

WITTGENSTEIN'S DOOR

Curtis Faville



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A glass box may be of our time, but it has no history.

Philip Johnson

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NIGHT-PIECE

Standing on my head in John Soane's chamber.
There is a hand here, from a cornice, a head reflect-
ed in a convex mirror, not regular at all. See how
the gesture of beckoning defers to the gesture of
warning. An infernal music permeates the space.
Now I'm adjusted to this position, I can float a-
round the room, almost at will. I feel nothing can
harm me, I'm pure spirit.

REFLECTION

Reading in the afternoon. Looking at the clock I can see through the kitchen door, at intervals determined by curiosity. Marking time. I'm interested to be in two rooms at once. Sitting here, but imagination suspends the kitchen of activity as narrative: something's cooking. Dinner makes the afternoon slope towards night's fixity, there's a division of labor. Determined by changing angle of light: 4 o'clock. Golden wheat of the sun. Narrative of China, seasons change, people walk on rubber soles. There are boiling disputes, rice fields paper-thin, attention to details. The act of reading feels like an arrival to a place prepared for by human hands. It is a room, quiet as a clock. Marking the interval. Like *it was* something I couldn't get out of my craw. News of the battle in the north, hoards of the Mongol invader captured our imagination(s). The narrative was writing itself. And out on the bay there were faint white dots, sailboats enjoying the day. Late to come in. Choppy waves, colder. But not heard. I had wanted to write too, but could not. The narrative kept on. This time it happened in 8 minutes. The princess out for a walk with the village idiot, so gentle, pathos, blossoms, pain. The trick, then, to appear to move the counters of their own. In a civilization, time passes casually. It is possible that I have slept, and taken up where I left off. Can it be that. I recall hunger, and the walls of the inner city. Is it that a day, wrapped in light, rolls upright. A hole in the night as narrative space. Out walking at night the friendly guard offered to share a jug. I read silently, not moving my

lips. The words dissolve behind me as I go, they come forward to meet me and wave, though some linger, in a line, for other reasons. Did I say that. You're just a figment of my imagination. I looked up to note the time, but knew within 3 minutes. Losing an hour, Robinson Crusoe was stranded, set adrift in space. Trying to construct a clock. I wrote a letter when small, then I grew up. There for. Reading in the afternoon, not remembered but quietness, my mother's eyes. The books on their shelves. It is 4 o'clock and nothing has moved. The sailboats have not moved. The sun has not moved. The narrative is a collection of pictures. I cannot begin. Looking at the clock I saw through the kitchen door. The other room is time adjacent, and I will go there, every day. Great journeys of the separation of souls, the river of fleeing people rests on your conscience. But time passes casually, and certainly leaves its mark. Reading in the afternoon, I couldn't get out of my set. The narrative wrote itself. If I lost an hour, who is to know. All this happened in the flick of an eyelash.

THE WINDOW

I could write a poem about getting up from the desk where I was sitting, walk to the door, open it, go out of doors and look in the window through the gauze curtains, where I had been, bathed in a cone of light. I would see the chair, the table, the light, the room inside itself, all in order to get a perspective on what I did, to take the whole in. And this is it--the window.

FROM A NOTEBOOK

The shape of writing is a 5 inch pyramid: solid platinum.

A clarity outlined by b-flat.

My voice is slightly out of phase.

I was thinking of breasts as voids. Oscar Schlemmer's dancers as cloaks of impression in relief. Black masks with white eyes.

Sun emerged from the French Horn.

Today it rained at the construction site. Clayey pot-holes and the stain of white pine, over all a hush that drips like a "faire Loire stone."

His first project was a fiasco. Streamlined Electrolux.

Words the mind's negatives of perception. Clouds may seem to pass under arches. Shapes haunt language, producing windows of signification. I am looking through a door, diagonally across a hallway to an opening in the wall. Beyond that is the mirror.

"Time is a room."

TRANSPARENCIES

We enter the transparent room at 9 a.m.

Our first impression is of light. At the center is a clear plastic cube, surrounded by chrome-tubed furniture. The ceiling is high. Coolness reaches out to every corner.

We seem to float. Effervescent water is served in tall cylinders.

The conversation is of expectations, appointments, and philosophical points of some nicety. What we desire are objects placed with clarity in an environment of literal intent.

Nothing that happens outside this space affects it. Order is the discipline of refinement. By holding the conflicts of disproportion at bay, perfect rest is achieved. Rationalist perspectives—proposed in synthetic space—unaffected by the weather.

Logic limits us to grammar. We are ready-made—absolutes of the mind which feels no pain. The love of opposites produces tortuous pleasure. We fulfill the demands of our sex and of our class.

The morning light falls in bars across the blond wood parquet floor. Our statement is contained in a single modest volume, which rests on the plastic cube.

Everything serves a suspended conception. This illusion plunges us into an enigma. We transcend the body by seeing through it—it casts no shadow. Common sense stops the heart.

On the floor is a transparent glass phone, very faintly ringing. It rings every 8 seconds. It has a limpid, remote sound, like Rameau.

We may state the case by arranging a number of objects in hypothetical disarray. By breaking the spell of the given we form an epitaph.

Objects ring the space. Everything is related by geometry and the calculus. The radius of motion pierces the volume of the room, including by implication the terrace, or the screen of trees beyond, not as a prelude to the spheres of change without, but suggesting an ornamental sculpture-garden of the mind.

The retreat into the illusion of the object where concrete forms are primary leads down a path through a maze in a daydream. We wake to the transparent room once more, the frigid floor underfoot, the plaster rotting with mildew.

Breakfast, though gleaming with chastened poise, reveals a luminous mountain, a backdrop of infinite formality that is unavoidable. It fills the lens. A regimen of meditation begins to open some of its static center.

Attention is a point with negative density. The body is weightless, the structure a culmination of detached perception, its potential a thing apart. The body is still. The book lies on the table, now opaque. The walls flat, sides of an enclosure held by the air. They are white wafers, pressed inside and out. Such are the dimensions of the mind.

*le jeu correct et magnifique
des formes sous la lumière*

--Le Corbusier

STATIC

If you are feeling claustrophobic your ideas are crystallizing. You cannot *enact* in this state, but only describe. The choreography of a necessary task forces intersecting tangents, to which you are oblivious. An order that appears random is indeterminate. You are its catalyst. Nothing stops. The phone rings 45 times.

THE ROOM

What are we in. Acoustic space. What is the code if not a system. A voice. Make a gesture to the wall. This is the key. What is the sound of the room but a key in the lock. Shapes in the dark. Where is the switch that turns on the light. The wish.

Where is the room. Outside. By mute we must mean opaque. Refer to the feeling of shapes. Blindness.

Air is a volume. An abstract box. The illusion of stillness is a state of grace. Now you may breathe.

It is necessary to be exact. I've moved beyond that. Still, a concise statement throws everything into relief. When I began my house I knew that everything should be precise. Like moving inside ideas. Building one house inside the other, only smaller.

In the room is a man, sitting upon a chair. His head has turned to stone. The monument is a tomb.

THE HYPERBOLIC SHEAVES OF WHEAT

The Constructivists bulked syntax.
Aggressive as forms, weaving in the East.
On the Mid-field stripe
a hen is carved. Big
numerals. October significance
for cold ears in the snow.
Exact type of who I am.
Conflict. The detail out
of focus. I heard cheering.
Eagle now extinct
as symbol.

FUTURES

The mall is filled with people. They move forward
on ramps, escalators, conveyers, toward food counters,
clothing marts, computer tellers, record plazas,
tiled fountains, bookstores with pyramids of bestsellers
on tables at the entrances. The people all wear
wrinkle-free polyester clothes in bright pastel colors,
hair cut like shaggy dogs. There are blank looks
on their faces. As they pass one another they point
and whisper, noticing their counterparts.

No one violates the code; the system remains intact.

ACT

The suspicion is, language could decompose at the same rate as attention. Reflection, which breaks the power of immediacy, is never so compelling as the illusion it dispels. Those capable of arresting thought at a point demanded by history thus enter the stillness of perspective. Discernment is used up in a circle drawn by the fixed idea. The orbit of anxiety is constantly decaying. This moment is an asymptote: As we approach each other time slows down.

WITTGENSTEIN'S HOUSE

Sensation, as described movement within limitation, a discrete intent made visible. Gravity warps light, amplifying mass. Mind poses riddles in scale, extorts proportion from variability. The eye compresses space, siphoning fluid. Silence, divided into rooms, traps memory, as sleep--a labyrinth--consumes itself. Correction is constant, an exact distance from the sun. The house is a clock, a deathknell. The body, surrounded by thought, masquerades as subject. Enormous potential--checked by irony.

Vienna. A million photographs comprise the city. The working out of these implications has been left to posterity; everything is here to apprise. I built a model; I did exactly as you did. Each piece indispensable, doomed. So this door inverts time: Going towards it, you are walking backwards through a reverse mirror to your own grave, whose exact location you cannot know, though you approach it inexorably.

TRANSLATION

I knew the address, and went there. This was in the town of S-----, to which I had returned after a long absence. When I arrived, the place was deserted, boarded up, with a sign on the door, in a language I did not understand. Suddenly I felt disoriented. Had the streets been shifted? The names altered? Was this the wrong town? Was I ten years late? I walked down the street, feeling my way as I went.

ATMOSPHERE

My first book was published in Bulgaria. Little notice of it was made in the press, and even less attention was paid in my native country, America. It came out in an edition of 400 copies. The pages had that pulpy texture we associate with newsprint. The censors (at the Ministry of Information) are said to have fallen asleep before finishing it, passing it over in bored disinterest. They may have been my most faithful readers; at least they were *looking for something*.

Mine is a modest existence, a wife, a child, a job as a clerk in the provincial capitol. I sometimes daydream of my early life in California, my pastoral middle-class childhood, my university education, my entry into the world and later disillusionment.

Though I am encouraged in my literary pursuits by a circle of dedicated hacks and doctrinaire critics, my most precious, improbable fantasy is to build bridges. Unable to gain admittance to the faraway Polytechnic Institute of Engineering and Scientific Studies, I spend the quiet evening hours constructing tiny models in the basement. Though I know these projects will never be built, I do not despair. My visions are my bread. Their realization would drive me from the last bastion of my secret identity. And that would be like death itself.

THE ISOSTATIC CULTURE

A quality or state subjected to equal pressure from every side, maintained by a yielding flow of masses beneath the surface by economic stresses. The surface is manipulated by the corporate state. It is brightly lit and filled with annoyance and provocation. The present is scuttled in the name of an impossible eventuality.

Perception is simultaneous and leaves nothing behind. My mind hovering 11 inches above this paper modulates the hand's labor, anachronistic fetish of free will. The writing absorbs its effects, anticipates causes and vanquishes them, making a protective and repellent coloration identical with expediency.

CONCEIT

When I say I am in love I mean I want to fuck (you). I feel curiously detached from my (self) when I say it. Is it a question. Do I ever ask it in the (same) way--or must it be otherwise. There is an unconscious rhythm. You are a body, which I share and want--my own. Today you are different. My love is not expressed, but implied by desire. When I speak the words my body disappears-- I feel you are waiting for me to speak, yet my hesitation is abstract. I must idealize your presence to submit to your charms. All love is enchantment. Put on your disguises. Now take them off.

MACABRE

He often had the illusion, lying in bed at night, just at the moment he shut his eyes to sleep, that he--that is, his perceiving inner eye--had withdrawn from his body into a nether realm of his mind, or that, collaterally, his body had grown tiny in an immense bed, which hallucinations were always instantly dispelled upon his again opening his eyes to the dimness of the room, the ghostly outline of shapes on his bedside table, which assumed in that obscurity so eerie a radiance, that those mute vases, tins, shells, fluted forms took on such austere, malignant presences that they became like archetypes in a gaunt and elegant theatre, the true furniture of dreams.

AIR

One might address the reader of these pages after one has died as a friend--not across time, but through an uncertain membrane of sensibility the words compose. One feels these movements of speech are frozen gestures --or that the words were merely the projections of a machine, like a complex life-support system, the rather pathetic ventriloquial effect. My *name* has a certain ghostly transcendence, such as names on gravestones, viz.: "We who survived to behold the passing of thine own majestic memorial salute you, as we repair to our very separate rests." These words are stone. Desert distances. Ears, eyes, perfect baby-fingers conceived in Paradise--vaporize, evanesce in the unspeakable crispness of void. Mnemonic imprints hurtling across a disembodied consciousness--as weirdly distorted pieces of music, bits of conversation, traffic noises. That one might wake, of some Spring morning, in another time, in a new body, intact, to hear the birds sing.

CUT

If the beginning implies the rest, I'm bored. Let's start in the middle. Something's happened, but we already know less about this person than we did at the beginning. Meet ourselves coming 'back' etc. Imagine the ending as one of three alternatives, determined by chance operation. If we are kept in suspense it must be a trick. I'm trying to write my way out of this. If it interests me, I'll objectify it. It's not a means to another end, but the *end*.

SCALE

A crystal is an immense model of structure. Penetrating to the molecular level we see the same interlocking matrix, force expressed in spatial terms, stresses worked out to the last degree. Mountain-climbers, clinging to shear rock walls, know the elegance of this logic, gravity's pyramid of argument revealed as precipice and inclination, seam and refraction. Propositions cannot puncture it, though sound, of sufficient woof and depth, may shake a mountain to its foundations.

LANDSCAPE

In an old brown photograph from the Civil War he notes pyramids of cannonballs piled in the foreground, in front of a stairway—actually an embankment—that leads up to a pocked field. The scene feels like an excavation. The earth is dark, the sky drained. The field, vacant, by a wood, is randomly scattered with shapes, which are dead bodies. The neatness of the piled cannonballs, the almost classical siting of the stairway, contrast starkly with the richness of the black soil, the superfluous shapes of the corpses. What was before ground of contention has become desecration, sinking beneath view, memorized into the riddle fabric of coincidence, of what *was*, in all its particularity. He is haunted by the irretrievability of *this* instant, instance, captured in such novel detail it appears to reveal more than it should, or rather *promises* to vouchsafe, or to discover, some clue that will lead in an unbroken line of descent to this moment of *his* existence, and so render a meaning, however oblique, to the act of his looking.

CHINESE BOX

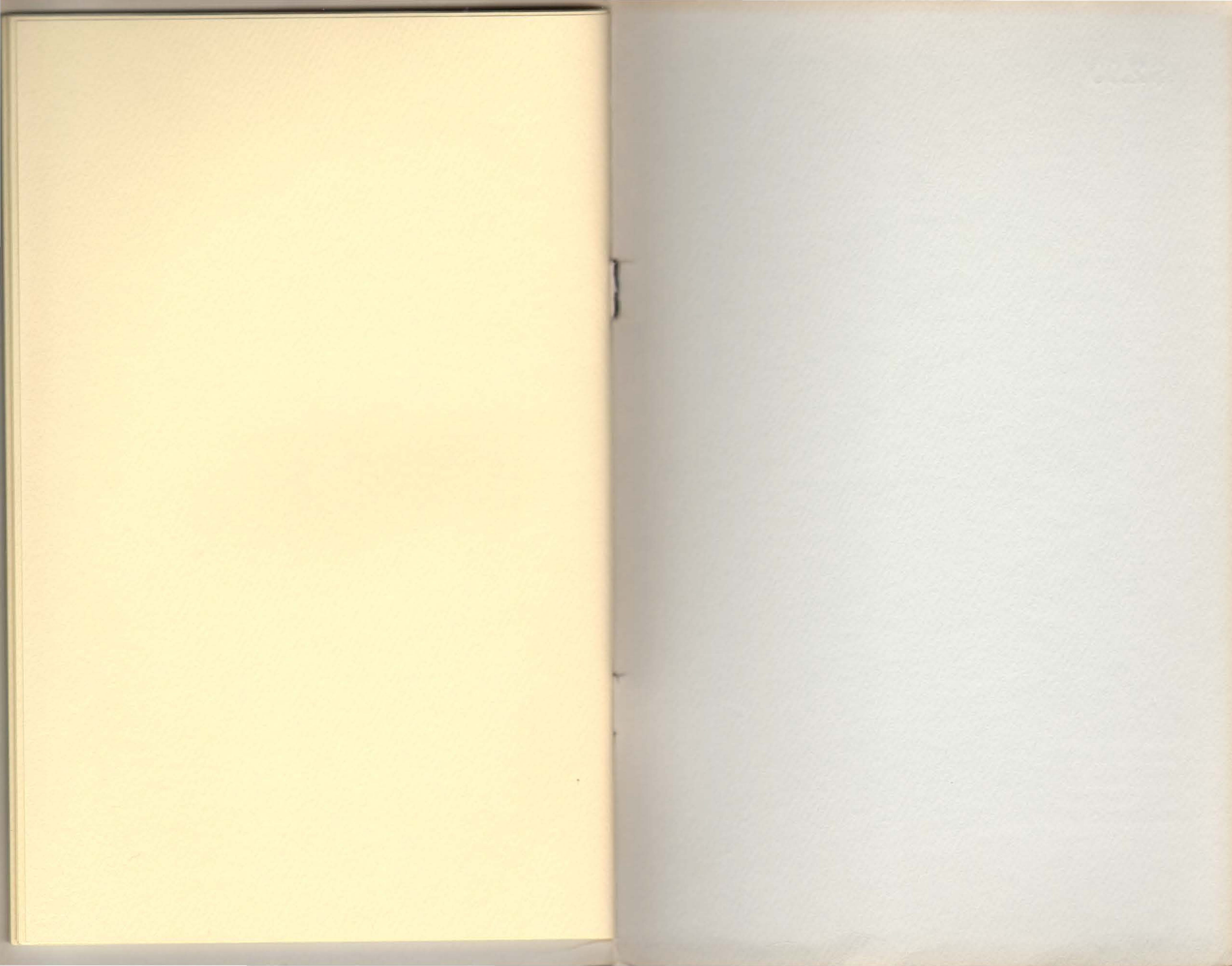
These words are sealed; when unearthed by the archeologist of posterity they begin to acquire an eerie elusiveness, whose riddle was left unguarded. It is not enough to say a writer describes the dimensions of his own tomb. We hardly suspect the true causes of our acts, which are withheld from us *by definition*. To attempt to catch them is like trying to photograph a ghost. The box is empty.

POSTSCRIPT

...that between his work and his life there was a deep passageway, or tunnel, where he had never trespassed, and which he indeed feared to discover, for as he would inevitably enter it with a curiosity to find where and how it led, suspected that in its circuitous route he might meet himself, in another guise, and in so doing complete these separate versions or unjoined halves of himself, either to emerge whole, a genius of identity, or vanish without a trace...

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