# Introduction

BRUCE DUFFY's magisterial 1987 novel, *The World As I Found It*, belongs to a genre that might best be described—precisely if not elegantly—as "fiction about real people": in this case, the philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, and G. E. Moore. At the time of its publication some readers considered the book scandalously presumptuous, an instance of the novelist arrogating to himself rights that ought to be reserved for the historian: in Duffy's own words, "fiction as some literary substitute for the old Classic Comics." If it affronted purists, however, *The World As I Found It*, in its very recklessness and invention and brio, enthralled readers of literature, most of whom knew little and cared less about its protagonists. Not only that, it was one of those novels that, to paraphrase Amy Hempel, "made other novels possible," among them Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* (1990, about the Viennese secessionist painter Egon Schiele), Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991, about the poet Siegfried Sassoon), and Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (1995, about the German romantic poet Novalis), all of which came out over the course of the next ten years. In these novels, real characters mingle with imagined ones. Letters that were never written are cited, as are diaries that were never kept. Most boldly, history is reshaped to suit the novel's exigencies, whereas usually the opposite is true. "In Shakespeare's time," Duffy observed in a lecture given at the John Adams Institute in Amsterdam in 1991, "to write plays about Julius Caesar or Prince Hamlet was not a bothersome thing, but today it is, I'm afraid. In an era of experts and unprecedented specialization—in a time when I should say we cripple ourselves by ceding far too much to the wisdom of experts—a book like mine is bothersome, for some to the point of being disorienting." Disorienting perhaps, but also exhilarating, like flying a loop-the-loop.

*The World As I Found It* opens in the late forties, in a Cambridge movie theater to which Wittgenstein has gone with a young friend to a screening of *Top Hat*. A conversation about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers leads, as such conversations will, to the redoubtable Mickey Mouse, whom Wittgenstein thinks "entirely creditable and charming."

> Also the duck. I very much like the duck. A *wise guy*, as the Americans say.
>
> Donald Duck, you say?
>
> No, no—a quick up-down look, amazed that a young man could be so removed as not to know this. Not Donald—*Daffy*.
>
> But then the philosopher wondered if the young man was instead making a veiled philosophical point about the indeed curious fact that these two excitable ducks spoke with sputtering lisps.

To Wittgenstein, the coincidence is so unaccountable as to merit interrogation:

> But don't you think it curious, he probed, pressing the obscure young man to make his point. I mean that neither of these ducks can speak *without spitting*. Assuming we could even *understand* a duck who could speak. But *spitting*—

The scene is a testament to Duffy's seductive talents: easing us into Wittgenstein's nautilus-shaped mind by way of cartoons, he presents his storytelling credentials (this really *will* be a novel) even as he illustrates the extent to which Wittgenstein—a philosopher whose name is now synonymous with difficulty—was in fact *down to earth*. Most important, he provides an early clue to Wittgenstein's nature: like "the duck," this is a man whose every utterance is marked, even marred, by the sheer effort that utterance requires. The desire to say things exactly warps the act of saying. Nor is it a coincidence that the lisp is a trademark of the mincing homosexual, a type from which Wittgenstein, though homosexual himself (remember the "young friend"), diverges at least outwardly.

In his writings, Wittgenstein labored over the relationship between language and the things that language represents—often quite ordinary things. ("Don't treat your common sense like an umbrella," he is reputed to have told the students, among them Alan Turing, who participated in his

1939 Cambridge seminar on the Foundations of Mathematics. "When you come into a room to philosophize, don't leave it outside but bring it in with you.") Wallpaper hangers, soldiers, white lions, and collapsing bridges made regular appearances in this seminar, as did Mary and her Little Lamb and the famous Cretan's paradox, by means of which Wittgenstein's mentor, Bertrand Russell, had in 1903 undone the efforts of the German mathematician Gottlob Frege to establish a secure foundation for mathematical inquiry. Here as elsewhere in the novel, Duffy eschews exegesis in favor of a *scene*: now we are sitting on a beach and Russell is trying to explain the letter by which he famously devastated Frege to his lover Ottoline Morrell.

> Wait, protested Ottoline dizzily. Please, you mustn't run on like this. You must go more slowly.
>
> No, no—Already he was gesturing. Really, it's not that hard to see. It goes back to our Cretan—the one who called all Cretans liars. Consider: if what the Cretan says is true, then he's a liar and his statement is false. If what he says is a lie, on the other hand, then he's telling the truth while at the same time lying. The same principle applies to the contradiction in Frege's mathematics.
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> Ottoline sat there, closing her eyes. I feel so stupid, so miserably stupid.
>
> Don't, he said, smoothing her arm. Consider it another way. You can say a man is part of the class of men. But the *class* of men is not itself a *man*.
>
> She blinked. Right . . .

By incorporating Russell's efforts to explain himself into dialogue, Duffy allows the reader to take the part of the bewildered Ottoline, for whom Russell's exposure of the kink in Frege's logic is far less troublesome than his obliviousness to its possible effects on Frege's psyche.

> But how vile of you! Ottoline jumped up and stared at him. First you praise the poor man, then you tell him that his work was all wrong?
>
> Not *all* wrong. But very much eroded by this paradox—at least with regard to the theory of classes.
>
> Ottoline continued staring at him. But didn't you feel dreadful, ruining his work like that?

Russell was at something of a loss. Well, I wouldn't say *ruin*. But, yes, I suppose I felt sorry, somewhat.

"Russell's Contradiction," as it came to be known, provides Duffy with a chance to examine the contradiction that was Russell: a putative advocate of free love ultimately outmaneuvered by his own possessiveness; an enemy of class ultimately straitjacketed by his aristocratic origins; an idealist ultimately defeated by the refusal of the larger world to conform to his plans for its reconstruction. Russell is at once the novel's most vigorous and most tragic character, doomed early on by what his colleague G. E. Moore recognizes as an excessive hunger for public adulation. For Moore, Russell is "saddled with ambition," just as for Russell, Moore is hobbled by his "legendary lack of vanity." Many of their clashes are over Wittgenstein, of whom Moore casually observes: "Wittgenstein is cleverer. More profound as well, I expect. I don't mind about it." But Russell does mind about it, just as he minds that Moore, in asserting Wittgenstein's superiority to himself, also implies his superiority to Russell.

It is to Wittgenstein's sexual, religious, and philosophical evolution that Duffy devotes the bulk of *The World As I Found It.* We see him as a child coming of age in the Palais Wittgenstein in Vienna, a hugely elegant circus tent of a mansion in which his father, the steel magnate Karl Wittgenstein, orders his children onto the high wire of intellectual rigor for his own amusement. By turns charming, hectoring, and vindictive, Wittgenstein père is among the most compelling and terrifying fathers I have ever encountered in literature. So elemental is his force of will that the reader is not the least surprised to learn that two of his older sons have already committed suicide and that his spirited daughter Gretl is in psychoanalysis with Freud. Then there is Kurt, written off as intellectually deficient simply because he is not quite as brilliant as his siblings, and Mining, assigned the unenviable role of the daughter who stays at home to look after her father (a role she embraces with self-pitying avidity). Rounding off this extraordinary clan is Paul, piano prodigy and cold fish: ironically he will come into his own only after he loses his right arm in the war. (It was as a commission for Paul that Ravel composed his justly famous Concerto for the Left Hand.)

Incidentally, Duffy is *not* one of those writers who stage cerebral meals

at which no notice is taken of what people are eating, and some of his most virtuosic set pieces are about food. Here, for instance, is dinner at the Trinity High Table.

> McTaggart . . . ate like a true dialectician. Taking a portion, he would halve it, then halve it again, eating the quarter of the first part, then a quarter of the second, which he then halved again before moving on to another portion, halving and halving to the point that he never finished anything.
>
> Among other eaters in evidence, there was also the old historian McDougal, a leveling reductionist long due for pasture, who mixed the all with the all—carrots, meat, and cauliflower—making of it an unholy mush of meaning. Then, far down from him, there was Cecil Goodheart, stoic, classicist, and xenophobe, for whom all had to be separate, like air, earth and fire, with each food group, and even its juices, free of the contagion of the other.

Most dramatic is Moore; watching him eat, Russell reflects that for better or worse he himself will never to be able to muster "that love of quotidian, bland or even marginal food that is the mark of the truly stouthearted eater."

> But Moore, Moore went these eaters one better. It was not enough to merely empty dishes. Moore must have *Moore*, went the joke, Russell's line. Having polished off two plates, Moore would snag a trout or waiter or would go back himself into the steamy, dark recesses of the kitchen, past the scullions toiling over the stacked havoc of the meal. . . . Happily, Moore would examine the cuts in their bloody brown paper and smell the melon bungs in season. Brushing away the shaved ice, he would prod the stacked cod, reeking and slimy, checking for the color of the scales and the clearness of the eyes. Moore knew the correct saffron hue of a good fresh pullet, and he likewise loved to appraise the leanness and savoriness of the bacons, bringing his nose down so close that he could see the little black stubs of unshaved bristle visible under the brownish skin.

Now consider Duffy's rendition of a family dinner at the Palais Wittgenstein. As the courses arrive and are placed before the Master of the

House, he attacks them and his youngest son, lately arrived from Cambridge, with equal gusto:

> There was, in short, little Wittgenstein could have told his father about England. But still the old man continued with these circling questions as he worked away at an enormous welcoming meal that featured *Jungschweinsbraten*, a young roast pork loin covered to its crackling with a thick cream sauce, and that culminated some five courses later with a snowy meringue *Spanische Windtorte*—four pounds of sugared egg whites that he couldn't look at when it appeared, vaguely polar, through the lapping candlelight.

Wittgenstein's refusal to partake of this dessert then impels his father to hold forth on English cooking:

> Well! he said. For myself, I really do think English food is amply deserving of its reputation for dreadfulness. At least in the main. The wealthy, of course, do not really eat English food. They still lick the boots of the French—French cuisine is the rage. Even their menus are in French, though they do persist, especially at breakfast, in serving grilled lamb kidneys, herrings and other solidly English offal.
>
> Out to charm his family now with observations far more picturesque and amusing than any his son could have made, Karl Wittgenstein added with a look of astonishment: But do you know what? The English do not know how to bake! Oh, there you would find nothing like this magnificent *Spanische Windtorte*, and certainly none executed so beautifully.

By way of a retort, Wittgenstein agrees with his father, adding that in their badness British baked goods are comparable to "Jewish baked goods"—a not so veiled allusion to the fact that the Wittgensteins, despite various acts of religious conversion, are themselves Jewish: the stalwart hamantashen, not the mystic *Windtorte*, is their legacy, just as Cambridge (if we follow the metaphorical trail of crumbs to its inevitable conclusion) is more like the shtetl than the palais, with Moore, of all people, cast in the role of the rabbinical father figure, gorging himself on the fruits of the crude earth even as Karl Wittgenstein rides the Spanish wind.

As the twentieth century progresses, the paths of Duffy's three heroes diverge. Just as Russell predicts, Moore cocoons himself in domesticity, rarely leaving the ambit of his Cambridge routine. Just as Moore predicts, Russell abandons the rigors of mathematical logic in favor of the public life, becoming a denizen of the American speaking tour circuit and a regular contributor to the popular press. ("No subject was too daunting and none too trivial. If the Hearst papers or *Vanity Fair* wanted an article on the morality of kissing or the social implications of bobbed hair, they would quickly have it.") In the end simple jealousy undoes Russell's labored efforts to live a life uninhibited by such outmoded values as monogamy, leaving him with "a sense of incredible disbelief at what was otherwise a given: that he should be himself, a presence named *Russell*, and that this fast-unraveling skein of sensation should actually be his life—that life should have slipped to this point." Nor can he contend with the whirling dervish that is Wittgenstein, who—following a peripatetic journey of a lifetime that leads him from the perpetual daylight of a Norway summer, to the unspeakable violence of the Russian front, to an Italian prison camp, to the grim poverty of the Austrian village of Trattenbach—ends up back at the one place where he has felt anything approaching a sense of belonging: Cambridge.

All this Duffy chronicles in a narrative that is alternately spare and spilling over with detail, abstract and carnal, relentless in its portrayal of pain and rhapsodic in its hymning of beauty. We see Vienna, over the course of two wars, smashed and partially rebuilt and smashed again. We see Cambridge, in its very resistance to change, providing a haven. We see Russell going at it with his mistress, the sturdy Miss Marmer ("a familiar dish: throat of pearls and lipstick, the clop of her black mules and the silk kimono that he liked to spread over her perfumed buttocks like a peacock's fan"), and Moore, in his lovely tenor voice, singing "Foggy, Foggy Dew," and Wittgenstein, in a moment of panic, hurrying to the toilet at the Vienna Opera only to discover that he has stumbled into the ladies' room. Nothing is off-limits, nothing sacrosanct—not even the once taboo subject of Wittgenstein's sexuality, of which Duffy writes with refined candor. Here, for instance, is Wittgenstein making one of his occasional forays into the sexually charged woods of the Prater:

> No, it was not *you*, Wurstel Prater, nor you, Ferris wheel. It was not you, Herr Vendor, selling bags of stale crumbs to feed the wintering geese on the chill pond, nor, heaven knows, was it you, innocent children, out today for a walk with your nanny—
>
> No, it was you, scowling Herr Kollege, saber scarred and swaggering with vituperative cane, away for a few hours from your brothers in the dueling fraternity. It was you, Game of Strength—you, the burly sausage maker or bricklayer. And it was, too, away for an hour from your wife and family, away from the privation and anxiety of Christmas. Yes, and if you weren't so slight—if you were darker, rougher, more menacing—it might well be you, young man, swatting your leg, mystically nodding about something that could be had, and had fast, among these shrouding firs.

And here is Wittgenstein trying to explain to Moore and Russell, in the viva voce portion of his dissertation defense, his efforts to pin down the language by which, as he grows older, he finds himself increasingly beset and baffled: the language of pain.

> We all have had pains, aches, sadness. We know how these things feel. But how do we express them? How, linguistically, am I to suppose that you, Russell, have the same pain that I have—that we are, so to speak, related in our pain? For when I say that "Russell has a pain," I am referring to a physical body—to Russell's body. But when I say, "*I* have a pain," I am not referring to my own physical body—"I" does not denote a possessor.

Russell misses the point, which Wittgenstein struggles to clarify:

> This pain was a séance, of sorts. Pain was a medium of human exchange, like body heat or love; it was a sort of litmus test that could be used to detect the human presence, tracing how it learned and grew, and the way it remembered. Pain, Wittgenstein strove to explain, was an as yet uncharted territory, a wide and various language with a kind of anthropology. Consider its wide variety, with grief, sorrow, anger and anxiety, and distinct languages for each. Indeed, pain seemed a kind of vault for the psyche, much as in polar regions one may find whole frozen mastodons, perfectly preserved.

> The men were speaking. Electrically, if imperceptibly, the pain was flowing.

It's that last line that gets me: the idea that, even as Wittgenstein labors to find an analogy for pain (ectoplasm, litmus, prehistoric fossil), pain—the electric current of pain—is in the room. It is pain that undermines his effort to taxonomize pain; pain that inhibits his Forsterian attempt to "connect" with Russell; pain that leaves him, in the end, at a loss for words.

Is the artist's role, as Chekhov claimed, to ask questions, not answer them? If so, what is the philosopher's role? These questions—which Bruce Duffy asks but never answers—lie at the heart of *The World As I Found It*, a novel about philosophers that manages, to its credit, never to be a "philosophical novel." At once audacious and austere, panoramic and intimate, *The World As I Found It* proves that not even Wittgenstein is beyond the novelist's ken. If fiction can do this, it can do anything.

—David Leavitt