

ON DELUSIONS OF SENSE: *A Response to Coetzee and Sass*

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THE GREAT WRITINGS on and of severe mental affliction—those for instance of Schreber, ‘Renee’, Donna Williams, Artaud, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*, Kafka’s “Description of a struggle,” and even (I would add) key parts of *The Lord of the Rings*—present us with something deeply enigmatic. They have, we might say, a *strong grammar*, a grammar—a mode of hanging together, and (in this case) of linguistically seeming to make a sense that is not our sense and that we cannot make sense of— . . . they have a grammar all of their own, and all of its own, a grammar that resists and rejects interpretation even as it sometimes seems to offer interpretations.¹

It was Wittgenstein’s view that to make mental illness unpuzzling was a mistake, or (better, perhaps) a *mythologically* problematic move. Wittgenstein’s aim in his philosophizing was to understand what was enigmatic when it could be understood without unwisely turning it into something *altogether* unpuzzling . . . and then to acknowledge that there are some things that may remain forever puzzling, *without* committing oneself to the metaphysically disastrous claim that

the reason they are endlessly puzzling is that they lie outside the boundaries of human life, language, or reason, as though we could peek outside those alleged boundaries to see what was there, but never truly say anything about it.

There simply may be places where our understanding—phenomenological understanding, understanding of what it is like—gives out, and not because it is (or we are) merely human. For instance, perhaps one cannot capture some mental illness by intellection alone, or even perhaps at all. Perhaps the best understanding one can have of mental illness is purely negative (in a sense at least as strong as that involved in *negative theology*, wherein *God* is only defined by what it is not).

Louis Sass (2003) writes

I am not sure whether or not Read would accept that a philosophical position can be understandable despite its containing deep, internal logical tensions (perhaps he would not). If such understanding is possible, however, it does seem to open the way for a similar understanding of conditions like that of Schreber. (p. XX)<EQ2>

Unfortunately, however, it is indeed not possible—that is, this notion is merely a fantasy—by my lights. Philosophical positions, all of which turn out to contain such inexorable tensions, cannot be understood: they are mirages. *Solipsism*, as a position, is not any better (or worse)

off than (say) (*Metaphysical*) *Realism*. They are both mirages, just different aspects of the same nothing.² Considered as positions, they are in the end literally—when one understands their logic—one and the same nothing. Wittgenstein already made this quite clear in his *Tractatus*. Perhaps in contrast to Sass, there is then nothing special about solipsism: it is just one mode of presentation rather than another of the illusion that there can be philosophical positions.

Sass claims that in saying this kind of thing I am committed to ruling out that some mental illness can be understood or can even exist, on abstract intellectual grounds. I am not. I am simply wishing to leave open the possibility that there may be things that some people utter or seem to experience which intellection gives us little or no assistance with. If Sass wishes to deny this, then I suggest that it is he and not I who is the absolutist intellectualist here, in insisting that rewriting something deeply strange in a weaker grammar is furthering our grasp of it.

My suggestion concerning Faulkner's presentation of Benjy, in my original paper, was that it is a mythological mistake to think that Faulkner provides us with the tools for giving an unpuzzling rendition of what had perhaps appeared to be "another country," inaccessible to us. Rather, Faulkner's representation is and remains enigmatic. To present an enigma as if it is another country, one beyond the bounds of reason, which we can nevertheless peek at or sidle up to or eventually represent in plain unpuzzling terms, is something different, and something usually very unwise.

Now, it might be objected that often even the seemingly trickiest enigma can be understood after all, if only one is broad enough, as Coetzee urges above that we should be, in our understanding of *understanding*. Indeed so. Great examples of how illumination and the avoidance of previously endemic misunderstanding have been achieved, and which I refer to above and in "On approaching schizophrenia through Wittgenstein" (2001), discussed by Sass (2003), include Peter Winch's account of the Azande, Thomas Kuhn's accounts of Aristotelian physics, and the great paradigm shifts in the history of natural science.

These (broadly Wittgensteinian) accounts achieve their ends by a deep hermeneutical effort that subverts our prior notions of what *understanding* must involve.

Sass has attempted something similar. And I would not necessarily wish to deny that his fresh and powerfully argued pseudo-solipsistic interpretation of Schreber and the others does "... have the potential to give us some insight into the nature of Schreber's lived world" (Sass 2003, p. XX). <EQ3> Much depends, as I will discuss below, on how we read the term *insight*. Although using *pseudo-solipsism* rather than *solipsism* is certainly helpful, insofar as it indexes the crucial sense, which I am glad to see Sass acknowledging fully, in which *solipsism* is nothing at all, but at best merely a hovering between inchoate wishes to mean. So, Sass and I are I think very close.

Where we may still differ is over my insistence that there is no reason, at least for those of us at all impressed by Wittgenstein's thinking, to expect that one's understanding in this region will not come to an end somewhere. That most attempted representations of the enigmatic will succeed only at the cost of fatally undermining those very same enigmatic qualities of that which we seek to understand. The task then is to acknowledge this coming to an end of interpretation without making it seem as though there has nevertheless to be something (something that really is something) lying beyond these interpretations. For if one thinks the latter, as it sometimes seems as though Sass does, and as the traditional interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has it,³ then one will never be able to be at peace in acknowledging the giving out of the hermeneutical quest.

The decidedly strong grammar of Faulkner's Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, or the fairly strong grammar of Coetzee's quasi-solipsistic and voice-hearing narrator in *In the Heart of the Country*, can, as I argued in my original paper, brilliantly provide us with the illusion that we are now *understanding* (in the usual sense of the word) an idiot, or a schizophrenic, or what-have-you. But my suggestion was that the risk of thinking that this is an understanding that helps

us to capture the psychopathological—and *capture* is the word repeatedly employed by Sass (2003)—is in the end rather less than the analogous risk in the case of the weaker grammars employed by psychologists and psychiatrists, even deeply literarily and philosophically sophisticated ones such as Louis Sass certainly is. The risk in the case of the more prosaic, less resistant schema or schemata for interpretation offered by the likes of Sass—in his case, pseudo-solipsism—is that it will seem that we have indeed captured much schizophrenia, and rendered it in a form that we can in the ordinary sense *understand*. (Whereas all we have, when we understand schizophrenia as solipsism, is at best a transliteration of psychopathology into . . . nothingness, into the relentless failure to mean that is solipsism.) The strong, strange grammar of the writing of a Faulkner or an Artaud is significantly less likely than the writings of a psychologist to be taken up as an orthodoxy for what schizophrenic language or what-have-you really means—and that is all to the good.

What an Artaud or a Dostoevsky or a Beckett or a Coetzee or a Faulkner actually gives us in their deranged literature is a new mode or manner of representation, not a way of capturing something that is waiting to be captured, to be rendered into anything remotely like plain prose.

And the stronger the grammar, the less akin to ordinary prose requiring no interpretative work, and the less likelihood of thinking that one has found the real meaning of what is represented.

What then can we do, with solipsism, to further understanding? There is something we can do. We can try to mimic the (would-be) solipsist. And seeing how such mimicry goes will indeed give us understanding of a kind, understanding of the moves that are likely to be made.

Now, let us be clear: There is nothing that there is to understand solipsism. The very idea of *solipsism* is in the end a delusion of sense. We may think we understand it; we may think we have a clear idea of what it means to think that “only I exist.” Wittgenstein’s great achievement, in wonderful therapeutic detail in his later work, was to show that we do not have a clear understanding of this; or rather, to show that there is

no *it* here. And Sass’s *Paradoxes of Delusion* (1994) is a great effort to follow Wittgenstein’s lead. As Sass implies, there is something that we can do to further our understanding of what the temptation toward solipsism can mean, humanly: we can mimic going round the houses and up the ladder and hovering in mid-air with the would-be solipsist, with the person tempted by solipsism. But—that is all. If Sass thinks we can do more, then he and I are not quite so close after all.

What I would like Sass to acknowledge is what Freud half-jokingly allowed of his own writings on Schreber, and what in all seriousness I made very clear in the latter stages of “On approaching schizophrenia through Wittgenstein” (2001): that one’s own remarks have in themselves no superiority to (for example) Schreber’s remarks. That they at best re-express or re-present those, in a weaker grammar. That they are no less nonsensical than them. When one is trying hard to re-present aright something that is resistant even to the subtlest hermeneutic, the irony is that one can only succeed by producing further nonsense.

Sass’s work is (or should be) a ladder that one throws away after climbing it. Or, better: the insight one gets from work like Sass’s is the coming to see that what appeared to be a key to understanding something strange is itself just more nonsense. In overcoming Sass’s words, in overcoming the temptation to think that one now simply understands what was problematic before, one learns something. (To say this is no criticism of Sass; it is an attempt to characterize the kind of text his is, the kind of writing that is actually of any use, hereabouts. Holding obstinately onto the ladder of the pseudo-solipsistic interpretation, as if holding onto a key, or a traveler’s phrase book, is chickening out from acknowledging the full strangeness and difference and difficulty, the utter paradoxicality, of that which one is trying to write about.)

One example of mine that Sass criticizes is that of the schizophrenic girl, Renee, in her pseudo-Heideggerian remarks on “the thing,” on “the things” around her that she saw as all alive. Here is what I wrote on this in the course of arguing that ‘Renee’ renders her own thought uninterpretable:

‘[T]he doctors . . . thought that I saw these things as humans whom I heard speak. But it was not that. Their life consisted uniquely in the fact that they were there, in their existence itself.’ // This stops one in one’s tracks. The chance one seemingly had of coming to understand Renee’s strange world (via the concept of ‘personification’ [of the things], etc.) finally disappears fairly precisely at this moment. She has specifically ruled it out. Any way that she has of expressing her experience is ‘inadequate,’ and so of course she is not understood. Her confusion is irredeemable, irrevocable. // For surely there just isn’t anything it can be for the *life* of objects to consist uniquely in their existence. (2001, p. 462)

Their appalling life was not for her simply (!) a matter of their being (like) malign-spirited objects, or humans everywhere in the form of objects, or just generically terrifyingly threatening. It consisted simply in their existence. My challenge to Sass is this: find a way of understanding this (and similar examples) that does not violate your own hermeneutical principles, that does not impose a false coherence on the thought processes of Renee and the others.

My suggestion is that one can only really be getting Renee right if one produces an account of her that is itself in the end plain that it is nonsense

Sass might respond by saying that *he* is not committed to the animism/personification interpretation of Renee, but rather to an interpretation of her as living Cartesianism, as having decisively lost what J.J. Gibson has called the “affordances” of ordinary human life. But either this is a heavy interpretation which does not start from what Renee herself thinks—I criticize such ‘impositional’ hermeneutics in “On approaching schizophrenia through Wittgenstein” (2001)—or this is simply a redescription of the problem. We can indeed say of Renee things like she has lost a sense of what the world affords an active social human being, a sense of what it is to live, to be in the world, and thus that she speaks of things as alive precisely due to their seemingly pointless existence . . . but does this help us to get any further with understanding how someone can actually feel/think of the life of things—again, it is their life that so disturbs or terrifies her—as consisting “uniquely in their existence”?

Perhaps it does help; the reader can judge for themselves. My question is: Can we avoid imposing on Renee a schema of interpretation that trashes her own, without finding her to be either irrational (not, as Sass would have it, “hyper-rational”), or to be living a life that is so utterly not ours that we are fooling ourselves if we think we can understand it in any positive way, or (and here our words really start to give out) a life that has no form, or a life-world that is so teeming with life that it is lifeless, or the sheer absence of anything that we will ultimately want to call a lived world, or. . . .

Sass holds that much of the strangest of schizophrenia is hyper-reflexivity, not lack of awareness; hyper-rationality, not deficit of rationality. His challenging and brilliant rendition of this (as he would have it) ‘Apollonian’ disorder threatens, however, to collapse under its own weight when we find him, in his response to my original article, making remarks such as this: “The principle of charity is obviously problematic when applied to forms of mental life that are less than wholly rational or logically coherent” (2003, p. XX). <EQ4>

The early Foucault held that there was another side to Reason that could be performed or gestured at even if it could not be spoken without simultaneously silencing it, as conventional psychiatry had done. Sass rejects the romanticization of madness implicit in that account. Derrida⁴ re-read Descartes and Foucault’s reading of him to counter in effect that there was no other side to Reason, that there was only whatever “the principle of charity” could yield for us. Sass inflects this account by arguing that Reason spontaneously generates its “other”—madness—as a more intense form of itself. Philosophy taken seriously is madness, a madness of frightening power that can logically dissolve even the Cartesian “Cogito.” More rational than rational is the motto of this madness. Madness, for Sass, is all method, all logical coherence.

But in quotes like that I just gave, Sass gives up on this radical move one step beyond Derrida, and falls back into the more familiar idea that maybe schizophrenia is just a form of irrational thought after all. My thought is that this is

no accident; because there is no position (no position that Sass could succeed in taking up) to be had here. Paradoxically, “if” schizophrenia is “hyper-reason,” if it is a pseudo-solipsism that generates of its own logic the existence of others, and so on, then it cannot be understood. It can only be re-presented or mimicked—where this mimicry is best regarded as the creation of a new paradigm for what mimicry hereabouts could and would be—as Faulkner, Kafka, Coetzee, and others perhaps do.

In short, Sass’s account at best collapses into my own, when his position starts giving out under its own weight. And it becomes clear that hyper-rationality is sheer irrationality is nothing comprehensible, much as *Metaphysical Realism* is Solipsism is nothing at all. Understanding can only be achieved hereabouts as a pretence, or as something purely negative, or as a kind of creative mimicry.

To be quite clear about this, let us reflect a moment further on the impossible character of Benjy’s tale and character. Let us reflect, that is, on this deeply aware (he notices things about young Quentin and her man, and even about Uncle Maury, that no one else does), sensitive and yet calm—even sensible—narrator . . . who is equally clearly an idiot.

Let us recall the way Benjy speaks, using not only quasi-neologisms like “curling flower spaces” that are interpreted into our language only at the cost of some loss, but also using many terms systematically in ways that just cannot be English (notably, his use of transitive verbs intransitively). Consider the following passages, the novel’s opening:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. // . . . They were hitting little, across the pasture. I went back along the fence to where the flag was. It flapped on the bright grass and the trees. (Faulkner 1984, p. 3)

And this, the end of Benjy’s narrative:

Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell . . . Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep. (p. 75)

I will not work through these (marvelous) passages here. Suffice to say, that the more time one spends with them, the more one picks up something of their rhythm, and they come to seem like a language; and the more one notices how very deep the differences are . . . between them and our language, or perhaps even . . . between them and anything we will actually (reflectively) want to call a language.

Finally let us recall, most crucially, that we gradually come to learn from his speaking to us that Benjy has no sense of the passage of time . . . no understanding of what is past, what is present, what is future . . . and yet here he is, telling us his tale. Telling us how it was. Not how it is in some timeless present. The whole of Benjy’s narrative as he speaks it is in the past tense. In sum, this is an ordinary tale without a sense of time, spoken in non-English English . . . an atemporal history told us and told nobody by a rational idiot.

This moving (and of course beautifully constructed) story that tells us Benjy from the inside, we have to recognize as nonsense if we are to understand Faulkner’s achievement, and, one might add, if we are not to miss the true horror of Benjy’s situation as it is constructed in the novel . . . Faulkner gives us perhaps a new way of speaking. He does not capture anything; and on Guetti’s interpretation of him (see Read 2003), he was clear about this, in ways that Sass is not.

I believe that what Sass does in his work is not to capture anything, but to re-present something (or rather, someone), in a novel, illuminating, and misleading way. Likewise, I think that the great novelistic renditions of madness represent something (someone), in a novel, illuminating, and probably less misleading way.

I think that the only word I disagree with in Coetzee’s wise commentary on my paper, is the one I have emphasized in the following, the final paragraph of his paper:

In the account preferred by storytellers, including Faulkner, an account that we willingly entertain when we read or listen to stories, storytellers (a) inhabit real beings and represent them from the inside, and also (b) by this process create them out of nothing and turn them into real beings. It is a paradoxical position, but it does appear to be a position of some

importance to human societies, which, in a paradoxical movement of their own, both (a) entertain it, and (b) dismiss it as nonsense. (P. XX) <EQ5>

I am not dismissing anything. Real human beings with severe psychopathologies deserve impossible degrees of compassion for the unfathomable terror and isolation they suffer. Novelists who create stunning—novel—nonsenses to accomplish ‘representations’ (we must preserve the scare quotes) where none were possible before are in my view the most important or greatest novelists of all. Philosophers tempted by solipsism (and in that group I include myself) deserve to be engaged with dialectically and dialogically until they have managed to find their way out of the fly-bottle. Philosophers (like Wittgenstein) who create stunning novel nonsenses (like the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*) to help midwife this emergence from the fly-bottle deserve to be read more profoundly perhaps than any other philosophers.

In sum, when we find someone saying something very new and strange, we academics and practitioners try to find out what it is that is being said; we try to find ways of rendering the words in ways that seem to us to amount to something; or sometimes we find ourselves resting content with the new saying we have been confronted with; or sometimes we may at length conclude that the words just do not amount to anything. This was either deliberate, in which case we can learn something from it, or undeliberate, in which case we can learn at best only something negative from it.

Renee and Schreber understand sometimes that they are speaking nonsense—the quotes I have supplied by them in this journal and in “On approaching schizophrenia through Wittgenstein” (2001) make this clear. But this does not help them to stop speaking it.

In that respect, they differ crucially from philosophers tempted by solipsism who will give up their solipsistic temptations/tendencies if you can convince them that their own words cannot be given a consistent interpretation; if you can convince them, that is, that they have been speaking nonsense.

And they differ crucially from Wittgenstein, who invites his subtler readers to understand slowly that he has been trafficking in nonsense and that they have been trafficking in it with him; that the words he has been inviting them to hear as making a surprising sense amount only to delusions of sense. Wittgenstein ventriloquizes someone intellectually tempted by solipsism—here we can talk about mimicry (without scare quotes), but where there are no preexisting standards for judgment, as in the case of Benjy (at least if Guetti and I are right about Benjy), there can only be the creative illusion of mimicry. We can mimic mimicking someone living out a philosophical position, an absurdity . . . We can imagine imagining it. This takes us no closer to actually imagining it. And this, I am suggesting, is sometimes the closest we can get to understanding (for example) schizophrenia: becoming clear that it is not understandable.

All that my texts on these matters are, really, are warnings. Warnings (which might, of course, be quite unnecessary) to the readers of deeply innovative psychologists such as Sass and deeply innovative novelists such as Coetzee and Faulkner; warnings not to fall into the utterly tempting trap of thinking that what the best or most exciting philosophical/ literary/ psychopathologic writing gives us is a way(s) of making sense of nonsense(s). For there is no such thing as making sense of nonsense. There is only seeing nonsense more clearly as nonsense; and sometimes there is understanding something, not of what the nonsense says or gestures at (i.e., nothing), but of what it is like to be processually caught up in or attracted by nonsense. Of what it is like at least to copy or to feel a bit like someone perhaps—endlessly not succeeding in signifying anything. But that latter understanding must not in turn be rendered as static, as a position. We will understand best what it is, if we keep the concepts of strong untranslatable metaphor and of creative mimicry close at hand, and further if we bear in mind how far such ‘mimicry’ (it is wise to retain the scare quotes) is from experiencing what one mimics.

The great temptation that must be resisted—but without trapping us in allegedly limited or

closed languages or minds or cultures—is to think that anything human must always be comprehensible. Occasionally, just occasionally, the greatest illusion is the delusion of sense—a delusion that itself intriguingly echoes the a typical delusion of the pseudo-solipsist, whose world is typically not blankly empty but, rather, too full of thought, of meanings, of significance—that insists there is always some sense to be found where there is something like the linguistic jingle of rationality, the sound of sense.

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NOTES

1. I owe the term *strong grammar*—the term *grammar* being originally borrowed from Wittgenstein, who uses it in a broader sense than some may be used to, including under its head even some matters that others might regard as belonging merely to pragmatics or stylistics—to Garrett Caples and James Guetti.

2. This is Wittgenstein's point at section 402 of his *Philosophical Investigations* (1958).

3. Not incidentally, I do not accept Sass's rendition, above, of the New Wittgensteinian reading of Wittgenstein. Those interested might wish to see my *Nothing Is Shown* (2003) for clarification of how Conant, Diamond, Goldfarb, Floyd, myself, and other resolute readers of Wittgenstein actually wish to understand (if that is the right word) Wittgenstein's work. The resolute, austere, new reading of Wittgenstein is quite deliberately not, as Sass suggests it is, committed to any theory of how nonsense comes about. Rather, as I discuss later in the present paper, one finds whether

something is nonsense or not simply by trying and trying to make sense of it.

4. And on this point, Derrida's arguments are close to Donald Davidson's, at least as the latter is expounded by Simon Evnine in "Understanding madness" (1989).

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