

APORIA / απορία

Hrsg. von / Edited by
Jesús Padilla Gálvez

Alessandro Arbo | Michel Le Du
Sabine Plaud (Eds.)

Wittgenstein has written a great number of remarks relevant to aesthetical issues: he has questioned the relation between aesthetics and psychology as well as the status of our norms of judgment; he has drawn philosophers' attention to such topics as aspect-seeing and aspect-dawning, and has brought insights into the nature of our aesthetic reactions. The examination of this wide range of topics is far from being completed, and the purpose of this book is to contribute to such completion. It gathers both papers discussing some of Wittgenstein's most provocative and intriguing statements on aesthetics, and papers bringing out their implications for art critic and art history, as well as their significance to epistemology and to the study of human mind.



Distributed in North and South America
by Transaction Books
ISBN 978-3-86838-167-2

A. Arbo | M. Le Du | S. Plaud (Eds.)
Wittgenstein and Aesthetics



Wittgenstein and Aesthetics Perspectives and Debates



- Walton, Kendal 1973, "Not A Leg To Stand On The Roof On," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 70/19, 725-726.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1960, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations."* Generally known as *The Blue and Brown Books*, ed. R. Rhees, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1967, *Zettel*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1975, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. by Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1997, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2000, *The Big Typescript (1932)*, in *Wiener Ausgabe*, 11, ed. by M. Nedo, Wien-NewYork: Springer.

Notes on Aesthetic Comprehension: Sound beyond Image

Leonardo V. DISTASO
Università di Napoli "Federico II"

1.

If the development of Wittgenstein's thought can be considered a philosophical reflection, then from the conclusion of his *Tractatus* we can draw, with him, this consideration: he who comprehends my propositions as propositions of my philosophy (and not as propositions of natural science) should *recognize them as nonsensical* and must throw them away after having surpassed them; philosophy must disappear, and along with it, its problem.¹ Thus the task of philosophy doesn't consist in formulating *philosophical propositions*, but *rather in the clarification of propositions*.² If the *Tractatus* is a book that expounds a philosophical reflection, its propositions are not, properly speaking, propositions of a philosophical theory, but *elucidations* [*Erläuterungen*]. They are senseless and clarifying propositions that put an end to Philosophy itself: they don't *say* anything. *Clarifying* means: to bring philosophy itself to an end, and more precisely to bring to an end the idea of philosophy as a doctrine, as a *theorein*. However, in order to reach the end the philosophy we must philosophize: "*it must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outward through what can be thought. It will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said*".³ Clarifying what can be said, philosophy ends in clarity.

This is worthy of consideration: if we can foresee the end of something, it means that we can survive its end. If we cannot foresee its end, we experience the inescapable finitude of our condition. Wittgenstein conceives the philosophizing of the *Tractatus* as a paradoxical endless task in which, through the experience of the finitude and limitations of thought, the strife towards clarification is never fully satisfied.

The *Philosophical Investigations* are also a philosophical reflection, and they should lead us to the discovery of a *plain nonsense* (*schlichten*

¹ Wittgenstein (1974), 6.54.

² Wittgenstein (1974), 4.112.

³ Wittgenstein (1974), 4.114; 4.115.

Unsinn: “The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense”).⁴ This discovery reveals itself within the philosophical reflection that intersects the realm of language as it is,⁵ penetrating the aspects of things that are hidden in their simplicity and daily existence,⁶ and, above all, *seeing clearly the use of our words* [*übersehen*]: “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’.”⁷

Seeing clearly means “seeing connections” [*Zusammenhänge sehen*] in the use of our language. It means having a *perspicuous representation*: this is the property of the grammar that we can understand.

Thus *comprehension* implies leaving everything as it is while describing the use of language; if *philosophy speaks of the use of the word “philosophy”* (and this is not a *second-order philosophy*),⁸ philosophizing means comprehending, and philosophical comprehension emerges from asking questions concerning words that speak about words: “In giving explanations I already have to use full-blown language (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shows that I can adduce only exterior facts about language [...]. Well, your very questions were framed in this language [...]. Your questions refer to words; so I have to talk about words.”⁹

If the language of philosophy is at the same level as ordinary language and if its problems are related to words – i.e. to language – the plain nonsense that philosophy results in the end of its investigation coincides with its own problem. This is *the problem of philosophy*, that is, the problem philosophy poses to itself, insofar as philosophizing is a reflection that intersects language to achieve nonsense. This interrogation experiences finitude and the limitations of thought, and it imposes on itself, paradoxically,

⁴ Wittgenstein (1989), § 119.

⁵ “On the one hand it is clear that every sentence in our language ‘is in order as it is’...Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.” Wittgenstein (1989), § 98, § 124.

⁶ “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.” Wittgenstein (1989), § 129.

⁷ Wittgenstein (1989), § 122.

⁸ Wittgenstein (1989), § 121.

⁹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 120.

cally, the interminable task that rests within the senseless pauses of the world. The nonsense of the contingency.

Wittgenstein’s reflection can be summed up as an interrogation on philosophy and on its possibilities through philosophy itself. This reflection intersects language for what it is. In the *Tractatus* the goal was to go through the totality of meaningful propositions: “We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand”.¹⁰ The sense of the philosophical reflection of the *Investigations* is to *penetrate phenomena* (*Erscheinungen durchschauen* or to look through phenomena) to go back to their possibilities, keeping in mind *the kind of statement that we make about phenomena*.¹¹

The result of the interrogation – the penetration of what lies in front of our eyes – is the *schlichten Unsinn*, the transition from patent nonsense to something which is disguised nonsense [*Übergang von einem offenkundigen zu einem nichtoffenkundigen Unsinn*].¹² It is a transition from the evident nonsense of language that leaves everything as it is to the non-evident nonsense of the language of philosophy that talks about the fact that we discover, we experience, we understand or we don’t understand etc. The language of the *Philosophical Investigations* is interminable in the opacity of its nonsense: “Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us”.¹³

It seems that in the transition from logic to language philosophy continues to inhabit the space of nonsense: “The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* (the philosophy) in question”.¹⁴ Those who comprehend the propositions of the *Tractatus* will find them senseless and will throw them away; those who follow the path of the *Investigations*, the passage of looking through the phenomena in order to understand their possibility, will eventually put philosophy at rest, will suspend the interrogation of philosophy itself, and will remain silent on its question. *Philosophy vanishes in extreme clarity*.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein (1989), § 89.

¹¹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 90.

¹² Wittgenstein (1989), § 524.

¹³ Wittgenstein (1989), § 126.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein (1989), § 133.

Both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* end the enigma of clarity. What is the enigma of the clear representation of what can be said and of the complete clarity in which the philosophical interrogation dissolves itself? It seems that Wittgenstein, along the road that leads him from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*, preserves and continues to think about the evident nonsense of clarity. *The enigma of clarity is its nonsense, and the enigma of nonsense leads us to the question of possibility.*

2.

In one of the paragraphs in which Wittgenstein considers the limits of the *Tractatus*, we find a short-circuit that reveals a further dimension: “Let us examine the proposition: ‘This is how things are’. – How can I say that this is the general form of propositions? – It is first and foremost *itself* a proposition, an English sentence... To say that this proposition agrees (or does not agree) with reality would be obvious nonsense. Thus it illustrates the fact that *one* feature of our concept of a proposition is, *sounding like a proposition*”.¹⁵

The *Satzklang* (the sound of proposition, in its literal and correct translation and in its deepest meaning) shows itself as it speaks out a patent nonsense: that the proposition is either in accord or not with reality. The *Satzklang*, in saying an evident nonsense shows its non-evident nonsense. However, *illustration* is the typical proposition of Wittgenstein’s philosophy.¹⁶ Thus the nonsense of Wittgenstein’s propositions shows –i.e. illustrates– the possibility of language and opens up to its reference and to its expression. The theory of correspondence and figuration in the *Tractatus* shows their nonsense, but this nonsense *tells us* something about the proposition. It tells us that what we intend by the word “proposition,” it *tells us* what a proposition is within our language: “And to say that a proposition is whatever can be true or false amounts to saying: we call something a proposition when *in our language* we apply the calculus of truth function to it”.¹⁷

The nonsense allows the philosopher to say what is, once more, ineffable. It is also a *patent nonsense to say that this proposition agrees or does not agree with reality*. But we can add further element: if we look through what we say we can see in the *patent nonsense* the transition to-

¹⁵ Wittgenstein (1989), § 134.

¹⁶ “Meine Sätze erläutern...,” Wittgenstein (1974), 6.54; “Alle *Erklärung* muss fort, und nur Beschreibung an ihre Stelle treten.” Wittgenstein (1989), § 109.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein (1989), § 136.

wards *disguised, hidden nonsense* (occult and enigmatic), in the dimension that anticipates the dimension of language: the *Satzklang*, *the sound of the proposition*. The conditions of language as a non-evident nonsense.

It is within the sound of the proposition that the hidden nonsense manifests itself and the transition towards it. It is within the *Satzklang* that the enigma of clarity is illustrated. It is a clarity that surpasses vision and that anticipates the *Spiel* of language. There is a preliminary dimension that must be thought of, and whose nonsense emerges from listening to language to understand its possibility, beyond convenience, beyond reference and correspondence. It is the dimension in which we are capable of suddenly grasping a word: “But we *understand* the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the ‘use’ which is extended in time!”¹⁸

We grasp a word when we hear it and when we pronounce it, when its sound resonates within us, when the whole of the word is before us, *but not as an image*.¹⁹ When we understand a word or a proposition, this event takes place immediately while listening or pronouncing it, vocalizing and articulating it. It takes place in a realm in which our dwelling and belonging to a linguistic dimension resonates. We feel within an all-encompassing whole that constitutes the horizon of the possibility that accompanies every step of the linguistic game. It is not the dimension of producing the image of something, but a sort a involuntary memory of a familiar sonority in which we perceive the echo of a possibility that we always carried with us and that appears in a productive and articulated manner in our comprehension.

To remember the possibilities of phenomena upon which our grammatical research rests, is to penetrate phenomena,²⁰ whose beginning coincides with a sound, whose resonance continues the process of understanding. The echo of the original dimension of a sonority as an occult nonsense is the opening and unfolding of language. It resembles the *pure language* mentioned by the young Benjamin. The journey of the belonging and comprehension of language – in its attrition and friction on rough ground [*rauhem Boden*]²¹ – begins with this resonance.

Philosophical problems acquire a sense and a direction within this original resonance: “These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are

¹⁸ Wittgenstein (1989), § 138.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 139.

²⁰ Wittgenstein (1989), § 90.

²¹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 107.

solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them [...]. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language".²²

Resonance is present in the atmospheric space in which the word lives and materializes itself in every possible use²³ and preserves and hides itself in everyday language. By using our everyday language we show *language as such as it speaks*, while we comprehend clearly the connections and familiarities that, through similarities and dissimilarities, illuminate the state of our language.²⁴ Only a philosophical interrogation on possibility can illustrate this state, provided that it leaves everything as it is. We can reveal the blunt nonsense of our language only by clashing against its limits and by listening,²⁵ resting on the limit created when philosophizing itself is put to rest. We grasp and we comprehend all this in the moment in which we go back to the possibility of interrogation and to the non-evident nonsense of our logical *conatus*. Pure *will-to-say*, pure *giving* and *comprehending*.

3.

Wittgenstein writes: "What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word? – Isn't it something like a picture? Can't it *be* a picture?"²⁶ If there is a relation between comprehending a word and knowing how to use it, this relation is not provided by the image that the word evokes in our mind, but rather by the capacity to grasp immediately something that guides us towards one use instead of another, towards one application instead of another. Wittgenstein proposes the example of "reading," as "the activity of rendering out loud what is written or printed; and also of writing from dictation, writing out something printed, playing from a score, and so on".²⁷

Wittgenstein underlines that, although the use of this word is well known in everyday life, it is extremely difficult to represent the role that this word has in our life, that is, the linguistic game through which we use

²² Wittgenstein (1989), § 109.

²³ Wittgenstein (1989), § 117.

²⁴ Wittgenstein (1989), § 130.

²⁵ Wittgenstein (1989), § 119.

²⁶ Wittgenstein (1989), § 139.

²⁷ Wittgenstein (1989), § 156.

it. The act of reading the sounds off from the letters,²⁸ passing from the printed to the spoken words,²⁹ seems an act that has much to do with playing a musical score: we have to let the words slide inside us while we pronounce them, *hearing the sound inwardly*.³⁰ Recalling a sound does not have its root in the image that the word might evoke, but in something that the word carries with itself well before its representative capacity. The familiarity of the word, its being played out in the texture of connections, in the vital intricacy that is always before our eyes, leads Wittgenstein to recognize that *the aspect of a word that is familiar to us is its sound*: "Remember that the look of a word is familiar to us in the same kind of way as its sound".³¹

We speak a language that we can already speak, but to go back to this possibility through language itself means to go back to that *possibility* that holds together many possibilities and that reveals itself in the dimension of the enigma, in the *non-evident nonsense* that only the unfolding of sonority can represent in the space of the language game.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty also thought about this dimension of language. In his *Phénoménologie de la perception*, in the chapter on *Le corps comme expression et la parole*, he writes: "je commence à comprendre une philosophie en me glissant dans la manière d'exister de cette pensée, en reproduisant le ton, l'accent du philosophe [...] une pensée dans la parole que l'intellectualisme ne soupçonne pas".³² We have to retrace the stratifications of that *pensée dans la parole que l'intellectualisme ne soupçonne pas*, and that emerges explicitly, although enigmatically, in the case of poetry or music, where it is evident that thought is not representation. The meaning of a sonata cannot be separated from its sounds, and the sense of the word, and its institution in a language is constituted in the simultaneity of gesture that, breaking the silence, poses the expression and embodies the word itself beyond any image: "De la même manière, je n'ai pas besoin de me représenter le mot pour le savoir et pour le prononcer. Il suffit que j'en possède l'essence articulaire et sonore comme l'une des modulations, l'un des usages possibles de mon corps".³³

²⁸ Wittgenstein (1989), § 159.

²⁹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 162.

³⁰ Wittgenstein (1989), § 165.

³¹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 167.

³² Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 209.

³³ Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 210.

Merleau-Ponty describes this situation in a more explicit and deeper manner. This is what he writes: “S’il nous semble toujours que le langage est plus transparent que la musique, c’est que la plupart du temps nous demeurons dans le langage constitué, nous nous donnons des significations disponibles et, dans nos définitions, nous nous bornons, comme le dictionnaire, à indiquer des équivalences entre elles [...]. Au contraire dans la musique, aucun vocabulaire n’est présupposé, le sens apparaît lié à la présence empirique des sons, et c’est pourquoi la musique nous semble muette. Mais, en réalité, comme nous l’avons dit, la clarté du langage s’établit sur le fond obscur, et si nous poussons la recherche assez loin, nous trouverons finalement que le langage, lui aussi, ne dit rien que lui-même, ou que son sens n’est pas séparable de lui”.³⁴

Wittgenstein’s familiarity of the sound of the word takes us back to the *couche originnaire du sentir qui est antérieure à la division des sens* by Merleau-Ponty.³⁵ Music doesn’t occupy any visible space, and the impossibility of representing the possibility of language appears, ineffable and invisible, within the visible in order to make us see through the words,³⁶ the non-evident nonsense that interrogates the word through itself, and against which clarifying analysis fails. If philosophy is an interrogation of the possible, it moves within the same space of music.

4.

Let us go back to Wittgenstein: “I want to remember a tune and it escapes me; suddenly I say “Now I know it” and I sing it. What was it like to suddenly know it? Surely it can’t have occurred to me *in its entirety* in that moment! – Perhaps you will say: “It’s a particular feeling, as if it were *there*” – but *is it there?*”³⁷

Wittgenstein can repeat, after saying it in *Philosophical Investigations* § 138: “It is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash... The point is, that it is as if we could ‘grasp in a flash’ in yet another and much more direct sense than that. – But have you a model for this? No”.³⁸ It seems that what I suddenly comprehend of the proposition is what the proposition is telling me. If we compare the proposition to an image, it tells me about a state of things that is characterized by being so and so. The

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 219.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 262.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1964), p. 313.

³⁷ Wittgenstein (1989), § 184.

³⁸ Wittgenstein (1989), § 191.

proposition tells me something, but if I ask “*what* does an image tell me?” what would I answer? This musical theme tells me itself.³⁹ It does this suddenly, immediately, and then in its unfolding, in its being time and making time, until vanishing in a point in which it is no more: the moment in which the musical theme *is* and *resonates* in the sound of the word and in the sound of the proposition. This can be both the peculiar phenomenon of the interior resonating of sound,⁴⁰ and the pronounced sound that makes a word familiar, familiar like its sound.⁴¹ This is something that – once again – stands in proximity of the experience of reading a playing a musical score.⁴²

Thus what I comprehend in a flash is not what the proposition is telling me, but what I say about the proposition, and what the proposition doesn’t say, but shows in the evidence of its sound. The proposition shows itself, and *don’t take it as a matter of course!*⁴³

This is *the transition from an evident nonsense to an occult nonsense*: from a “such and such” of the proposition to its possibility that shows itself only through itself and the immediacy of its sound.

The oscillation and the transition that I have expounded are both a comprehension and a non-comprehension.⁴⁴ I comprehend something *in* a painting or *in* a proposition, but there is something that I don’t understand *of* a painting or *of* a proposition: what I feel I do not comprehend is what constitutes the enigma of the painting and of the proposition: something that *is* in the painting and that I can’t see, and that in the proposition I grasp in a flash: it is not its meaning. It is its *will-to-say*, it is the Voice that wants its language *to be* and *to be open* to the abyss of the determined. It is the Voice that burdens itself with the contingent: it resonates with the inaccessible place of the original unfolding of language: the non-evident nonsense of philosophy.

Giorgio Agamben expresses this idea eloquently: “La parola che vuole cogliere la Voce come Assoluto, che vuole, cioè *essere* nel proprio luogo originario, deve, pertanto, essere già uscita, assumere e riconoscere il nulla che è nella voce e, traversando il tempo e la scissione che le si rivela nel luogo del linguaggio, far ritorno a se stessa e essere, alla fine là dove,

³⁹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 523.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein (1989), § 165.

⁴¹ Wittgenstein (1989), § 167.

⁴² Wittgenstein (1989), § 162.

⁴³ Wittgenstein (1989), § 524.

⁴⁴ Wittgenstein (1989), § 526.

senza saperlo, era già stata in principio, cioè presso la Voce. La filosofia è questo viaggio da sé a se stessa della parola umana che, abbandonando la propria dimora abituale nella voce, si apre al terrore del nulla e, insieme, alla meraviglia dell'essere e, divenuta discorso significante, ritorna alla fine, come sapere *assoluto*, nella Voce".⁴⁵

5.

In § 527 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein describes what he means when he writes about philosophical comprehension or comprehension of what we cannot comprehend as meaning: "Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? One would like to say 'Because I know what it's all about'. But what is it all about? I should not be able to say".

Comprehending something is neither a meaning nor an image: it is one and the same thing as *understanding a sentence in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other, something that only these words, in this sequence and position can express. It is like understanding a poem, or one musical theme that cannot be replaced by another*.⁴⁶ To ask what it means to comprehend in this sense is like asking: "What is the meaning of music? what is the meaning of these sounds?"⁴⁷

What is at stake here is what I mean by the expression "to comprehend," and in the concept of "comprehension" there is also its philosophical use, that is, how Wittgenstein defines philosophical comprehension.

The problem is to understand what Wittgenstein wants to say when he writes that philosophical comprehension is connected to the comprehension of the non-evident nonsense that hides the possibility of language, and that we can grasp in a flash in the sound of a word and in the proposition in which our already-knowing-something resonates as belonging to that horizon of possibility.

How does one lead anyone to comprehension of a poem or of a theme?, Wittgenstein asks in *Philosophical Investigations* § 533. The answer should clarify what it means to *explain meaning*. *Explaining meaning* is not a true explanation, but is related to an interminable pointing in the

⁴⁵ Agamben (1982), p. 116-117.

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein (1989), § 531.

⁴⁷ Wittgenstein (1989), § 529.

direction of an enigma. It means to show what can be expressed only *through these words in these positions, these sounds in this arrangement*, leaving everything as it is, starting from the enigmatic experience of hearing a sound of a word or of a proposition or of a musical theme or of a verse of poetry.⁴⁸

To explain a meaning is tantamount to going to the inaccessible original place of the word, to reach the non-evident nonsense that we clarify in a flash, and in which thought ceases to philosophize to rest near its Muse. The place where language takes place, the voice of *Sigé*.

The border of Wittgenstein's philosophical interrogation – what puts an end to philosophy and allows her to cease asking questions – coincides with the question: What is music?

References

Agamben, Giorgio 1982, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, Torino: Einaudi.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 1945, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 1964, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris: Gallimard.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1974, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D.F. Pears and B. McGuinness, London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1989, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein (1989), § 534.