

The Yale Review

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The Yale Review

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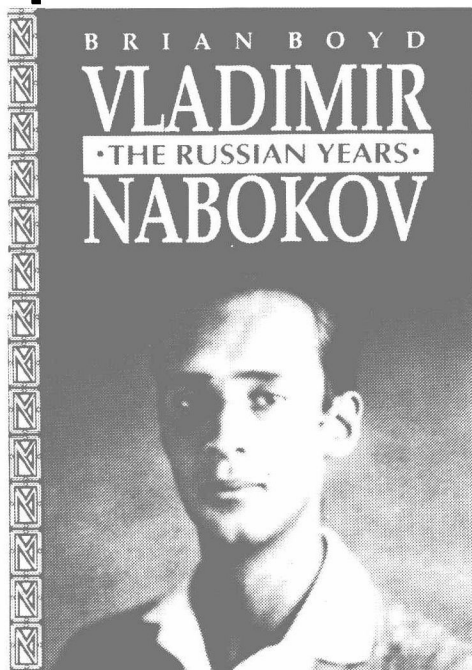
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Until 1 July 1991, the editorial office of *The Yale Review* will be located in the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University, at 53 Wall Street. Mailing address: 1902A Yale Station, New Haven, Connecticut 06520. US ISSN 0044-0124. Advertising, sales, and subscription office: Yale University Press, 92A Yale Station, New Haven, Connecticut 06520. Subscribers who do not receive a copy will be sent a replacement free of charge on notification within three months following the month of publication. Designed by Nancy Ovedovitz and printed by Capital City Press, Montpelier, Vermont. Published quarterly by Yale University Press. Copyright 1990 by Yale University.

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Edgar Bowers received the Bollingen Prize and the Harriet Monroe Prize in 1989. His book *For Louis Pasteur* was published by Princeton University Press this year.

Killarney Clary's first collection of poems, *Who Whispered Near Me*, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in May 1989 and is about to be released in paperback. Greenhouse Review Press published her chapbook *By Me, By Any, Can and Can't Be Done* in 1980. She is currently working on a second book of poetry.

Henri Cole is the author of *The Marble Queen* (Atheneum) and *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* (Knopf).

James Conant, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh, is the author of several articles on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Two of his essays are closely related to the one published here: "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense" (in *The Pursuits of Reason*, edited by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, forthcoming from Texas Tech University Press) and "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" (in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, Bucknell University Press, 1989).

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Jeanne Schinto is the author of *Shadow Bands*, a collection of stories. Her first novel, *Children of Men*, will be published by Persea Books in March 1991.

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Jonas Zdanys has published nine collections of poems and translations, most recently *Chimeras in the Tower: Selected Poems of Henrikas Radauskas* (Wesleyan University Press). He is preparing several new books for publication, including a volume of his poems in English entitled *Water Light*, a collection of his poems in Lithuanian to be published in Lithuania, and translations of works by the Lithuanian writers Sigitas Geda, Nijolė Miliauskaitė, and Ichokas Meras. He is Assistant to the President of Yale University.

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KILLARNEY CLARY

"In Doubt and Thus Alive"

Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957–1987, by John Ashbery, edited by David Bergman, Knopf.

In bringing others to an experience we have the responsibility to try carefully and without fear to discuss not only our ideas and how we question the ideas, but also how we feel, what we see, from what vantage we observe; and if the description comes only with struggle and confusion, our frustration and persistence prove our wonder. In *Reported Sightings*, John Ashbery brings us a finely composed but blessedly raw collection of essays about art, without daring us to spar on his ground. Rather, he invites us to take what we want, and in doing so he offers the freedom to observe. His work is various and uncertain, something that happens *to* us, and theory is small beside it.

Sometimes, in the attempt to comprehend and explain art without the help of the critic, what is most revealing is our inability to make a clear statement, wrap up an opinion and walk away with it. We aren't tidy enough. I believe Ashbery revels in the messiness of life and his own responses to it, not carelessly but with respect and awe. He asks us to "accept art for what it is: hybrid, transitional, impure and magically alive." He doesn't help us to package the experience, but to open it.

In part, what makes this approach possible is a kind of detachment. "I feel basically disinterested — not uninterested — in art." Ashbery's disinterestedness allows him to see more broadly. He uses personal examples, often commenting upon art as casually as we might remark on a good dinner. He doesn't avoid himself in what he sees; on the contrary, he admits that a great deal of any insight is subjective. There is a calmness to the distancing. If Ashbery doesn't seem to take art seriously, it is because he

recognizes the equal weight in all influences as influences. He's not the schoolteacher who would confiscate the child's yo-yo. A toy is as instructive as a lecture. Ashbery is able to make judgments, but quick to allow that art's impressions on anyone else are not something he could or would want to judge. The act of perception includes a personal, concrete reaction. "Lesser artists correct nature in a misguided attempt at heightened realism, forgetting that the real is not only what one sees but also a result of how one sees it—inattentively, inaccurately perhaps, but nevertheless that is how it is coming through to us, and to deny this is to kill the life of the picture." And to deny this is to see partially, believing in an absolute interpretation. To imagine entirety, we must discard finality.

Despite how much of Ashbery's self is in his perceptions, I have no sense that he takes his relationship to his criticism personally. He doesn't appear to measure himself by his work. What comes from art through him to us is, therefore, little tried, little decorated. Certainly as a writer he chooses his words with purpose, but the purpose is not to define himself or to impress. Instead, he attempts through language to give us the many possibilities contained in visual art, to suggest the marvelous uncertainty inherent in art and life, maybe even to remind us how changeable we are as viewers and interpreters. He allows us to hear his doubts and fluctuations.

The inner conversations that Ashbery reveals are not only his questioning of his opinions. This is not just an intellectual discussion; there is a great deal of heart in it. When theorizing isn't appropriate or can't take him far enough, he admits it, crediting the art for doing to him emotionally something as valuable as theory. His senses have their say, too, and he loves beauty, unashamedly. On Braque: "His colors remind one of tea, wallpaper, lemons, ivy, pewter, and autumn light seeping through curtains. In short, of cool, dry, reflective things."

Ashbery sees that we as humans are multifaceted beings. Most of us are out of balance, seeing with only part of ourselves at any one time, and that isn't enough. "Our eyes, minds and

feelings do not exist in isolated compartments but are part of each other, constantly crosscutting, consulting and reinforcing each other. An art constructed according to . . . canons . . . will wither away since, having left one or more of the faculties out of account, it will eventually lose the attention of the others." He supports internal friction, working the instruments of perception against themselves, never putting all power in one part. To feed the strong faculty in oneself is to starve the weaker.

There are ways to sustain and strengthen weaker faculties, ways to seek balance. In writing of surrealism, Ashbery recognizes abandonment as a useful exercise. "Real freedom would be to use [automatic writing] where it could be of service and to correct it with the conscious mind where indicated." Without that correction or balance, what many consider to be freedom is such an overcompensation that it becomes a new trap. "The dream of escaping from dreams is a dream like the others." Much of art tries for an extreme, sometimes at the expense of beauty or believability. It stretches what we accept as possible, gives us new limits within which we might balance, and often shocks us. If we can use it, if we can accept surprise and mystery within ordinary life, we may be better equipped to explore immediacy and more able to benefit from discomfort.

Ashbery values external friction also, recommends stepping outside of usual surroundings, as he practiced himself by living in Paris for years. "The feeling of being a stranger even in moments of greatest rapport with one's adopted home is the opposite of the American 'acceptance world' which so often ends up by stifling an artist's originality through the efficacious means of over-encouragement." He quotes from the artist Caroline Lee, who was given the opportunity, through a grant, to be "anonymous in the sense that [her] habits, reactions, impulses would neither expect nor find comprehending or knowing reactions." Allow yourself to be surprised by yourself, at almost any cost, Ashbery seems to say. Make yourself at least a little uncomfortable. Work against acceptance which might lead toward habit which will lull you and your audience to sleep. Ashbery

knows the difficulty in working against the habitual self. Certainly his own vibrancy is due in part to a resistance to cliché, including personal cliché. On de Kooning he writes: "It is good not to do the same thing all the time, even at the risk of doing nothing: this too will eventually take its place in the scheme of things." And as much as comfort is a trap, Ashbery admits its allure in his love of everydayness. If he were to deny the power of comfort he would fall into the trap of denial, a kind of habit in itself.

In writing of Fairfield Porter, Ashbery supports a lack of manipulation: "The whole point was to put down what was there wherever he happened to be, not with approval but with respect." Work with what you have. To do so is to learn. When Ashbery taught a poetry writing workshop in which I was a student, he passed out to each of us an envelope of materials: clippings, postcards, photographs—a different set for each student. As with other assignments, he treated it lightly, offering that small conglomerations of stuff had, at times, helped him to write. What I saw years later was that he had handed us each a little life: maybe it meant something; maybe he had selected the pieces in my envelope to address me in particular, maybe not. Maybe the jewelry store will be robbed while I am eating a sandwich. Perhaps I will someday have a cat. "There are no rules for anything, no ideas in art, just objects and materials that combine, like people, in somewhat mysterious ways. . . . We are left with our spontaneity and that life itself is a series of improvisations during the course of which it is possible to improve on oneself but never to the point where one doesn't have to improvise."

Improvisation, spontaneity—not rules, but ways. And if the way becomes a rule it will no longer serve the artist (or housewife or pilot) and the artist will no longer serve. Ashbery quotes Fairfield Porter: "The truest order is what you already find there, or that will be given if you don't try for it. When you arrange, you fail."

The mystery of art—what we see in it, what it does to us—is unrestricted. The one who peeled the paper off his walls to find

the "something fascinating beyond the surface pattern" is the same John Ashbery who writes of a "meaningful ambiguity that will give the work the widest possible range of associations." He lacks presumption. What any one person can know is limitless if he or she is honest and recognizes that reaction is not explanation or justification. The path that understanding takes here leads to a hysterical widening, for art, too, is reaction. Some influences are more powerful, useful, worthy than others, but all are fair game because all play upon the individual and upon each individual's many selves.

The purpose of art in this context is not only to reveal beauty to us through the senses or to increase our understanding, but also to allow us to do new things. So much of art breaks rules or habitual treatments. On Jackson Pollock: "It is a gamble against terrific odds. Most reckless things are beautiful in some way, and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing." Art mustn't take the easy out of one-sided, closed perfection, but at best remains vulnerable and risky so that we are inspired to find a new way of seeing.

To remain innocent is essential if we are to grow. Good art can knock us down to child-size, which can make us uneasy. Sometimes our acquired knowledge cannot protect us. More often we deny the impact and try quickly to reach a conclusion so that we can move away, claiming to move forward. The acquisition of knowledge, culture, expertise often takes precedence over experience. But life is not what is acquired. Ashbery lives *with* art. In no way does he own it—not in reasoning, not in trying to convince—and yet he gives it to us as readers in the most immediate manner, with uncomfortable delight.

JAMES CONANT

Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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