capable of owning anything” (CS, p. 527)—a thought which immediately leads one ask: is such a grammatical encoding of the ownership of bodies any less strange

for the living? That is, is this *my* body, or *am I* my body, or is my body *me*? In pressing on the surprisingly deep assumptions encoded in our ways of speaking, “Grammar Questions” is doing exactly the same thing Wittgenstein does in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Most explicitly, it resonates with Wittgenstein’s remarks that “Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same” and that “When Mr. N.N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies” (*PI*, §§284, 40).²⁴

Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation*, another recent work of fiction worth mentioning briefly for its resonance with Wittgenstein, points out the further complicated pragmatics of conversational questioning: “It is important if someone asks you to remember one of your happiest times to consider not only the question but also the questioner. If the question is asked by someone you love, it is fair to assume that this person hopes to feature in this recollection he has called forth.”²⁵ Taking the form of a series of fragments from the perspective of “the wife,” who once aspired to be an “art monster,” the niceties of family life be damned, but has given it up for a child, Offill’s novel slowly accumulates into a portrait of the pathos of domestic life. The narrator’s closest confidant is her friend “the philosopher” and she once quotes Wittgenstein (“What you say, you say in a body; you can say nothing outside of this body”), but it is the fragmentary form of the novel, as well as its attunement to the intertwinings of language and life, that is worth stressing here. For example: “When she tells people she might move to the country, they say, ‘But aren’t you afraid you’re going to get lonely?’” She responds: “Get?” (Offill, pp. 78, 135). Reviewing *Dept. of Speculation*, James Wood connects it to Davis’s work (as well as *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*), writing that “The form allows, as sensitive fictional and dramatic monologue usually does, for a managed ratio of randomized coherence. The waywardness and unreliability of the mind’s

contents compose a narrative of that mind before our eyes.”²⁶ One could equally apply this characterization to Wittgenstein’s own fragmentary style, adding only the caveat that the line of thinking that emerges is less overtly narrative.

Reading Wittgenstein alongside Davis undercuts the assumption that philosophy operates in claims and arguments, and fiction in character, plot, and images. Davis’s fiction often lacks characters or eventfulness, includes at least incipient lines of argumentation, and at times speaks in direct abstract language. Wittgenstein’s philosophy, on the other hand, is not without character and plot in some its vignettes, and often—even characteristically—stops short of explicit claims defended by arguments, favoring oblique questioning instead. Wittgenstein repeatedly describes his work as unoriginal, except in its introduction of new figurative language—a kind of description one would normally apply to a literary writer. “I don’t believe I have ever *invented* a line of thinking,” he writes. “What I invent are new *similes*” (CV, p. 19). Putting this thought into figurative language, he describes what originality he has as “belonging to the soil rather than to the seed” (CV, p. 36). He can develop others’ thoughts in a productive and novel manner. “A good simile refreshes the intellect,” not providing it with new content, but giving it the energy and clarity to realize its own capabilities (CV, p. 1). Similarly, Wittgenstein wrote “I think I summed up my position when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry” (CV, p. 24). Stressing self-descriptions such as these, it is easy to see his thought as continuous with a writer like Davis—especially given that “poetry” is a translation of Wittgenstein’s description of philosophy as *Dichtung*, not poetry in the narrow sense, but literature.

One might argue that the furniture (i.e., the concrete, un-abstract stuff) of Davis's prose—"Vernon Hall" a few lines in—gives it away as the work of a fiction writer, not philosopher. Such a proper noun seems to position the story in a specific place, where philosophical prose aims at greater generality. It is striking, however, how little specific furniture "Grammar Questions" actually contains. The other operative nouns are "the body," "the coffin," "the box," "the ashes," and most frequently "he." All of these would be right at home in a philosophical thought experiment. Even "Vernon Hall" seems abstract compared to such memorable philosophical furniture as a virtuoso violinist attached by tubes to one's kidneys or the cooling touch of Henry Fonda's hand upon one's fevered brow.²⁷ And as soon as we say this, we recall the weirdly specific furniture that populates Wittgenstein's own thought experiments: beetles in boxes, suit connoisseurs, etc.

What distinguishes "Grammar Questions" as a story rather than a bit of philosophy, if anything does, is how revelation works in it. The biggest shot of pathos in the story comes from the way that the anonymous and abstract "he" of its first page is revealed mid-story to be "my father": "I will continue to say 'my father' in relation to him, after he dies, but will I say it only in the past tense, or also in the present tense?" (*CS*, p. 528). Thus the grammatical probing, at first seemingly academic, comes to seem instead a psychological defense mechanism. When "he" loses its anonymity, so too does the narrator. No longer a disembodied philosophical voice, it now becomes a more specific consciousness contemplating her father's death and the transition from agent to body to ashes. Though "Grammar Questions" is not a story in which much if anything happens, what is revealed through reading it is something like character and an emotional sequence. Even though it

consists largely of questions, this is why it feels like fiction, whereas *The Interrogative Mood* does not.

In contrast to Davis's story, the logic of revelation we expect in philosophy happens wholly at the level of interpretation—philosophy, unlike literature, rarely values opacity. Constructing a philosophical thought experiment, one doesn't hold back any of the important particulars; one lays them out with parsimonious logic, then walks through whatever general claims consideration of them merits. Revelation occurs in the turns of explicit analysis. One can imagine a thought experiment in which "he" becomes "my father" halfway through, but not one in which "he" was "my father" all along, and thus the active occlusion of this fact shot through with meaning and feeling, retrospectively revealed.²⁸ Instead, the thought experiment would undergo a purposeful and explicit revision: e.g., "Now consider how our intuitions differ if this case involves not just any person, but specifically one's father." Having made this distinction between how "Grammar Questions" differs from a typical thought experiment, however, I think we can ask if perhaps the story isn't thereby doing, on exactly this front, interesting philosophical work of a distinctively Wittgensteinian sort. The danger of so many thought experiments is that they are lifted too far out of our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking, such that we have no real intuitions about them, and any judgments we force ourselves to make offer no reliable guidance. This has always seemed to me to be true of, to take a prominent example, Derek Parfit's science fictional cases of the fission and fusion of persons. If such technologies came into existence, our ways of speaking and thinking, and the thereby encoded concept of identity, would radically change, so our current intuitions tell us nothing relevant or reliable.

Often, Wittgenstein's own thought experiments feel quite thin: the builders who open the *Philosophical Investigations*, for example. He claims "It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle." Or, he goes on, and we can obviously connect this to Davis's story, "a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. [...] And to imagine a language is to imagine a life-form" (*PI*, §19). But can we *really* imagine a language, much less a form of life, that doesn't include more banal references to, say, eating and sleeping?²⁹ At the other extreme, however, surely one of the reasons Wittgenstein has achieved the status he has is the way that—in line with "Grammar Questions"—a unity of character, sensibility, and voice emerges in his work (i.e., the stuff on which one can build a cult of personality). Describing Wittgenstein as "the philosopher of poets and composers, playwrights and novelists," Terry Eagleton asks "What is it about this man, whose philosophy can be taxing and technical enough, which so fascinates the artistic imagination?"³⁰ The start of the answer: certain preoccupations, certain worries, certain turns of thought are distinctively Wittgensteinian, and they cluster together in a coherent manner. In an interview online, Sachs describes Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: "the drama (and the comedy, and the horror) is that you desperately want Wittgenstein to convince himself that it's okay to claim that the external world exists. I would subtitle that book 'A Novel.'" Overstated for effect, perhaps, but also revealing, both of how Wittgenstein's writing differs from most philosophy and of the way fiction writers tend to read philosophy, for its imagination and invention of concepts and language, rather than its claims and arguments.

The issue of inventing new words and ways of speaking takes us into the other story by Davis I want to consider at length, "Letter to a Funeral Parlor," which pairs notably in

terms of its content with “Grammar Questions.” Like about a half-dozen other of Davis’s stories,³¹ it takes the form of a letter of complaint or query, but quickly spools out of control in length, focus, and tone.³² These stories typically begin with a reasonable if slightly eccentric point, then grow humorously into something like entries in the series “Open Letters to People or Entities Who Are Unlikely to Respond” published on McSweeney’s website, before spiraling in the most interesting cases into full-blown pathos, having become akin to a diary entry or confession, as if beginning to write the letter is merely the impetus to put pen to paper, when it is something quite other that really needs to be expressed.³³ “Dear Sir,” Davis’s “Letter to a Funeral Parlor” begins, “I am writing to you to object to the word *cremains*, which was used by your representative when he met with my mother and me two days after my father’s death.” Before the death, the funeral home’s representative used the “comfortable” phrase “loved one,” but, after the death, uses “cremains,” which leaves her and her mother “disturbed”: “At first we did not even know what he meant. Then, when we realized, we were frankly upset. *Cremains* sounds like something invented as a milk substitute in coffee, like Cremora, or Coffee-mate. Or it sounds like some kind of a chipped beef dish” (CS, pp. 380–381). “Letter to a Funeral Parlor” was published earlier than “Grammar Questions,” and it reads like a more comic preamble for the later story’s pathos. Yet pairing them in this way, the letter’s comedy itself becomes pathos-ridden, as it appears to be a defense mechanism by which the narrator holds her grief at bay, much as grammar does in the later story.

What I want to emphasize about “Letter to a Funeral Home” is the way in which it scrutinizes the word “cremains” as invented—invented language being something on which Wittgenstein intriguingly comments. On the one hand, Wittgenstein describes his reaction

to Esperanto as one of disgust: “The feeling of disgust we get if we utter an *invented* word with invented derivative syllables. The word is cold, lacking in associations, and yet it plays at being ‘language’” (CV, p. 52). On the other hand, he reacts with “wonder,” though perhaps mistrustfully, to Shakespeare, famous for expanding English: “I do not believe that Shakespeare can be set alongside any other poet. Was he perhaps a *creator of language* rather than a poet?” (CV, p. 84). If new concepts and words are to be invented, this must be done within, or at least against the background of, a living language. And few of us—only someone on the rank of Shakespeare—would seem to be up to the task, at least as individuals, of bearing “The labour pains at the birth of new concepts” (CV, p. 62).³⁴ Furthermore, Wittgenstein describes philosophy as categorically incapable of this task: “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. [...] It leaves everything as it is” (PI, §124).

Davis is investigating these same issues when she writes: “You in the business must have invented this word and you are used to it. We the public do not hear it very often. We don’t lose a close friend or a family member very many times in our life, and years pass in between, if we are lucky. Even less often do we have to discuss what is to be done with a family member or close friend after their death.” The word “cremains” grates on the ear exactly because it doesn’t emerge in a normal lived linguistic context, but rather sounds invented for internal funeral home bureaucracy. The narrator describes herself as “someone who works with words for a living,” encouraging if not fully justifying us to take the narrator to be Davis herself, as many of her stories do.³⁵ As a writer, she points out that invented words and especially portmanteaus have “a cheerful or even jovial ring,” one “that I don’t think you really intended” for this situation. Even in its comedy, the story reveals

how densely entwined with language deep matters of dignity can be. Invented language seems incompatible with dignity, unmoored from history as it is. The story ends: “You could very well continue to employ the term *ashes*. We are used to it from the Bible, and are even comforted by it. We would not misunderstand. We would know that these ashes are not like the ashes in a fireplace” (*CS*, pp. 380–381).

Davis’s letters are finally exactly not letters. That is, the last thing they seem to be is acts of communication from the writer to a funeral parlor, or to a frozen peas manufacturer. Rather, they show the writer to be performing the act of communicating with someone else as a means of actually conversing with herself. A letter is a good image of a too crude paradigm of language, in which someone takes an idea from his head and puts it in a box for someone else to unpackage. Once again, a picture of language here holds us captive. By posing as such a use of language, while actually drawing our attention to complex tonal issues and the (failed) pragmatics of situation, these stories satirize this paradigm much in the same way that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy criticizes it: “The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please” (*PI*, §304).

Commenting on the style of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell memorably observes that Wittgenstein “*writes*: he does not report, he does not write up results.”³⁶ This is another way of viewing Wittgenstein as more continuous with literary writers than most philosophers. Very often, philosophers seem to conceive of themselves not as writers, working with the stuff of words, but rather professional thinkers trafficking in claims and arguments. If a thought is properly understood, writing it up is just the contingent work of

communicating it to others—akin to the conception of language as a series of letters dropped in the mail. For Wittgenstein (and Cavell), as well as for Davis and other literary practitioners, writing itself is the essential task, inseparable from thinking or communicating, all of which are one process.

In response to the question from the *Times Literary Supplement* “Jacques Derrida or Judith Butler?” Davis’s answer was: “Neither. Wittgenstein.” I cannot find any place where she elaborates, however, and there is but one scholarly article linking their work.³⁷ Among Davis’s translations, though, is Blanchot’s essay “Wittgenstein’s Problem,” which Blanchot identifies as: “that every language has a structure about which one can say nothing *in* that language, but that there must be another language dealing with the structure of the first and possessing a new structure about which one cannot say anything except in a third language—and so forth.”³⁸ No doubt this image of infinitely iterating systems of language bends Wittgenstein toward post-structuralism. It is right, however, that he is worried one has to step slightly back from ordinary language in order to scrutinize it, and that if this step back is one into philosophy, then *that* language game will introduce other, probably worse, confusions. It seems to me that, in Wittgenstein, there is a deep tension between wanting—needing, even—to invent new language and concepts and the simultaneous recognition that it is impossible to do this, especially as an individual, apart from a real, living language, emmeshed in a culture and history. In *Revolution of the Ordinary*, Toril Moi argues that ordinary language philosophy as it emerges in the late Wittgenstein is deeply contrary to theory. While it is true that Wittgenstein rejects the kind of totalizing move found in so many schools of theory—Marxist, Freudian, Foucauldian, Deconstructionist—it is not the case that Wittgenstein merely traffics in examples. Even Davis, as we have seen,

ascends into some generality, Wittgenstein all the more so. He both wants to find “perspicuous representations” of a certain elevation and abstraction, and to map the “rough ground” of specific examples (*PI*, §§122, 107). Or in a strange image that he offers mixing both directions at once, he wants “a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings” (*CV*, p. 7). The constant tension between these impulses—to move up into generality, down into specifics—is emblematic of the uncanniness of language, in its simultaneous familiarity and strangeness.

III. Uncanny Forms of Life in the Fiction of Ben Marcus

Having begun with an examination of the clear influence of Wittgenstein on the philosophical comedy of Adam Ehrlich Sachs, then uncovered a deeper connection between the philosopher’s investigations and the grammar of pathos in Lydia Davis’s short, fragmentary fiction, I conclude with a more speculative connection to the uncanny work of Ben Marcus. Marcus was a philosophy major at NYU—where Wittgenstein was the main thinker he studied³⁹—and considered pursuing graduate work in the subject. Instead, he went on to receive an MFA from Brown, studying with Robert Coover and John Hawkes. Marcus’s early work especially is deeply strange, the language worked heavily to evade easy comprehension. It might seem odd to pair Wittgenstein’s concern with our everyday language with a linguistically inventive writer like Marcus. Indeed, one reviewer exactly contrasts the two, writing that whereas Wittgenstein sought to lead the fly out of the bottle, Marcus “keeps his hand firmly over the lip and shakes the bottle vigorously.”⁴⁰ But if we stress in Wittgenstein’s thought the constant challenge of seeing through the too familiar, making the implicit explicit, then defamiliarizing techniques like Marcus’s are more clearly

relevant. As Wittgenstein writes, “Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones” (*CV*, p. 74). Notably, Marcus’s fiction, strange as it is, does not read like the work of fabulist or fantasist, someone interested in spinning other worlds for the sake of wonder alone. In an essay, Marcus complains that reading so-called realistic fiction, in the worst cases, “is akin to constantly crawling from a trench of received ideas,” so grounded is it in “exhausted assumptions of psychology.” In contrast, he is most interested in reading and writing fiction in which “literary language [...] might come in complex and challenging guises and [...] can at times seem put to uses so foreign that it resembles the dialect of a new tribe of people.” Such strangeness is not for its own sake, but exactly the opposite: it seeks “to engrave the elusive aspects of life’s entanglements.”⁴¹ Here we see Marcus programmatically in step with Wittgenstein, concerned with the commonplace, yet deep and difficult to articulate, entwinement of language and life.

Marcus’s work obsessively orbits the fraught nature of familial relations, the alternately banal and horrible realities of our embodiment, and—most especially—the strangeness and power, often malign, of language. His first three books might be read as taking place in the same world, one neither ours nor not ours. Such a suggestion is encouraged by reference in all of them to the same (fictional) theorists, Sernier and Thompson, who at times rise in status to marginal characters. Read together in reverse order, and thus back into Marcus’s strangest style, these books track the collapse of society brought on by language as a contagion (*The Flame Alphabet*), the emergence—perhaps after this apocalypse—of a new form of life in one cultish community (*Notable American Women*), and conclude in a reference work written in the strange language of a strange

world (*The Age of Wire and String*). I offer a sketch of such an interpretation here, guided by the idea that Marcus's fictions give us a glimpse of forms of life unfamiliar, yet still recognizable as meaningful, even if we cannot fully comprehend them. Read in the light of Wittgenstein, they bring, by contrast, our own practices of linguistic life into focus.

Commenting in an online interview on the evolution of his style, Marcus says “before I wrote *The Flame Alphabet* I wouldn't have written a sentence like ‘He got in his car and went to work....’” That novel sits at the cusp between Marcus's more recent stories, many of them published in *The New Yorker* (not known for experimental fiction), and his opaque early style. Genre-wise, it is recognizable as an apocalyptic thriller, if an unusually meditative and literary one. The narrator Sam and his wife have begun to feel lethargic, then ill, in unusual ways at the same time as their relations with their adolescent daughter have, in what would seem to be a more usual manner, become increasingly strained. “We left on a school day, so Esther wouldn't see us,” the novel begins. “In my personal bag, packed when my wife, Claire, had finally collapsed in sleep against the double-bolted bedroom door as it was getting light out, I stashed field glasses, sound abatement fabrics, and enough rolled foam to conceal two adults.” Sam also packs “anti-comprehension pills” and “a child's radio retrofitted as a toxicity screen.”⁴² Eventually we, along with him, come to understand that language itself has become toxic. At first it is the voices of children that harm others, especially their parents. Eventually all communication—whether spoken or written, merely gestural, or even a matter of subtext—is implicated: “Was language rich in information, filled with verifiable detail and data, worse than language that lied? Which diction made us sicker? Could abstract language, the kind that skirted anything visual and posited ideas and qualifications over the concrete, be less harmful? Were expressions of

love safer than threats?” Sam concludes: “it was comprehension itself that we could no longer bear” (*FA*, p. 196).

Read narrowly, *The Flame Alphabet* seems a parable about the weaponization of language in families. Everything a parent says is embarrassing, and everything a teenager says literally induces suffering—even when such is not the intent, often though it is. Interpreted more broadly, however, we might take the novel’s originating concept as a hysterically heightened literalization of Wittgenstein’s worries that misuses of language bring on confusion. “We’ve trafficked in an inexact language that must be translated anew. Not even translated. Destroyed. Rebuilt,” the novel suggests (*FA*, p. 64). Separated from his family, Sam pursues various medical experiments under the theory that the harm is physical in origin. The novel explores possible spiritual roots as well: initially it is speculated that only the words of Jewish children do harm, and Sam and Claire belong to a sect of “Forest Jews” who never meet or evangelize, but rather listen, once a week, to secret transmissions that spring from elaborate, quasi-organic devices in isolated huts.⁴³

The novel’s most interesting speculations—and those that resonate most with Wittgenstein—concern neither matter nor spirit, but language. Sounding not unlike the *Tractatus*, the novel suggests “that an ultra-restricted language, operating according to a new grammar, might finally be our way out of this” (*FA*, p. 63). Another proposal is “A list of rules so knotted that to follow them would be to say nearly nothing, to never render one’s interior life, to eschew abstraction and discharge a grammar that merely positioned nouns in descending orders of desire” (*FA*, p. 82). Sam experiments, to no avail, with both ancient and newly created alphabets and scripts, as well as with “errors, sentences afflicted with inconsistencies of tense and tone” to disguise their meaning. “Grammatical rules, rules of

usage, rules governing rhythm and silence,” he writes, “these I broke hard” (*FA*, p. 183). Elsewhere Sam seems to flirt with the idea of a private language. “I began work on a non-alphabet, a system revolving around one symbol that could never be used in a word, a letter that did not even exist yet,” he writes. “We did not precisely understand how to control which symbols were perceived as nonsense, and which ones suddenly came to mean something. In fact, we understood nothing” (*FA*, p. 210). Descending into silence, all communication with others forbidden, Sam reflects that “Without language my inner life, if such a phrase indicates anything anymore, was merely anecdotal, hearsay. It was not even that. It was the noisings one might detect if a microphone were held against a stone in the woods” (*FA*, p. 223). Wittgenstein looks at a stone and thinks it “too smooth” to “imagine it having sensations” (*PI*, §284). He might conclude that Sam is exactly right, and so exactly wrong to be troubled by the idea, that “Too much effort is required to divine activity within things like persons” (*FA*, p. 223). Of all the forms of communication, least toxic, it is said, are place-names (*FA*, p. 85), a suggestion that reads like a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Augustinian theory of language Wittgenstein considers at the beginning of the *Investigations*. Least toxic, but also least useful: “A language solely of place-names. What would we possibly say to each other?” (*FA*, p. 95).

Eventually Sam does discover at least a partial and temporary medical solution, though not before reverting to an animal-like state of isolation and incommunicability for a time. If this allows some resolution to the novel’s plot, it leaves its larger speculations about communication and understanding unanswered. This is perhaps in line with Wittgenstein’s famous line toward the end of the *Tractatus* that “We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely

untouched.”⁴⁴ In the novel, the problem of language turned toxin is neither truly solved nor merely dissolved—rather, it recedes back into mystery, still half understood at best. “I am showing my pupils details of an immense landscape which they cannot possibly know their way around” (*CV*, p. 56). We should resist the suggestion that in writing this Wittgenstein thinks he *does* know his way around, and that either a failure of communication on his part, or intelligence on his students’, is what inhibits their understanding. He is a guide only in the way that a group defers to whomever knows a place better—or merely has more wayfinding experience. He can’t see the terrain from above either, just knows where some dead ends and pitfalls lay in wait. Invoking the image of a landscape elsewhere, Wittgenstein describes his familiarity with it as fragmentary, as if he has but bits of a map: “piecing them together is *too hard* for me” (*CV*, p. 78). We should similarly resist the temptation, in reading Marcus’s fiction, of thinking that he knows what it all means and has carefully encoded it for the reader to decipher. Rather, his fiction, in its writing as much as its reading, is akin to an attempt to explore a strange space.

Whereas *The Flame Alphabet* shows the collapse of society, Marcus’s previous novel, *Notable American Women*, portrays a “compound” set apart from the world, not just physically, but by its strange practices. The through-line of the plot describes the coming of age of one Ben Marcus, but his is not a normal childhood. Rather, the compound is controlled by a cult leader, Jane Dark, who counts Ben’s mother, Jane Marcus, among her followers—or maybe just is his mother, in alter-ego form.⁴⁵ Ben’s early childhood is spent largely with what would seem to be, but it is insisted is not, a dog; in adolescence he is used, unsuccessfully, by the cult as they try to breed purer descendants; and at the end he is finally “launched” into the world. These already somewhat strange plot developments are

surrounded by various documents: a preface from Ben's father; a final section by his mother; a catalog of names and their effects when applied to women; descriptions of the cult's practices; a copy of the pledge, "Promise of Stillness," that adherents sign; dated and tersely described events related to the rise of Jane Dark: e.g., the 1972 development of "Women's Sign Language," which "will not only allow for private utterances but possibly enable new forms of thought not available under current systems of grammar and syntax."⁴⁶

Marginal characters from *The Flame Alphabet*, Thompson and Burke (there leaders of the Forest Jews), are mentioned in *Notable American Women*, but—speculatively reading the two books as taking place in the same world as I am—it isn't clear if we should understand Jane Dark's cult as having sprung up in the aftermath of the language plague, or rather as a forerunner to it, precociously sensitive to (or responsible for?) what is to come. The cult's thematic preoccupations, and so the novel's, are very similar to *The Flame Alphabet's*. Known as the Silentists, the cult fosters quiet and stillness with such tools and rituals as "listening cloth," "hearing suits," and "behavior removals," as well as special waters (seemingly related to the "cure" in the other novel) and a diet of nuts that encourages "grammar sympathy." Jane Dark's program is described as "a great gymnasium of ladies laboring to be silent" on "a farm meant to muffle the loud bodies of this world" (*NAW*, pp. 35, 45). Another strand of the cult's thought resonates especially with Wittgenstein's comments on private language and behaviorism. "The danger of a mimed emotion," it is claimed, "is that there is very little difference, if any, between pretending to feel something and actually feeling it" (*NAW*, p. 131). Many of the cult's, and especially Ben's mother's, actions aim at muting emotion: "the entire accessible level of feelings—

what we think we feel throughout the day, our supposed personalities—is gratuitous and fleeting [...] If these were true feelings—indeed, if there were such a thing as true feelings—they would not be so easily removed” (*NAW*, p. 178). She describes “using the face to communicate a mood” as amounting to “spying on oneself” (*NAW*, p. 210).

Notable American Women, under a domesticating reading, would seem to be about the difficulties of communication across gender, the violence of (especially male) language, the effects of being raised in a household that values quiet thought over emotion, and the damage done to a child by the separation of his parents. Michael Marcus, Ben’s father, has been driven with laughter and shushing from the house and is now confined, often underground, to the sparsely populated men’s side of the compound; Jane Marcus is coldly clear that they will not interact again. But this really is to domesticate the strangeness of the novel, which is told mostly from Ben’s damaged perspective, or even more opaquely via its found documents and catalogs. Disappointed as Jane is in her son’s mediocrity, she still writes that “it is on Ben’s language apparatus that we are pinning most of our hope, looking for unprecedented utterances. New words, old words said newly, nonwords, sounds. Maybe something else” (*NAW*, p. 232). Metafictionally, the novel can thus be read as suggesting that the strange and painful childhood of Ben (the character) will be redeemed if it results in the original literary voice of Marcus (the author). *Notable American Women* doesn’t just thematize these issues but reads, in light of Wittgenstein’s thought, as an account of a form of life other than ours—in a language sometimes still similar enough to be understood, at other times written in the genuinely other language of that new form.

In the *Age of Wire and String*, the balance between thematizing and uncannily performing the power of language tips over toward the latter. It begins with a brief

“Argument” that presents it as something like a work of anthropology, though that word never appears. “This book,” it begins, “is a catalog of the life project as prosecuted in the Age of Wire and String and beyond.” In conceit, it is thus something like a description of a form of life: “a collection of studies that might serve to clarify the terms obscured within every facet of the living program.” How the object of this study relates to more familiar times and places remains obscure, though my speculative suggestion is that this age takes place after the cataclysm and cult of Marcus’s novels. It is implied that its writer is part of the culture to be examined: “There is no larger task than that of cataloguing a culture, particularly when that culture has remained willfully hidden to the routine in-gazing practiced by professional disclosers, who, after systematically looting our country of its secrets, are now busy shading every example of so-called local color into their own banal hues.”⁴⁷

Strange as *The Age of Wire and String’s* initial, framing section is, it is far more immediately lucid than what follows. Here is just one example of its uncanny style:

Intercourse with resuscitated wife for particular number days, superstitious act designed to insure safe operation of household machinery. Electricity mourns the absence of the energy form (wife) within the household’s walls by stalling its flow to the outlets. As such, an improvised friction needs to take the place of electricity, to goad the natural currents back to the proper levels. This is achieved with dead wife. (*AWS*, p. 23)

I quote this passage in particular because Jess Row, drawing on the work of Roman Jakobson, offers it as the basis for his characterization of Marcus’s style as a kind of “learned aphasia,” and his first book as “a work of prose that is pure syntax, pure combination, which ‘communicates’ nothing and represents nothing.”⁴⁸ This could seem in line with Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, just itself” (*CV*, p. 58). But I take Wittgenstein to be suggesting not that a work of art

means nothing, but rather that the way it achieves meaning is not by communicating an idea, fully formed in the head of the artist, to an audience. It seems to me that, while the characterization of Marcus style's as aphasiac is illuminating, Row's specific gloss on that term is not. The quoted passage, for example, seems to mean quite a bit, even if one struggles to articulate just what that is. As in my glosses on Marcus's novels, it would appear to be the start of a domestic tale, however. A wife has left, perhaps after a fight, and the normal functioning of the household has broken down, but the narrator has romanced her back. Except, such a potential paraphrase leaves out the more than metaphorical connection between the wife's energy and household electricity—and that she is at once both resuscitated and dead. I don't think it is the case that Marcus's prose—even in its earliest, most heavily worked style—is pure syntax. Nor, in another possible sense of aphasiac, is it the case that the narrator has forgotten certain words and concepts, and so is forced to speak around them in a kind of thesaurusizing code. Rather, it is aphasic in the sense that contemporary English and the forms of life it encodes have been forgotten or otherwise slipped from full intelligibility. It still feels meaningful—deeply so—even though that meaning remains just out of reach, much as a bout of aphasia leaves us grasping for the word that accurately captures what we want to say. According the reading I've sketched here, that's because in his early fictions Marcus is essentially imagining a world in which our familiar forms of life become unstable and collapse, or at the very least have been smeared into half-recognizability, forcing us to re-cognize them.⁴⁹

An apt Wittgensteinian epigraph for Marcus's work would be: "I once said, perhaps rightly: The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover over the ashes" (*CV*, p. 3). Against the background of Marcus's uncanny

fictions, one might return to Wittgenstein's famous vignettes. If one willfully forgets the philosophical points scholars have decided they support—about rule following, about private language, etc.—one might see them anew as very strange short stories: about a group of beings of limited language and architectural forms building structures for unknown purposes, about a man who occasionally and inscrutably makes a mark, “S,” in his diary.

To characterize Wittgenstein's thought as uncanny might seem counterintuitive. After all, for Wittgenstein, more than just about any other philosopher, we live in language: forms of speaking and forms of living are completely intertwined. The key thought here, however, is that uncanniness isn't exactly opposed to being at home. To travel in an utterly foreign land is not uncanny. Rather, what is distinctive of uncanniness is an interplay of familiarity and strangeness, such that everything is just slightly off in an unsettling way (hence the uncanny valley is filled not by utterly inhuman automatons and animations, but those approaching, only not quite achieving, a fully lifelike quality). Novalis's claim that “Philosophy is actually homesickness—the *urge to be everywhere at home*” applies well to Wittgenstein's thought.⁵⁰ Though we live in language, we are always short of being fully at home in it. This is why philosophy of Wittgenstein's kind is necessary: his thinking focuses on the confusions and misalignments that remain, seeking to exorcize them. “What we do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” he writes (*PI*, §117). If Wittgenstein is thus responding to a certain uncanniness in our experience, his thought itself can also be characterized as uncanny, so central to it is the interplay between the familiar and unfamiliar. By focusing closely and at length on what is so familiar that we

barely notice it, Wittgenstein makes it explicit, and thereby unfamiliar, much in the way that repeating a word over and over can alienate you from its normal meaning, or looking at yourself in the mirror for too long can alienate you from your own appearance.

Having brought Wittgenstein together with a number of very recent writers, I conclude by revising Blanchot's image of ever-iterating languages into a more everyday one: ever-iterating new novels. Inasmuch as our language remains the same, Wittgenstein writes, it "keeps seducing us into asking the same questions," questions which might be confused rather than insightful (*CV*, p. 15). This thought, about language, is expressed in parallel about forms of life. One doesn't solve life problems, Wittgenstein suggests, rather one changes how one lives, living "in a way that will make what is problematic disappear" (*CV*, p. 27).⁵¹ But as soon as he writes this, he expresses ambivalence: "But don't we have the feeling that someone who sees no problem in life is blind to something important, even to the most important thing of all?" It thus seems to be suggested that we *should* always experience a certain uncanniness in life—to succeed in feeling at home everywhere would be possible only by covering over something essential. Wittgenstein is deeply ambivalent here, as he also expresses, if uncertainly, the hope that his work might effect "a change in the way people live which would make all these questions superfluous" (*CV*, p. 61).

Wittgenstein seems to see a life of uncertainty as itself problematic. Similarly, Cavell seems to see our relationship to language as fundamentally tragic. He writes that "we are the victims of the very words of which we are at the same time the masters; victims and masters of the fact of words" and that "The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us."⁵² Can we not, however, see constant questioning, reading, and writing as a form of life, and a quite attractive one at that? Nietzsche's criticisms of slave

morality are complicated, even overridden, by his paired suggestion that it is thereby that human beings become, for the first time, subtle and deep.⁵³ In much the same way, reading Wittgenstein and Davis on ordinary language can be taken to suggest not our tragic relation to it, but rather that way in which the fraught space that language opens up between us and the world is what makes life interesting. Recall the way in which Davis's narrator identifies herself as "one who works with words for a living." If one listens away from the idiomatic sense—getting paid—one remembers that we all work with words as part of our form of life. Writers bring but heightened skill and insight to this work. If no final, perfect language is possible, then literature, as a site privileged in its attunement to language, and specifically contemporary literature, as that attuned to the ways we currently use it—familiarily, strangely, uncannily—will remain perennially important.⁵⁴

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

² Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) and *Reckoning with the Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); G. L. Hagberg, *Meaning and Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Bernard Harrison, *What Is Fiction For?* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2015); Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, *A Different Order of Difficulty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). See as well the edited collections: *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, eds. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (London: Routledge, 2001); *The Literary Wittgenstein*, eds. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004); *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*, ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); *Wittgenstein on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); *Wittgenstein and Modernism*, eds. Michael LeMahiau and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017); *Wittgenstein and Literary Studies*, eds. Robert Chodat and John Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For a precise introduction to a Wittgensteinian way of thinking about literature, see John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially pp. 60–79.

³ See Andre Furlani, *Beckett After Wittgenstein* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

⁴ Almost all of these pairs are explicable at least in part due to the direct influence of one—not always the philosopher—on the other.

⁵ The germ of this paper originated when Rob Chodat told me he was teaching a graduate seminar on Wittgenstein and literary studies, and I began to wonder what fiction one might include on such a syllabus. I thank him and the students in the most recent iteration of this seminar for discussion of an earlier draft.

⁶ Lars Iyer, *Wittgenstein Jr* (New York: Melville House, 2014) and Philip Kerr, *A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: FSG, 1993).

⁷ For more connections between Wittgenstein and specific literary works, see Martin Klebes, *Wittgenstein's Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Theodore Ziolkowski, "Philosophers into Fiction" in *Philosophy and Literature*, 2015, Vol. 39(1): 271–284; Denis Mellier, "Wittgenstein Fiction" in *Le Savant fou*, ed. Helene Machinal (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013), pp. 303–325.

⁸ Wittgenstein circled the same ideas over and over throughout the later years of his career, so there is a great deal of overlap between manuscripts. After *Philosophical Remarks* and before the *Philosophical Investigations*, he wrote under the title *Philosophical Grammar* [*Philosophische Grammatik*], ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). At important moments, Wittgenstein emphasizes his key insights as being grammatical in nature. For example: "We have given, as it were, a *grammatical* explanation" in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 14; and "If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction" in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §307; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.

⁹ I reuse my title, but otherwise just a few phrases, from my review of Sachs's two books for *AGNI Online*.

¹⁰ Adam Ehrlich Sachs, *Inherited Disorders* (New York: Reagan Arts, 2016); hereafter abbreviated *ID*.

¹¹ "Our System" (*ID*, pp. 15–17), "Commentary" (*ID*, pp. 64–66), "Herb's Place" (*ID*, pp. 34–36), "The Constitutional Law Scholar's Traits" (*ID*, pp. 128–129), and "In a Vat" (*ID*, pp. 71–72).

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 7; hereafter abbreviated *CV*.

¹³ Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 27–28.

¹⁴ Sachs's "Concerto for a Corpse" (*ID*, pp. 20–22) is undoubtedly inspired by Wittgenstein's overbearing father and older brother Paul, for whom Maurice Ravel wrote the "Piano Concerto for the Left Hand" after Paul lost his right arm during World War I.

¹⁵ Harold Henry Joachim, who really assumed the Wykeham Professorship in 1919, was an idealist and developer of the coherence theory of truth—so Henry Hobson Fowler takes from him only the cadence of his name.

¹⁶ In Sachs's *The Organs of Sense*, a character inverts this thought, devoting his attention so wholly to his own blinking that, as he says, "I could actually no longer blink, I basically forgot how to blink, or rather I suddenly understood blinking too well now to do it, I saw *through* what it means to blink [...] I had utterly dismantled my blinking machine." Adam Ehrlich Sachs, *The Organs of Sense* (New York: FSG, 2019), pp. 38–39. "Utterly Inscrutable," on the other hand, sends up the overextension of this idea, with the son of a serial killer insisting "the people closest to us are sometimes the most opaque to us," despite years of laughably obvious evidence of his father's crimes (*ID*, pp. 167–168).

¹⁷ Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990). Wittgenstein's architectural work was the specific inspiration for Bernhard's novel *Correction*.

¹⁸ As part of his discussion of aspect seeing, Wittgenstein distinguishes between two kinds of seeing: "'I see this' (and then a description, a drawing, a copy)" versus the no less familiar but much harder to theorize "I see a likeness between these two" (*PI*, Part II, xi).

¹⁹ As Moi writes, jokes rely on a shared understanding, and a "failed joke reveals that we don't share enough of a world, of a form of life, to be spontaneously at ease together" (*Revolution of the Ordinary*, p. 147).

²⁰ In online interviews, Sachs lists Davis as one of his favorite writers and regularly identifies Bernhard as his favorite, which suggests another line from Wittgenstein to his work. *Inherited Disorders* follows *The Voice Imitator* formally with its very short stories, whereas Bernhard's rambling voice influences *The Organs of Sense*.

²¹ Padgett Powell, *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* (New York: Ecco, 2009).

²² Lydia Davis, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (New York: Picador, 2009), p. 527; hereafter abbreviated *CS*.

²³ Compare the stories of Kate Zambreno's *Screen Tests* (New York: Harper, 2019), which are short and fragmentary like Davis's, and sprinkled with references to Wittgenstein. Lacking any thematization of grammar, there is no resonance between them and Wittgenstein's thought.

²⁴ See too his remarks on referring to Excalibur after it breaks (*PI*, §§39, 44) and those on bodies, even while still living, "having" pains (*PI*, §286 and *passim*).

²⁵ Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 95.

²⁶ James Wood, "Mother Courage" in *The New Yorker* (March 31, 2014).

²⁷ Both from Judith Jarvis Thomson's oft-anthologized "A Defense of Abortion."

²⁸ Cavell is perhaps the exception that proves this rule. As Robert Chodat writes, "Cavell suggests how, in the stream of our lives, our concepts are never part of an inhuman system, but are applied in particular circumstances in light of particular forms of training that we receive. As we learn to speak—and in growing into the identities and existences that autobiographies typically trace—particular objects and situations become the 'samples' that, as Wittgenstein suggests, embody or express the words that we learn to apply." Robert Chodat, *The Matter of High Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 210–211. That Cavell weaves so much specificity into not just his autobiography (*Little Did I Know*, on which Chodat is commenting), but most all of his work, perhaps begins to explain why so many philosophers have struggled with it, while others revere it to an unusual degree.

²⁹ For more discussion of this topic, see Rush Rhees, "Wittgenstein's Builders—Recapitulation" in *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 151–169.

³⁰ *Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script* (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), p. 5. Ben Ware quotes as well Russell and Carnap describing Wittgenstein as akin to an artist. Ben Ware, *Dialectic of the Ladder* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 25.

³¹ See too "Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer" (p. 32), "Letter to a Marketing Manager" (pp. 80–81), "Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company" (pp. 136–138), "The Letter to the Foundation" (pp. 179–207), "Letter to a Hotel Manager" (pp. 227–231), and "Letter to the President of the American Biographical Institute, Inc." (pp. 279–281) in Lydia Davis, *Can't and Won't* (New York: FSG, 2014).

³² Davis notes that "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" "started as an actual, sincere piece of correspondence and then got carried away by its own language and turned into something too literary to send." Lydia Davis, *Essays One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), p. 20.

³³ Such is the form as well of Julie Schumacher's novel *Dear Committee Members* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), in which a professor turns the endless string of recommendation letters he must write into a ranting diary of decline—his own, his university's, and that of education generally.

³⁴ After quoting William James as saying "Our vocabulary is inadequate," Wittgenstein asks "Then why don't we introduce a new one? What would have to be the case for us to be able to?" (*PI*, §610; see too §120). Tellingly, he doesn't then answer these questions.

³⁵ Davis describes realizing that she could work “almost *entirely* from [her] own life” (*Essays One*, p. 9) but also insists that “Just because a story uses material from the writer’s life, I don’t think you can say that it’s her life, or that the narrator is her. As soon as you select the material from your life, and arrange it and write it in a stylized manner, it’s no longer really identical to that life and that person. “Lydia Davis, Art of Fiction N. 227” in *The Paris Review* 212 (Spring 2015): 171.

³⁶ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 65.

³⁷ Christopher J. Knight, “Lydia Davis’s Own Philosophical Investigation” in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 38, Iss. 2 (Summer 2008): 198–228, 293–294. Knight focuses on Davis’s one novel, *The End of the Story*. Davis’s second book of essays, which focuses on her work as a translator, includes only a few passing mentions of Wittgenstein.

³⁸ In Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 130.

³⁹ Peter Vernon, “Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*” in *The Yearbook of English Studies* 31 (2001): 118. In two other chains of connection to Wittgenstein, Marcus wrote about Thomas Bernhard for *Harper’s Magazine* in November 2006 and was supposed to interview David Markson for *Bookforum*, though his written questions were never answered.

⁴⁰ Richard B. Woodward, “Love Removal Machine” in *The Village Voice* (March 12, 2002): 62.

⁴¹ Ben Marcus, “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction” in *Harper’s Magazine* (October 2005): 42, 39. This essay is a rebuttal to Franzen’s infamous jeremiad about William Gaddis, “Mr. Difficult” in *The New Yorker* (September 30, 2002).

⁴² Ben Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet* (New York: Knopf, 2012), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *FA*.

⁴³ Connections between *The Flame Alphabet* and Judaism are the aspect of Marcus’s work that has so far drawn the most scholarly attention. See Inbar Kaminsky, “Epidemic Judaism: Plagues and their Evocation in Philip Roth’s *Nemesis* and Ben Marcus’s *The Flame Alphabet*” in *Philip Roth Studies*, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 (2014): 109-124 and Ashley Crawford, “Deconstruction: On Judaic Law and the Apocalypse of Language in Ben Marcus’ *The Flame Alphabet*” in *Religious Imaging in Millennialist America* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), pp. 159-197.

⁴⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David Pears and Brian McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 1974), §6.52. Brian Evenson, himself an author of uncanny fiction, writes that “Where Marcus differs from less successful experimenters is that rather than merely allowing science to turn inward, revealing the subjectivity innate to any apparently objective process, he forces the subjective pressure to deflect again outward—thus revealing an objectivity that can only be reached through the subjective.” Brian Evenson, “Rewiring the Culture” in *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 6, Iss. 2 (Jan. 1996).

⁴⁵ Marcus’s real mother was Jane Marcus, the feminist literary scholar, known especially for her work on Virginia Woolf.

⁴⁶ Ben Marcus, *Notable American Women* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 139; hereafter abbreviated *NAW*.

⁴⁷ Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String* (London: Granta, 1995), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *AWS*.

⁴⁸ Jess Row, “Beautiful Shame (or, What We Talk About When We Talk About White Writing)” in *White Flights* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019), p. 72. Marcus is a passing and extreme example for Row of the aesthetic championed by Gordon Lish, who edited *The Age of Wire and String*. Row’s larger target is the obscuring of race in Lish’s stable of authors—Raymond Carver, whose famous style is now understood to have been created largely by Lish’s heavy editorial hand, being the most prominent example. Row previously wrote on *Slate* about Marcus’s and Franzen’s essays.

⁴⁹ Lindsay Drager's *The Lost Daughter Collective* (Ann Arbor: Dzanc Books, 2017), stylistically similar to Marcus's fiction, features a more literal—and willed—aphasiac plotline via a father, "The Wrist Scholar," who is trying to rid the world of the concept of *wrists*, raising his daughter without it. This notion reads as an inversion of the idea, in Aristotle among others, that good concepts carve the world at its joints.

⁵⁰ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), p. 135.

⁵¹ Wittgenstein suggests further that, subsequent to a change of thinking or living, one doesn't just cease to see a problem, rather it becomes hard to even see why it could have bothered us in the first place (*CV*, p. 48).

⁵² Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" in *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 169, 171. Cavell approaches the uncanny through the standard figures of Hoffmann and Freud, Poe and Lacan.

⁵³ See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), sections 188, 195.

⁵⁴ This article first appeared, in shorter form, in *Philosophy and Literature* 46.1 (April 2022). Copyright Johns Hopkins University Press.