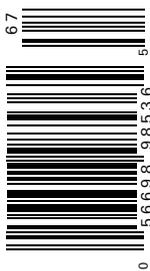


# Cabinet

A MAGAZINE OF ART AND CULTURE  
ISSUE 67 DREAMS  
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7



DISPLAY UNTIL 31 DECEMBER 2020



## WITTGENSTEIN'S DREAM, 13 JANUARY 1922

### Matthew Spellberg



#### DREAM

Last night I had a curious experience. It began like so: I dreamt that on some occasion (which one I've forgotten) my sister Mining made a flattering observation about my intellectuality. (She said, in a sense favorable to me, something like: "So you see right here the difference between minds.") I denied my special status by defending the others whom Mining had placed on a lower rung, but deep down I was pleased by her flattery and by the recognition of my elevated mind. Right then I awoke and was ashamed of my vanity and meanness, and as a kind of penance—my exact thoughts I no longer recall—I made the sign of the cross. I felt that at the very least I should bring myself to stand up or kneel down, but I was too lazy, and so I crossed myself sitting halfway up and then laid back down again. But then I felt that I must get up now, that God commanded it of me. It happened like this: I felt at once my utter nothingness, and I saw that God could command of me whatever he wanted with the understanding that my life would immediately become meaningless if I was disobedient. I thought immediately whether I could explain away the whole thing as an illusion and not at all God's command; but it became clear to me that if I did that,

then I would have to explain away all the religion in me as an illusion. That I would have to renounce the meaning of life. After some resistance I followed the command, turned on the light and got up. I stood in the room and had a terrible feeling. I went to the mirror and looked at myself, and my reflection looked so dreadful that I hid my face in my hands. I felt utterly defeated and in the hand of God, who could do with me as he pleased at any moment. I felt that God could force me to confess my meanness instantly, at any time. That he could at any moment force me to accept the worst for myself, and that I was not ready to accept the worst for myself. That I was not yet ready to renounce friendship and all earthly happiness. But would I ever be ready?! I had not yet been given permission to go back to bed but I was afraid of more commands and, like a bad soldier, like a deserter, I disobeyed

---

Above: A postcard of the Austrian village of Otterthal (formerly spelled Ottteral) sent by Ludwig Wittgenstein to William Eccles on 12 September 1925. Wittgenstein taught at the school that he identifies on the postcard from September 1924 until April 1926, when knocking a boy unconscious brought his schoolteaching career to an end.

orders and went in terrible fear back to bed. Turning off the light I had an accident. The fitting of the electric bulb had come unscrewed; I touched the electrical wire and was shocked. I pulled violently back and hit my elbow extremely painfully on the headboard. But the severe pain came as a deep relief. It distracted me somewhat from my inner feelings. Thus [I] lay there for some time with a horrible feeling and was afraid to fall asleep, so that in a dream my situation wouldn't come back in all its clarity to my consciousness and I wouldn't have to accept the worst for myself or lose my wits. I then fell asleep and dreamt no more, or rather not of this. Early in the morning I felt quite normal. Now I am downright feeble and washed out.

Like I said, last night I glimpsed my utter Nothingness. God deigned to show it to me. The whole time I thought of Kierkegaard and believed that my situation was "Fear and Trembling."<sup>1</sup>

#### COMMENTARY

In the early morning of 13 January 1922, Ludwig Wittgenstein was living in the village of Trattenbach in Lower Austria, where he had served as the schoolmaster for little over a year. The sheet of paper that records this dream and dream-aftermath also contains, up top, plans for the week's lessons—about Magellan; the surfaces of a pyramid; the area of a regular hexagon; the geography of Asia; and the human body. ("Skeleton o. Man," he notes, "Joints, Tendons, Muscles.") The dream follows right on the heels of his designs for the daytime, just a single skipped line between them.

Wittgenstein had renounced academic philosophy after witnessing firsthand the carnage of World War I. In 1919, though he was still preparing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for publication, he undertook a training course to become a primary school teacher. He entered this new profession with his customary refusal to compromise, and a counterweighting ballast of self-doubt and loathing. He requested a post in a poor, rural community where he knew the work would be especially difficult. Passionate for practical education, he taught botany by taking the children into the fields, and astronomy by summoning them at night to his telescope. He boiled dead cats until their flesh fell off the bones so that he could teach anatomy from the skeletons directly. He drilled mathematics for hours, inviting his most promising pupils to stay after school for private lessons. He demanded absolute honesty from his students and tried to imbue them with his

anarcho-Tolstoyan Christianity; when the local deacon taught the children the Catholic catechism, he was heard audibly to mumble, "Nonsense."

The villagers accorded him a grudging respect when he fixed the broken-down steam engine at the local wool factory. Otherwise they thought him an effete crank, suspected he might be an atheist, and were afraid to leave him alone with their children for too long. For his part, Wittgenstein quickly went from praising the beauty of the place and celebrating his duties there to telling Bertrand Russell, in a letter sent all the way to China, that despite the dismal nature of human beings in general, "here they are much more good-for-nothing and irresponsible than elsewhere." After two years there, he would leave the town under rumors that he'd beaten a child to the point of a bloody nose. More such allegations of overzealous corporal punishment would prove the end of his teaching career some four years later when, in another village nearby, Wittgenstein knocked a boy unconscious. One Herr Piribauer, whose own daughter had often been boxed on the ears in Wittgenstein's class, ran to the police station to have the philosopher apprehended. But the only policeman was out of town, and Wittgenstein fled that night to Vienna.<sup>2</sup>

This dream came to Wittgenstein near the beginning of his tormented school-teaching interlude (and less than a year after the publication of the *Tractatus*). His sister Hermine, whom he called Mining, gratifies his vanity; while still in the dream, he tries to disavow her compliment, but knows that deep down he loves to feel superior in someone else's eyes. Then, awake, he's disgusted with himself, with his vanity for sure, but also, one presumes, with his cheap hypocrisy, his dishonest defense of the slighted parties, whoever they were. He makes a more or less automatic and trite gesture of contrition. And in this moment God comes to him in rage and discipline, and shows him his own absolute Nothingness, his *Nichtigkeit*. His lowness, vulgarity, and meanness—*Gemeinheit*, from *gemein*, "common"—has brought the Whirlwind to his bedroom.

Wittgenstein's perpetual crisis of faith lay in his unshakable fear of inner betrayal. *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*: especially in the realm of ethics, where no language can ever penetrate the divine mystery of the good. In fact, on the contrary, language is almost certain to betray the good, to

cheapen it with sophistry. But actions also—even heroic, noble, virtuous, self-abnegating, *Christian* actions—can betray just as easily as language can. They too can serve vanity; they too can be an empty and lazy making of the cross. Wittgenstein's stygian solution to this unhappy epiphany is to accept that you are Nothingness, and so give up all pretensions of agency, save one, before the terrifying knowledge of God. God is omnipotent as a consequence of his omniscience; no flood could drown you as deeply as His definitive appraisal of your unworth. There is only one choice left, the choice to accept God and let Him act through you, or to call Him an illusion and so renounce *Sinn*, "meaning," become a man who is the moral equivalent of Chomsky's nonsense sentences: *colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. Wittgenstein was relieved that night to hurt his elbow, for the transformative fierceness of pain was a reprieve from the familiar torment of knowing who he was.

Wittgenstein paid careful attention to his dreams, and wrote many of them down. He had dreams of prayer rugs and snakes, of waterwheels and of a homicidal Jew named Vertsagt or Pferzagt. ("Must there be a Jew behind every indecency?" he, a Jew, reports his dream-self thinking.) He had other dreams that stoked his vanity, such as one in which his siblings and brother-in-law Jerome were astonished by his musical ability. ("I woke up and was irritated, or rather ashamed, at my vanity."<sup>3</sup>) Once he wrote to John Maynard Keynes asking if he should come to England, implying that it all depended on whether his old friend Keynes would want to see him again or was, instead, sick to death of his stupidity. Keynes rolled his eyes, said of course he should come, and advanced him £10 for the journey. "I'm awfully curious how we are going to get on with one another," Wittgenstein wrote back. "It will be exactly like a dream."<sup>4</sup>

Wittgenstein was interested in Freud, Otto Weininger, and the anthropology of James Frazer, but in the case of this dream, Kierkegaard came first to his mind. "Abraham cannot be mediated; in other words he cannot speak," we learn in *Fear and Trembling*. This may also be true in the dream-state, a state of doing without reflecting, of attending without distance, and, therefore, like Mt. Moriah, a state that seems, at least from a distance, like the absurd. Upon waking, Wittgenstein looks in the mirror and is horrified by what he sees; waking brings with it the unwelcome capacity for

self-reflection, and therefore despair. In this sense, Wittgenstein's wish to be a speck in the hand of God, doing His bidding and having no capacity to act otherwise, is perhaps his Caliban cry to dream again. While awake, he feels God's command, but also his capacity for disobedience, a fallen state if ever there was one. In the matrix of unreflection that is the dream, there is sin, but also redemption. By contrast, waking life and its peculiar, hyperlinguistic forms of cognition are good mainly for that incomplete and intermediary stage between sin and redemption—confession.

Ray Monk suggests that one reason why Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with a passage from Augustine is because he believed philosophy must always begin in confession.<sup>5</sup> The great obstacle to understanding is pride, not lack of intelligence. To make confession "dismantles" pride, and paves the way for understanding. Awake we can dismantle, and understand. But in sleep, we're back in the envelope of who and what we are, and our words can no longer obtain in the games for which they were created. There is being in dreams, but not philosophizing. This may provide some insight into Wittgenstein's final philosophical remark, written down two days before his death: "I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says 'I am dreaming,' even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream 'it is raining,' while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually concerned with the noise of the rain."<sup>6</sup> One might imagine a note of relief at the thought that, if you never wake up, this particular problem disappears.

<sup>1</sup> The dream is recorded on a sheet of paper, presumably torn from Wittgenstein's journal, bearing the date 13.1.1922. It was found in the *Nachlass* of Rudolf Koder, and is now in the National Library of Austria. It is published in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Licht und Schatten: Ein nächtliches (Traum-)Erlebnis und ein Brief-Fragment*, ed. Ilse Somavilla (Innsbruck, Austria: Haymon, 2004). My translation here is, so far as I know, the first into English.

<sup>2</sup> The details and quotations in these first two paragraphs are taken primarily from Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Denkbewegungen: Tagebücher 1930–1932, 1936–1937*, ed. Ilse Somavilla (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999), pp. 73–74.

<sup>4</sup> For all dreams in this paragraph other than the one cited in footnote 3, see Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pp. 230, 276, and 279.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pp. 366–367.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §676, in Wittgenstein, *Major Works: Selected Philosophical Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 439.