Guy Davenport

I never met Guy Davenport, but from the mid-seventies, when I first read his dazzling short story collection *Tatlin!* (the title story partly inspired my book *The Futurist Moment*), I've been savoring his critical-creative, densely self-illustrated writings. It was a red-letter day, therefore, when in the spring of 1994 I received a fan letter from Guy, regarding a little autobiographical essay I had written for a comparative literature compendium. It was my Viennese background that evidently spoke to the author of those brilliant aphoristic essays on Wittgenstein and Ernst Mach, or the documentary short story about Kafka called "The Airplanes of Brescia." But Guy's Europe was also the mythical Europe of Ezra Pound (on whom he had written a brilliant doctoral dissertation *Cities on Hills*, (Harvard 1961) as well as a score of now-classic essays), which encompasses his friend Hugh Kenner's "Pound Era" but also modernisms as diverse as the Russian avant-garde and the fictions of the American South (he was born in Anderson, South Carolina). But Guy was never predictable: his favorite novel (THE book as he called it) was *Robinson Crusoe.*

As critic, Davenport was part Jamesian pragmatist, part "mystical" language philosopher. Here he is (May 24, 1997) on *The Cantos:*

QTA: Please supply quote or check carefully.

> The *Cantos* are perfectly simple. Civilization (living in cities) is something that has to be passed on, critically, from generation to generation. The past is its repository. It can be lost in ten minutes, though it is the accumulation of centuries. That's the plot, and the message.
>
> Ezra was a diffusionist. Cultures have spores. E.g. Hindu "Arabic"Numerals, introduced into Renaissance culture (thank God!), and with them came fractions (algebra).

It's all common sense, no? And yet, what is more mysterious than language? In the first page of the letter cited here — the second of the forty or so I received from Guy over the last decade of his life — he opens, as is his habit, with a drawing — often his own, but here a curious fifteenth-century woodcut of Noah's Ark, juxtaposing men and ducks. I had told Guy I was planning to write about Wittgenstein's poetics and this is his response:

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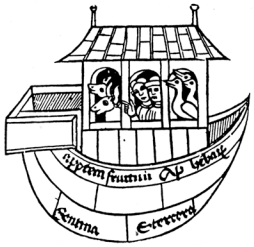

25 May 1994

Dear Marjorie Perloff:

This ark, the last word in 15th-century minimalism, is the cheekier for displaying ducks, who must have shrugged their shoulders at the whole enterprise.

A book on Wittgensteinian poetics. I'll be the first in line at the book store. (Dore Ashton has a wonderful way of saying she's writing a book on whatever -- Noguchi, Rothko, Watteau -- and then sending the published book as her next communication. I'm not at all certain that I understand a great deal of Ludwig. In one sense, he was trying to obsolete philosophy and make hypercritical nit-pickers of us. In another, he was a psychologist of language facing the fact that we speak nonsense most of the time and expect to be understood. It is an embarrassment that English wasn't his native language. That is, the Englishness of English is in its preposition + verb equivalents of our Latin, French, and Greek derivatives. Tolerate: put up with. Begin: set in. Persevere: go through with.

And yet all of these idioms are wildly ambiguous. We can put up with a nuisance, put up a friend for the night, put the jam up on the shelf with the jelly, put up a candidate, put up a window, und so weiter.

Gertrude by 1914 was making plays out of phrases that shift meaning when you think about them.

I haven't seen the Derek Jarman film.

I am utterly unqualified to write anything about LW. I do like to tuck into my fiction things by and about him (as I work in Stein). They are both totemic household figures.

*

Bonnie Jean (who thinks all philosophers are idiots) has this quarrel with Wittgenstein, who in several places says that reddish green is inconceivable. Yet every summer, when our peppers are drying from green to red, one can see an intermediate stage that is precisely reddish green.

Where did I pick up the fact that LW, who lived across the hall from AE Housman, once had diarrhoea in the middle of the night and asked to use Housman's toilet, and was refused? It's an anecdote that usually registers in the American mind as the horror of English plumbing rather than an awkward moment.

Apparently Housman and LW remained strangers to each other. Ditto Santayana (Epicurus to LW's Herakleitos).

I used to do 5-minute identification quizzes, a kind of taking-your-temperature poll, in which I would learn, for example, that Freud was a 16th-century scientist and that Vietnam is an island off the coast of Florida.

Wendell Berry once asked his daughter Mary what she'd learned at school (5th grade). She'd learned that the alphabet was invented by the Polynesians. Wendell got on the phone to Mary's teacher and was called an ignoramus. My niece was told about World War Eleven (1939-45), and I once got into an argument with a fellow prof who was talking about how Hitler's rise to power was due to his persuasive charm on television.

any
way

GWH

Casual as it seems, the recognition that Wittgenstein's view of language had everything to do with not being a native speaker in English is worth a dozen scholarly disquisitions on the *Philosophical Investigations*. It was because English verb forms were so alien to Wittgenstein that he came to see the immense difficulty of phrases like "put up," and adumbrated his theory of "use" so as to deal with their myriad possibilities — possibilities no film (e.g. Derek Jarman's 1993 *Wittgenstein*) could capture, but which link the Austrian philosopher to another Stein: Gertrude. Later in the letter, Guy comes back to Wittgensteinian definition, comically challenging the Master on the existence of "reddish-green," and relaying the story of Ludwig, A.E. Housman, and the toilet. No trivia game, this, for it leads to the great aperçu that Santayana was Epicurus to L.W.'s Herakleitos. And because Guy and I always exchanged jokes about the failures of contemporary education, he concludes with those hilarious references to the "Polynesian" alphabet and World War Eleven.

In his later years, Guy rarely left his home in Lexington (he had taught at the University of Kentucky for forty years). He disliked conferences, symposia, poetry readings, cocktail parties — and especially the travel it took to get to these venues. Never mind: his special mix of discrimination and humor makes his artful collage-letters quite unique. Poker-faced, Guy would write me about "the French critic who explained that 'Little Gidding' was an English schoolboy Eliot was in love with," or again, the Pound scholar "who identifies 'Fordie' as Henry, and Duccio as the late Italian dictator." Writing, for Davenport, was its own best pleasure. And, in any case, he quipped, writing poetry is much easier than reading it.

Marjorie Perloff