

In the shadow of Goethe: Wittgenstein's intellectual project

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Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) had considerable influence on the 'modern' world but did not consider himself part of it. His search for a way of thinking, to give a deeper understanding than the science of his day, has considerable analogies with that of Goethe. He was less sanguine than Goethe about the possibility of a renewal of culture in his own day but his philosophical work, in its stress on restraint and concreteness, is permeated by the ethical ideals that he attempted to realize in his life and that of his friends. He also shows some kinship with Goethe's non-theistic mysticism. His philosophical work is a guide that, perhaps rightly, requires readers to find the answer for themselves.

Fifty years after Wittgenstein's death, it seems appropriate to try to view him in a wider historical context. Philosophy, of course, has its own history and a philosopher is generally reacting to movements inside philosophy rather than directly to outside events and tendencies. It is in much this way that Gombrich has taught us to see the history of art. But there is no doubt a subtle connection between such particular histories and general history. Philosophy is not an epi-phenomenon but part of the intellectual history that, in a loose synchrony, both determines and is determined by its wider context.

To attempt an account of the importance and of the general nature of Wittgenstein's work would be too large a task for the present essay. Still, something must be attempted and, in particular, I think it is important to resist the temptation (perhaps especially strong for those professionally engaged with him) to let the fascination of his character loom too large in our thoughts. He himself feared that, in the future, people would talk about his life instead of

These thoughts were developed in the autumn of 2001, when I was a guest of the Rector, H. Wesseling, at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study at Wassenaar, and were published in part in the NIAS Newsletter.

listening to what he had to say. We should try (if we concern ourselves with him at all) to discern the intellectual project on which he was engaged.

I do not say the *philosophical* project, because he did not *have* to be a philosopher, and because it would be wrong to assume that he fitted into a well-defined subject called philosophy. He (of course he was not the first to do so) was trying to change the philosophy.

What, then, was Wittgenstein's particular context and how did he interact with it? We must distinguish here between the man himself and his reception. He was for many a typical member of the modern generation — we still tend to use the word not for our own contemporaries but for that period from the beginning of the last century to (say) the outbreak of the Second World War. It was a period marked above all by the First World War, after which many felt unable to continue on the paths of the past. Their writing, their composing and their philosophy refused the certainties they had inherited and attempted to build anew in a way that often seemed fragmentary and obscure. We think of Joyce, Eliot and Yeats (among those that wrote in my own language), and of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Richard Strauss. In all these cases there was not continuity but a return to the classic in a new form. And here certainly we see Wittgenstein, no one else could have written his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*. Above all, no one who had not been through that War could have written it, with its strange mixture of mysticism and logic, both unutterable yet neither dependent on the world of facts (perhaps just because that world was, in its own way, unspeakable). We find the same note struck, obviously without the same philosophical subtlety, in books that issued from the war, such as Charles Morgan's *The Fountain*, and also in contemporary letters including those of Wittgenstein's comrades and friends.

Yet he did not himself feel that he belonged to the culture of that generation. His preferred period, he said himself, was that of Schumann. His musical tastes certainly were conservative, reaching at most to Brahms or, to speak of a lesser figure, the house composer of his family, the classicizing Josef Labor. Prokofiev, indeed, who wrote a composition for Wittgenstein's brother, the one-armed pianist Paul, had to beg him to realize that here was music of the 20th century written for a pianist of the 19th. In some respects, we might say, Wittgenstein looks back to the age that Goethe sought to cure — Goethe, of whom Matthew Arnold finely said:

Physician of the iron age ...
He took the suffering human race,
He read each wound, each weakness clear,
And struck his finger on the place,
And said, *Thou ailest here and here!*

We can indeed see nostalgia for that period in Wittgenstein's love of the music

and the poetry of the romantics, nostalgia for that half-unreal Biedermeier world, in which his own family began its rise and which it continued to take as a point of reference.

He was of the 19th century, in more than one respect. When he spoke of science it was classical physics that he meant: he criticized Freud from the point of view of Helmholtz and Brücke (the latter, indeed, being both a relation of Wittgenstein's and the teacher of Freud). It was the problems of that age that he faced, as his mentor Frege had done, and he saw not only Frege's problems but also those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and, above all, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (the latter would not have objected to this coupling or this order).

There were many aspects of modernity with which Wittgenstein had little sympathy. The reaction of some to the disaster of the First World War was to put yet more faith in natural science as the guarantor of progress and improvement. Wittgenstein was not one of them. The idea that individual and social psychology could help to solve man's problems or that cosmology and other modern discoveries gave man insight seemed to him ridiculous or even sinful. This is why he dissociated himself so violently from institutional aspects of the Vienna Circle, which wanted to pursue philosophy itself in a scientific way. Not that he would have regarded a specifically *philosophical* system as in any way better, at most he would recognize a philosopher's insight. He saw (rather as Macaulay is related to have said about Kant) 'what Heidegger would be at'.

System indeed was the enemy in his eyes and this accounts for the fascination he has had for many who were not prepared to follow the detail of his destructive work. They liked his scepticism in the face of the advances of science. The greater and the more all-inclusive those advances have been, the more attractive such scepticism has become, verifying perhaps Wittgenstein's prediction that he himself was writing for a future generation, an idea to which we shall return.

His criticism of theory as such had much in common with Goethe's, as he himself recognized when he came to write about colour. Hard to reconcile as it is with the scientific point of view of the two distinct periods in which they wrote (and to an extent of ours) there must be something in Goethe's, and Wittgenstein's insistence on not seeking a hidden cause for phenomena. *Man suche nichts hinter den Phänomenen; sie selbst sind die Lehre*: we need no further theory, no further learning, behind the phenomena themselves. Wittgenstein quoted this but his own words 'Nothing is hidden' have also become a slogan and remind us, in turn, of how Goethe broke into verse on the subject: *Natur hat weder Kern noch Schale/Alles ist sie mit einem Male* (Nature is neither husk nor kernel, but all things at once). There is even an intellectual case to answer in Goethe's idea, developed in conversation, that the mathematician makes a reputation by inventing problems that are difficult to solve and then solving them. *Some* truth about mathematics,

and mathematicians, is implicit in Wittgenstein's criticism too, although perhaps not so negative a one as he thought.

The parallels between Goethe's idea of methodology in natural history and Wittgenstein's philosophical method in his later writings have been drawn convincingly by Joachim Schulte.¹ A careful consideration of cases in detail leading to a demonstration of analogies leads to a certain form of understanding of a domain, which may be exactly the understanding that we require. It was in this way that Spengler, whom Wittgenstein names as an influence, exhibited the likenesses and differences of human societies. Wittgenstein describes, and in part illustrates, how a similar method could be applied to the rites and practices that formed the subject of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. He draws on and uses for his own purposes Spengler's notion of family resemblances. These will enable us to get a perspicuous representation (*übersichtliche Darstellung*) of a field of study.

In Wittgenstein's own case, it is the whole field of philosophy that he attempts to throw light on in repeated and varied excursions. Often, but not always, this will be an attempt to get a clear view of how we use expressions in a certain part of our language but this is part of a general aim and one that makes his work philosophical. Again and again, his reminders of the concrete, the inescapable, the bedrock which turns our spade as we try to dig deeper are indications at once of the scope and the limitations of our understanding and (in terms the *Tractatus* both uses and condemns) of the limits of the world itself. It is an inescapable feature of these that only in this way can they be presented, shown or felt. I believe that here we can find an answer to the objection sometimes made that Wittgenstein's rejection of theory is not itself a theory, so that he gives us just snippets of method. He shows (in the *Tractatus* he thought he had proved definitively) that the fundamental can only be indicated and he goes some way to do that very thing.

Wittgenstein learnt from Spengler, who had learnt from Goethe, so that the former found himself in tune with the author he had so often praised to Russell in earlier days. In the 1930s, he indeed quotes the splendid passage that gives Schulte the title of the essay I have mentioned:

‘And so the chorus points to a secret law’ one feels like saying to Frazer's collection of facts. I can represent this law, this idea, [in a number of ways] but also by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a ‘perspicuous’ representation.²

The quotation at the beginning of this passage is from Goethe's elegy *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (‘The Metamorphosis of Plants’), touchingly addressed to his partner and later wife, Christiane Vulpius in her garden:

Alle Gestalten sind ähnlich, und keine gleicht der andern;
Und so deutet das Chor auf ein geheimes Gesetz,

Auf ein heiliges Rätsel. O, könnt'ich dir, liebliche Freundin,
Überliefern sogleich glücklich das lösende Wort!³

That Wittgenstein should find himself walking in the footsteps of Goethe, like nearly every German writer since the age of the *Epigonen* (his own preferred period) can afford us no surprise, but he was aware, only too keenly, that the world in which Goethe spoke had vanished and that a new culture (or lack of culture, as he thought it) had come into being. This is the theme that the layman rightly senses as underlying the tortuousness of Wittgenstein's philosophy. There is the wish for a return to something much further back, to some core that we find in nature itself and must be in awe of. But Wittgenstein would have had to cut short any specification of this, as the old man did in Tolstoy's fable, 'That's God's business'. (Paul Engelmann, at one time his spiritual midwife, employs just this passage in a memoir.⁴) Thus, Wittgenstein, like the Delphic Oracle in Heraclitus' phrase, 'neither declares nor conceals but gives a sign'; and this makes one reluctant to tie him closely to the problems or solutions of a particular period.

Still, he himself insists that it was impossible for a thinker of his own time to confront the problems that Beethoven and Goethe had wrestled with. 'No philosopher has ever tackled them (perhaps Nietzsche came near to them)⁵ — Goethe and Beethoven, whom he more than once coupled together: Beethoven's 9th Symphony is to Bruckner's as Goethe's *Faust* is to Lenau's⁶, it is impossible even to imagine what Goethe would have looked like while writing the 9th Symphony⁷, and (a subtle linking) Mozart and Beethoven are 'the actual sons of God'⁸ — an allusion to the *Prologue in Heaven* in *Faust*, where *die echten Göttersöhne* (Wittgenstein's quotations are usually slightly inexact) are possessed of self-creative power and give endurance by thought to what would else be but passing experience.

The Goethean ideal may have become impossible, but it was always before his eyes, and many, perhaps unconscious, allusions betray it. At times he felt that his falling short of it was a failure, 'I ought to have been a star, but I remain stuck on earth'. One hears a reminiscence of Goethe's 'Selige Sehnsucht' ('Sacred Yearning'), which his sister Hermine (surely here, as so often, taught by him) quotes. He fears that he may have remained 'ein trüber Gast auf der dunklen Erde' (nothing but a sombre guest on the darkened earth⁹). The atmosphere of Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (as we shall see again) is of a piece with the non-theistic mysticism that was Wittgenstein's originally, before the First World War and his reading of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*.¹⁰ (It is a complex question how whole-heartedly he accepted the Christian elements that the latter introduced into his thought world.)

Our point here, however, is that he did aspire, or had aspired, to something more than a technical success. The rejection of theory that constitutes his philosophy

was to be recognized as a programme not only for thought but also for life. It was for this reason that he said in his *Tractatus* (6.54) that the reader who had thought through his propositions and transcended them would see the world aright. An answer, if a negative one, was being given to the problems of life. The sort of publication that he sought is an indication of this, for he sent his typescript to Karl Kraus's publishers and then to Ficker's Christian cultural journal *Der Brenner*. From the first he had no illusion that it would be readily intelligible, indeed his preface begins with the words 'Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it' and goes on, 'Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it'. The preface, written in 1938 for a later work (and used for *Philosophical Investigations* 1953), is still more pessimistic, 'It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another but, of course, it is not likely.' Perhaps in a similar spirit he sometimes thought he was writing for a future generation.

The topos is familiar one. Goethe's poem just quoted opens 'Sagt es niemand, nur dem Weisen ...' ('Tell it to the wise alone ...'¹¹) — the mob will only mock. Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is subtitled 'A Book for All and for No One' while the preface to *The Antichrist* begins with the words 'This book is the property of the very few. Perhaps indeed not one of them is yet on earth'¹² and in the text Nietzsche compares his readers (as it might be, the initiated) to Pindar's Hyperboreans. 'Neither by ships nor by land canst thou find the wondrous road to their trysting place'.¹³ A total change is required to arrive at an understanding.

And is this not so with Wittgenstein too? He gives no system that can be followed because he requires of us precisely the recognition that there is no master science, no set of foundations for everything. He began it will be remembered with a demonstration that *Principia Mathematica* (for which he was asked to revise the logical basis) needed no foundations. The *Tractatus* sometimes seems to provide an alternative metaphysics, confronting us with the inexpressible limits of language and the world. The later writings give us an idea how to apply this. In each area, be it music, logic, language, we must be carried along by the material we are involved in, we must not force it, we must not lay down laws for it. Above all we must attend to it, in the spirit in which Goethe looked to the phenomena for their own explanation. (This does not exclude a widening of the field of vision such as a Goedel or a Turing brings about.) But what this spirit is we learn only as we follow Wittgenstein through discussions of possible misconceptions and simple examples in arithmetic, talk about friends, elementary mechanics, psychology, illusions, whatever comes to hand, as long as it was, perhaps for the first time, looked at without preconceptions. *Then* it could be seen what the philosophical problem, if any, was. J. A. Smith, it is related, told his Oxford pupils that his course would be of no use to them at all when they were statesmen, lawyers

or whatever, but that they would always know when someone was talking nonsense to them. This was certainly part of what Wittgenstein could have hoped for.

In the moral sphere, it is strange to think that the subject of deontic logic was founded by one who was not only a justly esteemed pupil of Wittgenstein's, but the successor to his chair.¹⁴ What is clearly abominable or admirable is obvious; the laws of what is abominable or admirable are not. A noble action often surprises us by its very nature: often it was precisely a new way of seeing the situation that was required. All calculation and deduction in moral matters seem alien to Wittgenstein's insistence on considering the whole context of each act and the pressures under which it was executed, and still more the spirit in which it was executed. How such an attitude can be applied in a legal context is an interesting question. *Wittgenstein and Justice* by Hannah Pitkin (Berkeley, 1972) was one of the first of the *Wittgenstein and ...* books, so to call them, which show how his sort of thinking can be carried, more or less faithfully from case to case, into different areas.

The spirit of his writings can then be recognized if not defined. To summarize, we might say that the restraint is in itself a programme. I am reminded of another poem from Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*, the 'Testament of Old Persian Faith' ('*Vermächtnis alt-persischen Glaubens*') where what the dying sage leaves to his disciples is just such a work of purification,

S c h w e r e r D i e n s t e t ä g l i c h e B e w a h r u n g
Sonst bedarf es keiner Offenbarung.

A r d u o u s D u t i e s ' D a i l y O b s e r v a t i o n
There's no need of other revelation.¹⁵

When we think of Wittgenstein's constant striving at a certain sort of purity of life (*mit sich selbst in's reine kommen* — 'to settle affairs with oneself', but the literal sense of the idiom — 'come clean'? — is not inappropriate in his case), we see that philosophy as he practised it was a natural part of his life project. It was the best way of learning the humility that any activity needs or, if you will, of acquiring the reverence that he accused Bloomsbury of lacking. It was also perhaps a way of reconciling the *esprit de finesse* and *esprit de géométrie* which he inherited (it is natural to think) from two greatly contrasting parents, the bold, calculating industrialist and the gentle, gifted musical amateur.

That he was always conscious of links between his intellectual activity, which we call philosophy and which he thought related to philosophy, and his moral and affective life, we know from many remarks. He told Russell he was thinking about *both* logic and his sins¹⁶ and he wrote to Engelmann that he wished he were cleverer or better and that these were probably the same thing. But there are two revealing references to Goethe that should be set alongside one another. First in

a letter to Russell he says that reading William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is helping him to get rid of *Sorge* in the sense in which Goethe uses it in the second part of *Faust*.¹⁷ That meaning is not uncontroversial, but most agree on the translation *Care* and the general sense of anxiety.¹⁸ This neurotic condition, which inhibits improvement, is also present (in Wittgenstein's eyes) in the puzzles of philosophy. It is a philosophic construction (*Bildung*) when we ask whether behind our sense-experiences of a body there really is a body — they were the criterion for its existence.¹⁹ And then he quotes in note form,

([Faust zur Sorge] 'Unglückliche Geschöpfe ... zu tausend Malen.')

It is a quotation from memory and so really part of his mental furniture. The actual passage runs:

Unselige Gespenster! So behandelt ihr
Das menschliche Geschlecht zu tausendmalen.
Horrible phantoms! Thus you still conspire
Again against mankind and yet again.²⁰

The doubts and fears that render decision impossible and possession joyless are present as in life generally, so also and in a systematic way in philosophy, where they can make a fool of the wisest of men ('Sie könnte selbst den klügsten Mann betören'). It is in rejecting *Sorge* and standing alone as a man against nature that Faust reaches the culmination of his life, which like Wittgenstein at the same moment, he embraces and thus brings to an end.

Wittgenstein was of a quite different temperament from Goethe, who, as T. J. Reed has excellently said,²¹ 'was not only born under a happy constellation but was himself such a constellation'. The elements were well mixed. Wittgenstein's were marked by opposition, as even an amateur astrologer could read from his chart. He himself believed in the superiority of those born in April and (no doubt inspired by Schiller's *Wallenstein*) in an affinity with the constellation of Cassiopeia. It was typical of him so to express his belief in his *Daemon*. Goethe's poem with that title was a motto for him just as I made it one for a book about him:

Wie an dem Tag, der Dich der Welt verliehen,
Die Sonne stand zum Grusse der Planeten,
Bist alsobald und fort und fort gediehen
Nach dem Gesetz, wonach Du angetreten.
So musst Du sein, Dir kannst Du nicht entfliehen,
So sagten schon Sibyllen, so Propheten;
Und keine Zeit und keine Macht zerstückelt
Geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt.

As on the day that gave you to this world
The sun stood in relation to the planets,

So from that moment forth and forth you thrive
 According to the law that rule your birth.
 So you must be, from selfhood there's no fleeing,
 So prophets, sibyls long ago declared;
 And neither time nor any power can break it,
 The living pattern latent in all growth.²²

Michael Hamburger's is a fine translation, but it is possible to read the last line with another emphasis — we are stamped with our form which nothing can alter, and yet by living it develops and we with it. It is a tribute to the universality of Goethe that the stages this development leads to, which he describes in stanzas almost equally splendid, are applicable in one way or another to Wittgenstein. Chance, Love, Necessity and perhaps even Hope — *Ein Flügelschlag und hinter uns Äonen* ('One beat of the wings she gives us and we leave the centuries behind us'). To explore this theme would be to look at his whole life through the prism of Goethe's concept of man.

Here we can only say that Wittgenstein in his own case was totally dedicated to guiding the development just mentioned. Wanting to be perfect he had the ideal aim, too high no doubt, of always learning, always approaching nearer to perfection as a man in nature and among friends. But he was easily upset by occasions great and small: he talks on one occasion (admittedly in a period of great stress, which was his return to civilian life from the prison camp after the First World War) of being tempted to commit suicide 'for purely external reasons'.²³ Psychologically he was predisposed to think any period better than his own and, generally, any place better than that in which he found himself. All the more remarkable that he produced a body of work, not systematic indeed, because it was not meant to be, but not shrill or rhetorical either, which (if there is anything in what I have been saying) should stand in its own right (not just as testimony to a complex personality) and, by entering into their perplexity, serve as a guide to some of the perplexed. Above all, he requires from them an intellectual effort comparable with his own. No formula will serve and he gives none.

References and Notes

1. See the title essay in his *Chor und Gesetz, W. in Kontext*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt/Main 1990. He has also kindly shown me a 2002 paper 'Goethe and Wittgenstein on Morphology', which develops some of the points in that earlier essay (itself first published in Italian, see *Intersezioni* 1982, pp. 99–124).
2. L. Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough', in: J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (eds.) (1993) *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* (Cambridge: Hackett), p. 131
3. Roughly: 'All their forms [those of the garden flowers] are similar but

- none identical: their chorus points to a secret law, a sacred riddle. If only, dearest one, I could give you its solution in a word.' *Das lösende* (or *erlösende*) *Wort*, the solution or answer — or salvation — in a word, was what Wittgenstein often longed for.
4. P. Engelmann (1967) *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* [*LE* henceforth] (Oxford), p. 81.
 5. L. Wittgenstein (1980) *Culture and Value* [*C&V* henceforth] (Oxford), p. 9. I have modified the published translation, 'Nietzsche passed by them', which seems almost the opposite of the required meaning.
 6. *C&V*, p. 34.
 7. L. Wittgenstein (1953) *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford), p. 186.
 8. L. Wittgenstein (1995) *Cambridge Letters* [*CL* henceforth] (Oxford), p. 19: a letter to Russell of 16 August 1912.
 9. I have adapted the translation of J. Whaley in Goethe (1974) *West–Eastern Divan* (London).
 10. See B. McGuinness (1988) *Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Life, Young Ludwig* [*YL* henceforth] (London), p. 222. Elsewhere I have tried to show the non-theistic character of the mysticism of the *Tractatus*, see B. McGuinness (2002) *Approaches to Wittgenstein* (London), pp. 140–159.
 11. Here I adopt the translation of E. C. Dowden (1914) *West–Eastern Divan* (London).
 12. There is some evidence that the reading of this tract was the occasion of Wittgenstein's remarks about Nietzsche in his First World War notebooks. See *YL*, p. 225.
 13. Translation of Pythian 10.30 by Sir John Sandys (1968) *Pindar* (London) (Loeb Classical Library).
 14. G. H. von Wright, in an article with that title in G. H. von Wright (1951) *Mind*, 60.
 15. An adaptation of J. Whaley's translation *op. cit.* The letter spacing is a rare emphasis in Goethe's poems. For a similar effect, cf. its use for the crucial sentence in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.
 16. B. Russell (1968) *Autobiography*, Vol.2 (London), p. 99
 17. *CL*, p. 14.
 18. Eva Picardi (2001) Rorty, *Sorge* and truth, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 9(3), 431–439, brings out well the importance of this concept for forming a judgement on the recent history of philosophy.
 19. MS 119, p. 82 (Band XI, this passage written in 1937)
 20. ll.11478–9 in David Luke's (1994) translation of *Faust, Part Two* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics). As misremembered by Wittgenstein the phrase would mean 'Miserable creatures!'
 21. In T. J. Reed (1984) *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Past Masters series) p. 105. The reference is, of course, to the second sentence of Goethe's autobiographical *Poetry and Truth*: 'Die Konstellation war glücklich'
 22. From 'Urworte: Orphisch' originally published as part of *Morphologie*. Translation by Michael Hamburger. Used as a motto for *YL*.
 23. *LE*, p. 21

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