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 Ottertal) 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 feel-
ings. 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 down-
right 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.”

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 school-
master 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 educa-
tion, 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.

This dream came to Wittgenstein near the begin-
ning 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.”) 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 am awfully curious how we are going to get on with one another,” Wittgenstein wrote back. “It will be exactly like a dream.”

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. 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.” One might imagine a note of relief at the thought that, if you never wake up, this particular problem disappears.