

BOOK REVIEWS  
Ed. Jasmin Trächtler

Essay Review:  
*Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries*  
by Dinda L. Gorlée

**Ilse Somavilla**

Gorlée, D.L.: *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries: Semiotic Writing in Cryptography*.  
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Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* consists of about 20.000 pages: apart from a few texts in English, Wittgenstein wrote in German, his mother tongue. In addition, there are roughly 447 entries written in code, some of them consisting of one or a few sentences or some longer passages, occasionally extending over a few pages. Although these coded passages appear frequently and are scattered throughout the *Nachlass*, they can be readily distinguished from his philosophical work per se.

The larger part of these coded entries is to be found on the left-hand side of his *Notebooks* written during the First World War, which stand in contrast to his philosophical reflections written on the right-hand side of the pages and which were the basis of the *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* and thus the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Whereas the philosophical sections written in ordinary handwriting were already published in 1960 (as NB), 1921 (as Log.-phil.Abh.) and 1922 (as TLP)<sup>1</sup>, the coded entries were withheld from the public, as decided by the Wittgenstein Trustees. In 1982, Wilhelm Baum illegally published parts of the encoded text in the *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*; in 1985, the entire text was published in a German-Spanish-Catalan edition in the philosophical magazine *Saber*. Finally, in 1990, Baum published the text in its entirety in German at Turia & Kant. The publication of the secret text raised a scandal in the Wittgenstein community and somehow altered the

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's *Notebooks 1914-1916* (NB) appeared as early as in 1960 in *Schriften I* by Suhrkamp, Frankfurt as *Tagebücher 1914-1916*. Wittgenstein's *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* first appeared in 1921 in Ostwalds *Annalen der Naturphilosophie*. In 1922 a German-English edition of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* with an introduction by Bertrand Russell was published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

hitherto existing perception of Wittgenstein as an austere and sober philosopher, for his coded remarks revealed an emotional and suffering person. At the same time, the coded entries provided insight into his approach to moral and religious questions that were not— with the exception of a few mystical remarks toward the end of the *Tractatus* – included in the philosophical part of his work.

With the recent publication of Wittgenstein's entire *Nachlass* in *The Bergen Electronic Edition*, all of Wittgenstein's coded remarks are accessible. These also include the coded remarks of a diary discovered as recently as in 1993 in Vienna, published under the title *Denkbewegungen* (DB) in 1997 and integrated into the catalogue of manuscripts and typescripts by Georg H. von Wright (these were assigned the catalogue number MS 183).

Wittgenstein's reasons for writing in code, or to be more precise, a secret script, remain an open question: it is widely assumed that the entries in code are reflections concerning very personal, diaristic thoughts and sentiments as well as remarks about ethical and religious questions which Wittgenstein did not want to treat within the context of strict philosophical discourse. However, there are also remarks about his personal life and reflections about so-called metaphysical problems written in normal script.

The recently published *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries* by Dinda L. Gorlée is the result of an extensive study of the coded texts found in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. According to Gorlée, her reason for undertaking this project goes back to a humorous incident: Some time ago, when she asked a Belgian colleague for his address, he handed her a visiting card with three addresses listed: the address of his "public" family domicile, the "private" address where he went on holiday, and the "very private" address of the residence where he spent time with his *maîtresse*. Gorlée was so fascinated by the idea of having several possibilities for one's conduct of life and identity that she decided to approach Wittgenstein's texts in terms of these differing levels – the public, philosophical one, and the private and coded one.

Having spent some time in the *Wittgenstein Archives* in Bergen, Norway, Gorlée was able to gain insight into the vast amount of Wittgenstein's writings – his philosophical as well as his personal writings, the latter often written in code in the form of a secret script. Trained in linguistics and semiotics, Gorlée began to analyze the public and private scripts not only from a philosophical or psychological perspective but also from a semiotic viewpoint. Drawing upon the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who introduced the term "code" (as a system of signs structured in a specific way) to semiotics, and, in particular, Charles Peirce's theory of signs, she found striking similarities to Wittgenstein's writings.

Employing the concepts of *symptom*, *sign*, *symbol* and *habit*, Gorlée analyzes Wittgenstein's texts via a new approach to his coded remarks – new and

innovative from a semiotic perspective, but also from a psychological and psychiatric approach. Her book of roughly 250 pages is divided into the following chapters (including sub-chapters): *Silence and Secrecy*, *Symptoms*, *Cryptography*, *Cryptomnesia*, *Fact or Fiction*, *Cryptosemiotician*, and *Tentative Conclusion*. She provides a list of all coded passages in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* at the end of the book.

Despite her thorough research, there are several inaccuracies, some of them likely inherited from the bulk of secondary and often unreliable literature – for example, she writes ‘Adolf Frege’ instead of ‘Adolf Loos’, ‘Gretle Stoneborough’ instead of ‘Gretl Stonborough’, *Lecture of Ethics* rather than *Lecture on Ethics*, and refers to Rilke's poem *Archaischer Torso Apollos* as ‘*Sanket Sebastian*’ when alluding to Wittgenstein's remark about changing one's life. Such inaccuracies are also found in the biographical details she provides.

Her use of the term “diary”, when applied to Wittgenstein's philosophical texts, is misleading (It would be better to refer to these ‘philosophical manuscripts’ or ‘notebooks interspersed with diaristic remarks’). One exception is the edition of a diary covering the years 1930-1932 and 1936-1937 (mentioned above) and given the title *Denkbewegungen* by the editor. In this case, one can rightly speak of a diary, as it contains diaristic remarks on Wittgenstein's personal life as well as cultural and philosophical reflections. However, it differs from both the wartime notebooks MS 101, 102 and 103, in which Wittgenstein wrote the philosophical text in normal script on the right-hand side of the pages, the personal text in code on the left. As to the philosophical papers of the *Nachlass*, which consist of 182 manuscripts, 44 typescripts and 10 dictations (according to von Wright's catalogue), they contain mainly philosophical discussions, though interspersed with remarks suggesting diaristic content predominantly written in code.

As Gorlée rightly states, the personal and coded part of the wartime notebooks were not allowed to be published, in accordance with the decision of the Wittgenstein trustees. However, the trustees did not change their mind in the case of the diary from the 1930s, since this diary was not known until 1993. Then it was found in the literary estate of Rudolf Koder, a friend Wittgenstein had met during his time as an elementary school-teacher. After having transcribed the diary, the editor, Somavilla, asked von Wright for permission to publish it, and von Wright consented.

Gorlée's use of the word *Denkbewegungen* is also somewhat misleading, because the concept is normally used in connection with the title given by the editor to Wittgenstein's diaries from the 1930s. Considering Wittgenstein's process and way of thinking, it would therefore be more appropriate and also clearer to speak of “thought movement” or “movements of thought” or when using the German term “Denkbewegungen”, placing it in quotation marks rather than italics.

On the whole, Gorlée's *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries* is a remarkable and extensive study of Wittgenstein's large corpus of texts. It might be of special interest to scholars in the field of linguistics and semiotics, but her novel approach should intrigue Wittgenstein scholars as well.

Apart from discussing Wittgenstein's texts – both the philosophical and personal diaristic remarks – in great detail, Gorlée offers descriptions of various thinkers (men of literature and philosophy) and their different ways of keeping diaries. Moreover, she offers insight into historical and cultural fields as well as into different kinds of religious beliefs, e.g., Judaism. Accordingly, she sees Wittgenstein's texts as embedded in his cultural and social environment, she argues that the “silent speech of the diary is not sealed off from Wittgenstein's lectures of philosophy” (p. 56).

Gorlée also claims that Wittgenstein aimed to impress his readers and to inspire them to learn his code (cf. p. 54 and p. 65). As I see it, however, Wittgenstein's entries in secret script flowed from the bottom of his heart. They can be seen as emotional and spontaneous outpourings from his innermost core, lacking any wish or hope to evoke something in his readers or students, let alone encourage them to learn the code in order to take part in his “‘absurd’ self or selves”, as Gorlée suggests (p. 56). His only purpose in writing these notes was to achieve clarity about himself and thus come to grips with the problems he faced in his life. Writing in code was also a way of approaching the so-called ‘higher sphere’, i.e., ethics and religion, which he avoided talking about in his philosophical discourse written in normal script. Wittgenstein was convinced that metaphysical questions had to be excluded from strict philosophy, as they transcend the limits of language and of science. In fact, before encoding these remarks, Wittgenstein had first written them in normal script but placed them in brackets. Later, when transferring his writings from his notebooks to the volumes, he encoded the bracketed remarks (cf. Pichler 1997: 68ff).

Gorlée also discusses Wittgenstein's idea of writing an autobiography, referring to his notes about his reasons. Here she mentions Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michel de Montaigne and Gottfried Keller as potential historical influences on Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's affiliation with Augustine is well-known from the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he refers to Augustine's preoccupation with language – more precisely, with the process by means of which children learn a language. Augustine's way of writing his confessions, seemed to have impressed Wittgenstein and may have inspired him to come to terms with his moral concerns, and thus of his feelings

of guilt.<sup>2</sup> Augustine's path from sin to sainthood was obviously something Wittgenstein strove after in his pursuit of moral perfection. This attitude comes through strongly in his coded remarks, which clearly reveal his high moral standards and his tremendous drive to meet them; Wittgenstein constantly accused himself of having failed to do so.

Gorlée sees Augustine as a “fresh impulse toward self-thought and self-scrutiny rephrased in Wittgenstein's philosophy and diary” (p. 106). With regard to Rousseau and Montaigne, she finds parallels to Wittgenstein in their feelings of pessimism and their state of being “in exile” (p. 109).

Keller, like Wittgenstein, spent time far away from his homeland as a traveller in his younger years, and considered keeping a diary as the best way to “preserve his independence by constant self-contemplation” (Keller 1942: 27, quoted after Gorlée 2020: 111). Self-contemplation, like the pursuit of moral perfection, was an important aspect of Wittgenstein's personality. Reflecting on the idea of one day writing an autobiography, he aimed to “produce clarity and truth” (cf. MS 108: 46), thus to achieve the same goal as in his philosophizing. In 1930, he wished to compose a melody in order to sum up his life, so to speak, and set it down in a crystallized form – “even if it were but a small, shabby crystal, yet a crystal” (cf. DB: 9ff.).

In his crypto-autobiography, Wittgenstein, according to Gorlée, wanted to “wash away the spot and stain of immorality to reach the genuine truth” (p. 98). However, as can be seen from numerous diary entries, Wittgenstein could not avoid traces of vanity in his writing – an attribute he considered among his worst character traits and which he desperately fought against. As he noted in 1929:

To the extent that keeping a diary is not life itself, it is a bad thing, in my case. For to me, like everything else I do, it almost certainly becomes a reason for vanity and the less time I have for reflecting on myself in vanity, the better (MS 107: 74, my transl.)

It was only by means of profound suffering or via religious belief that he sensed the possibility of conquering his vanity: “[...] And only if I could be submerged in religion might these doubts be silenced. For only religion could destroy vanity & penetrate every nook & cranny” (MS 131: 38; CV: 54e). In this respect, he did not really want to flee madness, as staying on the verge of it enabled him to achieve the kind of modesty and humility necessary to conquer his vanity.

Gorlée sees Wittgenstein's diary entries as a means to reconciling himself to his fate. Moreover, as mentioned before, she also sees them as a means to

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<sup>2</sup> According to Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein considered Augustine's confession as the “most serious book ever written” (Rhees 1984: 90).

impress the readers. However, as noted above, Wittgenstein did not strive to impress his potential readers, though he was sensitive about their reactions. In fact, he continually writes about being vain, cowardly, lazy, etc., thus drawing a more negative portrait of himself than he in fact deserved. His attempt at confession was instead a part of his wish to change his life and start a new one: “A confession has to be part of one’s new life” (MS 154: 1r; CV: 16e). However, it was not until 1936 and 1937 that he sent letters of confessions to his close friends Ludwig Hänsel and Paul Engelmann, and to his family members. Accordingly, he noted in normal script:

The solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic disappear. The fact that life is problematic means that your life does not fit life’s shape. So you must change your life, & once it fits the shape, what is problematic will disappear. (MS 118: 17r; CV: 31e)<sup>3</sup>

His way of writing his diary suggests he was to achieve clarity about himself and thus attain his aspirations of perfection. Varying between a monologue and a quasi-dialogue, he seems to speak to an “alter ego” deep inside of himself, but also to some imagined confidantes

In his secret diaries, Wittgenstein was engaged in a kind of dialogue with fictitious readers, similar to the one in his *Philosophical Investigations*, though with no expectation of being read or heard. As Hintikka suggests, Wittgenstein “played the quasi-communication alone”, because “real dialogue was not the ruled ‘grammar’ of his philosophy” (Hintikka 1986: 242-243, quoted after Gorlée 2020: 211).

Apart from discussing Wittgenstein’s crypto-diaries, Gorlée frequently refers to his philosophical remarks in plain text, often establishing connections between the two. This applies in particular to the example of the beetle (PI: § 293) or to the problem of pain, where she finds interesting points of contact. As hinted at before, Gorlée sees Wittgenstein’s writings – both his secret and official ones – as a means to reconciling his personal dilemmas within a socio-cultural and religious background. Accordingly, she offers extensive information about various forms of culture and religion and discusses the works of various philosophers and literary figures.

She rightly observes that the at times prophetic tone of Wittgenstein’s thought intermingled the habit of diarykeeping and philosophy with his real emotions, creating what looks like a poem or metapoem of his life. The literary

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<sup>3</sup> One might also think of Rilke’s poem *Archaischer Torso Apollons* in this context, which ends with the sentence “You must change your life”.

form involves more than the depiction of the biographical facts, but for Wittgenstein there is a radical distinction between different levels of language: the language of science and the language of poetry (p. 155).

This distinction reminds me of a remark found in MS 133 in 1946, where Wittgenstein confesses in an encoded passage that he feels like writing a poem when writing philosophy. Immediately after this remark, he continues in uncoded script and adopts a sober tone quite different from the lyrical tone preceding: “The craving for explanation prevents the description of the full construction of facts of the description. [...] The preconceived hypothesis works like a strainer that allows just a very small part of the facts into our minds” (Ms 133: 13r, my transl.).

Wittgenstein’s preference for a non-scientific approach is obvious; the passage clearly reveals his emphasis on an intuitive approach to the *impression* of an object, be it a picture or an object in nature, such as a tree.<sup>4</sup>

Gorlée maintains that the coded remarks of Wittgenstein’s diary seem to be vaguely connected to the philosophy written in plain text. She goes as far as to suggest that Wittgenstein’s double images of duck and rabbit showed his “fundamental insecurity of life” (p. 155; cf. MS 133: 35r).

Being unhappy, he seemed to live in two worlds: the world of the diary and that of philosophy (cf. p. 155). This applies above all to the 1940’s, especially to 1946, a time when Wittgenstein suffered from acute loneliness. Even though his lectures went well, he asked himself what use they served and whether they were of any help to others (cf. MS 133: 35v-41v, my transl.).

Despite his sadness, Wittgenstein avoided sentimentalities or theatrics (cf. MS 133: 78r). Instead, he focused on writing philosophical remarks in a detached and sober manner. The concept of pain, therefore, is a recurring topic in his philosophical investigations (PGL: 33-58), and there are various other examples (such as the one of the beetle, mentioned before) that can be seen as having their origins in his personal life. Gorlée mentions how, for example, in MS 130, Wittgenstein described how he observed the variety of objects surrounding him and argued that “the perception of visual signs (*visuelle Auffassung*) enabled the inner state of seeing these outer ‘objects’, but not how he could be acquainted immediately with the meaning of the objects” (p. 142).

In contrast to the abstract writing style employed in his philosophical texts, his secret notes reveal a more personal and passionate side, suggesting these are a means of self-therapy – his secret prayers and confessions, an attempt to heal himself.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, Wittgenstein did not need the help of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. MS 134: 27, where he writes about the difference between a mathematician looking at trees and looking at trees in admiration without attempting to analyze what one sees.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., in 1946, in MS 130: 153-154, Wittgenstein writes in code: “Oh! May God give that I accept my fate in contentment” and continues in normal writing: “In life it is the same as in philosophy” (my transl.). Cf. also: “Religion would give me a certain modesty that I lack.

psychoanalysis in the Freudian sense, but – as Gorlée maintains – he “followed the rational-emotive therapy of Peirce’s pragmatism, in the reformulation of William James’s psychological works” (p. 136).

It would go beyond the scope of this review to mention various further parallels between Peirce and Wittgenstein discussed by Gorlée. The same applies to a number of authors she considers which are only briefly mentioned here. In addition, Gorlée offers numerous examples of Wittgenstein’s philosophical entries in connection with his personal diaries. She frequently discusses his writings in light of semiotics or psychiatry, though in a way that leaves her open to the charge of overinterpretation.

However, she rightly maintains that the inter- or subtext is absent from the primary text in many editions of Wittgenstein’s works. The philosophical text thus “becomes a useless set of ‘muscles’” and therefore loses “a major part of the whole meaning”, disconnecting it from Wittgenstein’s real identity (p. 145).

Looking at cryptography from the viewpoint of semiotics, Gorlée sees Wittgenstein’s writing as part of his “language game”. While he generated texts on logic and philosophy, “his brain was crisscrossed by the private subtext in fragments of his non-logical diary” (p. 151).

According to Gorlée, in the diaristic remarks of MS 130 to 134 Wittgenstein employs the cryptographical code not only “as a medium of self-reflection, but also as a stimulus for his readers to introduce the language games”, and that he “wanted his readers to stumble at the regular details and irregular alphabetic order to feel in themselves the disorder of the textual and subtextual scripts” (p. 149). I do not agree with this claim. It seems more likely that Wittgenstein wrote his coded texts in order to conceal his deeper feelings, his anxiety and pain. The code served as a medium for expressing in words that which he did not want to be accessible:<sup>6</sup> “It is strange what relief it is for me to write about some things in a secret script which I would not like to have written in an easily legible way” (MS 106: 4, my transl.).

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Because I consider anything halfway human in me as a quality that distinguishes me” (MS 131: 15, my transl.). In his refuge to religious values, Wittgenstein frequently criticises scientists: “What is the scientist? Is he a researcher of truth, or a benefactor of humanity, or an artist, or is he an artisan? If he had religion, then his difficulties would be removed” (MS 131: 33; my transl.).

<sup>6</sup> In this context, I would want to mention the theme of *silence*, which plays a major part in Wittgenstein’s way of thinking, in his philosophizing. As he remarked: “‘Man has given man the gift of thinking in secret.’ Imagine one would say ‘Although nature has given to speak out loud, man can also speak low in his mind.’ So there are two ways for doing the same thing...But with internal speech, speech is concealed better than an internal process can be...Nobody sees, nobody hears, nobody perceives, what I think” (MS 133: 3r, 4r, Gorlée’s transl.).



In light of this and other remarks, and in view of his refusal to speak about certain spheres in philosophy, I suggest that his method of encoding enabled him to express his thoughts on matters he preferred to remain silent about. This includes ethical and religious matters as well as personal, existential questions that he considered too precious to be accessible to superficial readers. A note penned on 9 February 1937 in MS 157a seems to confirm this assumption: “There is a great difference between the effects of a script that one can read easily & fluently & one which one can write but not easily decipher. One locks one’s thoughts in it as though in a casket” (MS 157a: 59v).

I concur with Gorlée that Wittgenstein was a very secretive person who used his code for private thoughts. Accordingly, Gorlée calls Wittgenstein a ‘cryptosemiotician’, showing how he used cryptography to reveal his inner “Angst”. She sees Wittgenstein’s diary as “the iconic image of his identity” (p. 199). She further maintains that “the code turned the evil he suffered for many years into the magical remedy to find his true sign” (p. 201).

Wittgenstein’s prayers can be seen as cries for help, as the prayer is “no vain exercise of words, no repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul” (James 1982: 486, quoted in Gorlée 2020: 210).

Seeing Wittgenstein as a troubled man, who often found himself in difficult times politically and socially, the coded diary helped relieve his troubles and anxiety. The double identity of the formal and scientific passages of philosophy interspersed with informal, unscientific diaristic ones was “Wittgenstein’s strange formula of writing” (p. 204).

Even though I agree that Wittgenstein was a tortured person in many ways, it is also worth remembering other aspects of his personality, such as his good sense of humor and the joy he found in his philosophizing and thus also in his life. As he remarked in 1931: “The pleasure I take in my thoughts is pleasure in my own strange life. Is this *joi de vivre*?” (MS 155: 46r; CV: 20e).

Ilse Somavilla  
University of Innsbruck  
Ilse.Somavilla(at)uibk.ac.at

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