

The Saturday Times

New and improved

April 29, 2005

Mystic mechanic Wittgenstein and the artists

Terry Eagleton

THE LITERARY WITTGENSTEIN. By John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer, editors. 356pp. Routledge. Paperback, £18.99. 0 415 28973 4

Why are artists so fascinated by Ludwig Wittgenstein?

Frege is a philosopher's philosopher, and Bertrand Russell was every shopkeeper's idea of a sage; but Wittgenstein is the philosopher of poets and composers, novelists and movie directors. Derek Jarman made his last major film about him; Bruce Duffy plucked a novel from his tormented life in *The World As I Found It*; M. A. Numminem has set Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to music in his *Tractatus Suite*, and garbled fragments of the same text can be heard croaked in a hilarious stage-German accent by a Dutch pop group. The list is long.

One source of the fascination, no doubt, is the fabular, riches-to-rags nature of the philosopher's career. The child of one of the wealthiest industrialists of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Wittgenstein gave away most of his fortune and spent much of his life in zealously Tolstoyan pursuit of *sancta simplicitas*.

Like many early twentieth-century intellectuals, he hankered after the simple life in a complicated kind of way. His monkish austerity was among other things a reaction to the Vienna of which he was otherwise so exemplary a son. The place was a cockpit of magnificent art and appalling kitsch, glutted with waltzes, whipped cream, chocolate cake and high culture. The grimmer the political climate grew, the more relentlessly frivolous the city became. "In Berlin", remarked the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, "things are serious but not hopeless.

In Vienna they are hopeless but not serious." This was not entirely true: in Wittgenstein's youth, the city was afflicted with an extraordinary outbreak of suicides, including two of the philosopher's own brothers. Logical positivism was one response to the flatulence of Vienna. The new philosophy was to be chaste, lean, disciplined and translucent. Wittgenstein himself disdained material possessions and was forever on the hoof: engineering in Manchester (he was fascinated by anything that cranked, whirred, slotted, or articulated), spells of village schoolteaching and monastery gardening, an eccentric trip to the Soviet Union with the intention of being trained there as a doctor.

(He was no Communist, even though some of his closest friends in Cambridge were Marxists. No doubt there was some overlap between their critique of capitalism and his own patrician disdain for bourgeois modernity.)

Wittgenstein also fought in the trenches of the First World War, and with characteristic perversity bemused his military headquarters by constantly demanding to be transferred to more dangerous postings. The nearness of death, he hoped, might shed some light on his radically unfulfilled existence. He was forever eluding his Cambridge minders and scampering off to edges almost as extreme as the trenches:

Stalin's Moscow, a Norwegian fjord, a remote cottage in Connemara.

In a splendidly perceptive essay in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, edited by John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer, David Schalkwyk relates Wittgenstein's status as a permanent refugee to his philosophical project of leading erring words patiently back to their homes. A philosophical problem, he remarked, has the form: "I don't know my way about". For this displaced, part-Jewish thinker, a compatriot and contemporary of Sigmund Freud, philosophy had its source in a sort of lostness, a sense of self alienation from which Wittgenstein himself was never to recover. His writing, as Schalkwyk points out, is full of labyrinthine cities and restlessly criss-crossed landscapes, his imagery (like Freud again) more spatial than temporal. For this self-exiled maverick to come home, wherever that might prove to be, would involve the joyful release of being finally able to abandon philosophy, which is only necessary for those who get their pathways in a twist, and for which Wittgenstein always entertained a certain high-handed contempt.

Whereas the Russian Formalists thought the point of art was to estrange the familiar, this for Wittgenstein constituted the problem. It is a sense of estrangement -of vertigo, bewitchment, out-of-placeness -which the

therapy known as philosophy seeks to overcome, revealing to us what was always in place and which (to add the missing item to Donald Rumsfeld's permutation of knowns and unknowns) we somehow knew without knowing it, all along. For Wittgenstein, as for Sartre, philosophy begins in a kind of existential angst. Yet as Schalkwyk points out, there is also something strange, wondrous and uncanny about the familiar for this religious devotee of the commonplace, whose work is far from being some complacent consecration of the ordinary. This is why it is only superficially surprising that a writer as seemingly transparent and doggedly unsublime as Wittgenstein should prove so enticing to artists, with all their regard for spiritual secrets, auras of mystery and hidden depths.

Just as the German word *heimlich* means both "familiar" and "concealed", so Wittgenstein, like many a European intellectual emigre to these shores, was both at home and not at home. As Stanley Cavell, the high priest of literary Wittgensteinianism, argues in this volume, the human subject to whom Wittgenstein introduces us is a distinctively modern one -troubled, strange to itself, with only an uncertain grasp of its own experience.

Wittgenstein's very Oxbridge aversion to grand narratives and abstract theories, the quaint, whimsical, homespun quality of his writing, can distract us from a more alien, recalcitrant strain in his thought, which is closer to Heidegger than to J. L.

Austin. What he valued above all, stylistically speaking, was perspicuousness, no doubt (like his fellow German-speakers Marx and Brecht) with a nervous side glance at stereotypes of Teutonic obscurantism. But if his language is transparent, his thought is not. And this is at least one way in which language and thought, pace some of his more simple-minded acolytes, can be distinguished.

It is also notable that a man who declared that everything lies open to view and that nothing is hidden spent much of his life as a closet homosexual.

The *Philosophical Investigations* abandons the crystalline purity of its author's ascetic youth and seeks to return us to the rough ground of our ambiguous, fuzzy-edged practices. It is this nose for the density and irregularity of things, their distinctive, untotizable tones and textures, that links Wittgenstein's thought to the great European tradition of realist fiction. But nothing could less resemble this demotic, pluralistic vision than the man himself: haughty, autocratic, driven by a fatiguing drive for moral perfection, an arresting mixture of monk, mystic and mechanic. Wittgenstein was grotesquely, absurdly, ethical: he was afflicted by that curious mania known as Protestantism, for which everything is a potential sign of salvation or damnation. And if this imbues his writing with a novelist's sensitivity to stray details and unexplored byways, it also reflects a spiritual intensity at odds with the laid-back, non-doctrinal bent of the *Investigations*, its generous-hearted refusal to regard the unfinished, rough-hewn, or approximate as conceptual flaws.

Wittgenstein scorned the science of aesthetics (it was, he scoffed, like believing that science could tell you what sort of coffee tastes good), but he also considered that philosophy ought really only to be written as a form of poetry. He belonged to that distinguished lineage of philosophers, from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger to Benjamin, Adorno and Derrida, who were sceptical of the whole genre of philosophizing as they found it, and like avant-garde artists could say what they meant only by inventing a different sort of discourse altogether. In each case, that new style of writing challenged the distinction between the philosophical and the literary, trading in aphorism and persona, figure and fable, rhetorical strategy and dramatic dialogue. Rather as Walter Benjamin dreamed of a book that would consist of nothing but quotations, so Wittgenstein toyed with the idea of a text that would be composed of nothing but jokes. Both men were traditional-minded modernists who, like James Joyce, found the whole orthodox conception of a book deeply troubling (Wittgenstein published only one of them in his lifetime).

Along with Benjamin's colleague Theodore Adorno, they belonged to that heretical sub-current of philosophical thought that can compress a whole complex argument into some earthy dictum, gnomic epiphany, or striking image.

All three thinkers preferred a montage of fragments to a conventionally ordered argument. Wittgenstein, in true modernist fashion, liked his thoughts to jump around rather than being forced into a linear pattern. In this respect, he was closer to Molly Bloom or Mrs Dalloway than to A.

J. Ayer. Benjamin's distaste for totality also had a theological dimension: only God could restore a shattered history to wholeness, a belief that makes the unified work of art a sort of idolatry.

Yet the *Investigations* is "aesthetic" in another sense, too, which a sensitive essay here by Marjorie Perloff on poetry and philosophy fails fully to grasp.

Wittgenstein had no time for the notion that philosophy was a set of propositions about the world; it was more a demystifying practice or therapeutic intervention than a system of doctrines. Like the Freudian

analyst, its task was not to make propositions but to elucidate them. The Investigations seeks to disabuse us of the illusion that we use language primarily to describe, represent and inform; but it also achieves this end by its performative rather than propositional style, which, like a work of literary fiction, tells tales, floats hypotheses, stages imaginary scenarios, wonders aloud and asks us questions that may or may not be on the level. Like a work of art, then, its form and content are at one. The Investigations contains empirical propositions, but, as with empirical facts in a novel, they are there as elements in a rhetorical design, not for their own sake. Wittgenstein's technique, like a novelist's, is to show rather than to say, allowing illumination to dawn upon us gradually, by drawing us into a complex play of scenes and voices. As with any effective dramatist, we are not always sure which of these voices is his own.

Like the Freudian analyst, we suspect that the author has a few answers but is keeping them up his sleeve for the moment, forcing us into the work of self-demystification, genially inviting our collaboration, but running the odd ring round us at the same time. A rather rambling piece by Joseph Margolis in this collection addresses some of these issues about Wittgenstein's method, in so far as he had one.

If the Philosophical Investigations resembles a work of art in one sense, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* does so in another. Indeed, its author spoke of it as being a literary as well as a philosophical text. The Literary Wittgenstein contains two illuminating essays, by Alex Burri and Dale Jacquette, on the *Tractatus* and the notion of fictionality; but one might also view the work as caught up in a more general crisis of representation in early twentieth century European culture, one in which Joyce, Beckett, Saussure, Picasso, Heidegger and Schoenberg are also embroiled. The *Tractatus* belongs, in other words, to the tidal wave of European high modernism, for which the whole idea of art or language "picturing" the world is now thoroughly problematical. The book does indeed claim that the structure of language pictures the structure of the world -cuts it, so to speak, at the joints; but language cannot represent how it does this, cannot at once present reality and comment on its own relation to it. Such a self reflexive flip would be like trying to see oneself seeing something, or hauling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We cannot profitably use language to talk about language.

Our speech can no more get a handle on itself than a tin-opener can slice itself open. Hence the celebrated injunction to remain silent about that of which we cannot speak, which James Guetti takes as the cue for an essay on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Yet we are here involved in a typically modernist irony, since the *Tractatus* would seem to violate its own ordinance. In claiming that only factual propositions have sense, not logical or philosophical ones, it inevitably makes a philosophical proposition, and thus cancels itself out. In striving to accomplish what it has itself put under censure, it resembles those modernist works of art which find themselves drawn ineluctably into fashioning representations of the world, and which can salvage some meagre authenticity only by being simultaneously ironic about them, pointing to the limits of their own picturings or the arbitrary nature of their representational techniques.

Truly to represent an opaque, ambiguous world means secreting within one's text some kind of self-destructive device, illuminating the nature of things only in the brief flare of its self-implosion. Perhaps this is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he sought to confront death in the trenches, crouching on the extreme limit of language with the manuscript of the *Tractatus* in his knapsack.

A good many poets and painters are wary of what they see as philosophy's anaemic abstractions. But since Wittgenstein was wary of them too, this may be another reason why writers and composers find his work so hospitable. Art is nothing if not fleshly, embodying ideas rather than denoting them; and Wittgenstein's effort to persuade us out of the dualistic view that the soul lurks within the body, that I can know my own experiences directly but only infer yours, or that meaning is a ghostly process in our heads, represents a similarly incarnational project. That a sign lives in its concrete uses, a claim that Joachim Schulte investigates here in relation to poetry, is scarcely unwelcome news to literary practitioners, who can feel that they are dealing with one of their own kind. Literature, one might claim, is that anti-Cartesian phenomenon, public experience. Like writers, too, Wittgenstein understands that language is not a mirror but a social practice in its own right, with its own material thickness. Two excellent pieces in this volume, by Bernard Harrison and John Gibson, show us how the apparent choice between this "textualism", and the idea of language as mimetic or referential, is a false one.

In Gibson's appealing view, literary fictions engage with the world by providing us with a kind of archive of the standards and criteria we need in order to narrate our own way in it. Wittgenstein himself observed that nothing is more important for understanding the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones. Finally, there is the question of interpretation, on which Sonia Sedivy and Martin Stone both contribute enlightening pieces. After all the literary-theoretical fuss about textuality, ambiguity, indeterminacy of

meaning, and the endlessness of interpretation, it is salutary to be reminded that Wittgenstein, unlike Stanley Fish or Jacques Derrida, by no means believed that interpretation goes all the way down. On the contrary, he taught us that the word has force only in situations where there is genuine doubt over meaning. Hermeneutics, after all, began as a reflection on that most ambiguous of literary texts, the Bible. It does not make sense to talk in Nietzschean fashion of a perception as an interpretation when there could be no reasonable doubt about what it is we are seeing or smelling.

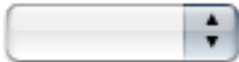
The best example of a sentence, Wittgenstein once observed, is a quotation from a play. He meant that nobody asks an actor what he is experiencing when he is speaking, and that in this sense theatre is the surest guide we have to how it is with us in real life, one which does not involve positing private mental states.

It is one instance, among the many recorded in this absorbing collection, of how art for Wittgenstein was not secondary or aberrant, but – along with St Augustine and cowboy movies – the real thing.

Terry Eagleton is Professor of Cultural Theory at the University of Manchester. A memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, and a study of tragedy, *Sweet Violence*, both appeared in 2002.

- [Print](#)
- [Email](#)
- [Post to del.icio.us](#)
- [Post to Fark](#)
- [Post to Yahoo!](#)
- [Post to Digg](#)

TLS selections



[Subscribe today](#)

The leading paper in the world for literary culture;
get the TLS for less

[Free Books for Schools is back](#)

Register now

Contents page

- [This week's contents in full](#)

[This week](#)

A note from the Deputy Editor

[TLS Newsletter](#)

Sign up here for our weekly taster of the stories, debates and controversies in the TLS

In the next TLS

P. D. Smith:

Woolworth and his monument

Jennifer Potter:

Societies in a garden

Peter Parker:

A. A. Gill's paper views

Hywel Williams:

A march through Wales

[The TLS e-paper](#)

An instant facsimile version of the TLS; enhance your subscription today

TLS information

- [About us](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Syndication details](#)
- [FAQs](#)

Advertise with the TLS

- [This week's classified ads](#)
- [How to advertise](#)
- [Rate card 2009](#)
- [Contact details](#)

MOST READ

MOST COMMENTED

MOST CURIOUS

Most Read

[Skip Most Read](#)

Today

- [Iran in scramble for fresh uranium supplies](#)
- [Barack Obama: behind the scene pictures of...](#)
- [City Minister Lord Myners attacks bankers...](#)
- [Susie Orbach: women are suffering from body...](#)

MOST COMMENTED

[Skip Editor's Pick](#)

Today

- [Gordon Brown lambasts RBS for...](#)
- [Banks ordered to start lending in new bailout](#)
- [RBS shares dive 70% on mounting debt fears](#)
- [Wealthy men give women more orgasms](#)

MOST CURIOUS

[Skip Most Curious](#)

Today

- [Take it as read: Kate Winslet is on for an...](#)
- [Hamlet may have poisoned stargazer Tycho...](#)
- [Priest Father John Skehan stole from US...](#)
- [New President wins a precious victory in the...](#)

Focus Zone

mentally ill adults.
social engineering
 individuals in order
social evolution n:
 simple type of stan
 eg.
Social Entrepreneur
 social entrepreneur (in pe
 may be made to pec

Social Entrepreneurs:

The inside track on current trends in the charity, not for profit and social enterprise sectors



Business Travel:

Everything the Business Traveller needs to know to make a better trip

- [Holidays in Bahamas](#)
- [Business Solutions](#)
- [Need to Know](#)
- [Social Entrepreneurs](#)
- [Business Travel](#)
- [More reports...](#)

Advertisements

A don's life...



Popular Searches on Times Online

[big brother blog](#) | [bollywood news](#) | [chess](#) | [dating](#) | [fashion](#) | [hallelujah](#) | [mortgages](#) | [music](#) | [oscars 2009](#) | [podcasts](#) | [recipes](#) | [redundancy](#) | [robert pattinson](#) | [savings](#) | [slumdog millionaire](#) | [sudoku](#) | [twilight](#) | [university guide](#) | [wine](#)

Shortcuts to help you find sections and articles

[Classifieds](#)

Cars

Jobs

Property

Travel

Cars

[Skip Cars of the Week](#)

[Saab 9-3](#)

05/2005

£13,500

[Bentley Continental](#)

08/2008

£109,950

[Aston Martin DB9](#)

2005 / 55

£59,500

[Car insurance](#)

Great car insurance deals online

- [Search for more cars and bikes](#)

Jobs

[Skip Jobs of the Week](#)

[Director of Education, Information and Access](#)

circa £70K

The National Gallery

London

[Business Development Director Designate](#)

Six Figure Package

Q Com

West Midlands

[Management Training Scheme](#)

£27k - £30k plus benefits

Reliance

UK Nationwide

[Change Control, Risk, Issues and Quality Manager](#)

£25,104 - £31,611

National Policing Improvement agency

London

- [Search more Jobs](#)

Properties

[The First Group](#)

High Return Investment Opportunities in Dubai and the Northern Emirates from £89,950

[Genesis Homes](#)

The smarter way to your first home

[Ipsus01](#)

Live free for a year

[Diversity Works For London Going for gold?](#)

How to achieve the gold standard

- [Search for more properties](#)

Holidays

[Skip Travel of the Week](#)

[United Vacations](#)

Be the first to stay at the new sophisticated

Encore Las Vegas Resort!

[CHIC by Thailand Offer!](#)

Amari Coral Beach Resort Phuket

Break from £799pp

[EXPEDITION:](#)

G.A.P Adventures £200 discount!

The ultimate adventure - voyage to the Polar regions on the M/S Expedition

[Travel insurance](#)

Great travel insurance deals online

- [Search for more holidays](#)

[Place your advert now](#)

Search Ad Reference:

Where am I?

[Home](#)

- [Arts & Entertainment](#)[The TLSTLS Selections](#) [Philosophy](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Back to top](#)
- [News](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Business](#)

- [Money](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Life & Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Driving](#)
- [Arts & Ents](#)
- [Archive](#)

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your [advertisement](#).

Times Online Services: [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#)

News International associated websites: [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Property Finder](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

