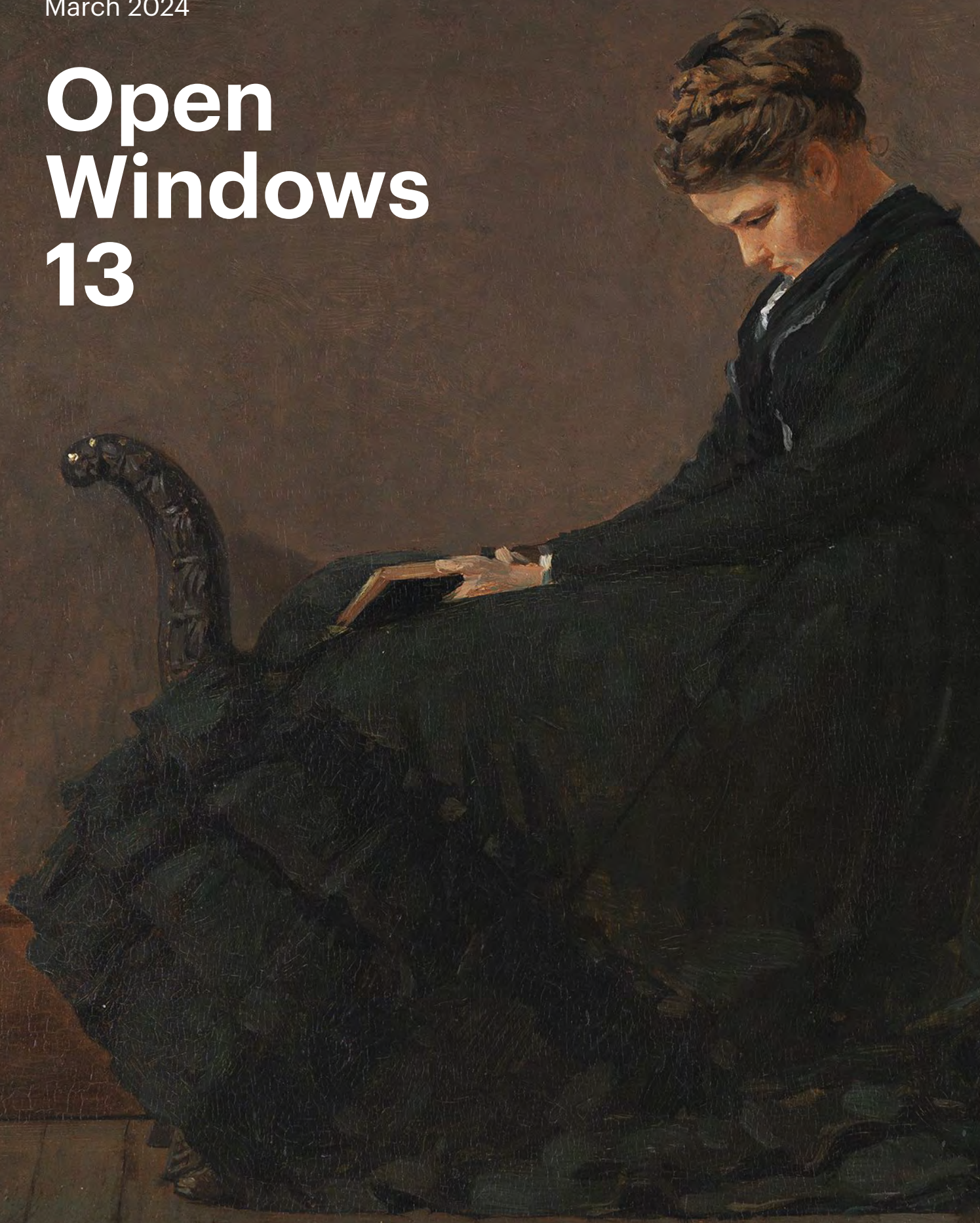


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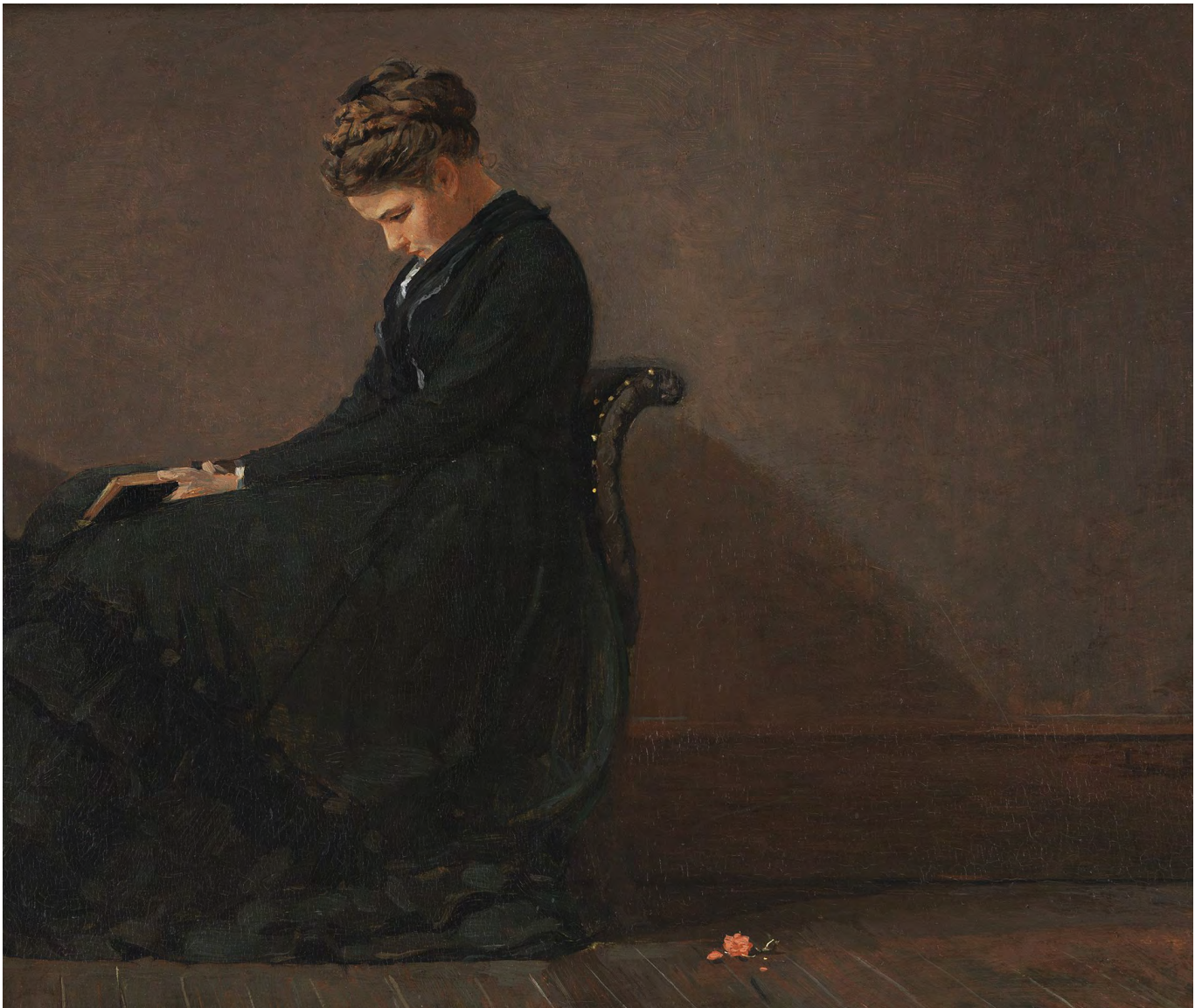
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Magritte, Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language: Between the Poetry of Mystery and the Philosophy of Visual Language

José Luis Calderón
Aguirrezabala

Helena de Kay: Apropos of Artistic Careers, Letters and Flowers

Clara Marcellán



Winslow Homer
Portrait of Helena de Kay, about 1872
(detail)
[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Winslow Homer
Portrait of Helena de Kay, about 1872
Oil on panel, 31 × 47 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. 591 (1983.25)



fig. 2

Helena de Kay and her husband
Richard Watson Gilder

**1**

See the complete auction catalogue at [2023 February 10 The Gilded Age: Property from the Collection of Richard Watson Gilder and Helena de Kay Gilder American Art Signature® Auction #8106](#).

2

Helena de Kay, *Sketchbook, 'Raywood, Staten Island'*, 1880–93, pastels on onion paper in bound ledger book, 27.6 × 22.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mary Lublin, 2023, 2023.284.1; and Anne Goddard Morse, *Helena de Kay Gilder Reading*, 1880s, watercolour on paper, 14 × 8.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mary Lublin, 2023, 2023.284.2.

In 2023, a series of events shed new light on the universe of Helena de Kay (1846–1916), the model for a small oil painting by Winslow Homer (1836–1910) whose sources of inspiration and significance we are still exploring [fig. 1]. What did this painting mean to its creator, Winslow Homer, and its first owner, Helena de Kay? What makes it a portrait? Is it the resemblance to Helena? Or do we know that it is a portrait from the title given to it by the sitter and her family, or, alternatively, from piecing together the circumstances in which it was painted from the correspondence between Homer and De Kay?

The collection owned by Helena de Kay and her husband, Richard Watson Gilder (1844–1909), was put up for auction on 10 February 2023 [fig. 2].¹ The sale included personal objects and artworks that help contextualise the oil painting in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. Two of the lots listed, a sketchbook belonging to Helena and a portrait of her reading painted by Anne Goddard Morse (1855–1938), were subsequently gifted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²



fig. 3
Helena de Kay
[Roses], n.d.
Watercolour and pencil on paper,
43.2 × 52.7 cm
Heritage Auctions, 10 February 2023,
lot 67138

Concurrently, the *New York Art Worlds, 1870–1890* exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum took a look at Helena de Kay.³ The show featured works executed by her and other pieces to which she is related in some way, be it as model, former owner or promotor of their creation.

In addition, the correspondence between Winslow Homer and Helena de Kay became accessible – eight letters dated between 1872 and 1886⁴ – bringing to the fore new information on their relationship around the time Homer painted this portrait, which he eventually gave to De Kay.

A Window on Helena de Kay's Private Life

More than a hundred years after Helena de Kay's death, the sale of her personal objects has opened a window on her family, artistic and social life. The lots put up for auction included many works by De Kay herself, mostly small and executed on paper. As little attention has been paid to her artistic side to date – possibly because of her greater dedication to illustration, for which she has not always been given due credit – the auction provided an excellent opportunity to learn about the pieces dating from her student days in New York in the late 1860s. These charcoal sketches and other drawings depicting biblical episodes, figure studies, landscapes and nudes were probably produced during her classes in life drawing at the National Academy of Design. Also notable are her many watercolours of the places where she lived or holidayed, as well as her studies of flowers [fig. 3], which later illustrated magazines and books such as Richard Watson Gilder's *The New Day* (1875). A poet, critic and editor of *Scribner's* and *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Gilder became her husband in 1874 and, along with the couple's seven children, appears in many of the drawings put up for sale.

3
In gallery 773 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from 12 December 2022 to 21 July 2024.

4
We quote from the letters and reproduce a few of their pages courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, which acquired them in 1999 together with other manuscripts belonging to the De Kay-Gilder family.



fig. 4
Attributed to Winslow Homer
***Helena Lying on the Beach*, n.d.**
Pencil on paper, 8.6 × 14.3 cm
Heritage Auctions, 23 February 2023,
lot 67129

5
 Sarah Burns, 'The Courtship of Winslow Homer', in *The Magazine Antiques*, New York, Brant Publications, vol. 165, February 2002, pp. 69–75.

6
 Letter from Winslow Homer to Helena de Kay, 15 November [no year], Lilly Library, see note 4 above.

7
 Lloyd Goodrich is thought to have visited Helena de Kay's daughter Rosamond Gilder once to see the portrait Helena had painted of Winslow Homer. See [Richard Watson and Helena de Kay Gilder papers, 1874-1878 | Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution | Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution \(si.edu\)](#).

Among the portraits of Helena de Kay is a drawing attributed to Winslow Homer showing her lying on the beach [fig. 4]. Authors such as Sarah Burns point out the possibility that De Kay may have posed for Homer on other occasions during the months before and after the creation of the Thyssen-Bornemisza portrait: for example, for *The Butterfly* and *Summer Afternoon*, both dated 1872 and owned by the Cooper Hewitt Museum.⁵ Although it is difficult to furnish documentary evidence that De Kay was the model, we do know that Homer relied on her to progress with his work:

My work this Winter will be good or very bad. The good work will depend on your coming to see me once a month at least. Is this asking too much?⁶

We also know that the roles were occasionally reversed and that it was Helena de Kay who portrayed Homer, according to the testimony of the author of the artist's catalogue raisonné, Lloyd Goodrich.⁷ Another object related to this friendship is a gold ring bearing the inscription 'AMI POUR LA VIE' [friend for life], which, as the catalogue of the 2023 auction stated, may have been a gift from Winslow Homer to Helena de Kay.



fig. 5
Mary Hallock Foote
Helena and Mary, n.d.
 Pencil and wash on paper laid
 on board, 18.7 x 14 cm
 Heritage Auctions, 10 February 2023,
 lot 67108

While De Kay's bond with Homer during those years has aroused interest due to a possible romantic attachment, the sale items have also highlighted her intense relationship with the writer and illustrator Mary Hallock (1847–1938), a classmate at the Cooper Union from 1867 to 1870. The women exchanged more than 600 letters that document their friendship and artistic development until De Kay's death in 1911.⁸ In one of these letters, Hallock refers to Homer's influence, appreciative of the fact that he does not succumb to triviality or 'prettiness':

What an advantage to have Winslow Homer around! You'll pick up arey [ever] so many crumbs of wisdom. I do think his pictures are very masterly looking and never trivial or 'pretty'.⁹

The relationship between the two women is also borne out by drawings such as the one Hallock entitled *Helena and Mary*, which was kept by the De Kay-Gilder family and has now come to light [fig. 5]. During these years Hallock confessed to Helena de Kay's future husband:

Do you know, sir, until you came, I believe [Helena] loved me almost as girls love their lovers. I know I loved her so.¹⁰

In 1876 Mary Hallock's life was turned around when she married a mining engineer whose work took the couple to California, Colorado and Idaho. There, encouraged by Helena and Richard, she became one of the most representative women writers of frontier stories, which she illustrated herself.¹¹ Hallock's tales, which were published in *Scribner's* and its successor, *The Century Magazine*, the leading illustrated monthly in the United States whose managing editor was Richard W. Gilder, earned her great renown. Together with the American painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), in 1893 she was chosen as a jury member for the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.

8
 There are 613 letters, written between 1868 and 1916, and 65 from Mary Hallock Foote to Richard W. Gilder, in the Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.

9
 Letter no. 15, folio 14, box 6, Foote papers. Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.

10
 Letter from Mary Hallock to Richard W. Gilder, 13 December 1873. Quoted from Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', in *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 1, autumn 1975, p. 7.

11
 The account of the experiences of a woman in the American West as a counterpoint to the views portrayed by the also highly popular Frederic Remington (1861–1909), which are dominated by figures of cowboys, Indians and soldiers and well represented in the Thyssen collections.

fig. 6

Helena de Kay
Paint box with nude study, about 1871
 Oil on wood, 5.7 × 23.8 × 13.7 cm
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift
 of Mary and William de Kay Pappenheimer,
 in celebration of the Museum's 150th anniversary,
 2019, 2019.442.1



Also prominent among the mementoes kept by the De Kay-Gilder family are the drawings and paintings made by another woman artist, Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942). Ten years Helena's junior, Cecilia studied in Philadelphia and Paris. When she returned to the United States in 1889, Helena became her mentor and protector and took her in for long periods. The many portraits Beaux painted of the couple and their children attest to their familiarity, and over the years she grew especially close to Dorothea (1882–1920), the eldest of Helena's daughters, who became her muse and close companion. The image we have of the mature Helena de Kay is the one captured in Beaux's 1911 portrait, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 2019.

De Kay and the New York Art Scene

As pointed out earlier, there are few examples of Helena de Kay's art in public collections, though the extent of her activity as a cultural tastemaker is recurrently touched on in the abovementioned *New York Art Worlds, 1870–1890* show. The earliest testimonies date from her time as a student at the Cooper Union, a revolutionary institution in art teaching since 1859 inasmuch as it admitted both men and women. The paint box Helena used as a student there is featured in this show [fig. 6]. De Kay's descendants gifted it to the Metropolitan

Museum in 2019 on the institution's 150th anniversary. The museum was founded precisely during Helena's formative years and is the product of the progressive artistic and cultural vitality to which she also contributed.

What is distinctive about this paint box is that its lid displays a sketch of a nude figure, whose dating is consistent with the period women were admitted to life drawing classes at the National Academy of Design. Some of her closest female classmates at the time were Mary Hallock and Maria Oakey Dewing (1845–1927), sharing a studio with the latter. It was also around that time that Helena de Kay met Winslow Homer, possibly through her art critic brother, Charles de Kay, who had probably used Winslow Homer's studio in the University Building in New York while the artist was visiting Europe in 1867. Homer became Helena's mentor for a time when they both had ateliers in the Tenth Street Studio Building.¹² A letter from Homer dated 22 December 1872 hints at their close relationship and regular contact:

My dear Miss Helena

If you would like to give your mother a Christmas present of that sketch I painted from you I will give it to you with pleasure. Why won't you limp into my studio on your way up or down and take it.¹³

Homer does not appear to have been De Kay's master for long. In a letter that is dated 15 November but does not mention the year – though it was probably 1872 or 1873, as he calls her 'Miss Helena' – Homer expresses his disappointment at her choice of a new teacher:

So Mr Butler is teaching you, I was almost disappointed when he told me, but now think it's all right. And considering the good hands you are in you have no need of any advice from me.

Helena de Kay's artistic aspirations, even after marrying, are clearly attested by her involvement in the establishment of the Art Students League in 1875 and the Society of American Artists in 1877. As in other European countries, these associations were a reaction to the conservative nature of the National Academy of Design and a strategy for lending greater visibility to members' works through its own annual exhibitions.

12

According to Annette Blaugrund, Homer was a tenant from 1871 to 1881. See Annette Blaugrund, 'The Tenth Street Studio Building: A Roster, 1857–1895', in *The American Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, spring 1982, pp. 64–71.

13

The eight letters from Winslow Homer to Helena de Kay are quoted and reproduced courtesy of the Lilly Library, see note 4 above.



fig. 7

Helena de Kay
***The Last Arrow*, 1874**
 Oil on canvas, 108 × 64.8 cm
 Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana
 University, Bloomington, gift
 of Rosemary and Charles Lanham,
 2018.³⁶

14

This university's library is the same one that houses Homer's letters to De Kay.

15

Women Masters, on view at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza from 31 October 2023 to 4 February 2024, included works by Mary Cassatt and Cecilia Beaux.

16

See Page Knox's lecture *Providing a Platform for Women Painters*, Malkin Lecture, 10 November 2020, available at [Malkin Lecture: Providing a Platform for Women Painters : Program & Events : Park Avenue Armory \(armoryonpark.org\)](https://www.armoryonpark.org/malkin-lecture-providing-a-platform-for-women-painters).

The Society of American Artists' first exhibition was held in 1878 and included three works by Helena de Kay. One of them, *The Last Arrow* [fig. 7], was listed in the catalogue with a selling price of 200 dollars. Aside from the fact she was now a professional artist and her painting had an economic value, its considerable size, 108 × 64.8 cm, and the subject matter, a female archer in a landscape setting, denote a certain amount of ambition. In 2018, 140 years later, this canvas joined a public collection, that of the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, at Indiana University.¹⁴ Will Helena de Kay benefit from museums' growing interest in recovering forgotten women artists? No doubt her wish to gain more exposure for her oeuvre will be gradually fulfilled.

Mary Cassatt also took advantage of the exposure provided by the Society of American Artists, with which she had exhibited her work since 1879. Cassatt enjoyed success in Paris with the Impressionists but was barely known to the American public. She herself had joined the association by 1885, and another prominent woman artist belonging to De Kay's circle, Cecilia Beaux, became a member in 1893. As we have seen, Beaux came into contact with the De Kay-Gilders in 1889 and by the end of the nineteenth century she was regarded as one of the great American portraitists.¹⁵ Helena's prominent presence in the Art Students League, the Society of American Artists and *The Century Magazine* has been interpreted by some specialists in this period as an incentive to many women to become involved in these organisations and publications.¹⁶

In parallel with her participation in exhibitions, which gradually dwindled, De Kay developed her skills as an illustrator. In the early 1870s Homer offered to help her contribute, as he did, to the illustrated magazines of the period. In an undated letter, probably written in the autumn of 1871 or the winter of 1872, he proposed:

If you would like to see a large drawing on wood, and will come to my studio on Monday or Thursday, I shall have a chance to see you.

Why can't you make some designs and let me send them to Harper's for you, they will gladly take anything fresh and I will see that you draw them on the block all right.



fig. 8

Helena de Kay
Cover of Richard Watson Gilder's book
The New Day, published by Scribner,
Armstrong & Company, New York, 1875

As an illustrator, Helena de Kay enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with her husband Richard W. Gilder, for whom she designed the cover of his book *The New Day* (1875) [fig. 8]. She chose a dark blue ground, which she stamped in gold with a large peacock feather, in line with the aesthetic promoted by the couple's intellectual circle. As the title and other details of the publication appear only on the spine, all attention is focused on the luxuriant feather. The collection of poems inside reflects the beginning of the couple's romance and includes 'Love Grown Bold', in which Gilder describes the oil painting by Homer that they had received as a wedding present:

This is her picture painted ere mine eyes
Her ever holy face had looked upon.
She sitteth in a silence of her own;
Behind her, on the ground, a red rose lies:
Her thinking brow is bent, nor doth arise
Her gaze from that shut book whose word unknown
Her firm hands hide from her;— there all alone
She sitteth in thought-trouble, maidenwise.
And how her lover waiting wondereth
Whether the joy of all joys draweth near:
Shall his brave fingers like a tender breath
That shut book open for her, wide and clear?
From him who her sweet shadow worshipping
Now will she take the rose, and hold it dear?

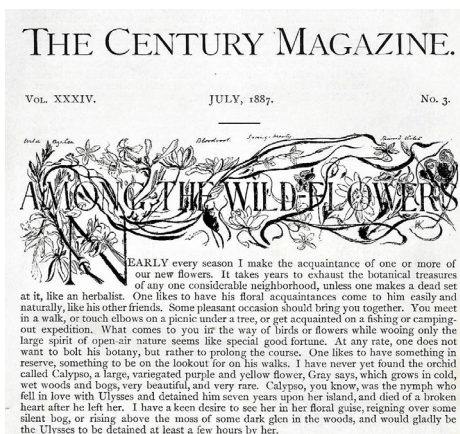


fig. 9

Illustration by Helena de Kay for
the article 'Among the Wild Flowers'
in *The Century Magazine*, vol. XXXIV,
no. 3, July 1887

Flowers played an important role in the illustrations for this book, just as they did in her subsequent contributions to *The Century Magazine*, such as the one she made for the article 'Among the Wild Flowers', in 1887 [fig. 9].

Aside from her artistic activities, at her 'Friday salon' Helena de Kay played hostess to artists and intellectuals such as Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Henry James, Winslow Homer, Cecilia Beaux and Grover Cleveland, twice president of the United States. De Kay also provided a link with Europe: she had spent a few years there during her teenage years and returned periodically following her marriage to Gilder. Her knowledge of Italian, German and French facilitated her role as a cultural mediator. In addition, in 1881 she translated from French into English Alfred Sensier's monograph on Jean-François Millet (1814–1875),¹⁷ a Barbizon School artist who had greatly influenced painters such as Homer and John La Farge (1835–1910), both mentors to De Kay.

Another publication on view at the Metropolitan Museum with which De Kay was connected is the *Book of American Figure Painters*¹⁸ written by Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, a critic at *The Century Magazine*. We know of her involvement thanks to a letter that Winslow Homer wrote to her on 10 May 1886:

Dear Mrs Gilder

I have just received your letter in regard to the *Book of American Figure Painters* – I have a circular from J. B. Lippincott & Co. & I suppose that is what you refer to.

I will send immediately to them, proofs of negatives from three pictures (taken by Pack & Bro). They can choose any one of the three & I will hunt up 'a line in prose or poetry in the English language'.

I thank you for bringing this matter so forcibly upon me, also for your very kind appreciation of my work. Yours truly

Winslow Homer

The letter is no longer headed 'Miss Helena', as Homer had referred to De Kay in those written before she married Gilder, and it is written in a more formal tone to attend to the request from his former pupil, which finally materialised in the reproduction of his work *Lost on the Grand Banks* (1885, in a private collection).

17

Helena de Kay's translations appeared in *Scribner's Monthly* and in 1881 they were compiled and published in Alfred Sensier, *Jean-François Millet, Peasant and Painter*, Boston, J. R. Osgood and Company, 1881.

18

See the commentary on the copy owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art available at [Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer | Book of American figure painters | The Metropolitan Museum of Art \(metmuseum.org\)](#).

The Letters

As stated at the beginning of this article, most of the eight letters Homer wrote to De Kay appear to refer to the Thyssen painting, or to the circumstances in which it was painted or passed to her. Homer scholars' interpretations of them lead to very different conclusions: Sarah Burns,¹⁹ a professor at Indiana University, believes them to be proof of a romantic relationship between the two, whereas Lloyd Goodrich and Abigail Booth Gerdts,²⁰ the authors of Winslow Homer's catalogue raisonné, deny any sentimental attachment. Was Helena de Kay the object of Homer's unfulfilled love? Maybe not, though she did inspire Homer to make statements such as:

My dear Miss Helena,

Inclosed [*sic*] find photos, which are a failure.

I keep one for company this Summer.

You may think it will be dull music with so faint a resemblance and so dolorous but it's like a Beethoven symphony to me, as any remembrance of you will always be.

Was he referring to a portrait of her? And, if so, could it be a photo of the painting now housed in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza?

Abigail Booth Gerdts questions whether our oil painting, which De Kay eventually received as a wedding gift, is a portrait. As we have seen, it is probably this work Homer is talking about in his letter of 22 December 1872, in which he refers to it as a sketch 'from' Helena de Kay:

If you would like to give your mother a Christmas present of that sketch I painted from you I will give it to you with pleasure.

19
Burns 2002, see note 5 above.

20
Lloyd Goodrich, *Record of Works by Winslow Homer*, 5 vols, ed. Abigail Booth Gerdts, New York, Ira Spanierman Gallery, 2005–14, vol. 2 (1867–1876), pp. 162–65, no. 392.



fig. 10
Winslow Homer
Boy Reading, n.d.
 Oil on panel, 16.5 × 23.5 cm
 Private collection

Gerdt's emphasises the difference between a sketch made 'from' Helena (not intended to be a portrait of her although she was the model) and one 'of' Helena (where the intention would have been precisely that). We know that portraits did not abound in Homer's oeuvre, and that this one could simply be a compositional study, possibly of the kind produced by the American painter James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). Whistler was very highly regarded among the circle of intellectuals to which Helena's brother Charles de Kay belonged together with Samuel Putnam Avery, also a collector of Homer's works. A very similar panel painting with the same divan and brown background, but more cropped, shows a boy reading [fig. 10]. As references to this painting are scarce, we have no context to help us interpret it, but its similarity to the Thyssen-Bornemisza work is considerable.

In the 1860s and 1870s Homer created archetypes of female figures – peasants, bourgeois women strolling or playing croquet – and even in cases where the facial features appear more individualised the titles refer to categories that shroud the subjects in anonymity. The only ones who seem to be clearly identified during these years are Helena de Kay and Eugenia Renee, the young schoolteacher Homer portrayed in 1871 (*The School Mistress*, Worcester Art Museum). Renee married Peter Burger in the summer of 1872, as the artist told De Kay in a letter of 19 June 1872:

Peter Burger has married the 'School Ma'am'. So I expect my heart line will shrink – you must look next October when you see me.



fig. 11

Winslow Homer***Girl with a Four-Leaf Clover*, about 1875**

Oil on panel, 20.3 × 31.8 cm

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk,
promised gift of Mr and Mrs Frank Batten,
L2010.1.3

Aside from any possible romantic feelings, Homer appears to have valued De Kay's opinion on professional issues and sought her advice or approval in the letters he wrote to her. For instance, he stated in that of 28 May 1873:

Until then I shall be very busy, so I must say good bye and wish you all kinds of good luck. I shall paint for your approval.

Another of the letters that Sarah Burns links to the portrait of Helena de Kay is undated. She transcribes it as follows:

Go and see your clever picture.
It was painted for you to look at.
Respectfully yours
Winslow Homer
To my runaway apprentice

Gerdts disagrees with the transcription of the underlined word, which she believes reads 'clover' and not 'clever'. This leads her to think that the work in question is not the Thyssen-Bornemisza portrait but possibly one of the two paintings from this period of which clover is an important feature: *Girl with a Four-Leaf Clover* [fig. 11], now dated to about 1875, and *The Four-Leaf Clover*,²¹ executed around 1873. Did De Kay have a special interest in either of these two works? Neither belonged to her and in *The Four-Leaf Clover* in particular the figure appears to be a girl, and it would therefore not have been a portrait either.

21

See a reproduction and commentary on the work on the website of the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum.

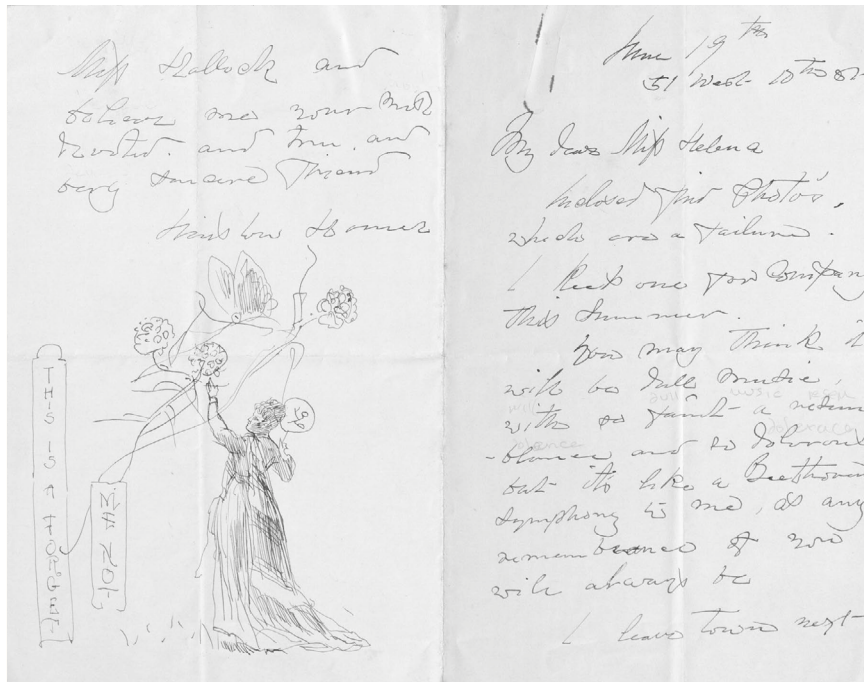


fig. 12
Letter from Winslow Homer
to Helena de Kay, 19 June [1872]

The last page of the abovementioned letter of 19 June 1872 includes a huge forget-me-not looming over a female figure [fig. 12]. One of her hands caresses a flower on which a butterfly has alighted and in the other she holds a fan. Could she be De Kay?

Clover leaves and flowers are a prominent feature of these early works by Winslow Homer and also of those of De Kay, who specialised in flower paintings. According to Judith Walsh,²² Homer used flowers throughout his career both as symbols and to add dashes of bright colour. The four-leaf clover means 'be mine' in the language of flowers, which was popular in the United States during the mid-1800s. Walsh also notes that holding a rose to one's lips means 'yes', and tearing off a petal and throwing it on the ground means 'no'. With respect to the Thyssen-Bornemisza painting, the presence of the petals on the floor in the foreground would thus indicate a negative answer. Can such a symbolic reading be applied to Homer's work? To what question could this gesture be a reply? Symbolism aside, roses were Helena de Kay's favourite flower, as Mary Hallock recalled in her memoirs on referring to her own wedding day in 1876: 'She [De Kay] sent me the red rose we called hers, her type and symbol, to wear inside my wedding dress'.²³

²² Judith Walsh, 'The Language of Flowers and Other Floral Symbolism Used by Winslow Homer', in *The Magazine Antiques*, New York, Brant Publications, vol. 156, no. 5, November 1999, p. 713.

²³ Rodman W. Paul, ed., *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*, San Marino, Huntington Library Press, 1992, p. 105.



fig. 13

Cecilia Beaux, *Helena de Kay Gilder*, 1911

Oil on canvas, 78.7 × 53.3 cm

**Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase,
Marguerite and Frank A. Cosgrove Jr. Fund
and Jonathan L. Cohen Gift, 2019, 2019.152**

As for the value the family attached to the painting once it was in their possession, apart from Richard W. Gilder's abovementioned poem, there is little more we can venture to say as there are hardly any written testimonies.

In 1894 the family loaned it to the *Portraits of Women: Loan Exhibition for the Benefit of St. John's Guild and the Orthopaedic Hospital* at the National Academy of Design in New York, where it was entitled *Portrait Study*. This is the first record of its showing and therefore its first known title.

In 1932 the painting was referred to as *Portrait of Helena de Kay* in an article surveying Homer's career. The author's commentary included a description of it supplied by Helena's son, Rodman Gilder: 'Seated figure of a young woman full length, in profile – pensive attitude. Property of my sister, Rosamond Gilder'.²⁴ The impersonal and generic nature of his words is striking bearing in mind it is a portrait of his mother.

The last portrait of Helena was painted by Cecilia Beaux in 1911 [fig. 13]. A widow since 1909, the sitter, once again with a meditative appearance, is portrayed dressed in black with a geranium, a symbol of faithfulness. Through memories of her, the works she produced, her relationships and the letters Winslow Homer wrote to her, the figure of Helena de Kay has grown and taken on many nuances, which we will carry on studying and adding to thanks to the new sources. ●

²⁴

Theodore Bolton, 'The Art of Winslow Homer: An Estimate in 1932', in *The Fine Arts*, New York, The Antiquarian Publishing Co., vol. 18, no. 3, February 1932, p. 53.

Emil Nolde and Nazism

Paloma Alarcó



Emil Nolde
Summer Clouds, 1913

[\[+ info\]](#)

‘Happy the man who can talk himself into believing that culture can safeguard society against violence. Even before the start of the twentieth century, the artists, the poets and the theoreticians of the Modernist movement showed that the opposite was true’, wrote Hans Magnus Enzensberger a few decades ago. He went on to state that ‘their predilection for crime, for the satanic *outsider*, for the destruction of civilization is notorious’.¹ The German writer, who always addressed modern European history from a somewhat pessimistic perspective, associated modern artists, writers and theoreticians with crime and the destruction of civilisation, eschewing the traditional mythicisation of the twentieth-century avant-garde movements as agents of human progress. On reading his words, perhaps we would be well advised to challenge the former impunity enjoyed by modern art, viewed as it was as progress of the human spirit and a paradigm of peace and freedom.

The increasingly questioned belief in the autonomy of artworks has given rise to the current proliferation of critical studies of artists’ historical and social contexts. Less harsh than Enzensberger, Jean Clair analysed the by no means easy relationship between avant-garde art and power as an introduction to the issue of artists’ political responsibility. On discussing the case of Expressionism, he asserted that this movement was ‘not only the “vanguard” of a spiritual liberation but also the spearhead of political terror’.² While, as the French thinker pointed out, German Expressionism was never as closely linked to Nazism as Futurism was to Italian Fascism, attempts were made during the gestation and early years of the National Socialist regime to assign Expressionism the role of representing ‘the “pure” essence of Germanness’.³ He based this statement on the research conducted by the German Jewish philologist Viktor Klemperer on how Nazi propaganda progressively appropriated everyday German words, customs and gestures, besides gathering a few intellectuals and artists around the party.⁴ One of the parallels Klemperer underlined in his study was the importance attached to words such as *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm* – the names of the well-known magazines used by the Expressionists as vehicles for disseminating their ideology – in the vocabulary of the

1
Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil War*, London, Granta Books, 1994, p. 52. Originally published as *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1993.

2
Jean Clair, *La responsabilidad del artista. Las vanguardias, entre el terror y la razón*. Madrid, La Balsa de la Medusa, 1998, p. 57. Originally published as *La responsabilité de l'artiste*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1997.

3
Ibid., p. 33.

4
Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI - Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Originally published as *LTI, la langue du Troisième Reich. Carnets d'un philologue*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996. Quoted from Clair 1998, see note 2 above, pp. 33 ff.

Third Reich. Of course, the fact that Hitler and the Nazis borrowed from Expressionism and used it to further their own interests does not mean that the Expressionists supported the new totalitarian government; however, some Expressionists are known to have been willing to collaborate with the new leaders. Although we find it difficult to believe today, the educated classes of the Weimar Republic and some of the most highly reputed avant-garde artists went along with an enlightened, high-profile figure called Adolf Hitler.

Nolde and National Socialism

A paradigmatic example was the Expressionist Emil Nolde (1867–1956), a diehard anti-Semite who enthusiastically welcomed Hitler's advent to power. Very soon after the dictator was appointed as the German chancellor in January 1933, Nolde and his Danish first wife Ada Vilstrup publicly proclaimed their support for the Führer by flying a flag with a swastika above their Seebüll home.⁵ The painter, then 65, hailed from a humble peasant family from the Duchy of Schleswig, the northernmost part of the German–Danish border. Largely an autodidact, throughout his career he had developed a free and transgressive personal style that reflected his fondness for the marshy landscape of his native region and for German medieval tradition. Taciturn and distrusting by nature, he had reluctantly taken part in the Expressionist group Die Brücke (The Bridge) established in Dresden by younger artists such as Ernst Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Max Pechstein. However, for most of his life he remained independent and had come to be considered one of the great German artists during the interwar period. Although he is documented as a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, NSDAP) in 1934, the Nazis classed him as a 'degenerate' artist⁶ – a circumstance which, as we will see, later proved to be his salvation.

5

The artist lived permanently in that house, built in 1926, from 1940 until his death in 1956. Since then, it has been the headquarters of his foundation, the Stiftung Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde.

6

This subject is studied and documented in Peter Vergo, 'Emil Nolde, Myth and Reality', in *Emil Nolde* [exh. cat.], London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995, pp. 38–65.

12.5.43

Es entstand in Deutschland –
dem Herzen Europas – wiederum
eine Gegenbewegung, rufend
nach Wille u. Kraft, sich aufleh-
nend gegen Dekadenz u. Schwä-
che, sich rüstend zum Kampf ge-
gen Bolschewismus, Judentum
u. Plutokratismus, ein mit
heroischem Mut u. Idealismus
auf Treiben u. Tod geführter Kampf
für Deutschland, für Europa u.
unserer ganzen Erdenswelt.

fig. 1

Notes made by Nolde, dated 12 May 1943,
enclosed in a letter written to Ada Nolde
on 15 May 1943

Nolde's affinities with National Socialism have been well known for some time. However, it was not until 2019 that a great deal of evidence of the artist's contradictions during the Third Reich was revealed at the exhibition *Emil Nolde: eine deutsche Legende, der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus* (Emil Nolde: A German Legend. The Artist During the Nazi Regime). The curators, Christian Ring (director of the Ada and Emil Nolde Foundation), Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika also showed that he was far from having been a resistance fighter.⁷ During the years of National Socialist domination, Nolde kept up a flow of correspondence with Joseph Goebbels, the all-powerful Propaganda Minister; Heinrich Himmler, the chief of the fearsome SS (Schutzstaffel); and even Hitler himself. As revealed by the recently unearthed archival documents, underlying this ideological worship of the new regime to an extent were his hopes of being appointed an official state artist by the National Socialist government.⁸

This research also unveiled the artist's intense feelings and convictions about the 'Jewish question'. He had harboured a deep dislike of Jewish people for some time. Above all he felt considerable animosity towards the Jewish dealers and critics who, he claimed, had rejected his oeuvre. After 1933 Nolde even went so far as to draw up a 'de-Jewification plan' to demonstrate to Hitler his loyalty and clever foresight.⁹ To cite an example, in a letter dated 15 May 1943 Nolde sent his wife Ada some of the notes he had made for this plan:

'12.5.43. What has arisen in Germany – in the heart of Europe – is a counter-movement that is summoning the will and the power to resist decadence and weakness, that is arming itself for the battle against Bolshevism, Jewry and plutocracy, that with heroic valour and idealism is fighting a life-and-death battle for Germany, for Europe, for the whole earth' [fig. 1].¹⁰

Nolde's view of the world war as a 'battle against Jewry' leaves no doubt about his unconditional identification with the Third Reich's political 'ethnic cleansing' project.

7

Bernhard Fulda, Christian Ring, Aya Soika, eds, *Emil Nolde: The Artist during the Third Reich* [exh. cat.], Munich, London, New York, Prestel, 2019. This catalogue and the Nolde Foundation's website contain essential information about Nolde's ideology and his relationship with the regime.

8

See Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika, 'Introduction', in Fulda, Ring and Soika 2019, pp. 17–34, see note 7 above, p. 1.

9

Bernhard Fulda, 'Nolde's Anti-Semitism', *ibid.*, pp. 97–114.

10

Ibid., p. 109.

Expressionism and Nazism

It is worth remembering that for a time Expressionism was defended by some of the Nazi leaders as an art that conformed to the myth of Nordic purity and that its exaltation of primitive Germanness was perfectly in keeping, at least in theory, with the artistic interests of National Socialism. Indeed, Goebbels commissioned Hans Weidemann, the head of the Propaganda Ministry's Department of Visual Arts, and the Nazi architect par excellence, Albert Speer, to decorate his home, which was hung with Expressionist works. Speer recalled: 'I borrowed a few watercolors by Nolde from... the director of the Berlin Nationalgalerie. Goebbels and his wife were delighted with the paintings – until Hitler came to inspect and expressed his severe disapproval. Then the minister summoned me immediately. "The pictures have to go at once; they're simply impossible"'.¹¹ Unlike Goebbels, Hitler considered Expressionist paintings to be incompatible with Nazi ideals and soon issued the decrees enabling him to set his 'cultural revolution' in motion. In June 1937 he ordered the director of the Reich Chamber of Culture, Adolf Ziegler, to confiscate all the avant-garde art in public collections.¹² Expressionist artists, whether or not they had been complicit with the regime, were branded 'degenerate' and forced to emigrate or give up painting for good. As a result, Nolde had to endure, not without concern, having his paintings removed from German museums. As if that were not enough, in August 1941 he was astonished to receive an official notification signed by Ziegler barring him from working in any field of the visual arts as well as from selling and showing his pictures [fig. 2].

The culmination of this systematic anti-avant-garde campaign, which is indelibly etched on the historical memory of twentieth-century art, was the defamatory exhibition entitled *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) in which National Socialism used its powerful and effective propaganda machinery to ridicule modern art and present it as an insult to German sentiment and the German race.¹³ The show opened on 19 July 1937 at the Archäologische Institut in Munich, the capital of Nazism, and subsequently travelled to several other German cities until 1941. All the Expressionist artists were represented.

11

Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 10–11.

12

The purge affected some 16,000 works in a hundred or so museums in more than seventy cities.

13

See, among others, Stephanie Barron, ed., *'Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-garde in Nazi Germany* [exh. cat.], New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1991.

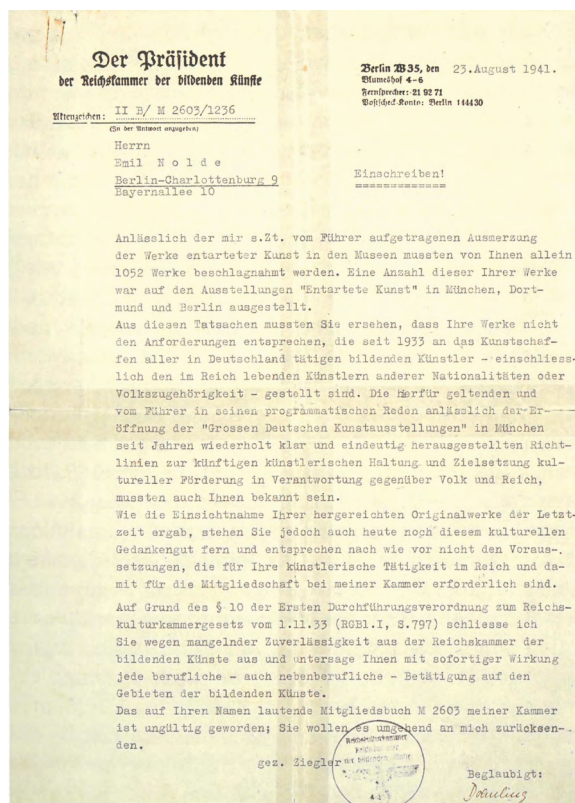


fig. 2
Letter from the president
of the Reichskammer der bildenden
Künste to Emil Nolde, 23 August 1941



fig. 3
Emil Nolde,
The Life of Christ, about 1911-12,
in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Berlin,
about 1938

Paintings by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, Otto Mueller, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, August Macke, Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei Jawlensky, Paul Klee, Lionel Feininger, Max Beckmann and George Grosz, as well as Emil Nolde, were chaotically hung and topped with denigrating labels. Of the 650 pieces by 112 artists on view, 33 were by Nolde, whose large polyptych of *The Life of Christ* was one of the highlights of the show [fig. 3].

Smarting and frustrated after visiting *Entartete Kunst* with his collector Friedrich Döhlemann, who besides directing the Bayerische Gemeindebank was the treasurer of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art) - the museum established by Hitler - Nolde decided to pen a series of letters to Nazi civil servants. He also wrote to the Education Minister Bernhard Rust and to the Propaganda Minister Goebbels, asking for the pictures shown in the exhibition to be returned to him. The historian Aya Soika has provided important information on how the painter campaigned to have his pictures removed from the show. A six-page declaration



fig. 4

Emil Nolde**Summer Clouds, 1913****Oil on canvas, 73.3 × 88.5 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, inv. 691 (1972.12)****14**

Aya Soika, 'The Long Dispute over Expressionism around Nolde', in Fulda, Ring and Soika 2019, pp. 39–64, see note 7 above, p. 62.

15

Ibid.

16

As proven by the inscription on the verso and the label on the back of the frame bearing the inventory number 'S.H.K.V. Inv. 277'.

17

Inv. EK 14222. Inventory of *Entartete Kunst*, about 1941–42. Two typed volumes listing the works confiscated from the public institutions by the German Propaganda Ministry and subsequently sold. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, MSL/1996/7/2.

of intent, written in a strongly anti-Semitic tone and sent to the Reich's press chief, Otto Dietrich, in December 1938,¹⁴ made it possible for several influential people with posts in various official Nazi agencies to express their support for him. As a result of these letters, after the spring of 1939 no more paintings by Nolde were displayed at the successive venues of *Entartete Kunst*. As Soika notes, in June 1939 Ada told their friends: 'We have fought and achieved much. In the "degenerates" is nothing more by N. and his name may no longer be mentioned in this connection'.¹⁵

The Museo Thyssen's permanent collection includes a painting whose provenance illustrates the ostracism to which the painter was subjected: *Summer Clouds*, executed in 1913 [fig. 4] and acquired by the Schleswig-Holsteinische Kunstverein for the Kunsthalle Kiel in 1918.¹⁶ It was confiscated on 14 July 1937 and stored in the Schloss Schönhausen in Berlin's Niederschönhausen district in August 1938, as is specified in the inventory of degenerate art.¹⁷ In their attempt to reclaim his seized pictures, Nolde and his wife visited the deposit in the spring of 1939 and Ada read out aloud a few paragraphs from her husband's memoirs to demonstrate his loyalty to the Nazis. It must have worked, as not long afterwards Ada's art dealer brother Aage Vilstrup managed to acquire eleven of Nolde's confiscated paintings.

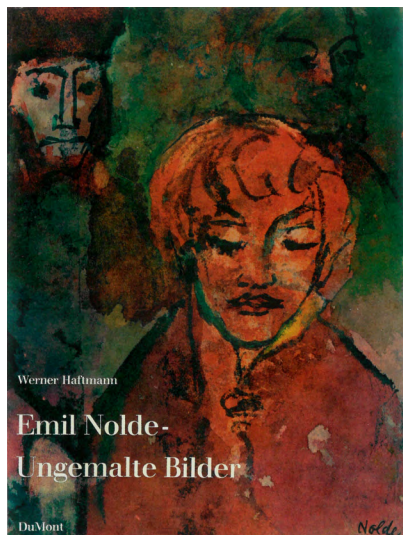


fig. 5

Cover of the book by Werner Haftmann,
Emil Nolde, Ungemalte Bilder, 1963

In 1939, when the government decided to put some of the seized artworks on the market to raise funds for the war, it enlisted several like-minded dealers and *Summer Clouds* was given to Karl Buchholz. This bookseller and gallery owner specialising in Expressionist art had managed to keep his Berlin gallery open by staging many exhibitions approved by the regime while secretly selling works by 'degenerate' artists. That is how Nolde's *Summer Clouds* came to be sold to Arvid Brodersen from Denmark in 1939.¹⁸

Nolde's Self-legend

When Hitler committed suicide, Nolde's passion for Nazism waned. The artist then set about undoing his previous association with the regime to present himself as a victim of National Socialism. It is fairly likely that he also did so to make amends for his previous life and convince himself that he could not have acted otherwise. It is known for a fact that he destroyed documents and rewrote certain passages of his memoirs – both *Das eigene Leben* (My own life, 1931) and *Jahre der Kämpfe* (Years of Struggle, 1934) – to shape his legend of a wronged martyr and promote a self-narrative of a misunderstood artistic genius doomed to ostracism, who secretly painted hundreds of small pictures during the last years of the war. This legend spread and after the painter died in Seebüll in 1956, at the age of 88, the Nolde Foundation further fuelled it by putting on display in a special room the *Ungemalte Bilder* (unpainted pictures), which had been concealed there [fig. 5]. These small watercolours were presented as evidence that Nolde had not made – artistically, at least – any concessions to the Nazi regime.

18

Later, in 1960, *Summer Clouds* was in the possession of the Gemäldegalerie Günther Abels in Cologne, and in 1966 it was auctioned at Kornfeld und Klipstein in Berne. From a private collection in London, it returned to the market through the London-based dealers Roland, Browse & Delbanco and Roman Norbert Ketterer, who displayed it in the *Moderne Kunst V* exhibition held at his Galerie R. N. Ketterer in Campione d'Italia in 1968. Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen purchased it from the Hamburg auction house Hauswedell & Nolte in 1972. Since 1993 it has belonged to the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

But it was possibly Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* (translated into English as *The German Lesson*), published in 1968, that gave the greatest impetus to the whitewashing of Nolde's image. The main character, an artist called Max Ludwig Nansen – apparently based on Nolde – creates a series of 'invisible paintings' when the Nazis bar him from painting. This book turned Nolde's 'unpainted pictures' into a lasting symbol of artistic resistance against the tyrannical regime.

Nolde's case is paradoxical and remained an obscure and unexplored terrain until very recently. The new information brought to light by Christian Ring and the Seebüll-based Foundation, which has opted for transparency and ceased to shield Nolde from his Nazi past, coupled with the research conducted by Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika, has made it possible to reinterpret many issues surrounding Nolde and give rise to an uncomfortable question: Should we ignore the artist's ideology and focus exclusively on his oeuvre? It also leads us to the somewhat troubling conclusion that if it was his painting, and not his ideology, that was persecuted during the Nazi regime, can his art, which no doubt blazed a brilliant trail for Expressionism, redeem his political convictions? ●

Magritte, Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language: Between the Poetry of Mystery and the Philosophy of Visual Language

José Luis Calderón Aguirrezabala



René Magritte
The Key of the Fields, 1936
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1
Magritte painting *Clairvoyance*,
Brussels, 4 October 1936
Charly Herscovici Collection,
Brussels



‘As for mystery, as for the enigmas imposed on my pictures, I will say that this was the best proof of my break with all the absurd intellectual habits that usually take the place of a genuine feeling for life.’

René Magritte, ‘Life Line 1’,¹ 1938

‘The metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist.’

Rudolf Carnap, ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’,² 1932

1
See the translation of ‘Life Line 1’, a lecture delivered on 20 November 1938 at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, in René Magritte, *Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Rooney and Eric Plattner, trans. Jo Levy, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 58–67, here at p. 64.

2
See ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’ in A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism*, New York, Free Press, 1966, pp. 60–81, here at p. 79.

Magritte’s paintings evoke certain human mysteries in a sort of visual poetry, often leaving the viewer in suspense, engrossed in thought or subsequent questioning. Philosophy aspires, with varying success, to provide rational answers to the mysteries of humankind. So far, we would be forgiven for thinking that there is a certain parallel between Magritte and the discipline of philosophy. But Magritte was evidently not a philosopher and made a point of stating this more than once.



fig. 2
Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1947

3
‘Nous [...] ne sommes pas des philosophes. [...] Pour nous existe l’extramental qui prouve définitivement le saugrenu des recherches philosophiques. Ces recherches sont saugrenues [...] depuis 2000 ans et plus’; René Magritte, ‘Manifeste de l’extramentalisme (Notes)’, in *Écrits complets*, ed. André Blavier, Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p. 209. All translations from *Écrits complets* in this article are by Jenny Dodman.

4
‘There is no evidence that Magritte ever read Wittgenstein, although he was well versed in philosophy. Yet the similarity between the preoccupations of both men is striking, to the point where even the images they use often correspond’, in Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (1970), London, Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 96.

5
A bibliographic explanation is provided further on. A good introduction to the question is the study by Emanuele Dell’Atti, ‘Language Games in Magritte and Wittgenstein’, trans. Laura Centonze, in *Segni e Comprensione*, 28, 82 (2014), Università del Salento, pp. 6–23, available at <http://siba-ese.unile.it/index.php/segnicompr/article/view/14087/12267>.

‘We are not philosophers’, he wrote. ‘For us all that exists is the extra-mental that ultimately proves the absurdity of the philosophical quest. These quests have been absurd for 2,000 years’.³ In addition, the absence of a logical explanation in several of his paintings – a characteristic of all Surrealist works – appears to stand in opposition to the logical reasoning to which any philosophical theory essentially aspires. However, aside from the mystery of Magritte’s paintings and of philosophy itself, there is a significant reason for associating the Belgian painter’s oeuvre with the ideas of some of the practitioners of what is known as the early twentieth-century philosophy of language, specifically Wittgenstein and his Vienna Circle colleagues. There is no direct documentary evidence that René Magritte (1898–1967) was familiar with the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who was practically a contemporary of his, or indeed with those of Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap or other members of the Vienna Circle. However, as pointed out in Suzi Gablik’s monograph on Magritte in 1970⁴ and recently noted by a few scholars,⁵ surprising coincidences between both lead us to wonder to what extent they may have been familiar with each other’s respective paintings and philosophical writings – either through first-hand contact or indirect references – or if they were not, to reflect on the reason for such links. Penned around the time of the exhibition *The Magritte Machine* at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (2021–22) and the centenary of the publication of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921) (which in its day played an essential part in establishing the philosophy of language as a discipline in its own right), this article relates Magritte’s works to those of the Austrian philosopher and other members of the group in order to offer an updated approach to this issue and shed further light on it. The first question that arises is therefore: what are the grounds for drawing this association between Magritte and the philosophy of language?

fig. 3
René Magritte
The Philosopher's Lamp, 1936
Oil on canvas, 50 × 66 cm
Private collection, Belgium



Reasons for Associating Magritte with the Philosophy of Language

We find that Magritte as well as Wittgenstein, Russell, Carnap and Schlik started out and reached their height of production precisely during the 1920s and 1930s. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*⁶ (which even fellow philosophers find difficult to interpret) influenced Russell, who wrote the introduction to the English translation of the treatise. Generally speaking, although there were evident differences between them, these thinkers explored the relationship between language and knowledge, and some (Carnap and post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein) highlighted the question of the **fallibility**, **ineffability** and even **fallacy** of language – an issue Magritte alluded to in a fair number of his works and explored in his well-known *Treachery of Images* series of 1928–29, with his famous 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' as a paradigm. Naturally this fallibility applied to both verbal and visual language. Magritte showed different types of relations between these two language forms in a considerable number of his paintings. Very few academic studies have been devoted to this subject and apart from those philosophers' theoretical treatises, Magritte's own writings are an essential primary source.⁷ Published during his lifetime or posthumously – among them articles and lectures – they attest to his intellectual prowess and ability to engage in philosophical reflection.

⁶ From here on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* will be referred to as the *Tractatus*. See the English translation by C.K. Ogden, London and New York, Routledge, 1981.

⁷ Magritte's *Écrits complets* were edited by André Blavier and published in French by Flammarion in 1979. A selection of these writings is available in English in *Selected Writings* (Magritte 2016, see note 1).

Magritte's interest in philosophy comes across clearly in his own writings.⁸ What he says about the discipline, from ancient philosophers to his contemporary Heidegger, and including Descartes and Hegel, reflects his respect for the study of the nature of knowledge, reality and existence, though he is also critical and clearly notes its inability precisely to attain the truth of what it sets out to discuss.⁹ At one point he criticises Descartes, though he stated in an interview granted to Michèle Coraine in the last year of his life: 'I am Cartesian. More Cartesian than Descartes, because I get to the bottom of things'.¹⁰ He clearly asserted that he was not a philosopher ('I am not a philosopher, not a metaphysician'), referring to the associations and interpretations pinned on his own paintings, and underlined his difference and uniqueness as a painter with respect to earlier artists. Even on one of the several occasions when he spoke of his distance from Breton's Surrealism, he told the novelist Léo Malet: 'Like you I find Breton saddening. He no longer seeks the *philosopher's stone*'.¹² Magritte's obsession with philosophical issues in general, which may be inferred from a by no means insignificant portion of the titles of his own paintings, is particularly revealing. These titles usually have no 'logical' or deducible correspondence with what is depicted (the referent or object) and, if anything, aim to evoke the poetic or mysterious: *The Invention of Life* (1928), *The Human Condition* (1933), *The Philosopher's Lamp* (1936), *Hegel's Holiday* (1958), *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (for example, those of 1962 and 1966)... Nor is it surprising that in today's audiovisual culture many of his works have become inspiring images that illustrate philosophical texts. But as we shall see in due course, some of these titles are related not only to wisdom or knowledge but also to language itself and poetry (for example, in *In Praise of Dialectics*, 1936). Therefore, Magritte's relationship is not only with philosophy in general but especially with the philosophy of language and with poetry, with the poetic use of language as a game. Indeed, on several occasions he referred to his painting precisely as 'poetry that evokes mystery'.

8

Since only some of Magritte's texts have been translated into English, unless otherwise specified from here on reference is made to André Blavier's edition of Magritte's *Écrits complets*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979 (see notes 3 and 7).

9

Ibid., pp. 390–93.

10

'Je suis cartésien. Plus cartésien encore que Descartes parce que je vais jusqu'au bout des choses'; *ibid.*, p. 691.

11

In English in the original; *ibid.*, p. 684.

12

'Je trouve comme vous que Breton est attristant. Il ne cherche plus la "pierre philosophale"'; *ibid.*, p. 207.

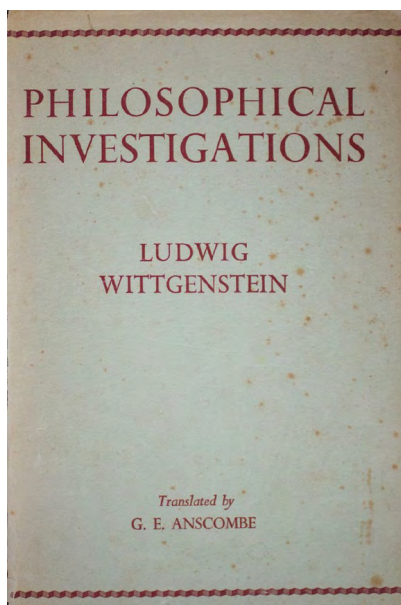


fig. 4
 Cover of Wittgenstein's
Philosophical Investigations
 (1953)

The Fallibility and Fallacy of Language: Signifier, Signified, Object

Judging from his paintings and writings, Magritte's concerns are related not so much to philosophy in general as to questioning the representation of images and words as well as of space itself – that is, the material, sensible domain. This amounts to questioning the fallibility of language, and is one of the central or essential themes of the philosophy of language, especially in Wittgenstein's writings.

It is known that philosophical reflection on language and its relationship with knowledge dates back a long way: to Pythagoras, the Stoics, Plato in *Cratylus* and book X of *The Republic*, Democritus, Aristotle in *On Interpretation*, and the Epicureans in Ancient Greece, extending to Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas of Aquinas in the Middle Ages, and John Locke and Johann Gottlieb Fichte in the early modern age. However, it was the explorations of Gottlob Frege, Charles Sanders Peirce and particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein in the contemporary period that ushered in a shift leading to the emergence of the philosophy of language as a philosophical discipline in its own right. Many of these thinkers' reflections (and Magritte's too) revolve around the dyadic conception (signifier–signified, Ferdinand de Saussure's dichotomic model) and in particular the triadic conception of the linguistic sign (Peirce's model with its respective variants, based on the old triad of language–thought–world¹³). In connection with Wittgenstein, it should furthermore be noted that although the *Tractatus* is held to be his essential and most famous work, it is not possible to understand the full extent of his philosophical thinking without reading his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). In these he centred precisely on the 'real' as opposed to the 'theoretic–logical–abstract' use of language, including its poetic or artistic use.

It may be said, albeit summarising somewhat, that the concerns of these philosophers revolved around questioning language in relation to human thought and knowledge, based on three main pillars that are part of **semiotics or sign theory** in linguistics: signifier, signified and object. The words we use to designate particular objects or ideas do not always have a straightforward and univocal meaning; that is, they are not a direct translation of reality (hence the **arbitrariness** of linguistic signs). The word

13

Peirce's triadic model consisting of object–representamen–interpretant corresponds respectively to what we now commonly call 'object', 'signifier' (the word in the case of verbal language or the image in the case of a painting) and 'signified' (that is, the idea we have in our minds about the signifier).

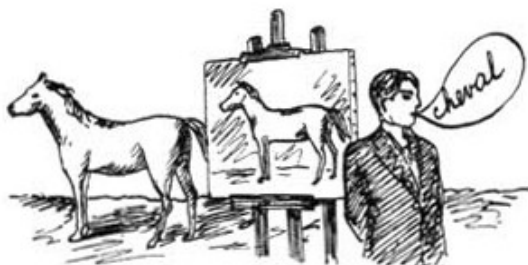


fig. 5
Detail of a drawing by Magritte in the 12th issue
of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 15 December 1929,
p. 33

(signifier) is not the object itself (referent) and its meaning does not always lead to denotation; rather, a high degree of interpretation, on the connotative plane, can be involved. In other words, verbal language is not something universal and infallible. It may be inferred from this fallibility that language is sometimes fallacious or leads us to error. Hence the conclusion drawn by some of these thinkers that philosophy had erred in its purposes throughout history not only because of the divergent opinions of various thinkers over the centuries but also because of a question of language, as the manner we find of expressing these ideas verbally is fallible to an extent or, at least, limited.¹⁴ One of the best examples for examining Magritte's reflection on this triadic conception as well as on the relationship between words and images is found precisely in an article he wrote and accompanied with several drawings. Entitled 'Les Mots et les images' [Words and Images], it was published in 1929 in the last issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*.¹⁵ Of all of these drawings, the one that perfectly illustrates this triadic aspect of the sign is the one depicting the horse itself, the painted horse and the man who utters its name ('cheval').¹⁶ Magritte began explaining these relationships between words and images at a level very similar to that of any semiologist or philosopher of language in his famous 'London lecture' delivered in 1937.

Guillermo Solana discussed this subject in his lecture on Magritte given in 2015 in connection with the exhibition *Surrealism and the Dream*, referring to another interesting theme directly related to the previous one: the correspondence theory of truth and the theory of truth as revealing or 'unconcealment'.¹⁷ The first, which was formulated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* and prevailed in the West from then until the emergence of the philosophy of language with Bertrand Russell, was based on a correspondence between thought and statement (what is stated or said) – that is, on a dyadic notion of the linguistic sign. The second (Solana reminds us) is Martin Heidegger's theory and instead of establishing this equivalence or correspondence between language and thought, it speaks of a revealing or 'unconcealment' (that is, a revealing of something concealed).

¹⁴ 'Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)', states Wittgenstein in section 3.324 of his *Tractatus*.

¹⁵ *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 12, 15 December 1929, vol. 1, pp. 32–33. See also Guillermo Solana, *La máquina Magritte* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, p. 26, fig. 12.

¹⁶ Judging by how Magritte illustrates this image, however, we might speak here of two signifiers ('representamen' in Peirce's terminology), while the signified or mental concept is absent ('interpretant' according to Peirce).

¹⁷ Guillermo Solana, 'René Magritte', lecture delivered as part of the series *Cinco surrealistas en las colecciones Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2015, available at <https://www.museothyssen.org/actividades/ciclo-conferencias-cinco-surrealistas-colecciones-thyssen-bornemisza-0>.

Magritte

'This is not a pipe' (1928)

'The extra-mental universe, about which **we can say nothing**, only that it exists?'

(*Manifeste de l'extramentalisme (Notes)*, *Écrits complets*)

'The mental world [...] leads to the existence of the amental, which **we can say nothing** about except that it exists'

(*Manifeste de l'amentalisme*, *Écrits complets*)

It will evidently be necessary to **avoid philosophical language**, as this language is precisely something to be combated'

(*Manifeste de l'extramentalisme (Notes)*, *Écrits complets*)

'When someone rides a **horse** in the forest, first you see them, then you don't, but you know that they are there. [...] Our thought encompasses both **the visible and the invisible**'

(Guillermo Solana, *La máquina Magritte*, Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, p. 198)

Wittgenstein and Russell

'This is not red'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

'The proposition "**this is a man**" is **neither** definitely **true nor** definitely **false**'

(Russell, 'Vagueness').

'**Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent**'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7)

'It is humanly **impossible to gather immediately the logic of language**. Language **disguises** the thought'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.002)

'Thus [from ordinary language] there easily arise the most fundamental **confusions** (of which **the whole of philosophy** is full)'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.324)

'Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but **senseless**. [...] Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that **we do not understand the logic of our language**'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.0031)

'When I see the **picture of a galloping horse** – do I merely know that this is the kind of movement meant? Is it superstition to think I see the horse galloping in the picture? – And does my visual impression gallop too?'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)



fig. 6

René Magritte
***The Treachery of Images*, 1929**
Oil on canvas, 60.3 × 81.1 cm
LACMA, Los Angeles, purchased
with funds provided by the
Mr and Mrs William Preston Harrison
Collection, 78.7

fig. 7

René Magritte
***Table, Ocean and Fruit*, 1927**
Oil on canvas, 50 × 65.2 cm
The Pearl Collection

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Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*,
with Illustrations and Letters by
René Magritte, translated and edited
by James Harkness, Berkeley–
Los Angeles–London, University
of California Press, 1983.

Whether it is based on a dyadic or a triadic conception, both the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign when viewed from a semiotic approach and the occasional lack of correspondence between signifier and signified (highlighted by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916), together with the fallibility of language, are issues on which both Magritte and Wittgenstein and other members of the Vienna Circle agree.

It is also curious to note the comparisons between different types of language in relation to human knowledge established by some members of this group of philosophers, who provide scientific explanations based on the philosophical positivism inherited from the previous century, specifically from mathematical (Russell) or musical language (Wittgenstein in relation to musical notation, with his example of the gramophone record in his *Tractatus*). This article includes **two comparative tables containing several quotations** from Magritte's writings and from certain theoretical treatises by these philosophers so that readers can see at first glance some of the similarities between what he as a painter and the others as philosophers thought about these questions simultaneously and in parallel.

The Treachery of Images: Types of Relationships and Interplay between Images and Words

In many of his works Magritte prompts us to reflect on the **fallacy of language** – verbal (in works where words and images are intertwined) and especially visual, but ultimately also that of the whole sensible realm, which we perceive through the senses. This question, which he began exploring in particular in the series on *The Treachery of Images* with his famous 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', was discussed at length precisely by the philosopher and psychologist Michel Foucault in his famous essay on Magritte,¹⁸ in which he even published the two letters Magritte wrote to him in 1966. There is no need to explain the meaning of this iconic series, which has not only provided such inspiration to artists and intellectuals but has made such a deep impression on the collective imaginary of contemporary visual culture, as well as questioning the treachery of visual language, which is equivalent to the fallibility of verbal language. The first twist of the screw in this reflection was made by Magritte when he began incorporating words into his pictures,

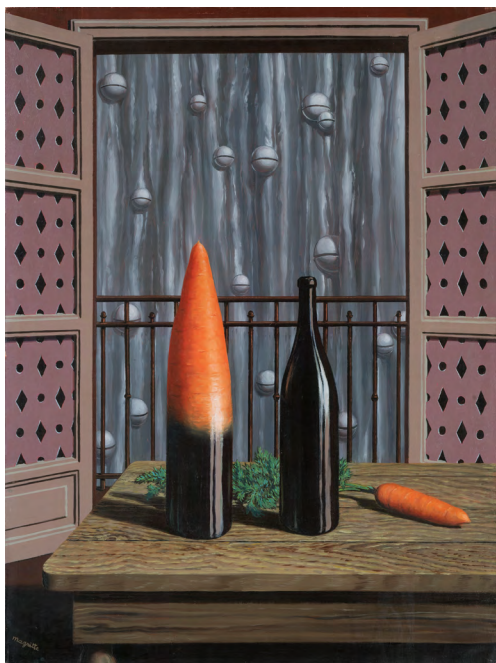


fig. 8
René Magritte
The Explanation, 1952
Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm
David and Ezra Nahmad

either substituting them for images or establishing a relationship of non-correspondence with them. The ‘treachery’ or fallacy that can be inferred from the shock effect this causes on the spectator can be seen in works such as *Table*, *Ocean and Fruit* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (both executed in 1927).

This shock effect Magritte employs in different ways is, ultimately, a (visual) ‘language game’ or, what amounts to the same thing, a ‘deviant’ or poetic use of language (the poetic function of language according to the terminology of the famous linguist Roman Jakobson). In his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), published shortly after his death, Wittgenstein focused more specifically on the use of language rather than on language as something abstract and theoretical. He referred to ‘language games’ nearly 100 times in the book, for example: ‘I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a “language game”’.¹⁹

Magritte plays with the spectator in this subtle relation–non-relation between the content or meaning (if there is a specific or single one) of the work and its title. A certain ‘logical’ relation can sometimes be deduced or established between title and content, for example, the relation between the bird and the cage that Magritte referred to in his ‘London lecture’ (1937). In contrast, Magritte was not interested in suggesting a univocal, singular content; rather, he was concerned with possible meanings, **playing** with the **ambivalence** so characteristic of the other two great masters of figurative Surrealism, Dalí and Delvaux. However, his painting was more ‘eidetic’ (belonging to the realm of ideas) in scope, part of a game that was more intellectual than theirs. What is undeniable is that owing either to the possible ambivalent interpretation of the titles or the clash or lack of correspondence between the title and the subject represented in the picture (that is, between signifier and referent), Magritte plays with and presents the spectator with another fallacy of language. Indeed, **paradox** is a

¹⁹

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), *The German text with an English Translation* by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed., Chichester, Wiley–Blackwell, 2009, p. 8, available at https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4294631/mod_resource/content/0/Ludwig%20Wittgenstein%2C%20P.%20M.%20S.%20Hacker%2C%20Joachim%20Schulte.%20Philosophical%20Investigations.%20Wiley.pdf.

fig. 9 →

René Magritte
The Key to Dreams, 1927
Oil on canvas, 38 × 53 cm
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen-
Sammlung Moderne Kunst in der
Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 16260

fig. 10 ↓

René Magritte
The Proper Sense IV, 1929
Oil on canvas, 73 × 54 cm
Private collection, courtesy DiDonna
Galleries, New York



literary device or language game based on the shock of contradiction. A few titles of his works also have a certain 'vagueness' or evocative breadth of meaning characteristic of poetic language so that the subject can be interpreted broadly (and there may accordingly be a relation between signifier and signified). In other cases, as sometimes occurs with language itself, we simply find non-sense and there is no explanation, as, ironically, in *The Explanation* (1952).

Returning to the language games in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, in one of these 100-odd mentions he referred to them using the demonstrative adjective 'this', as in Magritte's famous picture of a pipe: 'when a philosopher tries to fathom out the relation between name and what is named by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name, or even the word "this", innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday'.²⁰ The Austrian philosopher also referred in this work to different types of possible language games ('Our language-game [48] has various possibilities'²¹). And he likewise underlined the added value of 'fallacy' that is inherent precisely in these language games: 'Lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one'.²²

Ultimately, all these games are none other than what, according to diverse linguistic terminology, are known as **devices, literary figures or tropes**, which Magritte also called a 'disturbing poetic effect': metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, hypallage, antithesis, paradox... We come across many of them in Magritte's oeuvre. As a shock or surprise, paradox is one of the most common. One of the first devices or games that Magritte explained in his 'London lecture' (1937) is that of **replacing images with words and vice-versa**.

²⁰ Wittgenstein 1953, see note 19, p. 23e.

²¹ Ibid., p. 30e.

²² Ibid., p. 96e.



fig. 11
René Magritte
***The Key of the Fields*, 1936**
Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid

In the enumerations he progressively made in his talk he gave further twists of the screw so that the words do not correspond with the images and the element of surprise or shock occurs in his works in various ways that can be summed up as language or shock games:

- Through the incorporation of foreign or even invented objects (for example in the abovementioned *The Explanation*).
- Through the lack of correspondence between the title of the work and the object represented (the most common method, as we have just explained).
- Through the lack of a logical relation (that is, of associations that would be more familiar) between the objects themselves (Magritte gives the example of the cage and the shoe. We do associate the bird with the cage, but not the shoe).
- Through the context in which the elements are shown (I will discuss this later on).
- Through the size with which the objects are depicted (hyperbole, generally with an added contradiction: this is what was examined in the section entitled 'Megalomania' in the exhibition on *The Magritte Machine* at the Museo Thyssen).
- Through defiance of the laws of physics or a question we might call 'gravitational', which applies above all to objects suspended in the air.

Naturally shocks or surprises of this kind can also be combined. There comes a point where the spectator is aware, in some way or another, of the presence of one of these language games and asks questions like: Why is there this lack of correspondence? What are those elements doing there?

The various links between Magritte's painting and literature in general furthermore operate on different levels. For one thing, they are found in the very titles of his works, in which the painter does employ literary devices of different kinds, especially metaphor, metonymy and paradox: *The Voice of the Air* (for example, the 1928 and 1931 versions), *The Cicerone* (1947), *The Discovery of Fire* (1935), *The Voice of Blood* (1948), *The Amorous Vista* (1935), *The Flame Rekindled* (1943), *The Key of the Fields* (1936) and *The Art of Conversation* (the 1950 and 1963 versions) are just a few examples. The evocative power of these broadly interpretable titles, which, as commented above, stems precisely from the 'vagueness'²³ of the language used, is evident in a great many cases.

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Russell devoted an interesting article to the issue of the vagueness of language in Bertrand Russell, 'Vagueness', *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, 1 (June 1923), pp. 84–92. It was written shortly after the publication of the 1921 English edition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, for which Russell wrote the introduction. It confirmed the extent to which his colleague's ideas had influenced his thinking.



fig. 12
René Magritte
The Reckless Sleeper, 1928
Oil on canvas, 116 × 81 cm
Tate, purchased in 1969,
T01122

Context in 'the Disturbing Poetic Effect'

An additional aspect of these language games in Magritte's painting, and one that was also discussed by these philosophers of language, is the essential role played by the **context**. In the *Blue and Brown Books*, published between 1933 and 1935, Wittgenstein stated that only by applying a name in a real discursive context (that is, its use) can we grasp its truest or most appropriate meaning.²⁴ These books are a compilation of his class notes as a teacher and contain fundamental issues that he went on to discuss in *Philosophical Investigations*; one is precisely 'language as a game'. Context is one of the six essential elements of communication, and an unusual and illogical association between objects can also stem from the context or situation in which Magritte places them. The artist referred to this in his lecture 'Life Line 1' as the concept of 'order': 'Given my wish to make the most familiar objects jar [...] I obviously had to upset the order in which objects are usually placed [...] a woman's body floating above a city was a fair exchange for the angels which have never appeared to me'.²⁵ Magritte is referring here to how, inherently or unconsciously, we tend to associate ideas and meanings with particular objects, which are usually positioned in a specific order or context: a table, for example, stands on a surface, just as a human body does not usually float in the air.

He also used the term *dépaysement* – 'decontextualisation', causing 'disorientation' – to refer to this; that is, objects that the spectator finds unsettling when they are removed from their usual/familiar context: 'from 1925 to 1936 [...] the result of a systematic search for a disturbing poetic effect which, if created by setting objects from reality out of context, would give the real world from which these objects are borrowed a **disturbing poetic sense** by a natural exchange. [...] The objects which were to be removed from their usual context were very familiar objects, in order to make the sense of disorientation as disturbing as possible'.²⁶

²⁴ Dell'Atti 2014, see note 5.

²⁵ Magritte 2016, see note 1, p. 64.

²⁶ Magritte 2016, see note 1, p. 54.

Magritte

'A **symbol** is no more than a **representative**. [...] **Symbols teach us nothing** about what they symbolise or what they supposedly *represent* through pictures. [...] If one truly saw justice, the symbol *representing* it would have no value at all. The word justice refers to an idea that only **philosophy** can make clear'

(*'Le Rappel a l'ordre'*, *Écrits complets*, 1961)

'The art of **painting** [...] cannot articulate ideas nor express feelings [...], they belong to the realm of **the invisible** [...]. The **image of a circle** is equivalent to a *circular thought* but does not represent the idea or feeling of the circle, whose definition falls to **philosophy**'

(*'L'Art de la ressemblance'*, *Écrits complets*, 1967)

'The written or printed word means nothing – unless its intention is to **amuse** men'

(Magritte quoting Rex Stout in his 'Manifeste de l'amentalisme', *Écrits complets*)

Wittgenstein and Russell

'To psychology, of course, more is relevant; for **a symbol does not mean what it symbolizes** in virtue of a logical relation alone, but in virtue also of **a psychological relation** of intention, or **association**, or what-not''

(Russell in his introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*)

'And suppose this person gives someone else the ostensive explanation "**That is called a 'circle'**", pointing to a circular object [...] – can't his hearer still interpret the explanation differently? [...] That is to say, this "**interpretation**" may also consist in how **he now makes use** of the explained word'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

'**Lying is a language-game** that needs to be learned like any other one'

'We don't notice the **enormous variety of all the everyday language games**, because the clothing of our language makes them all alike'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

'I propose to prove that **all language is vague** and that therefore my language is vague [...] [the] **fallacy of verbalism** [...] consists in mistaking the properties of words for the properties of things.

I think **all vagueness in language** and thought is essentially analogous to this vagueness which may exist in a photograph'

(Russell, *Vagueness*, 1923)



fig. 13
René Magritte
***Not to Be Reproduced*, 1937**
Oil on canvas, 81 × 65.5 cm
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen,
Rotterdam, 1977, 2939 (MK)

The Mirror and the Window as Symbols between Reality and Fiction: Magritte, a Poet-Painter of Mystery and of the Philosophy of Visual Language

Lastly, on the subject of Magritte's relationship with the philosophy of language, specifically these language games, special mention should be made of **symbols**, which together with metaphors are precisely one of the most important literary, expressive or artistic devices. These philosophers of language and Magritte himself discussed them. Once again it is essential to read the artist's own writings to understand why he denied or objected to certain interpretations of his work, not only in relation to symbols but also in relation to **dreams and Surrealism itself**. Magritte shunned a univocal interpretation of his oeuvre, whether from the perspective of Breton's original Surrealism or from a psychoanalytical approach or one of symbolic interpretation. Over the years he denied his connection with



fig. 14
René Magritte
The Promenades of Euclid, 1955
Oil on canvas, 162.9 × 129.9 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art,
Minneapolis, The William Hood
Dunwoody Fund, 68.3

Breton's initial Surrealism due to having drifted apart from him (as occurred with other Surrealist artists), even though the oneiric or dream world (we might even say the unconscious or subconscious) is present in most cases, at least to the spectator's sight or mind. Nevertheless, Magritte made a point of stating that his inspiration stemmed more from an 'extra-mental' state of slumber than from the dream itself.²⁷ In 'Life Line 1' (1938) he spoke of how one night in 1936, due to a 'magnificent delusion', when he woke up he saw a cage with an egg inside it instead of the bird, which had disappeared.²⁸ Even in this case he did not refer to this vision as something dreamed. He did, however, use the terms magical and extra-mental on several occasions to refer to it.

As for **symbols**, Magritte's objection to having his work associated with them stemmed from his wish that certain elements or objects that he repeated in several works should not always be interpreted in the same way, as if they were part of an iconographic repertoire. He intended his iconographic motifs to inspire reflection and suggestions based on the mysteries of his visual poetry, not a single interpretation. Far removed from any possible symbolism, his objects do not necessarily have a meaning that is always interpretable and univocal, though they can suggest ideas and meanings to the spectator. Some of these philosophers theorised precisely on the value of symbols, attempting to establish whether it was possible to aspire to a general theory on their meaning. Starting out from approaches based on Russell's logical positivism, this project or idea was gradually thwarted as a result of the ideas progressively formulated by both Wittgenstein and Carnap.

27

Coined in his manifestos on 'extra-mentalism' and 'amentalism', 'extra-mental' and 'amental' are another two adjectives that tie in fairly well with his surrealistic style, which is often considered more intellectual than that of his colleagues.

28

Magritte 2016, see note 1, p. 65.



fig. 15
René Magritte
Attempting the Impossible, 1928
Oil on canvas, 116 × 81.1 cm
Toyota Municipal Museum of Art,
Toyota, 142

Of these symbols, **the mirror and the window** are motifs or objects that are repeated fairly frequently. Given their presence and different symbolic meanings throughout art history, it is no wonder that scholars have attempted to look for symbolic meanings in Magritte's paintings, however much he himself denied all possible associations. The mirror links up with the philosophical concept of the 'alter ego', otherness and even duplication, which is related in turn to the 'extramentalism' and 'amentalism' Magritte speaks of in his *Écrits*. A symbol of knowledge and self-knowledge (*nosce te ipsum*) – though by pointing this out we are going against Magritte's wishes – in the spectator's mind at least (as part of what is called the 'reception aesthetics') it conjures up an idea about knowledge and the fallacy of representation, as what we see projected is not the thing itself but an 'other'. Wittgenstein makes a similar statement about questioning and knowledge in his *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Here one might be pointing to a reflection in a mirror. But in certain circumstances, one might touch a body and ask the question [...] "Does my body look like that?"'²⁹ As in an 'Ariadne's thread' or a domino effect, it was one of the recurring motifs and symbols in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges – interestingly another of the great artistic geniuses of the past century, whose similarities of another kind with Magritte's paintings and Surrealism would require another study. In the artist's oeuvre, the play of mirrors reflected in each other furthermore brings us to his obsessive, so often repeated image of the infinite and the labyrinth... of the questioning of the reflected image, of the past and history... Here the mirror is also linked to the fallacy or falsifiability of the sensible realm, even language. *The False Mirror* (1929) and *Not to Be Reproduced* (1937), the latter featuring the famous portrait of Edward James, are some of his most iconic works in this respect.

²⁹

Wittgenstein 1953, see note 19, p. 131.

The mirror, as a projection screen, can also turn into a window. This links up with the other great symbol or 'non-symbol' (avoiding the word 'symbol' in accordance with Magritte's terminological recommendations), which is connected with the subject of the window-picture and his thoughts or concerns about the representation of space and its falsifiability in this dichotomous pairing of 'reality' with 'fiction' that gave rise to the series of works he began with *The Human Condition* in 1933. Magritte discussed this painting, of which he produced different variants (such as *The Promenades of Euclid*, executed in 1955), in 'Life Line 1'. It is worth recalling in connection with this study the relationship between this series and the question of the fallacy or 'treachery' of the sensible realm and in semiotic terms, of the signifier. It was a question that Michel Foucault also commented on in his abovementioned essay on Magritte, referring to the mirror functioning like a 'fluoroscope'.³⁰ Foucault pointed out another interesting idea that has been commented on in recent years by the linguist Sémir Badir, who has also published a work on the connections between Magritte and various philosophers. In his article 'Magritte et Wittgenstein: dire et montrer'³¹ he focuses his argument on the similarities (and also differences) between them in this division between 'showing' and 'saying'; for Magritte's paintings show as opposed to state. Foucault reminds us that early painting said a lot – a function characteristic of the 'propositions' of which Wittgenstein, Russell and other philosophers of language spoke so much. In this distinction between 'saying' and 'showing', Magritte's paintings neither state nor speak of anything (that is, they are not 'propositional', to use Wittgenstein's and Russell's terminology) but show and suggest; that is why they evoke and prompt reflection and mystery. And on the subject of mystery, it is worth remembering, by way of conclusion, what Magritte stated in one of the two letters he wrote to Foucault in 1966: '[Thought] is as completely invisible as pleasure or pain. But painting interposes a problem: There is the thought that sees and can be visibly described. [...] What does not "lack" importance is the mystery evoked *in fact* by the visible and the invisible, and which can be evoked *in principle* by the thought that unites "things" in an order that evokes mystery'.³²

30

Foucault 1983, see note 18, p. 51.

31

Sémir Badir, 'Magritte et Wittgenstein: dire et montrer' (2013), in *Magritte: perspectives nouvelles, nouveaux regards*, ed. Louis Hébert, Pascal Michelucci and Éric Trudel, Montreal, Nota Bene, 2018, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317443327_Magritte_and_Wittgenstein_agree_and_disagree.

32

Foucault 1983, see note 18, p. 57.

As he underlined, Magritte was not a philosopher, but this very denial, like those contained in his iconic pipe and in the contradictions found in some of his very many works, should at least leave us in suspense and doubt. He did not verbally establish a systematised philosophical theory as such; however, the theorising capacity of his writings on human thinking in general and on language as a form of expression of knowledge provide an insight into the poetic and mysterious scope of the genius of his painting, in which connections with the philosophy of language are sometimes evident. Through his pictures Magritte expressed his ability to reach the part-surrealist, part-extra-mental and part-intellectual universe located at the floating boundary between reality and fiction. This universe is but one of the great mysteries of humankind, akin to the notion of life as a dream to which Calderón de la Barca alluded in one of his plays. **A poet-painter of mystery and the philosophy of visual language**, Magritte captured this mystery between reality and fiction in the huge and promethean task of ‘attempting the impossible’, as stated in the title of one of his most iconic paintings. During those years both Ludwig Wittgenstein and, influenced by him, Bertrand Russell, as well as Rudolf Carnap not only realised the fallibility of language. Through its ‘falsehood’ or – as Magritte put it – ‘disturbing poetic effect’, they also became aware of its power to attain this realm of the ‘extra-mental’ and metaphysical. As Rudolf Carnap maintained, ‘the metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist’.³³ ●

33

Rudolf Carnap, ‘Psychologie in physikalischer Sprache’, *Erkenntnis*, 3, 1 (1932), pp. 107–42; English translation from ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’, see note 2, pp. 59–81, here at p. 79.

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