

The Empty Plenum:
David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress

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But what other philosopher has found the antidote to illusion in the particular and repeated humility of remembering and tracking the uses of humble words, looking philosophically as it were beneath our feet rather than over our heads?

—S. Cavell

There is nobody at the window in the painting of the house, by the way.

I have now concluded that what I believed to be a person is a shadow.

If it is not a shadow, it is perhaps a curtain.

As a matter of fact it could actually be nothing more than an attempt to imply depths, within the room.

Although in a manner of speaking all that is really in the window is burnt sienna pigment. And some yellow ochre.

In fact there is no window either, in that same manner of speaking, but only shape.

So that any few speculations I may have made about the person at the window would therefore now appear to be rendered meaningless, obviously.

Unless of course I subsequently become convinced that there is somebody at the window all over again.

I have put that badly.

—*Wittgenstein's Mistress* (54-55)

Tell them I have had a wonderful life.

—Wittgenstein on deathbed, '51

CERTAIN NOVELS NOT ONLY cry out for critical interpretations but actually try to direct them. This is probably analogous to a piece of music that both demands and defines the listener's movements, say like a waltz. Frequently, too, those novels that direct their own critical reading concern themselves thematically with what we might consider highbrow or intellectual issues—

stuff proper to art, engineering, antique lit., philosophy, etc. These novels carve out for themselves an interstice between flat-out fiction and a sort of weird cerebral *roman à clef*. When they fail, as my own first long thing did, they're pretty dreadful. But when they succeed, as I claim David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* does, they serve the vital & vanishing function of reminding us of fiction's limitless possibilities for reach & grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, & for sanctifying the marriages of cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping, marriages that in our happy epoch of technical occlusion & entertainment-marketing seem increasing consummatable only in the imagination. Books I tend to associate with this INTERPRET-ME phenomenon include stuff like *Candide*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus's *Stranger*. These five are works of genius of a particular kind: they shout their genius. Markson, in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, tends rather to whisper, but his w.o.g.'s no less successful; nor—particularly given the rabid anti-intellectualism of the contemporary fiction scene—seems it any less important. It's become an important book to me, anyway. I'd never heard of this guy Markson, before, in '88. And have, still, read nothing else by him. I ordered the book mostly because of its eponymous title; I like to fancy myself a fan of the work of its namesake. Clearly the book was/is in some way 'about' Wittgenstein, given the title. This is one of the ways an INTERPRET-ME fiction clues the critical reader in on what the book's to be seen as on a tertiary level 'about': the title: *Ulysses'* title, its structure as Odyssean/Telemachean map (succeeds); R. Goldstein's *The Mind-Body Problem* (really terrible); Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (succeeds exactly to the extent one ignores the invitation to hop around in it); Burroughs's *Queer & Junkie* (fail successfully (?)). W/r/t novels like these it's often hard to see the difference between a title and an epigraph, except for quotidian facts like the latter's longer, overter, & attributed. Another way to invite a kind of correspondence-interpretation is to drop the name of a real person like bricks throughout the text, as Bruce Duffy does in his so-called fictional biography of Wittgenstein, the execrable 1988 *The World as I Found It*, in which, despite loud 'this-is-made-up' disclaimers, Duffy brings to bear such an arsenal of historical fact and allusion that the critical reader can't help but confuse the homosexuality-crazed fictional 'Wittgenstein' with the real and way more complex & interesting Wittgenstein. Another way for a novel to linearize its reading is to make an intellectual shibboleth serve a repetitive narrative function: eg, in *Candide*, Pangloss's continual 'All for the best in the best of all possible worlds' is a neon sign out front of what is, except for its end, little more than a poisonously funny parody of the metaphysics of Leibniz.¹

¹. . . one that succumbs to the hazard of most parody and gets the point of Leibniz's best-of-all-possible-worlds stuff wrong, by the way.

Kate, the monadic narrator of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, gets a lot of her master's remarks wrong, too—the philosopher's better-known words and ideas are sprayed, skewed, all over the book, from its epigraph about sand to the *Tractatus's* 'The world is everything that is the case' to *Investigatory* speculations on adhesive vs. magnetic 'tape' that unequivocally summon the later Wittgenstein's concerns over words' 'family resemblances' to one another. Contra Voltaire, though, when Markson's Kate recalls lines & concepts incorrectly her errors serve the ends not of funny propaganda but of both original art and original interpretation. Because *Wittgenstein's Mistress*,² w/r/t its eponymous master, does more than just quote Wittgenstein in weird ways, or allude to his work, or attempt to be some sort of dramatization of the intellectual problems that occupied and oppressed him. Markson's book renders, imaginatively & concretely, the very bleak mathematical world Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* revolutionized philosophy by summoning via abstract argument. *WM* is, in a weird way, the colorization of a very old film. Though Wittgenstein's philosophical stuff is far from dead or arid, *WM* nevertheless succeeds at transposing W's intellectual conundra into the piquant qualia of lived—albeit bizarrely lived—experience. The novel quickens W's early work, gives it a face, for the reader, that the philosophy does not & cannot convey . . . mostly because Wittgenstein's work is so hard and takes so long just to figure out on a literal level that the migranous mental gymnastics required of his reader all but quash the dire emotional implications of W's early metaphysics. His mistress, though, asks the question her master in print does not: What if somebody really had to live in a *Tractatusized* world?

I don't mean to suggest that Markson's achievement here consists just in making abstract philosophy 'accessible' to an extramural reader, or that *WM* is in itself simple. Actually, though its prose & monotone are hauntingly pedestrian, the novel's diffracted system of allusions to everything from antiquity to Astroturf are a bitch to trace out; and the concentric circularity that replaces linear development as its plot's 'progression' makes a digestive reading of *WM* a challenging & protracted affair. Markson's is not a pop book, and it's not decocted philosophy or a Duffy-esque docudrama-of-the-week. Rather, for me, the novel does artistic & emotional justice to the politico-ethical implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's abstract mathematical metaphysics, makes what is designed to be a mechanism pulse, breathe, suffer, live, etc. In so doing, it pays emotional tribute to a philosopher who by all evidence lived in personal torment over the questions too many of his academic followers have made into elaborate

²Hereafter abbreviated *WM*.

empty exercise. That is, Markson's *WM* succeeds in doing what few philosophers glean & what neither myriad biographical sketches nor Duffy's lurid revisionism succeeds in communicating: the consequences, for persons, of the *practice of theory*; the difference, say, between espousing 'solipsism' as a metaphysical 'position' & waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, leaving you the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment & world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea. Put otherwise, Markson's book transcends, for me, its review-enforced status of 'intellectual tour de force' or 'experimental achievement': what it limns, as an immediate study of depression & loneliness, is far too moving to be the object of either exercise or exorcism. The ways in which the book is moving, and the formal ingenuity by which it transforms metaphysics into angst and so reveals philosophy as being first and last about spirit—these are enough for me, right now, to think of the novel as one of the U.S. decade's best, to deplore its relative neglect & its consignment by journals like the *NYTBR* to smarmy review by a young Carverian.³ But add to the novel's credits a darkly pyrotechnic achievement in the animation of intellectual history—the way *WM* so completely demonstrates how one of the smartest & most important contributors to modern thought could have been such a personally unhappy son of a bitch—& the book becomes, if you're the impotent unlucky sort whose beliefs inform his stomach's daily state, a special kind of great book, literally profound, and probably destined, in its & time's fullness, to be a quiet classic.

One reason *WM* whispers, as both a kind of classic & an interpretation-director, is that its charms & stratagems are very indirect. It's not only a sustained monologue by a person of gender opposite the author's, it is structured halfway between shaggy-dog joke and deadly serious allegory. A concrete example of how the prose here works appears as the second epigraph *supra*. Devices like repetition, obsessive return, free-/unfree association swirl in an uneasy suspension throughout. Yet they communicate. This studied indirection, a sustained error that practically compels misprision, is how Kate convinces us that, if she is forcene, so must we be: the subtextual emotive agenda under the freewheeling disorder of short isolated paragraphs, under the flit of thought, under the continual struggle against the slipping sand of English & the drowning-pool of self-consciousness—a seductive order not only in but *via* chaos—compels complete & uneasy acquiescence, here. The technique rings as true as a song we can't quite place. You could call this technique 'deep nonsense,' meaning I guess a linguistic flow of strings, strands, loops and quiffs that through the very manner of its formal construction flouts the ordinary cingula of 'sense' and

³viz. Amy Hempel in the *Review's* 22 May 1988 encyclical.

through its defiance of sense's limits manages somehow to 'show' what cannot ordinarily be 'expressed.' Good comedy often functions the same way.⁴ So does good advertising, today.⁵ So does a surprising amount of good philosophy. So, usually on a far less explicit level than *WM*'s, can great fiction.

The start of *WM* has Kate painting messages on empty roads: 'Somebody is living in the Louvre,' etc. The messages are for anyone who might come along to see. 'Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages.' The novel's end involves the use, not the mention,⁶ of such a message: 'Somebody is living on this beach.' Except use on what &/or whom? It's probably not right, as I think I did *supra*, to call this novel's form a monologue.⁷ Kate is typing it. It's written & not spoken. Except it's not like a diary or journal. Nor is it a 'letter.' Because of course a letter to *whom*, if there's no one else at all? Anyway, it's self-consciously written. I personally have grown weary of most texts that are narrated self-consciously as *written*, as '*textes*.' But *WM* is different from the Barthian/post-Derridean self-referential hosts. Here the conscious rendition of inditement not only rings true but serves essential functions. Kate is not a 'writer.' By vocation a painter, her time at the typewriter is thoroughly & terribly avocational. She is shouting into her typing paper's blankness. Her missive is a function of need, not art—a kind of long message in a big bottle. I need to admit here that I have a weird specular stance with respect to this novel's form as *written*. I am someone who tries to write, who right now more & more seems to need to write, daily; and who hopes less that the products of that need are lucrative or even liked than simply received, read, seen. And *WM*, in a deep-nonsensical way that's much more effective than argument or allegory'd be, speaks to why I'm starting to think most people who somehow must write must write. The need to indite, inscribe—be its fulfillment exhilarating or palliative or, as is more usual, neither—springs from the doubly-bound panic felt by most persons who spend a lot of time up in their own personal heads. On one side—the side a philosopher'd call 'radically skeptical' or 'solipsistic'—there's the feeling that one's head is, in some sense, the whole world, when the imagination becomes not just a more

⁴cf 'Who's on First?'

⁵cf Audi's '89 slogan for print adverts: 'It sets the standard by ignoring it.'

⁶A distinction of Frege, a Wittgenstein-era titan: to mention a word or phrase is to speak about it, w/ at least implicit quotation marks: eg 'Kate' is a four-letter name; to use a word or phrase is to mention its referent: eg Kate is, by default, the main character of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. . .

⁷Unless you can empty your head of connotation and translate the word literally from the Attic Greek—then it probably has a Marksonian poignancy no other term'd have. . .

congenial but a realer environment than the Big Exterior of life on earth. Markson's book's first epigraph, from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, invites & imposes this first interpretation of Kate's bind & its relation to her 'typing'.⁸ The need to get the words & voices not only out—outside the 16-inch diameter of bone that both births & imprisons them—but also *down*, trusting them neither to the insubstantial country of the mind nor to the transient venue of cords & air & ear, seems for Kate—as for anyone from a Flaubert to a diarist to a letter-fiend—a necessary affirmation of an Outside, some Exterior one's written record can not only communicate with but *inhabit*. Picasso, harking to Velasquez as does Markson to Kierkegaard & Wittgenstein, did big things for the idea of visual artworks as not just 'representations' but also things, objects . . . but I can think of no lit.-practitioner (as opposed to New-Critical or poststructural theorist) who's captured the textual *urge*, the emotional urgency of text as both sign and *thing*, as perfectly as has Markson here.⁹ The other side of the prenominate 2-bind—the side rendered explicitly by *WM*'s opening and close—involves why people who write need to do as a mode of *communication*. It's what an abstractor like Laing calls 'ontological insecurity'—why we sign our stuff, impose it on friends, mail it out in brown manila trying to get it printed. 'I EXIST,' is the impulse that throbs under most voluntary writing—& all good writing. And 'I EXIST' would have been, in my ungraceful editorial hands, the title of Markson's novel. But Markson's final choice, far better than his working *Keeper of the Ghosts* (deep but not nonsensical), is probably better than mine. Kate's text, one big message that someone is living on this beach, is itself obsessed & almost defined by the possibility that it does not exist, that Kate does not exist. And the novel's title, if we reflect a moment, serves ends as much thematic as allusive. Wittgenstein was gay. He never had a mistress.¹⁰ He did, though, have a teacher and friend, one Bertrand Russell, who, with his student's encouragement, before the '20s trashed the *Cogito*-tautology by which Descartes had relieved 300 years' worth of neurotic intellectuals of the worrisome doubt that they existed. Russell pointed out that the *Cogito*'s 'I think and therefore am' is in fact invalid: the truth of 'I think' entails only the existence of *thinking*, as the truth of 'I write' yields only the existence of

⁸The ep. is 'What an extraordinary change takes place . . . when for the first time the fact that everything depends upon how a thing is thought first enters the consciousness, when, in consequence, thought in its absoluteness replaces an apparent reality.' . . . from 'The Task of Becoming Subjective' in the *Postscript*—maybe worth noting that the form of 'change' in the Danish is accusative rather than nominative, & that what Markson renders as 'extraordinary' appears in some other translations as 'terrible' or 'fearful.'

⁹. . . maybe Beckett in *Molloy*. . .

¹⁰Too, 'mistress' conveys the exquisite loneliness of being the linguistic beloved of a man who could not, in emotional practice, confer identity on a woman via 'love.'

text. To posit an 'I' that's *doing* the thinking/writing is to beg the very question Descartes had started out impaled on. . . . But so anyway, Kate's situation in *WM* is doubly lonely. After having spent years 'looking' for people,¹¹ she has literally washed up on shore, now sits naked & in menses before a manual typewriter, producing words that, for her & us, render only the words themselves 'ontologically secure'; the belief in either a reader for them or a (meta)physical presence producing them would require a kind of quixoticism Kate's long since lost or resigned.

What keeps the title from being cute or overheavy is that Kate really *is* Wittgenstein's mistress, the ghostly curator of a world of history, artifacts, & *memories*—which memories, like TV images, one can access but never really own—and of *facts*, facts about both the (former) world and her own mental habits. Hers is the affectless language of fact, and it seems less like by skill than by the inevitable miracle of something that had to be written that Markson directs our misprision in order to infuse statements that all take the form of raw data-transfer¹² with true & deep emotional import.

Kate's spare, aphoristic style, her direct & correct quotation of 'The world is everything that is the case,' and her obsessive need to get control of the facts that have become her interior & exterior life—all this stuff directs the reader to run, not walk, to Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.¹³ The reason why I, who am no critic & tend to approach books I admire with all the hesitancy of the blind before walls, feel I get to assert all the flat indicatives about Kate's plight above is that so much of *WM* so clearly sends one to the *Tractatus* for critical 'clarification.' This isn't a weakness of the novel. Though it's kind of miraculous that it's not. And it doesn't mean that *WM* is just written 'in the margins of the *Tractatus* in the way *Candide* marginalizes *The Monadology* or *Nausea* simply 'dramatizes' part three of *L'Être et le néant*. Rather *WM*, if it is any one thing for me, is a kind of philosophical sci-fi. Ie, it's an imaginative portrait of what it would be like actually to *live* in the sort of world the logic & metaphysics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* posits. This sort of world started out, for Wittgenstein, to be logical heaven. It ends up being (I opine) a metaphysical hell; and the way its philosophic picture rasped against the sort of life and worldview Wittgenstein the man thought worthwhile was (I claim) a

¹¹ . . . though she never says what's true: that it was at first for a particular person, her husband, then only eventually for just anyone at all. . . .

¹²(data transferred to herself, or her self-consciousness, or to whoever may come down the pike, or to both herself and someone else, or to neither, or maybe all that's supposed to be left there is the sand of English, awaiting tides)

¹³hereafter abbreviated *Tractatus*, and the equally famous 1953 *Philosophical Investigations PI* or just the *Investigations*, as it's known in the industry.

big motivation for the disavowal of the *Tractatus* represented by his masterwork, 1953's *Philosophical Investigations*.¹⁴

Basically the *Tractatus* is the first real attempt at exploring the now trendy relation between language and the 'reality' it is language's putative function to capture, map & represent. The *Tractatus*'s project is Kantian: what must the world be like if language is even to be possible? The early Wittgenstein,¹⁵ much under the spell of Russell and the *Principia Mathematica* that revolutionized modern logic, saw language, like math, as logic-based; and he viewed the paradigmatic function of language as mirroring or 'picturing' the world. From this latter belief everything in the *Tractatus* follows, just as Kate's own fetish for paintings, mirrors, & the status of mental representations like memories & associations & perceptions forms the canvas on which her memoir must be sketched. The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* chose as the paradigm of language the truth-functional logic of Russell & Whitehead's *Principia*. His choice made practical sense, project-wise: if you're going to try to construe the world from human language, you'll be best off choosing the most perspicuous, precise type of language available—one faithful to Wittgenstein's belief that the business of language is to state facts—as well as selecting the most direct & uncontroversial relation between a language and its world of referents. The latter, I iterate & stress, is simply the relation of mirror to mirrored; and the criterion by which to judge the perspicuity of a statement is entirely & only its fidelity to that feature of the world it denotes: cf W's 'The statement is a *picture* of the fact.'¹⁶ Now, technically, the Russellian logic that comprises language's Big Picture consists all & only of 3 things: simple logical connectives like 'and,' 'or' & 'not'; propositions or 'statements': & a view of these statements as 'atomic,' meaning that the truth or falsity of a complex statement like 'Ludwig is affable and Bertrand is well-dressed' depends entirely on the truth value of its constituent atomic propositions—the prenominate molecular proposition is true if & only if it is true that Ludwig is friendly and it is true that Bertrand is dapper. The atomic propositions that are language's building blocks are, for both Russell and Wittgenstein, 'logically independent' of one another: they do not affect one another's truth values,

¹⁴Eg 'What is the use of studying philosophy,' Wittgenstein wrote to a U.S. student while working on the *Investigations* in 1946, 'if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., and if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life?'

¹⁵Scholars tend to schizofy Wittgenstein, counterposing the 'early' W of the *Tractatus* and the 'late' W of the *Investigations*, *Blue and Brown Books*, & *Philosophical Grammar*.

¹⁶See the *Tractatus* 2.1512 & .3 & .4; emphasis supplied.

only the values of those logical molecules in which they're conjoined—eg, 'L is cheerful or B is well-heeled,' 'It is not the case that if B is wealthy then L is cheerful,' etc. Except here's the kicker: since language is the world's 'mirror,' the world is metaphysically composed only & entirely of those 'facts' that statements in the language stand for. In other words—the words of the *Tractatus's* first & foremost line—the world is everything that is the case; the world is nothing but a huge mass of data, of logically discrete facts that have no *intrinsic* connection to one another. Cf the *Tractatus* 1.2: 'The world falls apart into facts . . .' 1.2.1 'Any one [fact] can either be the case, or not be the case, and everything else remains the same.'

T. Pynchon, who has done in literature for paranoia what Sacher-Masoch did for whips, argues in his *Gravity's Rainbow* for why the paranoid delusion of complete & malevolent connection, whacko & unpleasant though it be, is preferable at least to its opposite—the conviction that *nothing* is connected to anything else & that *nothing* has anything intrinsically to do with *you*. Please see that this Pynchonian contraparanoia would be the appropriate metaphysic for any resident of the sort of world the *Tractatus* describes. And Markson's Kate lives in just such a world, while her objectless epistle 'mirrors' it perfectly, manages to capture the psychic flavor both of solipsism and of Wittgenstein in the simple & affectless but surreal prose & short aphoristic paragraphs that are also so distinctive of the *Tractatus*. Kate's textual obsession is simply to find connections between things,¹⁷ any strands that bind the historical facts & empirical data that are all her world comprises. And always—necessarily—genuine connections elude her. All she can find is an occasional synchronicity: the fact that certain names are similar enough to be richly confusing—William Gaddis and Taddeo Gaddi, for example—or that certain lives & events happened to overlap in space & time. And even these fairly thin connections turn out not to be 'real,' features only of her imagination; and even *these* are nonetheless isolate, locked into themselves by their status as fact. When Kate recalls, for example, that Rembrandt suffered bankruptcy & Spinoza excommunication, & that, given biographical data, their paths may well have intersected at some point in the Amsterdam of the 1650s, the only encounter she can even *imagine* between them is:

'I'm sorry about your bankruptcy, Rembrandt.'
'I'm sorry about your excommunication, Spinoza.'

The basic argument-thrust here is that Markson, by drawing on a definitive atomistic metaphysics & transfiguring it into art, has achieved something

¹⁷this connection-urge more fundamental and scary than the humanistic syrup of *Howards End's* 'Only connect': the latter refers to relations between persons, the former to the possibility of any extracranial universe at all. . .

like the definitive anti-melodrama. He has made facts sad. For Kate's existence itself is that of an atomic fact, her loneliness metaphysically ultimate. Her world is 'empty' of all but data that are like the holes in a reticular pattern, both defined & imprisoned by the epistemic strands she knows only she can weave. And weave she does, constantly, unable to stop, self-consciously mimicking Penelope of the Attic antiquity that obsesses her. But Kate—unlike Ulysses' legit mistress—is powerless either to knit intrinsic pattern into or to dismantle what her mind has fabricated. She ends up, in this respect, not Penelope but both Clytemnestra & Agamemnon; the Clytemnestra whom Kate describes as killing Agamemnon 'after her own grief,' the Agamemnon 'at his bath, ensnared in that net and being stabbed through it.' And since no things *present* connect either with each other or with her, Kate's memorial project in *WM* is sensible & inevitable even as it reinforces the occluded solipsism that is her plight. Via her memorial project, Kate makes 'external' history *her own*. Ie rewrites it as personal. Eats it, as mad van Gogh 'tried to eat his own pigments.' It is not accidental that Markson's novel opens with the Genetic prepositional 'In the beginning. . . .' It is neither colorful tic nor authorial pretension that the narrator's 'irreverent meditations' range from classical prosody to Dutch oils to Baroque quartets to 19th-century French Realism to post-Astroturf baseball. It is not an accident (though it is an allusion) that Kate has a fetish for feeding the warp & woof of tragic history into fires—she is the final historian, its tragedian and destructor, cremating each page of Herodotus (the 1st historian!) as she reads it. Nor is it cute or casual that she feels 'as if I have been appointed the curator of all the world...', living in museums and placing her own paintings next to masterworks. The curator's job—to recall, choose, arrange: to impose order & only so communicate meaning—is marvelously synecdochic of the life of the solipsist, of the survival strategies apposite one's existence as monad in a world of diffracted fact.

Except a big question: *whence facts*, if the world is empty?

Dalkey Archive Press's jacket copy for *WM* describes the solipsism of the Mistress as 'obviously a metaphor for ultimate loneliness.' And Kate is indeed awfully lonely, though her ingenuous announcements—'Generally, even then, I was lonely'—are less effective by far than the deep-nonsensical facts via which she communicates isolation's meaning—'One of those things people generally admired about Rubens, even if they were not always aware of it, was the way everybody in his paintings was always touching everybody else'; 'Later today I will possibly masturbate'; 'Pascal . . . refusing to sit on a chair without an additional chair at either side of him, so as not to fall into space.' Though for me the most affecting rendition of her situation is Kate's funnysad descriptions of trying to play tennis without a

partner,¹⁸ probably the most fecund symbols of Kate's damnation to a world logically atomized in its reflective relation to language as bare data-transfer concern the narrator's obsession, marvelously American, with property & easements & houses. The following excerpt is condensed:

I do not believe I have ever mentioned the other house.

What I may have mentioned are houses in general, along the beach, but such a generalization would not have included this house, this house [unlike Kate's own] being nowhere near the water.

All one can see of it from [my] upper rear window is a corner of its roof. . . .

Once I did become aware of it, I understood that there would also have to be a road leading to it from somewhere, of course.

Yet for the life of me I was not able to locate the road, and for the longest time. . . .

In any case my failure to locate the road eventually began to become a wholly new sort of perplexity in my existence. (88-89)

It's of course tempting, given the book's critical imposition of Wittgenstein as referent & model & lover, to read Kate's loneliness as itself an intellectual metaphor, as just a function of the radical skepticism the *Tractatus's* logical atomism itself imagines. Because, again, whence and wherefore the all-important 'facts' which, for both Wittgenstein & Kate, the world 'falls apart into'¹⁹ but does *not* comprise? Are facts—genuine existents—intrinsic to the Exterior? admitting of countenance only via the frailties of sense-data & induction? Or, way worse, are they not perhaps perversely deductive, products of the very head that countenances them as Exterior facts & as such genuinely ontic? This latter possibility—if internalized, really believed—is a track that makes stops at skepticism & then solipsism before heading straight into insanity. It's the latter possibility that informs the neurasthenia of Descartes's *Meditations* & so births modern philosophy (and with it the distinctively modern 'alienation' of the individual from all wholes both natural & social). Kate flirts with this Cartesian nightmare repeatedly, as in:

What happened after I started to write about Achilles was that halfway through the sentence I began to think about a cat, instead.²⁰

The cat I began to think about instead was the cat outside of the broken window in

¹⁸plus continual reference to bunches of tennis balls bouncing all over the place made me realize tennis balls are about the best macroscopic symbol there is for the flux of atomistic fact. . .

¹⁹*Tractatus* 1.2

²⁰Since I can't find any more graceful place to stick it in, let me invite you, with this line as exemplar, to see another cool formal horizon-expansion Markson effects in *WM*—the mode of presentation is less 'stream of consciousness' than 'stream of conscious *utterance*'; Markson's technique here shares the associative qualities of Joycean s.o.c. but differs in being '*directed*'; at what or whom it's directed becomes the novel's implicit, or anti-, plot, & accounts for a 'narrative movement' that's less linear or even circular than spiral.

the room next to this one, at which the tape frequently scratches when there is a breeze.

Which is to say that I was not actually thinking about a cat either, there being no cat except insofar as the sound of scratching reminds me of one.

As there were no coins on the floor of Rembrandt's studio, except insofar as the configuration of the pigment reminded Rembrandt of them. (62)

The thing is that the painted coins that fooled Rembrandt, & Rembrandt, & Achilles, too, are all just like 'the cat' here: Markson's narrator has nothing left *except* 'sounds of scratching'—ie memory & imagination & the English language—with which to construct any sort of Exterior. Its flux is that of Kate's own head; why it resists order or population is attributable to the very desperation with which Kate tries to order & populate it: her search's fevered pathos ensures dissatisfaction. Note that by page 63, after the shine of metaphysical scrupulousness has faded, Kate goes back to talking about the unreal cat as 'real.' The big emotional thing is that, whether her treatment of linguistic constructs as existents is out of touch with reality or simply an inevitable response to the novel's reality, the solipsistic nature of that reality, *as far as Kate's concerned*, remains unchanged. A double-bind to make Kierkegaard, Shakespeare & Wittgenstein all proud.

Still, as I read & appreciate *WM*, more is at stake for Kate in countenancing the possibility that her own 'errors' are all that keep the world extant than questions of metaphysics or even of madness. Kate's pretty sanguine about the possibility of insanity—jokes about having been mad, before, at times, 'times out of mind.' Actually, what are finally at stake here seem to be issues of ethics, of guilt & responsibility. One of the things that putatively so tortured Wittgenstein in the twenty years between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* was that a logically atomistic metaphysics admits exactly nothing of ethics or moral value or questions about what it is to be human. It's history that Wittgenstein the person cared about what made things good or right or worthwhile. He did things like volunteer for the Austrian infantry in 1918 when he could & should have 4F'd out, like give his huge personal inheritance away to people (Rilke among them). A deadly serious ascetic, Wittgenstein lived his adult life in bare rooms devoid of even a lamp or coccyx-neutral chair. But it was no accident that the *Tractatus*, very much the product of the same Vienna that birthed '...two of the most powerful and symptomatic movements of modern culture: psychoanalysis and atonal music, both voices that speak of the homelessness of modern man,'²¹ nevertheless itself birthed the Vienna Circle & the philosophical school of Logical Positivism the Circle promulgated: a central tenet of Positivism being that the only utterances that made any sense at all were the well-formed

²¹See William Barrett, 'Wittgenstein the Pilgrim,' in *The Illusion of Technique*, Doubleday '78.

data-transferring propositions of science, thus that considerations of 'value' such as those of ethics or aesthetics or normative prescription were really just a confused mishmash of scientific observation & emotive utterance, such that saying 'Killing is not right' really amounts just to saying 'Killing: YUCK!' The fact that the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* not only couldn't take account of but pretty much denied the coherent possibility of things like ethics, values, spirituality & responsibility had the result that 'Wittgenstein, this clear-headed & intellectually honest man, was hopelessly at odds with himself.'²² For Wittgenstein was a queer sort of ascetic. He did deny his body & starve his senses—except not, as with most monkish personalities, simply to enjoy a consequent nourishment of the spirit. His big thing seems to have been denying his *self* by denying, through his essays at philosophical truth, the things most important to him. He never actually wrote anything about the exquisite tensions between atomism & attendant solipsism on the one hand & distinctively human values & qualities on the other. But, see, this is *exactly* what Markson does in *WM*; and in this way Markson's novel succeeds in speaking where Wittgenstein is mute, weaving Kate's obsession with responsibility (for the world's emptiness) gorgeously into the character's mandala of cerebral conundrum & spiritual poverty.

Of the many specular vantages *WM* demands, Kate's central identification with the 'fact' of historical personage is with Helen of Troy/Hisarlik—the Face That Launched 1000 Ships & the body that lay behind the Trojan War's impressive casualty-count.²³ And the vehicle for this identification with Helen is a distinctively female sense of 'responsibility': like the *Iliad*'s Helen, Kate is haunted by the passive sense that 'everything is her fault.' And Kate's repeated attempts at defending Helen against the charge of instigating exactly what emptied Ionia of men have a compulsive & shrill insistence about them that bespeak too much protesting:

I have always harbored sincere doubts that Helen was the cause of that war, by the way.

A single Spartan girl, after all.

As a matter of fact the whole thing was undeniably a mercantile proposition. All ten years of it,²⁴ just to see who would pay tariff to whom, so as to be able to make use

²²Dr. James D. Wallace, unpublished response to his son's cries for help with *Wittgenstein's Mistress & Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

²³Also true that Kate identifies closely with Penelope, Clytemnestra, Eve, Agememnon, & particularly Cassandra, the mad prophetess who warned about armed men inside empty gifts. But I'm thinking Cassandra's importance is more a function of Kate's *self-consciousness* about her own identification with Helen and feminine culpability, about which more below.

²⁴(the same period of time Kate spent traversing the ancient & modern empty worlds, flopping in museums and 'looking' for people)

of a channel of water. . . .

Still, I find it extraordinary that young men died there in a war that long ago, and then died in the same place three thousand years after that. (59, cf 8-9, 22)

Issues orbiting Helen & femininity & guilt mark a sort of transition in this novel & its reading. Have I yet mentioned that a notable feature of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, male-written, is that the novel's composed entirely of the words of a female character? And it is in terms of gender & authenticity, I think, that Markson's book becomes at once least perfect & most interesting. Most 1988ish. Most important as not just a literary transposition of a philosophic position but also a transcendence of received doctrine. Here Descartes & Kant & Wittgenstein cease being overt critical touchstones and become springboards for a flawed, moving meditation on loneliness, language & gender.

See, Homer's Helen is 'guilty' finally not because of anything she's done but because of who she is, how she appears, what she looks like; because of the effect she has, hormonally/emotionally, on men who're ready to kill & die over what they're made to feel. Kate, like Helen, is haunted by an unspoken but oppressive sense that ' . . . everything is her [own] fault.' What everything? How close is she to the Helen she invokes?²⁵ Well, first off, it's easy to see how radical skepticism—Descartes's hell & Kate's vestibule—yields at once omnipotence & moral oppression. If *The World* is entirely a function of Facts that not only reside in but *hail from* one's own head, one is just as Responsible for that world as is a mother for her child, or herself. This seems straightforward. But what's less clear & way richer is the peculiar slant this omniresponsibility takes when the responsible monad in question is historically *passive*, per- & conceived as an object and not a subject—ie when one is a woman, one who can effect change & cataclysm not as an agent but merely as a perceived entity . . . perceived by historically active testosterone glands positively *gush* with agency. To be an object of desire (by hirsute characters), speculation (by hirsute author), oneself the 'product' of male heads & shafts is to be almost *Classically* feminized, less Eve than Helen, 'responsible' without freedom to choose, act, or forebear. The [my] terribly blanket assumption is that received Western perceptions of women as moral agents divide into those of Hellenic & those of Evian (Eve-ish) responsibility; the claim I can support is that Markson, despite his worst intentions, manages to triumph over 400 years of post-Milonic tradition and to present the Hellenic as the more poignant—certainly more apposite—situation of women in any system where appearance remains a 'picture' or 'map' of *ontology*. This presentation seems neither pre- nor

²⁵Evidently pretty close for readers: over half the reviewers of *WM* misnamed the narrator Helen.

post-feminist: it's just darned imaginative, ingenious even; and as such—despite some failures of authorial vision & nerve—flies or falls on its own merits.

The degree of success with which Markson has here rendered the voice & psyche & predicament of a female, post-Positivist or otherwise, is a vexed issue. Some of the fiction I try to write is in feminine voice, and I consider myself sensitive to the technical/political problems involved in 'cross-writing,' and I found the female persona here compelling & real. Some female readers on whom I've foisted *WM* report finding it less so. They objected not so much to the voice & syntax (both of which are great in *WM* in a way I can't demonstrate except by quoting like 20 pages verbatim) as to some of the balder ways Markson goes about continually *reminding* the reader that Kate is a woman. The constant references to Kate's menses, for example, were cited as clunky. Menstruation does come up a lot, & for reasons that remain narratively obscure; and if it isn't a clunky allusion to Passion or martyrdom then it's an equally clunky (because both unsubtle & otiose) reminder of gender: yes, women are persons whose vaginas regularly bleed, but repeating & dwelling on it reminds one of bad science fiction where aliens are making continual reference to cranial antennae that, were they & the narrative voice truly alien/alien-empathic, would be as unquestioned & quotidian a fact of life as ears or noses or hair.²⁶ Personally I'm neutral on the menstruation point. What I'm negative on is the particular strategy Markson sometimes employs to try to explain Kate's 'female' feelings both of ultimate guilt & of ultimate loneliness. The *realistic* or character-based explanation is not, thank God, just that Kate's been left in the emotional lurch by all sorts of objectifying men, psychic abandoners who range from her husband (variously named by her Simon or Terry or sometimes Adam) to her final lover, univocally called Lucien. The proffered explanation is rather that, back in the halcyon pre-Fall days when the world was humanly populated, Kate betrayed her husband with other men, & that subsequently her little boy (variously Simon or, gulp, again Adam) died, in Mexico, possibly of meningitis, & that then her husband left her, about ten years ago, 'time out of mind,' at the same psychohistorical point at which Kate's world emptied and the diasporic quest for anyone else

²⁶This is not my analogy, but I can't think of a better one, even though this isn't all that good; but I see the point & trust you do—it's one of those alarm-bell issues where the narrative voice is clearly communicating to a reader while pretending not to, as in dialogue like 'Lord, Cragmont, the vermilion of your MOTHER tattoo is looking even more lurid against the dead-white of your prison pallor now that the circulation's returned to the legs you smashed trying to outrun a 74-car grain train in Decatur IL that balmy yet somehow also chill night in 1979'—'clunky' is about the best analysis for stuff like this.

alive in the world at all commenced, a search that led Kate to the empty beach where she now resides & declaims to no one. Her betrayals & her son's death & husband's departure—alluded to over & over, albeit coyly—are the Evian diagnosis of her transgression & metaphysical damnation; they're presented, with an insistence impossible to ignore, as Kate's Fall²⁷ across gender, a Fall from the graces of a community in which she is both agent & object²⁸ into a post-Romantic, Wittgensteinian world of utter subjectivity & pathological responsibility, into the particular intellectual/emotional/moral isolation a 1988 U.S. reader associates with *men*, males alienated via agency from an Exterior we have to objectify, use up, burn the pages of in order to remain subjects, ontologically secure in shield & shaft. All this stuff I find fecund & compelling, a pregnant marriage of Attic & Christian reductions of women. But the death of her son & separation from her husband are also in *WM* presented as a very particular emotional 'explanation' of Kate's psychic 'condition,' a peculiar reduction of Markson's own to which I kind of object. The presentation of personal history as present explanation, one that threatens to make *WM* just another madwoman monologue in the Ophelia–Rhys tradition, is oblique & ever artful, but still prominent & insistent enough to make it hard [for me] to blink its intent:

Possibly [I was not mad] before that. [When I went south] To visit at the grave of a child I had lost . . . named Adam.

Why have I written that his name was Adam?

Simon is what my little boy was named.

Time out of mind. Meaning that one can even momentarily forget the name of one's only child, who would be thirty by now? (9)

²⁷cf in this respect:

After he knew that he had fallen, outwards and down, away from the Fullness, he tried to remember what the Fullness had been. . . .

He did remember, but found he was *silent, and could not tell others*.

He wanted to tell others that she leapt farthest forward and fell into a Passion *apart from his embrace*.

She was in great agony, and would have been swallowed up by the sweetness, had she not reached a limit, and stopped.

But the Passion *went on without her, and passed beyond the limit*.

Sometimes he thought he was about to speak, but *the silence continued*.

He wished to say: *strengthless and female fruit*.

—w/emphasis supplied, from Valentinus's AD 199 *Pleroma*, part of the Neo-Platonic Gnosticism that functions as a metaphysical counterpoint to the anti-idealism of the *Tractatus*, & signals nicely Markson's artistic ambivalence about whether Kate's bind is ultimately Hellenic or Evian.

²⁸this community being nothing other than sexual society as limned by the males who wrote scripture & epic, these males themselves interpreted & transfigured by Markson. . .

As a matter of fact I believe it was when I went back to Mexico, that I [gessoed a blank canvas & then stared at it for a long time & then burned it]. In the house where I had once lived with Simon, and with Adam.

I am basically positive that my husband [Simon/Terry] was named Adam. (24)

There is no longer any problem in regard to my husband's name, by the way. Even if I never saw him again, once we separated after Simon died. (52)

Although probably I did leave out this part before, about having taken lovers when I was still Adam's wife. (225)

I'm told Shiite women walk swaddled & veiled in deference to their responsibility to be invisible & so keep poor barely-keeping-it-together males from being maddened by exposure to fair sexuality. I find in *WM* the same complex & scary blend of Hellenic & Evian misogyny—Helen essentially guilty as object & Eve guilty as subject, temptress. Though I personally find the Hellenic component more interesting & a better ease-ment into contemporary politics, I find Markson's vacillation between the two models narratively justified & psychologically neat. It is when, though, he seems to settle on the Evian as both character-archetype & narrative explanation—as the argument traced *supra* & beyond indicates—that his *Wittgenstein's Mistress* becomes most conventional as fiction. It is here, too, that for me the novel falters technically by betraying its authorial presence as thoroughly male, outside Kate &/or womanhood generally. As in most cutting-edge experimental fictions, too, this technical flaw seriously attenuates the thematics. It seems very interesting to me that Markson has created a Kate who dwells so convincingly in a hell of utter subjectivity, yet cannot, finally, himself help but objectify her—ie by 'explaining' her meta-physical condition as emotional/psychical, reducing her bottled missive to a mad monologue by a smart woman driven mad by the consequences of culpable sexual agency, Markson is basically subsuming Kate under one of the comparatively stock rubrics via which we guys apparently must organize & process fey mystery, feminine pathos, Strengthless & Female fruit. Kate's Fall, ostensibly one into the ghastly spiritual manifestation of a masculinely logic-bound twentieth-century metaphysic, becomes, under a harsh reading, little more than a(n inevitable?) stumble into alienation from the heroine's role—her self—as mother, wife, lover, *beloved*. Under this reading, Kate's empty solipsism does not get to become a kind of grim independence from objectification: Kate has rather simply exchanged the role of real wife of real man for the part of nonexistent mistress of an absolute genius of objectification²⁹ indisposed toward heterosexual union. And I found it weird that many of the female readers who disapproved things like *WM*'s menstruation-cues as 'ringing false' nevertheless approved

²⁹'The world is everything that is the case. The world falls apart into facts.'

Markson's provision of Kate's ostensible 'motivation,' here. Though I'm coming to accept that it's the petrifiedly standard critical line w/r/t fiction these U.S. days: readers want stories about very particular persons with very particular qualities in very particular circumstances whose genesis must on some level be personally-historic & psychological as well as 'merely' intellectual or political or spiritual, pan-human. The 'successful' story 'transcends' its thoroughgoing individuality/idiosyncrasy by subsuming the peculiarities of character & circumstance to certain broad archetypes & mythopoeiae inherited from Jung or Shakespeare or Homer or Freud or Skinner or Testament. Particularity births form; familiarity breeds content. Rarely is our uncritical inheritance of early Wittgensteinian & Logical Positivist models so obvious as in our academic & aesthetic prejudice that successful fiction encloses rather than opens up, organizes facts rather than undermines them, diagnoses rather than genuflects. Attic myths were, yes, forms of 'explanation.' But it's no accident that great mythos was mothered by the same culture that birthed great history—or that Kate divides her reading- & burning-time between classical tragedies & histories. To the extent that myth enriches facts & history, it serves a Positivist & factual function. But the U.S.'s own experience with myth-making & myth-worship—from Washington & cherries to Jackson & hickory to Lincoln & logs to dime novels & West as womb & soul's theatre to etc., etc. to Presley & Dean & Monroe & Wayne & Reagan—an experience that informs & infects the very physics of reading, today—confirms that myth is finally compelling only in its opposition to history & data & the cingulum of Just The Facts, Ma'am. Only in that opposition can story enrich & transfigure & transcend explanation. Kate's idiosyncratic/formulaic 'real' past in *WM* isn't weak as an explanation; it is for me weak & disappointing *because* it's an explanation. Just as it would have been weak & disappointing to have 'explained' & particularized Kate's feelings of isolation & imprisonment, not via the idea that the typing hands she holds out in search of communion form the very barrier between Self & World they're trying to puncture, but, say, by plunking her down via shipwreck on a deserted island á la TV's Gilligan or Golding's flylord schoolboys or the Police's top-40 'Message in a Bottle.'

I'm struggling to make clear, I think, that it's its own masculinely prejudiced imperfection that illuminates how important & ambitious *WM* is as an experimental piece of late-'80s literature. As a would-be writer I like how the novel inverts received formulae for successful fiction by succeeding least where it conforms to them most: to the precise extent that Kate is presented here as circumstantially & historically unique, to just that extent is the novel's monstrous power attenuated. It's when Kate is *least* particular, least 'motivated' by some artfully presented but standardly digestible Evian/Valentinian/post-Freudian trauma, that her character & plight are

most e- & affecting. For (obvious tho this seems) to the extent that Kate is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us, and the empty diffraction of Kate's world can map or picture the desacralized & paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists & skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance or sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning. Etc. The familiar bitch & moan that Markson's novel promises & comes close to transfiguring, dramatizing, *mythologizing* via bland bald fact.

I think finally the reason I object to *WM's* attempt to give Kate's loneliness a particular 'motivation' via received feminine trauma is that it's just unnecessary. For Markson has in this book succeeded already on all the really important levels of fictional conviction. He has fleshed the abstract sketches of Wittgensteinian doctrine into the concrete theatre of human loneliness. In so doing he's captured far better than pseudobiography what made Wittgenstein a tragic figure & a victim of the very diffracted modernity he helped inaugurate. Markson has written an erudite, breathtakingly cerebral novel whose prose is crystal & whose voice rivets & whose conclusion defies you not to cry. Plus he's also, in a way it'd seem for all the world he doesn't know, produced a powerfully critical meditation on loneliness's relation to language itself.

Though of course any writer's real motivations are forever occult & objects of at best lucid imagining, it's safe to point out that the post-atomist metaphysical peripety that is L. Wittgenstein's late *Philosophical Investigations* articulates philosophical concerns & assumptions so different from those of the early *Tractatus* that the *PI* amounts to less a renunciation than a kind of infanticide-by-bludgeon. For Marksonian purposes, the three important blunt instruments, near-diurnal differences between 'early' & 'late' Wittgenstein, all concern W's enduring obsession with language-&-reality questions. One. *PI* now takes as paradigmatic of the language with which philosophers ought to be concerned not the ideal abstraction of math-logic, rather now just ordinary day-to-day language in all its general wooliness & charm.³⁰ Two. The *PI's* Wittgenstein expends much energy & ink arguing against the idea of what's been called 'private language.' This term is the Pragmatist William James's, whom W., not an enemy to welcome, accused of looking forever 'for the artichoke amongst its leaves.' But *PI's* concern to show the impossibility of private language (which it does, pretty much) is also a terrible anxiety to avoid the solipsistic consequences of mathematical

³⁰Very cool elaborations on this sort of move are observable in J. L. Austin's *How To Do Things with Words* & Stanley Cavell's 'Must We Mean What We Say?'

logic as language-paradigm. Recall that the truth-functional schemata of math-logic & the discrete facts the schemata picture exist independent of speakers, knowers, & most of all *listeners*. *PI*'s insistence—as part of the book's movement away from what the world must be like for language to be possible & toward what language must be like given the way the world in all its babble & charm & deep nonsense actually *is*—that the existence, nay the very *idea* of language depends on some sort of communicative *community*³¹ ... this is about the most powerful philosophical attack on skeptic-/solipsism's basic coherence since the Descartes whose *Cogito* Wittgenstein had helped to skewer. Three. The final big difference is a new & clinical focus on the near-Nixonian trickiness of ordinary language itself. A tenet of the *PI* is that profound philosophical stuff can be accomplished via figuring out why linguistic constructions get used as they are, & that many/most errors of 'metaphysics' or 'epistemology' derive from academics' & humans' susceptibility to language's *pharmakopia* of tricks & deceptions & creations. Late Wittgenstein is full of great examples of how persons are constantly succumbing to the metaphysical 'bewitchment' of ordinary language. Getting lost in it. Eg, locutions like 'the flow of time' create a kind of ontological UHF-ghost, seduce us into somehow seeing time itself as like a river, one not just 'flowing' but doing so somehow external to us, outside the things & changes of which time is really just the measure.³² Or the ordinary predicates game and rules, attached simultaneously to, eg, jacks & gin rummy & softball & Olympiade, trick us into a specious Platonic universalism in which there is some transcendently existent feature common to every member of the extensions of 'game' or 'rule' in virtue of which every member *is* a 'game' or a 'rule,' rather than the fluid web of 'family resemblances'³³ that, for Wittgenstein, perfectly justifies the attachment of apparently univocal predicates as nothing more or less than a type of *human behavior*—rather, that is, than any sort of transcendental reality-mapping. Wittgenstein, by life's end, conceived meaningful human brain-activity (ie philosophy) as exactly & nothing more than '... a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (*PI* 1, 109). The *PI* holds that persons must or at any rate do live in a sort of linguistic dream, awash & enmeshed in ordinary language & the deceptive 'metaphysics' linguistic usage & communication among persons imposes . . . or costs.

³¹cf *PI* I, 23. . .

³²Tachyons & causality violations & the Superposition Principle all complicate W's point quite a bit, and actually there's very interesting stuff starting to appear in industry mags about deep affinities between ordinary-language temporal locutions & cutting-edge quantum models . . . but anyway you get the idea.

³³the famous & infamous *Familienähnlichkeiten* (no kidding)—cf *The Blue Book* 17 & 87 & 124 or *Philosophical Grammar* 75 or *PI* I, 67. For equally famous stuff on games & rules see *PI* I, 65-88.

The above summary is pretty crude.

But, actually, so, on the surface, is *Wittgenstein's Mistress's* use & reconstitution of the *PI's* seminal new perspective. Much of the overt master/mistress relation here again involves resemblance-as-allusion [sic]. Lines in the novel like 'Upstairs, one can see the ocean. Down here there are dunes, which obstruct one's view' are conscious echoes of the *PI's* 'A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."³⁴ Also heavily allusive (sometimes just plain heavy) are Kate's prolonged musings on the ontological status of named things: she (as would we all) still refers to the house she burned down as a house, but she keeps wondering in what way a destroyed house is still a 'house,' except in virtue of language-habits from time out of mind. Or, eg, she wonders about questions like 'Where is the painting when it is in my head instead of on the wall?' & whether, were let's say no copies of *Anna Karenina* still extant (unburned) anywhere, the book would still be called *Anna Karenina*. Or marvels at facts like 'One can drive through any number of towns without knowing the names of the towns.'

A little of this narcissistic echoing goes a long way, and Markson is sometimes tiresome, allusively, on the surface. Again, though, the mistress like the master invites you/me *down*: what's ponderous on the first pass opens up later. It's toss-offs like the last just above that are most interesting as invitations, less allusions to a genius than gauzy prefigures of Markson's own meditations about & around some of the themes dominant in *PI*. What first strikes one as heavy or ponderous refines itself after time into a fragile note of resignation—ie *weltschmerz* as opposed to *naïveté* or *hubris*—in most of Kate's speculations on the way a name tends to 'create' an object or attribute³⁵; albeit on the other hand a twinge of envy whenever she countenances the possibility of things existing without being named or subjected to predication. Why this battle occupies Kate & engages the reader has partly to do with the actual ethical pain that we may assume filled the long silence between the *Tractatus* & *PI*, but it's also attributable to an original &

³⁴*PI* I, 123, a profound little offering meaning roughly to point out that we are now & forever 'down here' in language, inside it, on ground-level, & thus have no better a view of the Big Picture than someone earthbound in contrast to someone aloft who can look down at the earthbound guy & the terrain around him, discerning patterns against backdrops of other bigger patterns, seeing them as *patterns of something larger* instead of as the -bound man's terrain, maze, world, total. . .

³⁵note in passing that themes of nomination-as-enfranchisement, presence-as-privilege, also run through much of the feminist theory with which this novel's author reveals himself familiar. . .

deeply smart exploration by Markson of something that might be called 'the feminization of skepticism.'

Which is probably a bad term to start throwing around in this late inning, since it requires definitions & so on; this is already pretty long.

But recall to this abstraction's ambit prenominate stuff about Helen & Eve & Cassandra & the *Tractatus*, plus the longly discussed second half of the double bind that cingulizes solipsism: radical doubt about not only the existence of objects but of *subject*, self. Kate's text, acknowledged within itself as writing, is a desperate attempt to recreate & so animate a world by *naming* it. The attempt's desperation underlies her near-pathologic obsession with names—of persons, personages, figures, books, symphonies, battles, towns & roads—and it accounts for what Markson communicates so well via repetition & tone: Kate's extreme upset when she can't remember—'summon,' 'recall'—names well enough to make them *behave*. And her attempts at ontology-thru-nomination are a moving synecdoche of pretty much the whole history of intellectual endeavor in the whitely male West. She, no less than was Wittgenstein, or Kant, or Descartes, or Herodotus, is writing a world. The ingenious poignancy of Markson's achievement here is that Kate's modernly female vantage, in conspiracy with the very desperation that underlies her attempt at worldmaking,³⁶ renders her project doubly doomed. Doom 1 is what's evoked on surface: skepticism & solipsism. Ie, that there is no 'world' to see itself mirrored in Kate's text is unhappy enough; but in *WM*, Kate's memoir *itself* is 'written in sand,' itself subject to the 'deterioration'³⁷ & dry rot that is such a dominant recurring image in the loops of recollection & assembly here.

I'm going to shut up right after I make this idea clear. I'm pretty sure *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is an imperfect book. Questions of voice, over-allusion, & 'explanation' get to be pushed aside, though, because of the novel's terrific emotional & political/fictional & theoretical achievement: it evokes a truth a whole lot of books & essays before it have fumbled around: (at least) for the modern female—viz the female who understands herself as both female & modern—both sides of the solipsistic bind:

³⁶ie, she's doing it for mental survival, not for interest or acclaim or tenure. . .

³⁷I keep waiting for feminist theorists to start talking about *deterioration* as a textual phenomenon; it would be the sort of wry joke that captures truths: 'deterioration' is essentially 'deconstruction' made passive, observed rather than performed, the reader the ultimate 'absentee' in the post-structural totem of absence: one of the things Kate's story unpacks is the terrific power of writer-as-witness, utterly passive, unheard: it might be this, more than what's argued in my final paragraph, that's skepticism's feminist vishna.

If I exist, nothing exists outside me

But

If something exists outside me, I do not exist³⁸

amount to the same thing—damnation to ghostliness among ghosts, curating a plenum of statues, mistaking echoes for voices. And, too, here both binds force on the subject just what her own dramatic predicament forces on Kate: a kind of parodic *masculinization*, one in which the Romantic Quest for the Absent Object, a desire for attainment w/r/t which *unattainability* is that desire's breath & bread, replaces an ability to be-in-the-world as neither center nor cipher, neither all-responsible nor impotent, part of one great big Family Likeness. Markson's Kate's sudden loss of interest in roads once she's found them & in data once she's 'mastered' (!!) it is just as clunky & imperfect & human & real as, say, Stendhal's rush to wind up *Charterhouse* the minute Fabrizio finally nails Clelia. . . . And Kate's valuation, finally, only of what's *unsaid*, *unread*—burning pages once she's read them, jettisoning family once she's 'responsible' for them; probably even fueling her epistle with the doomed/delicious knowledge that it's headed toward nothing—summons perfectly, again, the terrible & moving final prescription of the master's *Tractatus*. This, loosely translated, is 'Anybody who understands what I'm saying eventually recognizes that it's nonsense, once he's used what I'm saying—rather like steps—to climb up past what I'm saying—he must, that is, throw away the ladder after he's used it.'³⁹ This passage, like most of W, is only indirectly about what it's really about. It whispers & plays. It's really about the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence in terms of speech. Markson nails this idea (from my male p.o.v.); Kate's monograph has the quality of speechlessness in a dream, the cold muteness urgency enforces, a psychic stutter. If it's true her ladder goes noplacé, it's also true nobody's going to throw either book away.

³⁸I won't waste anybody's time shouting about what a marvelous inversion of the *Cogito* & Ontological Argument this is.

³⁹*Tractatus* 6.54

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