

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Unphilosophical Notes—By ERICH HELLER

*The bell-fire of life consumes only the select among men.
The rest stand in front of it, warming their hands.*

FRIEDRICH HEBBEL

WHAT manner of man was Ludwig Wittgenstein? One answer, which is easy to come by, vague, large, and true, is: a man of rarest genius. Of all words that defy definition—which may be, simply, all words—genius is the most defiant. But how else describe a man who was a logician of the first order; a writer of German prose abundant in intellectual passion and disciplined clarity (perhaps only talent is needed for writing such prose in any other language, but certainly genius for writing it in German); an engineer of great promise and some achievement; the architect of a modern mansion; a gifted sculptor; a musician who very probably would have become, had he chosen this career, a remarkable conductor; a hermit capable of enduring for long periods the utmost rigours of mind and loneliness; a rich man who chose poverty; a Cambridge professor who thought and taught but neither lectured nor dined?

He was also an Austrian who conquered British philosophy; but this, as befits Austrian conquests, was due to a misunderstanding. At least he himself believed that it was so. When the pages of the journal *Mind* were filled with variations on his philosophical themes, he praised a certain American detective-story magazine, and wondered how, with the offer of such reading matter, “anyone can read *Mind* with all its impotence and bankruptcy.” When his influence at Oxford was at its height, he referred to it as “a philosophical desert” and as “the influenza area.” These are ironical exaggerations, but undoubtedly serious as expressions of Wittgenstein’s discontent.

Why should he have been so displeased with the rôle his thought played in contemporary philosophical circles? What was the source of his suspicion that a misunderstanding was viciously at work in the proliferation of his views and methods throughout the departments of philosophy? And if it was a misunderstanding, was it avoidable? These questions raise a bigger one: what is the nature of philosophical opinion?

THE occasion of these notes is the recent appearance of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *THE BLUE AND BROWN BOOKS* (Basil Blackwell, 1958), and Norman Malcolm’s *LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN—A MEMOIR*, with a *Biographical Sketch* by Georg Henrik von Wright (Oxford University Press, 1958). *THE BLUE AND BROWN BOOKS*, illuminatingly prefaced by Mr. Rush Rhees, were dictated by Wittgenstein to some of his pupils at various times between 1933 and 1935. They are indispensable for any study of the intellectual history that led, within the lifetime of the mature generation of Anglo-Saxon philosophers, to a fundamental change in philosophical opinion—a break outwardly less dramatic but probably more significant than that which occurred when Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore banished the very much “post”-Hegelian metaphysics of F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet from the academic scene.

It is the most strange characteristic of the new “revolution” that it was the same man, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who both perfected the “old system” (in the *TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS*, finished by 1918, first published in 1921) and initiated its destruction (with *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS*, complete by 1949, posthumously published in 1953). Mr. Malcolm’s *MEMOIR*, greatly assisted by Professor von Wright’s informative sketch, is a noble biographical document, the more moving by virtue of its simplicity and affectionate restraint. It is from this book that the biographical references of my notes are taken.

E. H.

THERE are philosophies which, however difficult they may be, it is in principle easy to teach and to learn. Of course, not everyone can teach or learn philosophy—as little as higher mathematics; but the philosophies of certain philosophers have this in common with higher mathematics that they present the simple alternative of being either understood or not understood. It is, in a final analysis, impossible to *misunderstand* them. This is true of Aristotle, or St. Thomas Aquinas, or Descartes, or Locke, or Kant. Such philosophies are like mountains: you can climb to their tops or you can give up; or like weights: you can lift them or they defeat you; and in either case you will know what has happened and “where you are.” But this is not so with the thought of Plato, or St. Augustine, or Pascal, or Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche. Their philosophies are like human faces on the features of which are inscribed, disquietingly, the destinies of souls; or like cities rich in history. “Do you understand Kant?” is a question like “Have you been to the summit of Mont Blanc?” The answer is *yes* or *no*. “Do you understand Nietzsche?” is like asking “Do you know Rome?” The answer is simple only if you have never been there. The trouble with Wittgenstein’s thinking is that it sometimes looks more like Descartes’: you believe you can learn it as you learn logic or mathematics. But it almost always is more like Pascal’s: you may be quite sure you cannot. For to understand it on its own level is as much a matter of imagination and character as it is one of “thinking.” Its temperature is of its essence, in its passion lies its seriousness, the rhythm of its sentences are as telling as is that which they tell, and sometimes it is a semi-colon which marks the frontier between a thought and a triviality. How is this? Are we speaking of an artist or a philosopher? We are speaking of Ludwig Wittgenstein. “*Der Philosoph behandelt eine Frage; wie eine Krankheit.*” It is a profound semi-colon, and not even Miss Anscombe’s competent work as a translator could save the profundity: “The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness” is, by comparison, a flat aperçu.

PHILOSOPHY, for Wittgenstein, was not a profession. It was a consuming passion; and not just “a” passion, but the only possible form of his existence. The thought of losing his gift for philosophy made him feel suicidal. He could not but have contempt for philosophers who “did” philosophy and, having done it, thought of other things: of money, publication lists, academic advancements, university intrigues, love-affairs, or the Athenaeum—and thought of these things in a manner which showed even more clearly than the products of their thought

that they had philosophised with much less than their whole person. Wittgenstein had no difficulty in detecting in their style of thinking, debating, or writing, the corruption of the divided life, the painless jugglery with words and meanings, the shallow flirtation with depth, and the ear deaf to the command of authenticity. Thinking for him was as much a moral as an intellectual concern. In this lay his affinity with Otto Weininger, for whom he had great respect. The spectacle of the detachability of a thought from a man filled him with loathing and with an anger very much like that with which Rilke in the fourth of the *Duino Elegies* denounced, through the image of the dancer, the cursed non-identity between performer and performance:

... *How gracefully he moves!*
And yet he is disguised, a dressed-up philistine,
Who will come home soon, entering through the
kitchen.
I cannot bear these masks, half-filled with life.

Had Wittgenstein ever cared to write about himself, this apparently most “intellectual” of philosophers might have said:

I have at all times thought with my whole body and my whole life. I do not know what purely intellectual problems are... You know these things by way of thinking, yet your thought is not your experience but the reverberation of the experience of others; as your room trembles when a carriage passes. I am sitting in that carriage, and often am the carriage itself.

This, however, was written by Nietzsche. And it was Nietzsche whom he resembled in many other ways: in his homelessness, his restless wanderings, his perpetual search for the exactly right conditions in which to work, his loneliness, his asceticism, his need for affection and his shyness in giving it, his intellectual extremism which drove thought to the border of insanity, the elasticity of his style and (as we shall see) in one philosophically most important respect. Like Nietzsche then, he knew that philosophical opinion was not merely a matter of logically demonstrable rights or wrongs. This most rigorous logician was convinced that it was above all a matter of authenticity—and thus, in a sense, not at all of negotiable opinions. What assumed with him so often the semblance of intolerable intellectual pride, was the demand, which he made upon himself still more than upon others, for the absolutely authentic utterance. The question was not only “Is this opinion right or wrong?” but also “Is this or that person *entitled* to this or that opinion?” This lent to his manner of debating the tone, at times, of an Old Testament prophetic harshness: he would suddenly be seized by an uncontrollable desire to mete out intellectual punishment. He reacted to errors of

judgment as if they were sins of the heart, and violently denied opinions, which in themselves—if this distinction were possible—might have been harmless enough or even “correct”; and denied them because they were untrue in the self that uttered them: they lacked the sanction of the moral and intellectual pain suffered on behalf of truth.

WITTGENSTEIN, as Mr. Malcolm remembers, once said, using a comparison with swimming, that “just as one’s body has a natural tendency towards the surface and one has to make an exertion to get to the bottom—so it is with thinking.” And in talking about the stature of a philosopher, he remarked “that the measure of a man’s greatness would be in terms of what his work *cost* him.” It is Kantian ethics applied to the realm of thought: true moral goodness was for Kant a victory over natural inclination, the costlier the better. Nietzsche too was, by character and insight, such a Kantian moralist of the intellectual life; yet he, who was never more ingenious than in producing the devastating argument against himself, could also say this:

The labour involved in climbing a mountain is no measure of its height. But where knowledge is concerned, it is to be different; at least this is what we are told by some who consider themselves initiates: the effort which a truth costs is to decide its value! This crazy morality is founded upon the idea that “truths” are like the installations in a Swedish gymnasium, designed to tire one out—a morality of the mind’s athletics and gymnastic displays.

Perhaps it is a pity that Wittgenstein was not the man *also* to say things of this kind. It might have lightened the burden of earnest irritability carried by many a contemporary philosophical debate.

II

THE appreciation of Wittgenstein as a person and thinker (and how misleading is this “and”!) is bedevilled by a persistent optical delusion. The high moral pathos of his life (in which his “legend” has already taken firm roots) *seems* at first glance to be unconnected with the drift and trend, the content and method of his philosophical thought. Every page of Pascal or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche at once conveys, however impersonal may be the subject-matter, a sense of urgent personal involvement. But it is possible for anyone but the most sensitively predisposed to read many pages of Wittgenstein’s without suspecting that the ruthless precision and often apparently eccentric virtuosity of this thinking, which has neither models nor parallels

in the history of philosophy, is anything but the result of the utmost intellectual detachment. Its first emotional effect upon the reader may well be one of exasperated melancholia—the effect which Robert Musil (not for nothing an Austrian contemporary of Wittgenstein’s) ascribes in *The Man Without Qualities* to a certain thinker:

He had drawn the curtains and worked in the subdued light of his room like an acrobat who, in an only half-illuminated circus tent and before the public is admitted, shows to a select audience of experts his latest break-neck leaps. . . .

Yet Wittgenstein’s work is none the less suffused with authentic pathos, and will one day be seen as an integral part in the tragically self-destructive design of European thought.

IF BY some miracle both European history and thought continue, then the future historians of thought will be not a little puzzled by Wittgenstein. For nothing could be less predictable than that a work which more deeply than any other affected contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, should have as its motto a sentence from the classical comic playwright of Austria, Nestroy. Or that its philosophical author should have experienced a kind of religious awakening thanks to a performance of *Die Kreuzelschreiber* by Anzengruber, a considerably lesser Austrian dramatist. However, these will be minor surprises, less important, certainly, than Professor von Wright’s perspicacious discovery of the affinities between Wittgenstein’s manner of thinking and writing and that of the great 18th-century German aphorist Lichtenberg. But of greater weight still would be the realisation that the name of Wittgenstein marks the historical point at which, most unexpectedly, the cool, analytical intellect of British philosophy meets with those passions of mind and imagination which we associate first with Nietzsche and then, in manifold crystallisations, with such Austrians as Otto Weininger, Adolf Loos, Karl Kraus, Franz Kafka, and Robert Musil.

Like Otto Weininger, Wittgenstein believed in the surpassing ethical significance of thinking, and in thought as both a deeply personal and almost religiously supra-personal dedication. With Adolf Loos he shared the radical rejection of all ornamental comforts and decorative relaxations of the mind, and the concentration on the purest lines of the intellectual architecture; with Karl Kraus, the conviction of an inescapable bond between the forms of living, thinking, feeling, and the forms of language (Wittgenstein’s dictum, “Ethics and æsthetics are one,” may serve as a perfect characterisation of Karl Kraus’ artistic *credo*). As far as Kafka and

Musil are concerned, a comparison between their styles of writing (and therefore modes of perception) and Wittgenstein's would certainly be as fruitful as that between his and Lichtenberg's; and the more revealing because there can be no question of influence beyond the anonymous and peculiarly Austrian dispensations of the *Zeitgeist*, which even suggests that there is a family resemblance between the logical structures, the motives and intentions, of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and those of Schönberg's musical theory—for Schönberg too is guided by the conviction that the "language" of his medium, music, has to be raised to that level of logical necessity which would eliminate all subjective accidents. It is in such a constellation of minds that Wittgenstein is perhaps truly at home, whereas in the history of British philosophy he may merely "hold an important position." This at least is one way of accounting for the discomforts he suffered from the British philosophical climate and on a philosophical scene which so deceptively appeared to be largely of his own making.

WHAT are the motives and intentions of Wittgenstein's philosophy? What is, beyond and above its own philosophical declarations, the historical meaning of that "revolution" which changed the face of Anglo-Saxon philosophy in the course of Wittgenstein's gradual modification and final abandonment of some of the principles laid down in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*? Has it analogies with the revolutionary effects of other philosophies?

In his book, *My Philosophical Development*, Bertrand Russell engages in a bitter attack on the author of *Philosophical Investigations*, a broadside which, if it is not damaging, is yet illuminating.* The man who was one of the first to recognise Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as a work of philosophical genius (even if he interpreted it too exclusively as the culmination of his own doctrine of "Logical Atomism") says now of the *Philosophical Investigations* that he has not found in it "anything interesting"—"I cannot understand why a whole school finds important wisdom in its pages." He abhors the suggestion, which he believes to be implied in Wittgenstein's later work, "that the world of language can be quite divorced from the world of fact," and suspects that such a view must render philosophical activity trivial ("at best, a slight help to lexicographers, and at worst, an idle tea-table amusement") by insidiously giving to "language an untrammelled freedom which it has never

hitherto enjoyed." He disagrees with the disciples of Wittgenstein most radically when they tend to regard "as an outdated folly the desire to understand the world"—as distinct, it would seem, from their own desire to understand the workings of language. If incomprehension can ever be significant, then this can be said of Lord Russell's estimate of *Philosophical Investigations*. For he certainly knew what he attacked when once upon a time he victoriously fought the domineering influence of Bradley's idealism, and also knew what he welcomed when Wittgenstein first sent him the *Tractatus*. But the later Wittgenstein is to him, on his own confession, "completely unintelligible." This might clearly show which of the two recent changes in philosophical outlook—Russell's dislodging of Bradley, or Wittgenstein's superseding of Wittgenstein—is the more profound.

Bertrand Russell was at intellectual ease with Bradley as well as with the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* because both were, like he himself, philosophers thinking *within* the metaphysical tradition of European philosophy. This goes without saying in the case of Bradley. In the case of the *Tractatus* it may sound alarming. But it is true to say that in its own way—and an exceedingly subtle way it is!—the *Tractatus* participates in a pre-Kantian metaphysical faith: that there is, in however small an area of human understanding, a pre-established correspondence between the cognitive faculties of man and the nature of the world. In other words: what man thinks and feels—and therefore *says*—about the world, has a chance of being *metaphysically* true. At a time when philosophers were still on intimate terms with God, this metaphysical faith found its luminously comprehensive dogma: God is no deceiver; He has created the world and planted in man the desire to understand it; He has also endowed him with perception and rationality, which man cannot help taking for the servants of this desire. Could it have been God's intention to frustrate it from the outset by giving man nothing but the *illusion* of understanding? Is the creature made in His own image to be the eternal dupe of the universe? The simple faith that this cannot be lies at the heart of even the most complex philosophical systems which ever since the 17th century have profoundly affected European thought. This faith is discernible behind the scholastic apparatus of Leibniz's Pre-established Harmony and Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*, those grandiose attempts logically to demonstrate the integral accord between human thought and the true nature of Being. And it is the same faith in reason's power, to "comprehend the wondrous architecture of the world," which inspires the great cosmic discoveries of that age. "Thanks be

* See "Russell and Wittgenstein," in ENCOUNTER, January, pp. 8, 9.

unto you, my Lord, our Creator, for granting me insight into the beauty of your creation." Thus speaks Kepler in concluding *The Harmony of the Cosmos*.

IT IS a far cry from Descartes to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Yet there is an angle of vision from which the *Tractatus* looks like a last victory of the traditional metaphysical faith: a Pyrrhic victory.

Compared to the vast dominions that metaphysical thought had claimed in the past for its settlements of truth, there is now hardly more than a little province of "significant" speech in a vast area of silence. But within this catastrophically narrowed space man can still confidently assert some truths about the world, utter words the meaning of which is not imprisoned within themselves, and speak sentences the significance of which is not wholly embedded within the flux of linguistic commerce and convention. No, there are still words and sentences which are true in an absolute sense, reflect "that which is the case," and picture Reality. Of course, this ideal correspondence between picture and model, thought and world, language and reality, is not easily attained. Its condition is the observance of the strictest logical rules. Thus it will hardly ever occur in the actuality of human speech. Yet it is realised, nevertheless, in the *essence* of language: indeed, it is its *real meaning*. True, in order to speak "essentially" and "significantly," we must leave much unsaid. But once we respond to the "atomic facts" (the bricks of the intelligible world) with "atomic propositions" or their "truth-functional compounds" (concepts which Wittgenstein, considerably modifying and refining them, took over from Russell), our speech, and therefore our thought, is perfectly attuned to Reality: for "Logic is not a theory but a mirror-reflection of the world." And although Wittgenstein courageously insisted that in proposing this relationship between language and fact he himself broke the law governing meaningful propositions, his *Tractatus* is yet built upon a site salvaged from the metaphysical estate of the Pre-established Harmony. The ground, however, was soon to give; and as it gave, Bertrand Russell (for one) saw nothing but collapse. And it is true that from the *Blue Books* onwards Wittgenstein immersed himself in a philosophical enterprise which, if set up against the traditional hopes of philosophers, looks desperate indeed.

For its intention is to cure philosophers of a sickness the name of which may well be—philosophy. His aphorism of the philosopher's treating questions as if they were patients has more than epigrammatic relevance.

III

THE BREAK between *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* is of the same kind as that between Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) and his *Human, All-too-Human* (1879). In both cases it was brought about by the abnegation of metaphysics, the loss of faith in any pre-established correspondence between, on the one hand, the logic of our thought and language, and, on the other, the "logic" of Reality. In the course of those eight years stretching from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *Human, All-too-Human*, Nietzsche came to believe that he had freed himself of this "philosophical prejudice"—which he diagnosed as the prejudice vitiating the whole history of thought—by turning (to use Wittgenstein's obviously autobiographical words from *Investigations*) his "whole examination round. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)" Nietzsche could have written this. Indeed, it might serve as an exact description of what he claimed as his great achievement: to have turned through 180° our whole horizon around the point of our "real need" which "needed" another vision, a need radically different from that

which had been at work in forming the... [traditional] categories of thought; namely, the need not to "recognise" but to subsume, to schematise, and, for the sake of communication and calculation, to manipulate and fabricate similarities and samenesses... No, this was not the work of a pre-existent "Idea"; it happened under the persuasion of usefulness: it was profitable to coarsen and level down things; for only then were they calculable and comfortable... Our categories are "truths" only in so far as they make life possible for us: Euclidean space is also such a purposeful "truth"... The inner compulsion not to contradict these "truths," the instinct to reach our kind of useful conclusions is inbred in us, we almost *are* this instinct. But how naïve to take this as proof of a "truth *per se*." Our inability to contradict proves impotence and not "truth."

It was Nietzsche's declared intention not to follow any longer this "instinct" and thus to cure the philosophical sickness of centuries, just as it was Wittgenstein's to "solve the philosophical problems" by recognising their source in "the functioning of our language"—"in spite of an instinct to misunderstand it." For Nietzsche the truth about man was that he must live without Truth. This was the "real need." The creature that would satisfy it Nietzsche called Superman—and never mind the offensive word, poetically begotten in a great mind by a Darwinian age. In his letters he often used less grandiose, if not

less ambitious, words in speaking of his philosophical goal, words to the effect that

he felt as though he were writing for people who would think in a quite different way, breathe a different air of life from that of present-day men: for people of a different culture. . . .

But this is reported by Professor von Wright as a saying of Wittgenstein's.

IT WOULD, of course, be absurd to represent Wittgenstein as a latter-day Nietzsche, and the comparison is certainly not meant to "manipulate and fabricate similarities and samenesses." The two philosophers could hardly be more different in scope and object, approach and humour, key and tempo of their thought. Yet they have in common something which is of the greatest significance: the creative distrust of *all* those categorical certainties that, as if they were an inherited anatomy, have been allowed to determine the body of traditional thought. Nietzsche and Wittgenstein share the genius for directing doubt into the most unsuspected hiding-places of error and fallacy: namely where, as Wittgenstein puts it, "everything lies open to inspection," where everything is simple and familiar, where, day in day out, man takes things for granted—until suddenly one day just this fact strikes him as the "most striking and most powerful." This may happen on the day when suspicion reaches the notion of "meaning," that is, the idea, held however vaguely, that through some kind of cosmic arrangement, made by God or logic or the spirit of language, a definite meaning had become attached to the world, to life, to facts, or to words. When Nietzsche discovered the "death of God" the universe of meanings collapsed—everything, that is, that was founded upon the transcendent faith, or was leaning against it, or was intertwined with it: in fact, *everything*, as Nietzsche believed; and henceforward everything was in need of revaluation.

With Wittgenstein the decisive change of vision, which occurred between *Tractatus* and *Investigations*, seemed centred upon a more modest event: the vanquishing of the belief in a categorical logic of language, and hence in a categorically harmonious relationship between words and world. But the event behind the event was of the same magnitude. It entailed the same crisis of metaphysical confidence that, with some metaphysically more fanatical Germans and Frenchmen, leads to the great perversion of metaphysics: the lost belief in any rationally reliable dealings with Reality was replaced by the notion that (on the contrary) it was a Pre-established Absurdity which determined the relationship between the intellectual constitution of man and

the true constitution of the world. Nietzsche was the first to conceive of such a possibility. After him European art and literature excelled in showing man and world labouring under the tragic or melancholy or grotesque or hilarious compulsion to make nonsense of each other. And there is a historical sense in which the two extremes of contemporary philosophising—Heidegger's tortuous metaphysical probings into language and Wittgenstein's absorption in language-games (and some of the examples he chooses reveal an almost Thurber-like talent for absurd and grotesque inventions)—can be seen as two aspects of the same intention: to track down to their source in language and there to correct the absurdities of the human endeavour to speak the truth. It is an intention which was by no means alien to Nietzsche. Certainly, his universal suspicion did not spare language, and some of his utterances on the subject are almost literally indistinguishable from Wittgenstein's.

Very early in his philosophical life, Nietzsche knew that he "who finds language interesting in itself has a mind different from him who only regards it as a medium of thought," and he left no doubt which of the two he regarded as the more *philosophical* mind: "Language is something all-too-familiar to us; therefore it needs a philosopher to be struck by it." This is Nietzsche's way of saying the same as Wittgenstein when he discovered that "the most important aspects of things are hidden from us by virtue of their simplicity and familiarity." Or when some time later Nietzsche found that "the philosopher is caught in the net of *Language*," he meant much the same as Wittgenstein who, referring to his own *Tractatus*, said: "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably." Indeed, Nietzsche sounds as if he had in mind the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* when he speaks of the conclusion of a primitive metaphysical peace which once upon a time fixed "what henceforward is to be called truth": "A universally valid and compelling notation of facts is invented and the legislation of language issues into the principal rules for truth"—in the manner, precisely, of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "To give the essence of proposition means to give the essence of all description, therefore the essence of the world." But Nietzsche asks: "Is language the adequate expression for all realities?" And soon he was to be still surer that it was not. On the contrary, the grammatical and syntactical order of language, its subjects, predicates, objects, causal and conditional connections, were "the petrified fallacies of reason" which continued to exercise their "seductive spell" upon our intelligence.

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

This last aphorism is by Wittgenstein; but it would be impossible to guess where Nietzsche ends and Wittgenstein begins.

IV

ONE of Wittgenstein's aphorisms (unfortunately mistranslated by Miss Anscombe—a rare flaw in her work) runs as follows:

Philosophy results in the discovery of one or another piece of simple nonsense, and in bruises which the understanding has suffered by bumping its head against the limits of language. They, the bruises, make us see the value of that discovery.*

And in one of the jottings of his late years Nietzsche wrote under the heading FUNDAMENTAL SOLUTION:

Language is founded upon the most naïve prejudices. . . . We read contradictions and problems into everything because we *think only* within the forms of language. . . . *We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language*; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit. . . . *All rational thought is interpretation in accordance with a *schizis* which we cannot throw off.*

Yet neither Nietzsche nor Wittgenstein "ceased to think." In Nietzsche's thought, the persistent misgiving that the established conventions of philosophical language did not cater for our "real" intellectual needs was only one facet of his central thesis: with the death of God, with the silencing of that Word which was at the beginning, *all* certainties of faith, belief, metaphysics, morality, and knowledge had come to an end, and henceforward man was under the terrible compulsion of absolute freedom. His choice was that of either creating, with the surpassing creativity of the Creator, his own world, or of spiritually perishing. For the world *as it is* has neither meaning nor value. Meaning and value must be *given* to it: by God or by man himself. If God is dead and man fails, then nothing in this world has any value and our own language deceives us with all its ancient intimations of higher meanings.

In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.

* And this is one of Karl Kraus' aphorisms on language: "If I cannot get further, this is because I have banged my head against the wall of language. Then, with my head bleeding, I withdraw. And want to go on."

These sentences from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* might have been invented by Nietzsche—and many like these were in fact invented by him—when in *The Will to Power*, like an inspired actor, like an initiate, he spoke the mind of European Nihilism which he so urgently desired to overcome.

Wittgenstein's *Investigations* would be as trivial as Bertrand Russell thinks they are, were their infinite intellectual patience not informed with a sense of urgency not altogether unlike that which inspired Nietzsche's prophetic impetuosity. To bring some light into "the darkness of this time"—this was the hesitant hope of the author of *Philosophical Investigations*. This hope, like all true hope, was founded upon the paradox of faith: the faith despite doubt. It was, with Wittgenstein, the faith in language; and language retained for him its all-importance even after it had ceased to be the mirror of Reality. For when all the dangers of language are exposed, when the captivity is shown in which our minds are held by its metaphors, when the witchcraft is denounced with which it assails our intelligence, there still remains the ineradicable trust in its ultimate wisdom and its power to heal our disease.

NOTHING in Wittgenstein's work is more vulnerable to further questioning than this trust; indeed, its very intellectual vulnerability establishes it as his faith. Often he speaks of language with utmost vagueness:

When philosophers use a word—"knowledge," "being," "object," "I," "proposition," "name"—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it has its home?*

One may well ask, who, with language speaking in a hundred tongues through our literatures, dialects, social classes, journals, and newspapers, establishes this "actual use"? Shakespeare? Donne? James Joyce? the *Oxford Dictionary*? the College Porter? the local M.P.? the habitual reader of the *News of the World*? And when Wittgenstein says: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday usage," or "When I talk about language. . . I must speak the language of every day," one cannot help being struck by the homely imprecision of this programme. One wonders why he should not rather wish to bring language back to Lichtenberg's or Gottfried Keller's usage, or to the speech of Karl Kraus,

* Was it the vagueness of this which induced the translator to use "language-game" where the German is simply "*Sprache*"?

which was in fact much closer to Wittgenstein's own than that of a Vienna or London "everyday." Or again, he says:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. . . . It leaves everything as it is.

or

We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place.

But might we not be "held captive" by a picture "actually used" in language, and can we be sure that "actual usage" will never "bewitch our intelligence"? And if it does, how are we to loosen its grip without "explaining" its nature? (And I am using "explain" here as it is "actually used.")

Or is Schopenhauer, who so indignantly "interfered" with the "actual use" made of language by those who corruptly spoke and printed it every day, guilty of errors of judgment *because* he wrote a prose modelled on the example of a classical literary tradition as remote as can be from the everyday traffic in words?

And what is the "everything" that philosophy "leaves as it is"? Not, surely, the manner of thinking and uttering thoughts. Many philosophers, like all great poets, have deeply affected perception, and therefore language, and therefore have changed our world: Plato, for instance, or Descartes, or Rousseau, or Kant, or Nietzsche, or indeed Wittgenstein.

WHEN Wittgenstein speaks of the language of every day, he does not mean what "actual usage" would suggest he means. In fact, he means Language—something that is of supreme importance as the repository of human community, understanding, knowledge, and wisdom. What he calls "actual usage" and "the language of every day" is hardly more than the uneasy concession made by an absolute faith to the demand for an empirical criterion, or else his manner of disdainfully denouncing the violations of language of which many a philosopher has been guilty in his pursuit of spurious heights and depths. With two aphorisms of *Investigations* above all, Wittgenstein can be observed in the very act of avoiding, in the manner of an empiricist fighting shy of metaphysics, the open declaration of his all-but-metaphysical belief in language:

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language, and their significance is as great as the importance of our language.

How true; and yet how disquieting is the word "misinterpretation"! What does it mean? It seems to suggest that there is, or can be, an absolutely reliable rule for deciding, philosophically or philologically, what is a correct and what is a false interpretation of every particular "form of language." But no such standard can apply to a medium like language, which has no little share in the allusiveness of dance and gesture, the elusiveness of music, the ungrammatical extravagancies of life itself. For no sooner have we left the field of logic, grammar, and syntax, than we have entered the sphere of *æsthetics* where we no longer wonder whether a writer has "interpreted" words correctly, but rather whether he has used them well or badly; and this will be a matter not of any power to interpret but of something more adequately described as the feeling for language, a feeling which has its ground in sensibility or genius, and has been formed by tradition—that is, by the particular "form of life" within which alone, according to Wittgenstein, language has its meaning.

"To imagine a language," he says, "means to imagine a form of life."

That this is so, is one of Wittgenstein's most striking realisations; and indeed it not only renders the "rules of language," as he well knew, logically unmanageable but also makes their "description," which he hoped for, a task that could not be fulfilled by even a legion of Prousts and Wittgensteins. For what is *the* "form of life" which, in one language, is shared by Goethe and Hitler, or, in another, by Keats and the *Daily Mirror*?

THE word "misinterpretation" in the quoted aphorism conveys yet another suggestion which is even more erroneous; namely, that depth is a by-product of error. But if words like depth and truth and error are to have any meaning at all, then truth is deeper than falsehood. Indeed the suggestion is withdrawn by the aphorism's very form and rhythm which unmistakably intimate that language itself, not merely its misinterpretation, has the character of depth, and that the disquietudes which arise from it are as deep as is the peace which sometimes it may bring: through a great writer and even, rarely, through a philosopher whose thought is deeply rooted in the mystery of words—or, to use the terms of that other aphorism of Wittgenstein: in the ground of language. For this second aphorism comes close to revealing his metaphysical secret.

"What is it that gives to our investigation its importance," he asks there with the voice of an imaginary interlocutor, "since it seems only to destroy everything interesting? (As it were all

the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.)" And he replies: "What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand."

The ground of language—it is a transparent metaphor. And what shines through it is a mystical light, even if there is nothing left for it to illumine but a philosophical landscape most thoughtfully cleared of all the fragile and disfiguring edifices built throughout the ages by the victims of linguistic delusion, such as Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, or Immanuel Kant.

It is an ending a little like that of Goethe's *Tasso* where a man, a poet, with all his certainties shattered, grasps hold of his last possession: language. It has remained an open question of literary interpretation whether that ending spells an ultimately happy consummation or a tragedy. But so far as philosophy is concerned, this enters with Wittgenstein the stage which has been reached in this epoch by many another creative

activity of the human mind—by poetry, for instance, or by painting: the stage where every act of creation is inseparable from the critique of its medium, and every work, intensely reflecting upon itself, looks like the embodied doubt of its own possibility. It is a predicament which Nietzsche has uncannily anticipated in a sketch entitled "A Fragment from the History of Posterity." Its subject is "The Last Philosopher." Having lost faith in a communicable world, he is imprisoned within his own self-consciousness. Nothing speaks to him any more—except his own speech; and, deprived of any authority from a divinely ordered universe, it is only about his speech that his speech can speak with a measure of philosophical assurance.

Wittgenstein says in *Philosophical Investigations*: "What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." But who asks? Who answers? And who is the fly? It is an unholy trinity; the three are one. This way lies no way out. This way lie only fly-bottles, and more and more fly-bottles.

Song

As the images pull
The fog of distance apart,
Under that steep-browed
Cliff with the echoes calling
I see the water's light-blue sweep.

The lake is clear and motionless,
In it in depth upon depth
Is reflected the changing cloud,
The swaying pines, the world.
My heart is like the lake, full.

Throw in a stone, it drops
Through the reflected world,
Out of sight, still falling
To darkness, the water heart.
My love is like the lake, deep.

Robert Conquest