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## Introduction: Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man, the Life, and the Work

### I

"One couldn't be very long with him without becoming aware – of the quality of genius," F. R. Leavis, the eminent literary critic, wrote of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> He was not the first to notice this quality in the philosopher. Bertrand Russell had discovered it almost immediately when Wittgenstein had shown up in Cambridge in 1912 to become his student. Even decades later Russell was struck by the fact that the young man had been "perhaps the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived – passionate, profound, intense, and dominating. He had a kind of purity which I have never known equaled except by G. E. Moore ... His life was turbulent and troubled, and his personal force was extraordinary."<sup>2</sup> Russell remembered, in particular, Wittgenstein's struggle over whether to follow his passion for philosophy or to return to aeronautical engineering. At his behest Wittgenstein undertook to write a trial essay ("on any philosophical topic that interests you") that he submitted the following term. "As soon as I read the first sentence," Russell recalled, "I became persuaded that he was a man of genius, and assured him that he should on no account become an aeronaut."<sup>3</sup>

Russell soon began to treat the young Austrian as more of a collaborator than a student. When Wittgenstein's sister Hermine visited Cambridge he said to her unforgettably: "We expect the next big step in philosophy to be taken by your brother."<sup>4</sup> And Gottlob Frege, on whom Wittgenstein had made an equally profound impression, wrote that he expected the young man to "achieve great things for humanity."<sup>5</sup> The category of genius has lost much of its luster for

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us, but Wittgenstein himself certainly anguished over it. Was he really a genius or perhaps only a reproductive talent?<sup>6</sup> No wonder, for the belief in genius had been very much alive in the Vienna of his youth with Ludwig van Beethoven, perhaps, as its most widely recognized exemplar. Wittgenstein was moreover familiar from early on with the reflections on genius in the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and Otto Weininger. A genius, Schopenhauer had written, sees through the delusions of the principle of sufficient reason and grasps “the persistent, essential forms of the world and all its phenomena.”<sup>7</sup> Genius, to Weininger, is the truly creative individual. “A man is to be called a genius, if he lives in conscious connection with the world as a whole.” As such, genius is not a gift but “an inner imperative.”<sup>8</sup> The young Wittgenstein, if we are to believe Russell, evidently sought to make that imperative his own. He, too, sought to live in conscious connection with the world as a whole, as the first sentence of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and his preoccupation with “the world” throughout that book testify. And he, too, sought to discern “the essential forms of the world” by delineating its “logical structure” in the *Tractatus* as well as that of the language in which we depict the world. Weininger, who was like Wittgenstein both Jewish in his family background and homosexual, also worried over whether Jews and women (and homosexuals) could have genius. Wittgenstein seems to have been plagued by similar worries. Eventually Weininger killed himself in the house in which Beethoven had died – a spectacular gesture which meant to say that being a genius or not was a matter of life and death. This episode may also have reverberated in Wittgenstein’s mind and may have contributed to his own early preoccupation with both the idea of genius and that of suicide. There are stories, in any case, that he attended Weininger’s funeral.

The aura of genius surrounds Wittgenstein until today and this has helped to fuel a remarkable and continuing interest in the man and his life. Where Schopenhauer and Weininger suggest that the work of genius reaches beyond the personality of the one who produced it, the popular imagination has always assumed a particularly close and revealing link between the work of genius and its creator. When Ray Monk published his widely read biography of Wittgenstein in 1990 he subtitled it accordingly “The Duty of Genius.”<sup>9</sup> Given this aura and given Wittgenstein’s exceptionally forceful, and

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to some overpowering, personality, his unusual family background – with its Jewish roots, its exceptional wealth, and its integral place in Viennese society – the lush culture of fin-de-siècle Vienna and the intellectual riches of Cambridge in the first decades of the twentieth century, we can understand why his life, his work, and everything that surrounds them have attracted the curiosity not only of professional philosophers but also of cultural historians,<sup>10</sup> biographers,<sup>11</sup> memoirists,<sup>12</sup> gossip-writers,<sup>13</sup> novelists,<sup>14</sup> makers of television documentaries,<sup>15</sup> film-makers,<sup>16</sup> and even visual artists<sup>17</sup> and composers.<sup>18</sup>

## II

The profusion of material that has become thus available, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to say anything new on the connections between Ludwig Wittgenstein, the man, his life, and his work in a single short chapter.<sup>19</sup> Instead of providing an inevitably unsatisfactory summary of what is already known, it may be more useful to consider some of the larger issues that arise.

The first question to pose is, perhaps, how we are to read the work of someone who has attracted such extraordinary attention. Can we ignore the man and his life when we turn to his writings? Or is our reading inevitably colored and perhaps even tainted by what we know about him? How are we to decide what is and what is not relevant? That will depend, of course, on how we read the work and there are dozens of ways we can do so. If we were to read Wittgenstein's writings psychologically and perhaps even psychoanalytically, his family relations and his own personal characteristics and foibles would be of foremost interest to us: the repressed Jewish background, the dominant father, the suicides of his brothers, his own unresolved sexuality, his turbulent life, and his choppy interactions with others.<sup>20</sup> If we look at Wittgenstein as a representative figure of late Viennese culture and at his work as a product of that period, we will, in addition, want to examine his link to figures like Karl Kraus and Adolf Loos, Ludwig Boltzmann and Sigmund Freud, read him perhaps together with Robert Musil and Hermann Broch, and attend to the unique combination of modernism and conservatism in the intellectual, literary and musical life of Vienna.<sup>21</sup> When we seek to position Wittgenstein, on the other hand, in philosophy

much of this personal and cultural background will cease to be of interest to us and we will focus, instead, on his engagement with Frege and Russell as well as with figures like Schopenhauer and Weininger. We may want to examine his place in twentieth-century analytic philosophy and possibly think of him in conjunction with figures like Rudolf Carnap and Karl Popper.<sup>22</sup> In the wider context of recent philosophy with its diverging philosophical schools we may also want to relate him to a thinker like Martin Heidegger and, forward-looking, to Michel Foucault.<sup>23</sup> And when we broaden the philosophical canvas still further, we may end up with comparing Wittgenstein to figures in ancient philosophy or even to someone from another culture like the Daoist sage Zhuangzi.<sup>24</sup>

It should be obvious, then, that there is no one way the man, his life, his time, his culture, his world, on the one hand, and his work, on the other, will be connected for us. And while our knowledge of the historical circumstances may bear, no doubt, on how we read the work, our reading of the work will, at the same time, determine what we will find significant and illuminating in those circumstances.

### III

In his 1924 lectures on *Fundamental Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, Martin Heidegger took a very different tack. "The personality of the philosopher has only this interest," he told his students: "He was born at such and such a time, he worked, and died."<sup>25</sup> But this was, of course, a rhetorical flourish, for Heidegger referred his audience in the same breath to Werner Jaeger's path-breaking *Aristoteles: Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung*, dedicated precisely to the exploration of the link between Aristotle's biography and his thought.<sup>26</sup> Jaeger tells us of Aristotle's entrance in the Platonic Academy, of his travels, and his mature life in Athens and seeks to show how this background illuminates not only the development but also the meaning of Aristotle's work. He adds: "Aristotle was the first thinker to set up along with his philosophy a conception of his own position in history ... It was, therefore, both philosophical and Aristotelian when men followed him in this, and sought to understand him by means of the presuppositions out of which he constructed his own theories."<sup>27</sup> That task is, however, made difficult for us by the fact that we know so little

about Aristotle and his life. What might have been major sources for understanding his background and development – his letters and public writings – have been lost.<sup>28</sup> Jaeger concludes: “If we possessed the writings that the ancients knew of we should have a picture of Aristotle’s political development from his Academic beginnings down to his old age.”<sup>29</sup> But we don’t. His attempt to reconstruct Aristotle’s development proves thus to be guesswork and we can understand therefore why Heidegger preferred to turn his attention to the Aristotelian texts themselves as we have them.

The situation is evidently different in the case of Wittgenstein, where we possess such an overabundance of information. There are numerous collections of letters to and from Wittgenstein and there are memoirs by friends, students, and associates.<sup>30</sup> There are, in addition, extensive writings on those with whom Wittgenstein associated. Fin-de-siècle Vienna and the Cambridge of the first half of the twentieth century have been the subject of detailed studies. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore this material when we read Wittgenstein’s philosophical work today. And we are drawn to this material because, like Aristotle, Wittgenstein sought to position himself historically in his writings. In the preface to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* we read: “Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has already had the thoughts that are expressed in it . . . I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty. . . I will only mention that I am indebted to Frege’s great works and to the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell” (TLP, pp. 3–4). Every one of those sentences refers us to a piece of the historical and biographical background of Wittgenstein’s book. A decade later we read, in the foreword to the posthumously published *Philosophical Remarks*: “This book is written for such men as are in sympathy with its spirit. This spirit is different from the one which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand” (PR, p. 7). And finally in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*: “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” (PI, p. x). Such comments could be easily supplemented with passages from *Culture and Value* – a collection of remarks excerpted from

various writings of different periods – in which Wittgenstein returns again and again to his time and his own place in it.

Werner Jaeger writes of Aristotle also that he thought of his own work as the outcome of an “intellectual development in time” that depended largely on its own inner trajectory. Jaeger concludes that we need to read Aristotle’s writings, then, as depicting a course of thinking, as documents of a process rather than an expression of a fixed system of ideas. The difficulty in taking this view is, however, once again considerable, since we possess no authoritative timetable for the composition of Aristotle’s writings and have to construct one from conjectures based on their content and on altogether unreliable second-hand bits of biographical information. Wittgenstein’s writings also invite a study of his intellectual development in time. In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations* he writes of his intention to have his *Tractatus* published together with the new work since it seemed to him that “the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking” (PI, p. x). His friend Friedrich Waismann remarked of him, moreover, in 1934 that “he has the wonderful gift of always seeing things as if for the first time . . . He always follows the inspiration of the moment and tears down what he has previously sketched out.”<sup>31</sup> This was, admittedly, said at a particularly volatile moment in Wittgenstein’s philosophical career, but the notebooks and typescripts that make up his oeuvre show how he kept re-formulating, revising, and re-arranging his ideas throughout his life. It was this process that delayed the completion of the *Philosophical Investigations* and that left large volumes of other writings unfinished and unpublished. Waismann’s remarks draws our attention, in fact, to what may well be the single most important characteristic of Wittgenstein’s entire work in philosophy. It is that, from the *Tractatus* onward, he never thought of philosophy as a theory to be expounded and defended but as an ongoing process of thinking. “Philosophy is not a body of doctrine,” he wrote in the *Tractatus*, “but an activity. . . Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions,’ but to make propositions clear” (TLP, 4.112). To the potential objection that we can then no longer speak of progress in philosophy and certainly not of a progress in theorizing, he responded drily later in life: “If somebody scratches the spot where it itches, do we have to see some progress? Isn’t it genuine

scratching, or genuine itching? And can't this reaction to an irritation continue thus for a long time, before a cure for the itch is found?" (CV, 1980: 86–87; 1998: 98, translation modified). If we follow this line of thought, it becomes clear that Wittgenstein wanted us to look at his written work as a record of an activity and of the individual writings as momentary crystallizations in his course of thinking, rather than offering us changing formulations of a single, timeless doctrine. But all this does not mean that we *have* to read the work in this way. We may just as well ignore Wittgenstein's programmatic assertions and mine his writings for the theoretical insights they may provide. This is, in fact, how some readers have approached those writings. But if we follow their example, we should, at least, be clear about what we are doing and how we are deviating from Wittgenstein's original intent.

Just as in the case of Aristotle difficulties arise, however, when we set out to map the course of Wittgenstein's thinking – but this, once more, for the opposite reason that we have too much material to digest. In Wittgenstein's case we possess a wealth of notebooks, manuscripts and typescripts in addition to the few published writings, and this material extends from the earliest to the latest moments. It is, in fact, not at all easy to find a path through this jungle of words. There has emerged, as a result, a highly sophisticated Wittgenstein scholarship dedicated to the philological and hermeneutic study of Wittgenstein's work. This scholarship is, of course, for the most part motivated by a sympathetic interest in Wittgenstein, but we may ask to what extent it is faithful to Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy. It seems, in fact, engaged in a form of philosophy far removed from Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein himself certainly did not often write about philosophical texts and he never engaged in philological or hermeneutic studies. His writings testify, of course, to a thoughtful dialogue with Russell and Frege and many others. But there is only one place at which Wittgenstein quotes another philosophical text at length and explicitly comments on it. That is to be found in the first section of his *Philosophical Investigations*. But the spirit in which he discusses Augustine's conception of language is not that of historical scholarship. Augustine, Wittgenstein suggests, has given voice to a significant, widely attractive, but overly narrow view of language. We must seek to understand how a profound thinker like Augustine

could end up with such narrowness of perspective and how one might be able to open one's eyes to a more a comprehensive view of language.

Can't we then read Wittgenstein in the way Heidegger proposed to read Aristotle and in which Wittgenstein himself read Augustine? That is, in a thoroughly unhistorical manner, setting aside all our views about the author and his life, about the historical context and the internal development of his thought, and the state and status of his innumerable writings? Written works have, after all, a life of their own detached from their authors. Homer is only a name for us and may never even have existed as a single person but the Homeric epics are still read, understood and appreciated by us. Why can't we treat Wittgenstein in the same manner? We certainly can and, in fact, often do exactly that. This way of reading Wittgenstein may proceed on the assumption that the meaning of a text must be explicable in its own terms. That is how the New Criticism treated literary texts and there are interpreters of Wittgenstein who proceed, indeed, on this somewhat shaky basis. One might argue that this technique of reading is, in fact, justified in the light of Wittgenstein's own reflections on language and meaning in the *Tractatus*. There he entertained the idea that every true or false proposition must have a single and definite meaning that is fixed by its internal, "logical" structure and the ways that structure maps on to the world. But his later writings repudiated that view and declared the meaning of a word to be given by its use that can, of course, be diverse and change over time. Applying this idea to philosophical texts, we will come to see that they, too, have various uses and that their use can change over time. There is then no single way in which a philosophical text *must* be read, certainly not in the way the New Criticism insisted.

It is no use being dogmatic on this point. We can understand a great deal in the Homeric epics without knowing anything about how they were written, by whom and under what conditions. Even a freely associative reading of Homer may have an interest for us and it may even help us with a more fully engaged kind of reading. (And the same may be true for a freely associative reading of philosophical texts and of Wittgenstein's texts, in particular.) But if we knew more about "Homer" we might also come to have a substantially richer understanding of "his" epics. There are, perhaps, texts that are so



self-contained that they don't seem to call for attention to the context in which they were produced in order to be understood, but most are surely not like that. Wittgenstein's exposition of logical atomism in the *Tractatus*, for instance, is so compressed that it is difficult to say what he means or what his words mean without bringing Russell into the story. The *Tractatus* distinction between sense and reference will make little sense without attention to the way Frege used those terms. Some readers have, in addition, been struck by the Kantian tone of the *Tractatus* such as its claim that logic and ethics are "transcendental," and this may force one to look at Kant's writings in order to determine how the word "transcendental" is understood by Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus* contains in addition more or less explicit references to three other philosophers: Fritz Mauthner, Heinrich Hertz and Schopenhauer. Can we understand what Wittgenstein meant by the critique of language in the *Tractatus* without attention to Mauthner's *Contributions to a Critique of Language*? Can we comprehend its account of science without looking at Hertz's *Principles of Mechanics* and its doctrine of pseudo-pictures? And how are we to understand the rudimentary statements on ethics at the end of the book, if we are not aware of the fact that they derive from Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*? Once we are down that road, we are bound to ask also how much Wittgenstein knew of the work of these authors and when he read them and how he understood them. It evident, then, that we cannot easily avoid referring to the historical context where the *Tractatus* is concerned.

Not that reading historically is one kind of thing. In his reading of Aristotle in 1924, Heidegger had proceeded in a decidedly anti-historical manner, but subsequently his thinking took a more historical turn, though not in Werner Jaeger's direction. The great thinkers and poets of the past were, rather, to be examined as part of a "history of Being" in a spirit that was at once historical and philosophical. Even then Heidegger disdained Jaeger's "methods of historical philology," advocating, instead, "a thoughtful dialogue between thinkers" (*ein denkendes Gespräch zwischen Denkenden*). In the name of such a dialogue, Heidegger was even willing to do violence to the texts or what might look like such.<sup>32</sup> To proceed in this manner, meant for him "to free and to preserve" the intrinsic powers of the philosophical questions inherent in those texts, to

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discover “the movement of philosophizing” and the points at which it hesitates and draws back, and thus make it possible to set the thought process once again into motion.<sup>33</sup> Should we seek to read Wittgenstein in this spirit? How much of the philological and hermeneutic machinery of current Wittgenstein scholarship would we need to do so? Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein certainly abstained from operating this machinery. And this separates them from the historical–hermeneutic–philological scholarship that is now so widely applied to their writings and that has, in fact, become one of the staples of academic work in philosophy today. It is not clear how we should assess this development. Are we seeing in it the triumph of a different sort of philosophizing from the one that Wittgenstein and Heidegger envisaged? Or is that scholarship to be understood as a propaedeutic for another and more philosophical engagement with texts that is, however, constantly postponed? Or are we to envisage a new kind of philosophizing in the form of a merger of these different ways of thinking? Reflection on Wittgenstein’s form of philosophizing and, at the same time, on our hermeneutic reflection on this philosophizing may help us a few steps further with these questions.

#### IV

The signs of genius that Leavis, Russell, and others discovered in Wittgenstein are perhaps most evident in the *Tractatus*. We may even say that the book was composed as a work of genius and what readers have found so attractive in it or what has bewildered them or even repulsed them in it is just that. Arranged in a series of elaborately numbered propositions that suggest the deductive structure of Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*, the work conveys at first sight the impression of pure, crystalline order that is, however, quickly dispelled by the unexpected turns in the text, its often gnomic formulations, and its final deconstructive twist. The *Tractatus* is certainly a work of startling originality – so much so that it dismayed both Russell and Frege. They had expected Wittgenstein to continue their own labors in symbolic logic and the *Tractatus* did that in its own way – but it added to this a series of disconcerting reflections on the meaning of life, the limits of language, on mysticism and the overcoming of philosophy. Though Wittgenstein