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The View Atop the Ladder: Wittgenstein's Early Aesthetics

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WITTGENSTEIN AND HIS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT
PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUM
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WITTGENSTEIN UND SEIN EINFLUSS AUF DIE GEGENWÄRTIGE PHILOSOPHIE
AKTEN DES 2. INTERNATIONALEN WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUMS
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HÖLDER - PICHLER - TEMPSKY
In a letter to Ludwig Ficker, editor of Der Brenner, a man whose aid he was enlisting in attempting to publish the Tractatus and through whom he anonymously dispersed his fortune for the aid of Austrian authors and artists such as Kokoschka, Trakl, and Rilke, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes:

You see I am quite sure that you will not get that much out of reading it. Because you won’t understand it, its subject matter will seem quite alien to you. But it isn’t really alien to you, because the book’s point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now, but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then was this: my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just gassing (schwefeln), I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it. And for that reason, unless I am very much mistaken, the book will say a great deal that you yourself want to say. Only perhaps you won’t see that it is said in the book... (Prototractatus, p. 15)

The purpose of the book, then, is to draw limits so that what is most important, what Wittgenstein calls the higher (das Höhere) and the mystical (das Mystische) can be known although they cannot be said. In his letter to Ficker, Wittgenstein says he draws limits to the ethical (and the aesthetic) from "the inside as it were." What, one might ask, is the difference between drawing limits from the inside and from the outside? An answer might be that in drawing from the inside one must know and experience both sides of the limit. A person must have experience of ethics and of aesthetics as well as of logic and mathematics and then know what to leave in the realm of the real but indescribable. To draw the limit from the outside would seem to be the placing of a boundary from the standpoint of logic alone and then saying everything beyond the boundary was beyond the possibility of meaning (Sinnlosigkeit) and was in fact a kind of nonsense.

In the writings of G. C. Lichtenberg, a genius greatly admired by Ludwig Wittgenstein as well as by Goethe, Mörike, Hebbel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, von Hofmannsthal, Kraus, and Musil, the Aphorist quotes a letter from a Herr S. to Herr Ljunberg. Speaking of the nonsense of poetic language that is overly ornamental, he says in part:


After citing this letter Lichtenberg adds the footnote that it was written at the time "when the sap was beginning to rise up in the trees", when there was "viel Nonsense, was im Rausch Vernunft zu sein schien." Certainly this kind of "roaring" or "sap-rising" would have been most uncongenial to Wittgenstein’s classical sense of balance. His basic conservativism favored not the poem of Romantic enthusiasms, but the poem of balanced feeling and thought, the music of measured emotion; i.e., Mörike and Goethe, Schumann and espe-
cially Schubert.

Returning to Lichtenberg's earlier citation one must say that the way to cure poetic 'nonsense' is not an alternative between "being silent or learning better German." Learning better German, French, Polish or English will not help. All poetry, in one sense, is nonsense. It is nonsense in that it cannot be described. Yet there is a difference between good and bad poetry. We should have to render Lichtenberg's use of 'nonsense' in the above citation as 'foolishness'. This can't be said of the work of Goethe, Mörike or Schubert. That there is, however, a nonsense of the non-intelligible is also attested to by Lichtenberg when he says it cannot be denied that "the word nonsense if spoken properly is no less bothersome than chaos or eternity and that one feels a kind of convulsion which flows from a flying away of human understanding." (Aphorismen, S. 90) That there is, moreover, this kind of nonsense understood as the frighteningly unthinkable, the stupefying, or the merely ludicrous is not to be denied. The distinction that Wittgenstein is making is a technical one and differs from those other meanings of nonsense. The statements of logical language are nonsense (or, nonsense) but they are important nonsense. They are on a different level and cannot stand beside empirical statements; mathematical statements are nonsense in a similar way, but not in the same way in which, say, Lewis Carroll's verses are nonsense. Metaphysical statements, though, are nonsense (foolishness?) in that one cannot give a description of the totality of the world. Wittgenstein tells us that if persons come to us with such 'descriptions' we merely show them where they have used their signs wrongly. (TLP 6.54)

There is, however, a tradition concerning wisdom that dominated Germanic language during the whole age of Goethe. This is excellently exemplified in Goethe's "Weissagungen des Bakis." Goethe often presented comments in cryptic and epigrammatic form. His mystifications, if they seemed mystification, always contained the means for solution to those who would search carefully. In his "Alex and Dora" Goethe tells us:

... So legt der Dichter ein Ratsel,  
Künstlich mit Worten verschränkt, oft der Versammlung ins Ohr.  
Jeden freuet die selte, der zierlichen Bilder Verküpfung,  
Aber noch fehlet das Wort, das die Bedeutung verwahrt.  
Ist es endlich entdeckt, dann heitert sich jedes Gemüt auf  
Und erblickt im Gedicht doppelt erfreulichen Sinn.

That Wittgenstein was very sensitive to this meaning of riddle (Rätsel) is not to be doubted. In his corrections and notes sent to C. K. Ogden for the Tractatus, he points out that Rätsel has two senses in German, a lesser meaning and a higher meaning. The lesser meaning is found in puzzles, e.g., why is a raven like a writing desk? The higher meaning is found in expressions such as the "Rätsel des menschlichen Lebens" or the "Rätsel der Existenz der Welt." He wishes it to be used in the 'higher' sense to avoid anything profane or frivolous in the word. Here the important use of "Rätsel" in this way occurs at Tractatus 6.4312...

The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time. (It is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required.)

Another of the Rätsel of Goethe from the "Weissagungen des Bakis" offers some interesting advice.

Schlüssel liegen im Buche zerstreut, das Rätsel zu lösen;  
Denn der prophetische Geist ruft den Verständigen an.  
Jene nenn' ich die Klügsten, die leicht sich vom Tage belehren  
Lassen; es bringt wohl der Tag Rätsel und Lösung zugleich.

Keys to solving the riddle of the book are scattered throughout the book. This means the solution of the various parts must be approached from a knowledge of the whole, i.e., after repeated readings of the whole and after picking up various keys wherever they may appear. Wittgenstein had aided Ficker with such a skeleton key: "My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written." This procedure, then, is the drawing of the limits from the inside and from the top of the ladder, so to speak. (Vide, TLP 6.54).
The ethical and aesthetic meanings must lie outside the actually written; they are pointed to by it. The locus of worth lies beyond the sayable. "The sense of the world must lie outside the world . . . if there is any value that does have value, it must be outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case . . ." (TLP 6.41) This leads to the conclusion:

And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing of what is higher. (TLP 6.42)

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.) (TLP 6.421)

It is this fusion of values plus the unsayable nature of what a poem or a piece of music means that sets the tone for Wittgenstein’s own aesthetic beliefs. A good work was known by a kind of intuition achieved by listening to or reading the work, which could not be explained but only praised by words such as 'uncanny', 'wonderful', 'great', 'having a fantastic greatness' and by attending to it repeatedly; and a good work was characterized by its clarity of style and expression, its lack of frivolity, and its spareness of ornamentation.

In a letter of 9 April 1917 to his friend Paul Engelmann, Ludwig Wittgenstein says in a context of Uhland and Brahms:


That which is unsayable is actually 'heard' within what is said. This letter also binds Wittgenstein to the tradition of the poet Lessing. In Ernst und Falk, a series of five dialogues about Freemasonry, Lessing said there is a secret (Geheimnis) at the heart of Freemasonry. One can know it, but one cannot say it. By participating in it, however, one may catch glimpses of it. Or as the Tractatus puts it:

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words (Unaussprechlichches). They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical (es ist das Mystische). (TLP 6.522)

Lessing at another time wishing to convert a lady and tell her of the place of the body in religion had her meet him in an art gallery, and pointing at the pictures exclaimed: "There, there is what I mean!"

Writing to G. E. Moore in August of 1945, Wittgenstein could only say of that work he judged to be one of the finest (the Schubert Quartet in C Major, op. 163) that it possessed "a fantastic greatness." Writing to Bertrand Russell from Skjolden, Norway, in January of 1914 he speaks of Mörike as being "a great poet" and his poems as being "part of the best that we have." What Wittgenstein truly appreciated in Schubert was no doubt that perfect blending of classicism and romanticism, that beauty with lack of excess. It was this quality of seriousness of purpose and exclusion of non-functional ornament that drew the philosopher to kindred spirits like Karl Kraus, Adolph Loos, and Oscar Kokoschka. It was this quality that brought him to an appreciation of Uhland’s poetry and of Hebbel’s, and it was Uhland’s simplicity that led Hebbel to the power of reducing everything to ‘das Einfach-Menschliche.’

He enjoyed the plays of Johann Nestroy (from whom he took the motto for the Philosophical Investigations) and probably Ferdinand Raimund whose satirical plays hit at the pretension of a ‘gassing’ bourgeoisie, as did the incisive journalism of Karl Kraus. Whereas Wittgenstein admired the aesthetic logic of Adolph Loos and patterned his design of the house in Vienna constructed for his sister, Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein after it, one wonders what might he have thought of some of the seeming excesses of men such as von Hofmannsthal, or even Gustav Klimt.

Although Hugo von Hofmannsthal held some views not unlike Ludwig Wittgenstein’s regarding "das Mystische," he would probably have been thought too ornate and sensationalist. In the case of Klimt, who had done a fine portrait of Wittgenstein’s sister, Margarethe, I think he would have been somewhat acceptable, as much of his ornamentation was integral
to his manner of presentation. I cannot but look at the book reproduction of Klimt's "Philosophie," one of the main ceiling panels created for the University of Vienna, though never installed, and wonder if in some way it did not represent the ladder of *Tractatus* 6. 54 — its ascending bodies contrasted to the stern face of Fräulein Philosophie off to the side of them. The ladder must lead past philosophy to the "höheren Mystizism der Kunst" as the poet Novalis called it. Klimt's ladder was destroyed in World War II in Olmütz; Wittgenstein said his should be thrown away after one has climbed it.
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