

James Elkins

Between Picture and Proposition: Torturing Paintings in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Art history is currently mining a number of disciplines to find adequate accounts of the differences between pictures, writing and other graphic marks. Anthropology, archaeology, semiotics, linguistics, speech act theory, various strains of psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism and literary criticism have all been pressed into service. In this chorus of ideas and contributors Wittgenstein's name is largely missing. One reason for that omission is his emphasis on simple schemata, "games" and logical relations at the expense of pictures. Even though the entire system of the *Tractatus* is based on Wittgenstein's "picture theory," it has seemed that he meant principally "proposition" instead of "picture," thus excluding the very nonpropositional elements that are of interest in actual pictures. Here I argue that the "picture theory" actually *is* about pictures in several important senses, and that it offers a more rigorous and logical model of graphic meaning than many later theories.

James Elkins is associate professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His books include The Poetics of Perspective (Cornell, 1994) and The Object Stares Back (Simon and Schuster, forthcoming). He has written on word-image issues in Res, Word & Image, Meaning and Qui parle. Essays arguing against aspects of visual semiotics are forthcoming in Critical Inquiry and The Art Bulletin.

Department of Art History,
Theory and Criticism
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Chicago, Illinois 60603

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James Elkins
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Rhode Island
School of Design

Providence
Rhode Island 02903

Of the various nineteenth and twentieth-century theories concerning words and images, the account Wittgenstein gives in the *Tractatus* stands out by implicitly denying that it is necessary to distinguish between “pictures” and “propositions” or “sentences” in the logical sense. At first it may seem that this position has little to say to the humanities: after all, Wittgenstein was interested in the logical structure of the world, and not in paintings, and even if he did mean something like paintings when he said “picture,” it still would not make much sense to equate pictures and propositions. In addition, resurrecting the *Tractatus* as a viable source instead of an historical document seems like a dubious endeavor. Since the 1930s, the *Tractatus* has generally been left to historians of philosophy, as the living issues have tended to come from the philosopher’s later work. Whatever the picture theory became in Wittgenstein’s later thought—and debate on this topic comprises the bulk of philosophic writing on the subject—it was an ancillary “view,” showing “how things looked from one angle” rather than a model with foundational status.¹

But there may be good reason to reconsider the “picture theory,” and the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in light of contemporary visual theory. It is at least intriguing that Wittgenstein’s use of “proposition” belongs in a direct line that runs from positivism through current semiotic theories of pictures. Semiotic art history posits signs, structures, lexemes, syntax and other linguistic elements in pictures, and those entail the logical elements Wittgenstein was concerned about.² Wittgenstein’s position is much stronger, and more thorough, than contemporary semiotic models of pictures, since it demands not just essential fragments of linguistic forms, but total identity between logical grammar and pictures—or so it seems.³ In art history, those propositional or linguistic aspects of pictures are balanced by awareness of nonlinguistic, “purely visual” elements that cannot be well described in language. Much of current art history is polarized by the difference, since there seems to be no intuitively acceptable way of creating a single picture of “picture” that includes both traits. The “word-image” distinction has grown into a generative opposition that tends to crowd out nuances and alternate formulations: pictures are seen to be uncertain mixtures of linguistic forms—or in this journal’s title, *language*—and unnameable, inenarrable, almost inconceivable elements—the *visual*.

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For the view that the picture theory continues beyond the *Tractatus*, see A. J. P.

Kenny, *Wittgenstein* (London: Penguin, 1973); for the contrary view, see P. M. S. Hacker, “The Rise and Fall of the Picture Theory,” in Irving Block, editor,

Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981), 85–109. For the idea that

Wittgenstein’s later theory widens so that “pictures need not be images,” see Ronald Burr,

“Wittgenstein’s Non-Representational [i.e., linguistic] Religious Pictures,” in Werner Leinfellner and Franz M. Wuketits, editors, *Die Aufgaben der Philosophie in der Gegenwart / The Tasks of Contemporary Philosophy*, Proceedings of the 10th International Wittgenstein Symposium, Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1986), 352–54.

The phrase in quotation marks is from E. Stenius, “The Picture Theory and Wittgenstein’s Later Attitude to It,” in *ibid.*, 110–39, esp. 135.

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See my “Marks, Traces, Traits, Contours, Orli, and Splendores: Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures,” forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*.

Normally, when art historians want to work their way out of the word-image debate they either critique its apparent harshness by finding subtle connections between “words” and “images,” or else they try to redefine the problem by adopting alternate terms to stand in place of “word” or “image.” These are, I think, mostly cosmetic alterations, and they leave the dichotomy untouched. Even trichotomies such as Charles Peirce’s division of signs into symbolic, iconic and indexical, tend to reduce to the familiar dichotomy when the third term, in this case the “indexical,” begins to appear as an attribute of the more commonly noticed symbolic and iconic.⁴ To some extent the stubborn split has been beneficial, since it has allowed a wide latitude of historical and critical projects to find purchase, to set themselves problems and solve them within the terms of the dichotomy; but in another sense, it has been profoundly limiting since it prevents effective engagement with the huge variety of images that do not lend themselves to polar schemata.⁵ The picture theory, if it has anything to say outside the rarefied, sometimes artificial and often ambiguous world of the *Tractatus*, may offer a unique way out of the polarized critical climate that now bears down on visual theory in the humanities. It may, in short, offer the most powerful possible critique of the word image dichotomy, since it proposes a concept of picture that is undecidably both “visual” and “verbal”—or in Wittgenstein’s more clear and honest language, “pictorial” and “propositional.”

The picture theory is explicated in two places in the *Tractatus*, in 2.1-3.01, and again in 4.01 ff., and Wittgenstein’s commentators have mostly focused on those parts of the picture theory that are most relevant for what Wittgenstein then goes on to develop, namely his theory of propositions and logical forms. What I would like to do here is look at those passages again, with the eye of an interested outsider—someone concerned with what the picture theory might have to do with ordinary pictures and the words that are associated with them as captions, as superimposed texts, as historical and critical paraphrases and narrative commentaries and especially as denotata. The kinds of questions that I want to ask will have meaning within Wittgenstein studies as attempts to understand the dynamics and vicissitudes of the concept of “picture,” but I mostly want to find out whether his way of conceiving, developing and applying the word “picture” has any residual meaning for the late twentieth century. Can Wittgenstein’s odd usage be of help to a discourse that is aimed

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A parallel case is Nelson Goodman, with his strict analytic exposition of notation; see my “What Really Happens in Pictures? Misreading with Nelson Goodman,” in *Word & Image* 9 no. 4 (1993): 349-62.

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This is discussed in my essay “Peirce’s Wider Semiotic,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly, forthcoming.

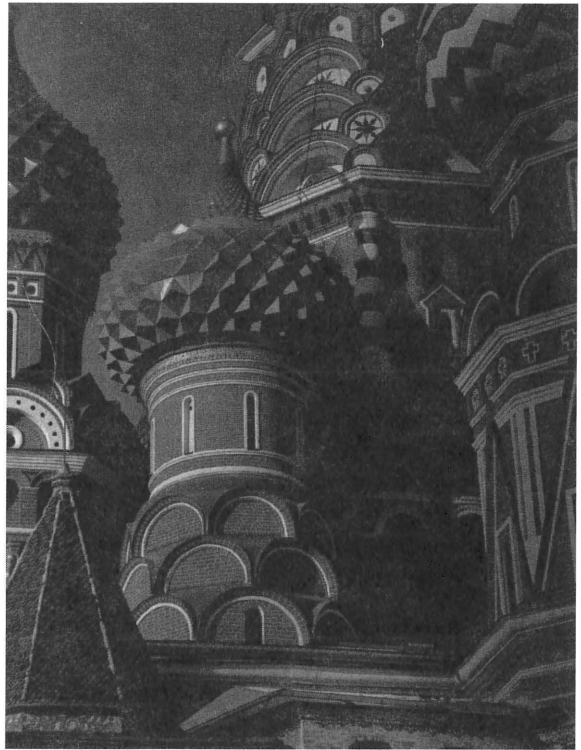
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The possibility of other schemata that are not binarisms is promised in Mieke Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

at actual, individual pictures? In the end I will not argue for a revival of the *Tractatus* itself (there are too many problems with the structure that supports the picture theory for that to be a sensible option), but for what it can tell us about what we want pictures to be. My essential claim is this: Wittgenstein's exposition tortures the concept of picture in just the ways we tend to torture it, but he does it better, pushing the concept until it is nearly illegible. I would say we are not happy with "picture" as the word is given to us, and our semiotic and other structural theories are aimed at forcing "picture" into certain molds that help us write about pictorial structures, but that also give rise to unacceptably harsh polarities between "word" and "image" or the "visual" and "language."

To my mind the most careful commentary is still Max Black's *Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, and I will be commenting on Black's glosses as much as on the original. For my purposes it is especially significant that Black takes the vernacular meaning of "picture" seriously, and one effect of that decision is that he keeps trying to pull the concept back toward its ordinary uses—a tendency that I think he may have felt the later Wittgenstein would have approved. Still, he doesn't succeed in placing our "picture" in Wittgenstein's "picture," and I will be paying special attention to the limits of his project of renormalizing "picture" as a sign of the potential problems in importing anything resembling the *Tractatus*'s "picture" into contemporary discourse on art.

The Cathedral of the Intercession of the Moat (St. Basil's), Moscow, 16th c. Wittgenstein once mused that the onion domes of St. Basil's are sufficiently different from one another that they look very much like language—as if they must mean something.³⁷ It might be better to say that the feeling of meaning, or propositional content, is strong, but so is the feeling that such a picture cannot be a proposition. Photo from William Craft Brumfield, *A History of Russian Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).



Section I

The first statement about the picture theory is § 2.1, “We picture facts to ourselves.” Black stresses that from the outset, Wittgenstein is taking “picture” as a nontechnical term, and that he is not using it “in some figurative sense.” Instead

his remarks should be taken as intended to apply literally to all representational paintings, photographs, or diagrams such as maps, that can be “read” as depicting how things stand in reality.⁶

It is not correct to assume, as some commentators have, that Wittgenstein’s “picture” is a neologism *ab ovo*, detached from its vernacular meanings. The “picture theory” is built on the premise that the concept “picture” can be used to describe what happens in “an electrical circuit, a map, a printed record of a game of chess,” a sentence, a proposition, musical notation, logical sigla such as “aRb,” and—perhaps most fundamentally—everyday pictures (90).⁷ As Guido Küng puts it, Wittgenstein

calls a sentence a picture (Bild) because he wants to compare it with a broad spectrum of other examples of

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Black (1964), 74. Further references to this will be included in the text.

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For the sigla, see Wittgenstein (1961), 4.012.

*pictures, ranging from a tableau vivant (lebendes Bild: a silent and motionless group of persons, etc., arranged to represent a scene) to a mathematical projection (Abbildung).*⁸

The part of Wittgenstein's word *Bild* that means, essentially, "painting" or "drawing" is not at all irrelevant to Wittgenstein's purpose. Since *Bild*, as Wittgenstein knew the word, took its meanings from specific kinds of pictures, projections and so forth, no common association is necessarily irrelevant: *tableaux vivants* for example, as they are described in Goethe and elsewhere, were motionless assemblages intended to mimic *paintings*, and so they are deeply engaged with fine art senses of the word "picture" (4.0311).

But there are immediately problems. While I agree with Black that there is no reason to assume, without having been told otherwise, that "picture" means anything other than representational images, making this explicit also sets up the dynamic that haunts the succeeding pages of both the *Companion* and the *Tractatus*.⁹ It turns "picture" into a term that is about to be sorely tested, rather than a philosopheme that might merely need some adjustment (as Black adjusts *abbilden*, *darstellen*, *bedeuten* and so forth, on the page immediately following this quotation). Even if we allow that Wittgenstein is following mathematical protocol by letting "picture" function as an undefined term, it remains to be answered why he would choose such a nonphilosophic, ordinary word that has none of the benefits of definitional rigor and none of the advantages of well-worn but abstract vernacular usages. He could have tried *darstellung* or *vorstellung*, with their echoes of Hegel and Schopenhauer. But he chose the more ordinary, and much more slippery, *Bild*.

It is certainly the case that part of what Wittgenstein wants to conjure with his word is the idea of projection, especially in the mathematical sense, but also in its perspectival and optical meanings.¹⁰ But he does not specify projection until 3.11, in part because he wants to leave the exact relation to the world undefined for the moment. Later he mentions "feelers" or "antennae" between picture and world, and evokes the idea of "reaching right out to the world" and "actually" touching it. They are odd images, reminiscent of the visual rays and lines of projections, but also of insect communication and wordless tactile experience in general.¹¹ Throughout the *Tractatus* the mechanism of repre-

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Guido Küng, *Ontology and the Logistic Analysis of Language: An Enquiry into the Contemporary Views on Universals* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1967), 51.

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It also provides the limits to accounts that stress logical relations over pictorial ones, such as Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978).

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This is discussed in Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

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2.1515, 2.1511, 2.1512 respectively.

sentation is left to vacillate between the most rigorous mathematical mappings and the most intuitive “feelings.”¹² (And this is why graphical depictions of his “projection,” and class terminological symbolizations of the picture theory, seem to me misguided.¹³) But “projection” is also omitted at the beginning because he wants to have “picture” function as “model” as well as two-dimensional painting or photograph (74-75): “A picture is a model of reality,” he asserts (2.12). This also follows the German *Bild*, which means both “picture” and “model,” and it is likely Wittgenstein intended those uses from the first.¹⁴

Three numbered paragraphs after he has first mentioned pictures, Wittgenstein gives the first description of the properties that allow pictures to model states of affairs. “In a picture,” he writes, “objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them” (2.13). All Wittgenstein says here is that pictures have “elements,” so they are not necessarily atomic, and that they have “correspondence” with objects. But it seems that something more is needed to make sense of this in light of what is about to transpire in the *Tractatus*. Black expands the word “element” into a tripartite theory of picturing (78-79). First, he says that the “elements” in a picture (he suggests the example of Frith’s *Derby Day*, a distinctly odd choice, since it fits neither the taste of Wittgenstein’s milieu nor that of mid-twentieth century American academia) can be separated into “blobs of paint, black and white patches,” and that we will cease differentiating such patches when we come to the smallest units that have denotational significance. He proposes we call these *graphemes*, on the model of linguists’ use of “morphemes” to denote the smallest meaningful units of language.¹⁵ Using this definition of “element,” he proposes three features of pictures that will have special resonance in the later development of Wittgenstein’s thought. First, the elements must somehow resemble their denotata. He names Peirce and suggests that “graphemes stand for their objects iconically,” no matter what exact “principle of element-thing coordination” is involved. Second, the arrangement of the graphemes in the painting—Black adds that they must be “suitably defined so as to exclude irrelevancies”—must be parallel to the arrangement of objects in the world. “The principle of representation of spatial structure is, broadly, speaking, identity of arrangement.” And third, since pictures represent by virtue of conventions, “every representational picture belongs to an enveloping system of pictures governed by the same princi-

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G. L. Hagberg points this out in *Art as Language, Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), p. 11 n. 7.

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As in G. Küng, *Ontology and the Linguistic Analysis of Language*, 53.

14

This is stressed by P. M. S. Hacker, “The Rise and Fall of the Picture Theory,” 107 n. 1.

This idea, that a root of the concept “picture” is to be found in three dimensional “proxies,” “models” and “tokens,” is one that has wide resonance in twentieth century visual theory, from Freud’s description of the origin of language in the “Fort / Da” game, to the art historian David Summers’s theory of visual objects as “real metaphors,” to the archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat’s theory of the origin of counting in Mesopotamian clay “tokens” that later became pictographs. Without pursuing any of these leads, I would take note of a peculiar extension of the concept of picture into the realm of three-dimensional “proxies.”

See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in J. Strachey and A. Freud, editors, *Standard Edition*, vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955); D. Summers,



ples of representation." As H. O. Mounce puts it, "the structure which is common between the proposition and the world is revealed... only if we understand the rules for their use"; but still, this third requirement may sound more like later Wittgenstein, with its emphasis on interpretation, than the more contextless analysis in the *Tractatus*.¹⁶

Each of these three criteria is strongly qualified. Spatial relations have to be adjusted "so as to exclude irrelevancies" before they can be correlated with the arrangements of objects in the world, and graphemes only resemble real world objects by "sophisticated" routes. But given that the criteria are not intended to represent Black's sense of the structure of pictures, we may still wonder if they represent Wittgenstein's sense. Because Wittgenstein says he was led to question the *Tractatus* when Pietro Sraffa asked him to explain how a certain gesture—a rude flick of the hand under the chin—could have a "structural correspondence with the state of affairs that it represents," we know Wittgenstein must have assumed some more articulated, if fragile, account of representation. (The power of Sraffa's question comes from the fact that such a gesture "can easily communicate just as much as a fully articulate proposition," so it casts doubt on the idea that the meaning of a sign depends "on its own internal structure."¹⁷) From the present point of view, the question this episode raises is why it took a "certain Neapolitan gesture" to establish the shakiness of the picture theory. Determinate, symbolic gestures have been integral to Western painting and sculpture from Roman times, and so we might say Wittgenstein had never clearly imagined a narrative picture as he wrote. But is this enough of an explanation? It could easily be argued that all the inchoate ordinary senses of pictures involve "elements" that are "fully articulate" and yet do not "correlate" to the world. What understanding of "picture" could take so much for granted?

"Real Metaphor," in Norman Bryson, Michael Holly, and Kieth Moxey, editors, *Visual Theory* (New York: Harper Collins Icon Editions, 1991); Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing: From Counting to Cuneiform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

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Black's usage is a little eccentric here, since "morpheme" normally denotes the smallest meaningful unit of writing, such as "con" in "construction," and "grapheme" means the smallest disjoint unit of writing, such as the "c" in "construction". "Lexeme," a related term, denotes a "minimal unit of the mental lexicon" used in building words, such as the "struc-" in "construction." The closest to Black's meaning is "morpheme," not "grapheme"; but all three terms could be used to widen the discussion at this point.

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H. O. Mounce, *Wittgenstein's Tactatus: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 29.

17

Karlheinz Lüdeking, "Pictures and Gestures," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 no. 3 (1990): 219-20. Lüdeking suggests that Sraffa's Marxist sympathies may account for his relative absence from the Wittgenstein literature (*ibid.*, 230 n. 6).

A corner of a Feraghan rug. The nearly linguistic quality of some rugs has been remarked by a number of authors, from Alois Riegl to E. H. Gombrich. Wittgenstein once dreamed about a rug that he thought had some hidden significance, as if it had a message it could not quite communicate: but in accord with his critique of Freud's dream analyses, he declined to pursue the dream by breaking its enigmatic code.

Photo from Rosa Belle Holt, *Oriental and Occidental Rugs, Antique and Modern* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing, 1937).



Section II

In Black's gloss, "picture" is a strongly logical concept. It has definable "elements" that resemble objects in describable ways and that combine into "structures" that also occur in the world.¹⁸ The tripartite description of "elements," despite Black's qualified exposition—and his is by far the most nuanced of any commentary on this passage—is already beyond the pale of "pictures" as many people in the visual arts understand them. For a reader in art history or art criticism, all this may seem to belong to the realm of logic or linguistics, so that the only places Wittgenstein crosses the "word-image" gap and evokes the visual are when he talks later in the *Tractatus* about the non-verbal "mystical" that has to do with the fact "that" something exists instead of "how" it exists (6.44), and when he enjoins silence over whatever is nonsensical or senseless (7). But it seems to me that these earlier moments in the *Tractatus* capture a significant amount of the anti-rational, nonverbal glamour of the "purely" visual, and it is premature to say that Wittgenstein's "picture" has already left the fold of ordinary pictures and become a tool of rationality. And that is so because "picture" is not yet something that is firmly enough chained to its rational prison of

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H. O. Mounce,
Wittgenstein's Tractatus,

“element,” “correspondence,” “grapheme,” “identity” and “arrangement” to be sure that nothing remains free, unsaid or unsayable.

Wittgenstein next asserts that the elements of a picture are “related to one another in a determinate way,” otherwise the object is not a picture (2.14). Black sees this partly as an injunction against vagueness: “a smudged or blurred picture is not a picture at all; the sense of the picture must be precise, even if the picture depicts a non-atomic situation and thereby leaves much unspecified” (80). Black cites a Turner painting of a foggy sunset as an acceptably “precise representation of what it purports to depict”; what Wittgenstein wants to exclude are vague, indeterminate or indefinite organizations in pictures. To those who work with visual images, this may seem like the last straw, the stifling requirement that breaks the connection between Wittgenstein’s “picture” and ordinary pictures. But Black also suggests a more lenient, and I think more accurate, alternate: “‘determinate’ can also be opposed to ‘indefinite,’” so that “the blobs of paint of which a picture is made must be organized in a single, definite way, out of the many that are possible... in order to constitute a determinate picture” (80). In this reading, when Wittgenstein says a picture’s elements “are related to one another in a determinate way,” he means “in a way that can be determined,” or “in a way that is the case,” rather than “in a distinct or precise way.”

Two propositions later, Wittgenstein says more about determinateness:

The fact that the elements of a picture are related to one another in a determinate way represents that things are related to one another in the same way [2.151]

What is happening here is that the still largely undefined concept of “picture” is being stretched away from its vernacular and critical senses, so that it can accommodate the incipient theory of propositions. The stretching is nearing a breaking point with this kind of atomic correspondence theory, though it is again released just a little by the comment that Black appends. In response to 2.14, he had said that “a determinate picture” must possess a definite organization, leaving it open that there might be other kinds of pictures that Wittgenstein does not mention. I do not agree with that reading, since Wittgenstein says clearly “What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one

another in a determinate way,” not “What constitutes a determinate picture is that its elements are related to one another in a definite way.”¹⁹ Black comments on 2.151 by setting out a “picture” (he puts the word in quotation marks, as if in token of its increasing oddity):



The “picture” is identified by the asterisk in parentheses, instead of the marginal number that is usual in mathematics and logic. (It is interesting that Black chooses an affectless mathematical picture, in contrast to Wittgenstein’s first picture of the two dueling stick figures in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, or the boxer invoked in the *Philosophical Investigations*. If this were a *psychological* inquiry into Wittgenstein’s sense of “picture,” I might want to claim that his philosophic sense of “picture” may be linked to belligerence. And if that is so, it is a meaning Black transforms into friendly admiration.²⁰)

This “picture,” Black says, has a meaning defined by several stipulations:

- (i) the circle stands for Russell;
- (ii) the cross stands for Frege;
- (iii) that the circle is immediately to the left of the cross means that whatever the former sign stands for admires whatever the latter sign stands for. (The whole picture therefore means that Russell admires Frege.)

Black thinks that given just this picture, without the stipulations, we would be inclined to speak directly about “the fact (*),” as if “putting a circle and a cross side by side on paper uniquely generated a certain fact, which could then be identified without ambiguity or misunderstanding” (80). But the figure could “yield any number of facts” depending on how we read it. We might see it as a circle, a vertical line and a horizontal line, and I would add that we also inevitably see it as a circle, a cross, two parentheses, and an asterisk. So understanding a picture as a fact, or as an object with a “definite sense,” or as a fact that depicts something, or—in the terminology that is about to make its first appearance—as a proposition, entails “the selection of a definite

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Later Wittgenstein does say things that allow that not all pictures are determinate, though he never does so as fully, or explicitly, as Black implies by his commentary. See for example *Tractatus* 2.201, *Companion* p. 90.

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See the *Notebooks 1914-1916* entry for September 9, 1914, and *Philosophical Investigations* 1.22 n.; I would also note that G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), makes the duelists actually touch swords.

articulation of the picture elements” and a definition of their relations.²¹ Black does that for his indeterminate “picture” with his three stipulations. A little later Wittgenstein says “The pictorial relationship consists of the correlations of the picture’s elements with things” (2.1514), and Black asks, “What features of a picture are to be counted as elements?” (85).

In a literal reading of the text to this point, a picture is determinate, but in Black’s reading, pictures are issued a reprieve and allowed to be sometimes indeterminate. (Black may be rescuing “picture” when it does not need to be, since Wittgenstein only says that arrangement in any picture is its determinateness, and every picture, no matter how “non-verbal” or “iconic” it seems, has an arrangement.) Now this accords very well with a prevalent model of painting, according to which it is inherently indeterminate and structurally vague, but susceptible to “stipulative” reductive readings. But it does nothing significant to alter or erase the word-image dichotomy, and so I would like to stress the literal reading over the more familiar-sounding interpretation that Black offers. “Picture” as it emerges in 2.1-2.151 is a potentially powerful reworking of our usual “picture,” because of the way it places these nascent logical forms in the heart of pictures rather than imagining them as a pole toward which pictures might incline, or from which they need to be rescued.

Two further issues will move this reading toward its conclusion: first there is the difficult relation of showing and saying, and then there is the curious way that Wittgenstein stretches, blurs and distorts “picture” without always being aware of doing so.

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Elsewhere the “referents of [the picture’s] constituents” are said to be sufficient. See 4.01, and Black (1964), 164.

Wittgenstein, *Portrait Bust*. Wittgenstein remarked that he had only good manners (*gute Manieren*) when he made art. There is a tempting parallel to be made between the simplified forms that he borrowed from contemporary sculptors and the propositional, schematic nature of pictures in the picture theory. Everything is simple and orderly: *gute Manieren* are also logical. Photo from Michael Nedo and Michele Ranchetti, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), pl. 306.



Section III

The picture theory reveals its strength unexpectedly when it takes its most counter-intuitive form, in the assertion that a statement is a picture. That leads Wittgenstein to several deeper connections between pictures and statements that follow from the distinction between showing and saying. Proposition 2.15, which I began earlier, concludes:

Let us call this connexion of its elements the structure of the picture, and let us call the possibility of this structure the pictorial form of the picture. [2.15II]

Black draws out the nascent distinction here between the “picture as a fact in its own right (an arrangement of blobs of paint on canvas, without any associated meaning) and the picture *as a picture* (a fact that *depicts* something, a possible state of affairs) (81). His paraphrase of 2.15II ends this way: “...let the structure of the fact be called the structure of the picture, and the form of the fact be called the form or the form of representation of the picture” (82). “Picture” is bifurcated into something with internal structure and external form. He calls the “picture as a fact in its own right” the “picture-fact” and “the picture *as a picture*” the “picture in the full sense” (81).

Wittgenstein's own way of developing this thought is to place the truth-function of a picture in its external relation, and its "sense" in its internal relation (92).²² A picture's sense, which is contained in its internal structure, is not dependent on its truth-value, which is expressed in its "form of depiction." Black reads 2.221 as "What a picture shows is its sense," rather than "What a picture represents is its sense" as Pears and McGuinness have it, and that allows him to see an anticipation of the central doctrine that will be made explicit only in 4.022: that a picture "*shows* its sense," but it "*says*" its truth-content (92-93). Later,

*Wittgenstein insists strongly that the logical form can only be displayed (aufgewiesen), mirrored or reflected (gespiegelt), shown (gezeigt), and that it cannot be depicted (abgebildet), represented (dargestellt), [or] said (gesagt).*²³

This concept, and the entire impetus to employ the word "picture," probably came from Frege. At one point Frege writes "it would be desirable to have a special term for signs having only sense. If we name them, say pictures (*Bilder*), the words of an actor on the stage would be pictures; indeed the actor himself would be a picture."²⁴ It is important that this idea of silent pictures may be at the origin of Wittgenstein's "picture," but in the *Tractatus* it is not clear if a picture's internal structure cannot also be "asserted," "claimed," "said" or couched as any sort of proposition. By itself, a picture's sense agrees or disagrees with reality and can be true or false (2.222). The internal structure of the foggy sunset painting might be incoherent, and therefore false, without any reference to other foggy sunsets, painted or real. Because that is the case, it is not obvious what can say and show, or only do one or the other.

There are some particularly elliptical passages here, with widely varying readings.²⁵ Since a picture's sense is already a truth statement, showing seems to be ubiquitous and prior to saying, and saying begins to look a little superfluous. As Black asks, "what function is left over for *saying*?" To G. E. M. Anscombe, the showing / saying distinction names the difference between a picture and a proposition; the former shows, the latter says:

[W]hile a picture may be said to shew how things are, if there is something it is a correct representation of, it certainly does not say that is how things are; the most that one could grant would be that we could use the picture in

22

See further Bernard Harrison, "Frege and the Picture Theory: A Reply to Guy Stock," *Philosophical Investigations* 9 no. 2 (1986): 134-39.

23

Guido Küng, *Ontology and the Logistic Analysis of Language*, 54-55.

24

Frege, cited in Guido Küng, *Ontology and the Logistic Analysis of Language*, 51 n. 2.

25

Problems have arisen over the wording of 4.022II ("A proposition *shows* how things stand if it is true. And it *says* that they are so"), where Wittgenstein seems to be saying that true propositions both say and show. It leaves open the question of what happens to negative propositions (Stenius [1960], 148), and it has even seemed to be a "mistake." (J. W. T. Wisdom, "Logical Con-structions," 205, cited in *Companion*, 165.)

Carmap mounted an attack on the concept that a picture cannot depict its form of depiction. He argues, in Küng's words, that "although we cannot step *outside* any logical form... we can, nevertheless, make statements about the formal system of any language within the system of a metalanguage." Guido Küng, *Ontology and the Logistic Analysis of Language*, 55.

*saying how things are: we could hold the picture up and ourselves say: "This is how things are."*²⁶

It seems to me this is too stark, and it gives away the complexity of the preceding analysis. Why would Wittgenstein have expended so much thought to bring "picture" closer to "proposition," if he had meant to make picturing so clearly not a matter of asserting?

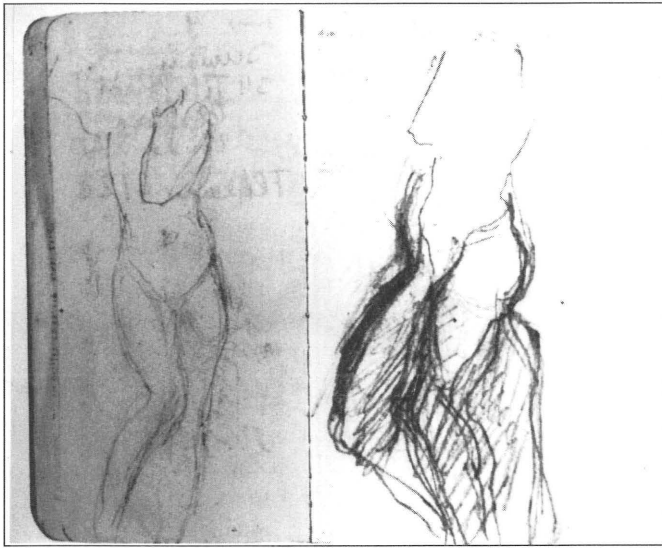
It is better, I think, to try to put showing and saying together in the composite concept that is the "picture." Erik Stenius does this when he says pictures show both internal structure and external states of affairs.²⁷ He develops the idea of "internal showing," which only happens when what is shown cannot also be said, and concludes that "the internal structure of reality can only be shown or exhibited by language, not described in sentences."²⁸ For "language," we might substitute "pictures" in the ordinary sense. This is a more modulated interaction of showing and saying, though it still confines the "internal relations" of a picture to exhibiting sense.

Like Wittgenstein's "picture," showing and saying are partly propositional and partly not, or to put it another way, propositions are always both shown and said. For Black, "saying" is "an aspect of" the sense, rather than a second function that is "superadded to it" (165). "Propositions show what they say," Wittgenstein claims, so that "tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing" (4.4611). Showing, it seems, is something that is done by merely existing, and by possessing internal structure; and it can also be the only mode of meaning for statements that are void, contradictory or tautological. Pictures are often that way.

26
G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 65.

27
Stenius (1960), 179.

28
Stenius (1960), 181.



Wittgenstein, *Sketches after Michelangelo's Slaves*. This most typical art student's subject has rarely yielded interesting work (Tintoretto's drawings are among the best exceptions), but it is strong in propositional content: here it declares a range of aspirations typical of a certain period and a certain social class. The nonlinguistic aspect of such drawings is almost incidental: they merely need to denote their subject and they have fulfilled their function. From Michael Nedo and Michele Ranchetti, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pl. 406.

Section IV

Showing and saying are intriguing concepts for contemporary visual theory, especially if they are linked in the way I have suggested. They are the signs of a true fusion of the intuitive and beleaguered nonverbal nonlinguistic "picture" and the counter-intuitive and relentless "determinateness" of readings that insist on pictures' propositional logic: a fusion, that is, of "image" and "word." That is the moral I would like to draw from this reading, and the central claim of this essay. Although these are powerful and promising ideas, it is not likely that the *Tractatus* itself could ever become a foundation for contemporary visual theory: the picture theory is too much based on the logical atomism that Wittgenstein, and the majority of writers after him, have long since rejected. But I have pressed the point in order to indicate how a more rigorous understanding of what we want to mean by "picture" is commensurate with Wittgenstein's formulations. He was, in this respect, one of the major art critics of the century: he took desires we still have in regard to pictures and made them more orderly and clear than most writers since his time have managed.

That is the doctrinal portion of the reading I want to make; but in order to pursue our own notion of "picture" it is necessary to

leave off exposing the picture theory itself and consider instead a kind of side-effect of the reading. What I have in mind is the violence that is done to “picture” throughout the text. It begins slowly, since “picture” enters the text as an undefined term, but it builds until the word has only the most improbable connections to its original meanings. I would like to close by examining that process, and positing that the distortion of meaning is itself both significant and thematic: it expresses the strangeness of the *Tractatus*'s aims in this respect, and it exemplifies the oddity of trying to compose a sense of combined “picture” and “proposition.”

As Black says, if I look at a picture of a red ball on a white kitchen tablecloth, I can pick out any number of formal resemblances between the picture and the actual state of affairs it depicts. The sentence “The red ball is on the white cloth” seems quite different, and in order to understand it as a picture I have to take special note of the fact that the ball, the cloth and the relation between them are all “united in the sentence-fact” in the way that the physical denotata are united. Black seems fairly reconciled to this notion (89): “Since concatenation of elements in the sentence-fact means concatenation of the co-ordinated elements in the represented state of affairs, it is not far-fetched to detect a residual ‘iconicity’ even in a sentence”—or is it? Do we really want a “residual” property to be the strongest link between our rather attenuated concept of “picture” and the sentences that we wish it to exemplify? And why isn’t Wittgenstein more concerned about this—at least as concerned as Black is when he finds himself inventing this dubious example? Why doesn’t he notice that he is left with “rather unexciting” correspondences when it comes to sentences?²⁹

Wittgenstein might have replied that the “determinate” picture, with its strict “elements” and “pictorial form,” is very much like a sentence, and that Black’s example takes “picture” too much as something that resembles and not enough as something that has structure. But what is at stake in the reading I am pursuing here is the concept of “picture” itself, which is sorely tried by this development. What is left of “picture,” aside from its potentially “determined,” well-articulated structure of pseudo-linguistic elements and its various “forms of depiction”?

Wittgenstein knew he was being vague about pictures. G. E. Moore records some of his thoughts about that, in lectures given in the early 1930s:

29

J. W. T. Wisdom, “Logical Constructions,” *Mind* 40 (1931): 205, cited in *Companion*, 163.

*In connection with the Tractatus statement that propositions... are "pictures," he said that he had not at that time noticed that "picture" was vague; but he still... thought it "useful to say 'A proposition is a picture or something like one'" although... he was willing to admit that to call a proposition a "picture" was misleading; that propositions are not pictures "in any ordinary sense"; and that to say they are, "merely stresses a certain aspect of the grammar of the word 'proposition'- merely stresses that our uses of the words 'proposition' and 'picture' follow similar rules."*³⁰

Stenius remarks that "one often has the impression that when [Wittgenstein] later speaks of themes related to the picture theory he, as it were, asks himself "What did I really mean?" and does not find an answer to this question." In this regard the *Tractatus* is "vague," and so it stands to reason that Wittgenstein might have a hard time recalling what "picture" had once meant.³¹ Yet despite his memory that he had not noticed the vagueness when he was writing the *Tractatus*, there is some evidence he did know some aspects of the theory were vague. In 4.011, he says that sign languages are pictures, "even in the ordinary sense, of what they represent," which Black calls an "important remark" that "can hardly be defended." "In this passage," he thinks, "Wittgenstein seems to be aware that he has stretched the ordinary meaning of 'picture.'"³²

The vagueness and the stretching go hand in hand throughout the *Tractatus*. At times the operations that would be required to revive the flagging "picture" are so extensive that they seem rather hopeless. Black makes a list of the "modifications" that are needed in Wittgenstein's doctrine to make the form and structure of pictures "fit the most general case of a representation" (90). First, we can no longer insist that elements in a picture resemble their denotata, so that iconicity needs to be replaced by some more general "abstract notion of one-to-one correspondence." And there can no longer be an identity between arrangements of elements in pictures and in real-world denotata; instead we have to speak about "*homology* of arrangements." The spatial arrangements in a musical score are homologous, but not identical, with the temporal relations in a performance. And third,

homomorphic structures may still be held to have something "in common," namely a pattern of relationships, indifferently exemplified by each member of a class of

30

G. E. Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930 33," in *Philosophical Papers* (London, 1959), 252-324, esp. 263, quoted in Black, *Companion*, 162-63.

31

E. Stenius, "The Picture Theory and Wittgenstein's Later Attitude to It," 134.

32

Proposition 4.013 notes that the "essence" of "pictorial character" of propositions is "not impaired by apparent irregularities (such as the use of [sharp] and [flat] in musical notation)," and 4.0141 observes that "There is a general rule by means of which the musician can obtain the symphony from the score"—a statement that I would imagine has entertained Nelson Goodman, since the bulk of *Languages of Art* is given over to specifying that what might mean.

mutually homomorphic structures. So, in a very abstract sense of "same form," we might still say that representation and what it represents have the same form (in my terminology, are homomorphic). [91]

This is "very abstract" indeed. Is there any reason not to abandon the word "picture" altogether, in favor of some neologism that would express its non-visual meanings a little more accurately—something like "determinate depiction-vehicle"?

The most compelling thing about the picture theory is this very abuse of the concept "picture." No matter how much it is distorted, its vernacular meaning remains indispensable. It is saved from disappearing into a non-visual proposition by the vagueness that cloaks it, but it also repeatedly calls out for the kind of clarity that would ultimately destroy it. In terms of the philosophic claims of the *Tractatus*, this is a crucial elision on Wittgenstein's part, though we might also describe it as a calculated decision since it allows the picture theory to remain afloat. In terms of my own agenda, and the potential meaning of the *Tractatus* for visual art, the thematic significance would have to be put something like this: any attempt to escape from the word-image opposition by fusing "word" and "image" will involve doing some violence to the vernacular meanings of "picture," and that violence may be expressed most powerfully in the *Tractatus*.

A harried sense of "picture" may be the inescapable sign, condition and constitutive state of any such attempt. The fact that post-modern visual theory harasses the notion of "picture" so consistently and resourcefully may be part of the desire to collapse the word-image dichotomy—to know and not know pictures, to have them as analytic "propositions" and wordless objects.

In Wittgenstein's hands "picture" nearly becomes—to use a word that plays a central role in sections 6 and 7 of the *Tractatus*—"nonsensical," *unsinnig* (376, 380). In literary terms, the picture theory can be read as the result of an intense desire to have exactness of concepts together with "mysticism," not only in the realm of "silence" but in the most immediate, familiar, unanalytic, unphilosophic interpretation. "Picture" is familiar and unfamiliar, "shown" and "said," defined and undefined, a term from the fine arts and from philosophy. Perhaps—to strike a somewhat extravagant note—it may even be that the true *object* of attempting to escape from the word-image dichotomy is to harass the concept of "picture."

Wittgenstein, *Photograph of Ben Richards*. One of the ways a picture can show and say at the same time is by presenting itself as a declaration—in this case, perhaps, as a declaration of love. The photograph is an almost forensic document of its subject's essential features: even though it says nothing about them, it is clearly propositional. From Michael Nedo and Michele Ranchetti, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pl. 460.



Section V

A helpful concept for analyzing that object is “hypericon,” coined by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Iconology*. Though he only mentions the word twice, he gives at least five examples: Wittgenstein’s comparison of propositions and hieroglyphics, “Plato’s cave, Aristotle’s wax tablet, Locke’s dark room,” and a simple diagram showing a man’s head, looking at a candle, which projects through his eye and reforms as a mental image inside his mind.³³ There are at least three senses in which we might understand these as “hypericons.” First, they are images that seem to tell us about how the mind forms images, figures that “figure the practice of figuration” (5). In David Summers’s phrase, they are “metaphors in terms of which the mind itself is characterized.”³⁴ Thus the perspective diagram “displays a whole matrix of analogies... that govern representational theories of the mind;” as I have argued elsewhere, it tells us how to think about point of view by providing structures generated from perspective, which itself gave rise to the concept of point of view.³⁵ In this first definition, hypericons are sources of a *mise en abyme* of reflection, in which we think with the aid of images, but also through images, about images and because of images. It would be inter-

33 Mitchell (1986), 16, 158. For Wittgenstein’s hieroglyphic see Wittgenstein (1961), 4.106, cited in Mitchell (1986), 6, 20.

34 Summers (1991), 192.

35 Mitchell (1986), 16, and Elkins, *Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

esting to make a study of hypericons in this sense: hypericonicity would have to be regarded as an inalienable property of all thinking about (and through) images.

That thought leads to a second definition, which is nascent in the first. Hypericons can be examples of a property of our concept of idea, because the very word "idea" is itself an image, and names an image. The opening lines of *Iconology* are an exemplary introduction to this issue:

Any attempt to grasp "the idea of imagery" is fated to wrestle with the problem of recursive thinking, for the very idea of an "idea" is bound up with the notion of imagery. "Idea" comes from the Greek verb "to see," and is frequently linked with the notion of the "eidolon," the "visible image" that is fundamental to ancient optics and theories of perception. A sensible way to avoid the temptation of thinking about images in terms of images would be to replace the word "idea" in discussions of imagery with some other term like "concept" or "notion," or to stipulate at the outset that the term "idea" is to be understood as something quite different from imagery or pictures. This is the strategy of the Platonic tradition, which distinguishes the eidos from the eidolon by conceiving of the former as a "suprasensible reality" of "forms, types, or species," the latter as a sensible impression that provides a mere "likeness" (eikon) or "semblance" (phantasma) of the eidos.

In place of this "strategy," which is presented as a kind of analytically conceived grammatical imposition on something more unruly, Mitchell opts for a "less prudent," but "more imaginative and productive, way of dealing with the problem": he disallows the artificial, and by implication ultimately ineffective, Platonic distinctions, and allows the "recursive problem full play."

This involves attention to the way in which images (and ideas) double themselves: the way we depict the act of picturing, imagine the activity of imagination, figure the practice of figuration. These doubled pictures, images, and figures (what I will refer to—as rarely as possible—as "hypericons") are strategies for both giving in to and resisting the temptation to see ideas as images. [5-6]

I would distinguish this definition from the first because it is not so much concerned with the regression *ad infinitum*, as the helplessness of thought to distinguish itself from images. As the phrase “both giving in to and resisting” shows, it is a deconstructive strategy, aimed at the Platonic conceptual apparatus and at any similar theory that entails a rigorous and untenable separation of word and image.

An example is Plato’s cave, which presents itself as a philosophic analogy, an “attack on the illusory knowledge of ‘pure’ images and appearances.” (92) But the allegory “is an image in two senses:”

- (1) it involves an elaborate scene or picture that the reader must construct mentally;
- (2) this scene must be interpreted by a series of likenesses or analogies that compare the scene of the cave to the human condition. [93]

Therefore the Allegory of the Cave argues about images by means of images, producing an indeterminate chain of receding responsibilities (the first definition of hypericon), and it does so by both managing images and being managed by them, both “resisting” the figural and “giving in” to it (the second definition).

The hypericon is an unavoidable obstacle to any interpretive program that would distinguish ideas from images, and it is also—particularly in its second definition—a siren for those who are attracted by the conceptual difficulties posed by the mingling of the two. Hypericons are beautiful traps, places where it is a pleasure to be caught, and for that reason I would propose them, along with the entire Platonic heritage of the ambiguously imagistic “idea,” as the locus classicus for the desire I have been tracing in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. In both *Iconology* and the picture theory, something that is undecidably or fundamentally both image and concept, or picture and proposition, is also something beautiful.

There is also a third definition entangled with these, and it comes out in the introduction to the last part of the book, where Mitchell proposes that hypericons “have their analogues in the realm of graphic images.” He names “Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, Foucault’s *Las Meninas*, Lessing’s Laocöon (the image, not the text),” which “all serve, like the philosophers’ images,” as

“figures of figuration, pictures that reflect on the nature of images” (158). It doesn’t matter in this context whether Wittgenstein or Foucault or Lessing say about their images is true: what counts is that they become exemplary of certain issues of figuration. *Las Meniñas* has attracted a large literature in the past twenty years, and virtually all of it concerns the painting’s intellectual puzzles, its optical and epistemological properties. Virtually nothing has been written in that period about its color, its formal properties, or its *facture*—a sign that it has ceased to be a painting that might sometimes be used to think about intellectual conundra, and has become instead transparently equal to them. We can no longer think about certain problems of depiction, reflection and beholding without *Las Meniñas*, and we can no longer see *Las Meniñas* without those concepts.

Mitchell calls these “analogues in the realm of graphic images,” but I would say instead that they are *examples*. They are hypericons in a third sense, since they are what we make when we invest these desires in existing images. They are a new kind of picture, or else a pathological instance of a universal quality of images for our culture; and this brings me back to the idea of torturing the concept of picture. *Las Meniñas*, the Laocöon, and other works of visual art—I would add, for example, Manet’s *Maid at the Folies-Bergère*, Seurat’s *Grand Jatte*, Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, and Botticelli’s *Primavera*, for various reasons and in various contexts—have been curiously stretched and distorted by their attendant discourses.³⁶ *Las Meniñas* has become the sum total of a sometimes bizarre literature claiming the painting embodies everything from a graphic equivalent to modern fragmented subjectivity to a hidden phallus and a hidden portrait of Lenin, so that it can only speak to us in shrill, contentious and analytic voices. “Picture” has become distorted, almost—but not quite—beyond recognition, if by “recognition” we mean the now—almost-invisible modes of seeing that took place before the psychic investment, the philosophic cathexis, of recent writing.

But these are only the extreme cases. Not all pictures become entangled in these ways, so that it might make sense to call them hypericons. Yet our concept of “picture” is everywhere susceptible to this violence or harassment, and when part of what we want a picture to be is a proposition, “picture” is likely to become incoherent or unlikely in these ways. Wittgenstein, I think, offers the most powerful account of what we can expect from our desire to torture paintings.

36

For an historiographic inquiry into these same issues, see my essay “On Monstrously Ambiguous Paintings,” *History and Theory* 32 no. 3 (1993): 227–47.

37

Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 45.

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