

# The Geology of Norway

*Poem with Introduction by Jan Zwicky*

## Notes on Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and Poetry

OVER THE YEARS, WITTGENSTEIN MADE A NUMBER OF working visits to Skjolden, a village on the Sognefjorden in Norway. The first, and perhaps most significant, of these occurred in 1913-14, at which time Wittgenstein began to work intensively on ideas that were to receive their final form in the *Tractatus*, the only book published in his lifetime. The last occurred over twenty years later, by which time Wittgenstein was attempting to rework material he had dictated in lectures at Cambridge in the mid-1930s and which we now know as *The Blue and Brown Books*. He left Norway late in 1937 without having wrestled the material into what he felt was publishable form. He did return one more time for a brief holiday in the summer of 1950, a visit cut short by the illness from which he was to die a year later—but his departure in 1937 marked the end of his use of Norway as a working retreat.

He was drawn to Norway by its isolation, convinced he could not focus sufficiently in Cambridge where he was constantly subject to both the irritations of intellectual society and the temptations of concerts. His life in Norway was not entirely that of a hermit (though it was, as it was elsewhere and always, Spartan)—he made a number of friends in the community. But it was, except for his correspondence, non-academic—a circumstance Wittgenstein found especially congenial to philosophical concentration.

The material in *The Blue and Brown Books* is among the earliest in the Nachlass to reflect the techniques and preoccupations that were to become the foundation for the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. And there can be little doubt that Wittgenstein's conception of the *mechanics* of linguistic meaning underwent serious revision between the publication of the *Tractatus* in 1921 and the work that we now think of as constituting his later views. But there remains a considerable range of opinion on what, if any, other intellectual dynamic may have been involved in the transition. The relation between the *Tractatus* and later works is complicated not only by the apparent discontinuity in the views, but also by difficulties in interpreting the views themselves—difficulties compounded by the fact that Wittgenstein tended to present his thought in dense, often highly metaphorical fragments, eschewing the standard argumentative style with which professional

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philosophers are most comfortable.

The poem that follows, like its five older cousins, published in 1986 under the title *Wittgenstein Elegies*, is an attempt to address some of these themes and issues. Like the earlier poems, it incorporates phrases from Wittgenstein's work and incidents from his life, but unlike them, it does not limit its preoccupations to matters that *might* have concerned the living Ludwig Wittgenstein. The voice of this poem, for example, is apparently familiar with both poststructuralist narratology and plate tectonics, neither of which was really on the scene when Wittgenstein died in 1951. Its trajectory nonetheless is, I hope, "Wittgensteinian"—though clearly its take on Wittgenstein's views on meaning must be regarded as controversial.

As for the latter: Wittgenstein once remarked to M. O'C. Drury, "It is impossible for me to say one word in my book about all that music has meant in my life; how then can I possibly make myself understood?"<sup>1</sup> An interesting question on a number of counts, not least for what it reveals about Wittgenstein's sense that his lifelong passion for music was *linked* to his philosophical endeavours. It is also interesting for what it suggests about the nature of musical meaning—that it is real, but somehow resists linguistic expression. This, I believe, is a clue to one of the fundamental links between the early and late views: the conviction that linguistic meaning is merely one *facet* of a larger phenomenon, and not always a paradigmatic facet at that.

**T**HE LARGER PROJECT OF WHICH THIS POEM IS A PART IS A book-length collection entitled *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth*. Its meditations range in subject matter from Kant, Hegel, and Pythagoras to Beethoven, Bruckner, and Hindemith, unified by questions about the nature of home and our responsibilities to it. I have defended elsewhere<sup>2</sup> the view that lyric poetry and philosophy are not mutually exclusive pursuits, and rest this claim on a demonstration that we (professional philosophers) have not actually provided a *defence* of the claim that clarity of thought (the erotic pull of which I take to be defining of philosophical activity) can be provided only by systematic analysis. In the absence of such a defence, I have suggested, we must take seriously numerous examples of philosophy pursued according to other lights, and, indeed, must take seriously the possibility that there exist compositions which, owing to their form, have never been considered philosophical but which nonetheless *are*. This view, not surprisingly, turns out to point to an understanding of meaning both deeper and broader than that which can be provided by formal semantics. *How* we say, I argue, is integrally bound up with *what* we mean; and, I suggest, there exists a particular subclass of formally anomalous works, conditioned by a (lyric) demand for coherence *as well as* the (philosophical) demand for clarity—which thus might reasonably be called lyric philosophy. In their contexts, it turns out that one of the tests for truth becomes compositional integrity.

Seamus Heaney, in his Nobel lecture, "Crediting Poetry," remarks: "I credit [poetry] ultimately because [it] can make an order... where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew. An order which satisfies all that is appetitive in the intelligence and prehensile in the affections. I credit poetry, in other words... for making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference... for its truth to life, in every sense of that

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phrase.”<sup>3</sup> An integrative understanding of history and perception, mind and emotion, knower and known—how, if there is even a chance that Heaney’s assessment is accurate, can we as philosophers not be urgently interested in such a medium?

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*But when his last night in Norway came, on 10 December, he greeted it with some relief, writing that it was perfectly possible that he would never return.*

—Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

I have wanted there to be  
no story. I have wanted  
only facts. At any given point in time  
there cannot be a story: time,  
except as now, does not exist.  
A given point in space  
is the compression of desire. The difference  
between this point and some place else  
is a matter of degree.  
This is what compression is: a geologic epoch  
rendered to a slice of rock you hold between  
your finger and your thumb.  
That is a fact.  
Stories are merely theories. Theories  
are dreams.  
A dream  
is a carving knife  
and the scar it opens in the world  
is history.  
The process of compression gives off thought.  
I have wanted  
the geology of light.

They tell me despair is a sin.  
I believe them.  
The hand moving is the hand thinking,  
and despair says the body does not exist.  
Something to do with bellies and fingers  
pressing gut to ebony,  
thumbs on keys. Even the hand  
writing is the hand thinking. I wanted  
speech like diamond because I knew  
that music meant too much.

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And the fact is, the earth is not a perfect sphere.  
And the fact is, it is half-liquid.  
And the fact is there are gravitational anomalies. The continents  
congeal, and crack, and float like scum on cooling custard.  
And the fact is,  
the fact is,  
and you might think the fact is  
we will never get to the bottom of it,  
but you would be wrong.  
There is a solid inner core.  
Fifteen hundred miles across, iron alloy,  
the pressure on each square inch of its heart  
is nearly thirty thousand tons.  
That's what I wanted:  
words made of that: language  
that could bend light.

Evil is not darkness,  
it is noise. It crowds out possibility,  
which is to say  
it crowds out silence.  
History is full of it, it says  
that no one listens.  
The sound of wind in leaves,  
that was what puzzled me, it took me years  
to understand that it was music.  
Into silence, a gesture.  
A sentence: that it speaks.  
This is the mystery: meaning.  
Not that these folds of rock exist  
but that their beauty, here,  
now, nails us to the sky.

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The afternoon blue light in the fjord.  
Did I tell you  
I can understand the villagers?  
Being, I have come to think,  
is music; or perhaps  
it's silence. I cannot say.  
Love, I'm pretty sure,  
is light.

    You know, it isn't  
what I came for, this bewilderment  
by beauty. I came  
to find a word, the perfect  
syllable, to make it reach up,  
grab meaning by the throat  
and squeeze it till it spoke to me.  
How else to anchor  
memory? I wanted language  
to hold me still, to be a rock,  
I wanted to become a rock myself. I thought  
if I could find, and say,  
the perfect word, I'd nail  
mind to world, and find  
release.

The hand moving is the hand thinking:  
what I didn't know: even the continents  
have no place but earth.

These mountains: once higher  
than the Himalayas. Formed in the pucker  
of a supercontinental kiss, when Europe  
floated south of the equator  
and you could hike from Norway  
down through Greenland to the peaks  
of Appalachia. Before Iceland existed.  
Before the Mediterranean  
evaporated. Before it filled again.  
Before the Rockies were dreamt of.  
And before these mountains,  
the rock raised in them  
chewed by ice that snowed from water  
in which no fish had swum. And before that ice,  
the almost speechless stretch of the Precambrian:  
two billion years, the planet  
swathed in air that had no oxygen, the Baltic Shield  
older, they think, than life.

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So I was wrong.  
This doesn't mean  
that meaning is a bluff.  
History, that's what  
confuses us. Time  
is not linear, but it's real.  
The rock beneath us drifts,  
and will, until the slow cacophony of magma  
cools and locks the continents in place.  
Then weather, light,  
and gravity  
will be the only things that move.

And will they understand?  
Will they have a name for us? —Those  
perfect changeless plains,  
those deserts,  
the beach that was this mountain,  
and the tide that rolls for miles across  
its vacant slope. φ

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> M. O'C. Drury, *The Danger of Words* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), p. xiv.
- <sup>2</sup> Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), pp. 10-11.