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PORTRAITS OF WITTGENSTEIN

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By

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Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993) is one of the very few films made about a philosopher's life. Almost a parody of a late 20th century art-house movie, it contains a mimetic performance by Karl Johnson in the title role, plus cameos by Michael Gough (Bertrand Russell) and the ubiquitous Tilda Swinton (Russell's lover, Ottoline Morrell). There is a green Martian (played by Nabil Shaban) who quizzes the young Ludwig Wittgenstein, and a collection of handsome young men sitting on deckchairs, looking puzzled and gazing adoringly at the Master. The action, such as it is, takes place against a theatrical black background with a few props, and the whole thing lasts a brisk 70 minutes.

Among all 20th century thinkers, Ludwig Wittgenstein stands out as the one whose life fascinates almost as much as his work does. Even the life of Martin Heidegger, with his controversial Nazi connections and his later attempt to live the authentic life of a peasant, looks dull and suburban by comparison. Wittgenstein was born in 1889 into one of Austria's richest families. His father was a self-made industrialist who built his fortune in iron and steel; his mother came from a Prague Jewish family. Ludwig was the youngest of eight siblings — three sisters and four brothers. Tragedy hit the family again and again. Three of Ludwig's brothers committed suicide. The fourth, Paul, was a concert pianist who lost his right arm in the First World War and later commissioned works for the left hand from Ravel, Prokofiev, Hindemith and Erich Korngold. (Music figured significantly in the

family's life: Brahms, Mahler and Richard Strauss were among the composers who heard their works performed at the Wittgenstein house.) Ludwig originally studied engineering, first in Berlin and then in Manchester, where he became interested in the design of aeroplane propellers. At this time he developed a deep interest in mathematics and its foundations. Having studied the ground-breaking works of philosophy of mathematics by Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege, he visited Frege in Jena, and Frege advised him to study with Russell in Cambridge. Wittgenstein turned up, unannounced, at Russell's rooms in Trinity College in October 1911, and discussed philosophy with Russell regularly over the next few months. Russell wrote to Ottoline Morrell that his "Austrian engineer" was "rather good" but "very argumentative and tiresome". But Russell was sufficiently impressed to accept Wittgenstein as a student at Cambridge in 1912. Wittgenstein had a huge impact on the intellectual scene there, but throughout his life he claimed to dislike Cambridge and preferred to spend time writing and thinking in remote, isolated places (Norway and Ireland were favourites).

After the death of his father in 1913, Wittgenstein inherited a huge fortune, and in the next few years he gave it all away. When war broke out he enlisted in the Austrian Imperial army, and fought on the Eastern front in Galicia and in Italy, where he was captured and spent time in a POW camp. During the war he worked on the book that was to become the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the only philosophical book he published in his lifetime (it was published in German in 1921 and the English translation appeared in 1922). Believing that this short and lapidary work had solved the remaining problems of philosophy, Wittgenstein abandoned the subject and trained as a primary schoolteacher in Vienna. He then taught for some years in a small rural village in Lower Austria. While there he was visited by the brilliant young Cambridge philosopher Frank Ramsey, and they discussed philosophy constantly. He left his teaching post under something of a cloud — he had hit one of his pupils so hard that she lost consciousness — and returned to Vienna

in 1926, where he designed a house for one of his sisters, Margarete Stonborough. The house, a modernist masterpiece, is now owned by the Bulgarian government (they allow visitors; it is well worth seeing). The philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright wrote that “its beauty is of the same simple and static kind that belongs to the sentences of the *Tractatus*”.

Partly as a result of the conversations with Ramsey, Wittgenstein found himself drawn back into philosophy and returned to Cambridge in 1929. Needing a qualification in order to work there, he submitted the *Tractatus* — now a famous work which had already influenced the direction of 20th century philosophy — as a PhD thesis. One of the examiners, G.E. Moore, wrote in his report, “It is my personal opinion that Mr Wittgenstein’s thesis is a work of genius but, even if it is not, it is well above the standard required for the Cambridge degree of Doctor of Philosophy”. Wittgenstein began teaching at Cambridge in his unorthodox way — from contemporary accounts, Jarman’s representation of it, deckchairs included, is quite accurate — and he produced in the next twenty years a wholly new philosophy which superseded and replaced the doctrines of the *Tractatus*. This work was finally published after his death as the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). During the war Wittgenstein worked in various jobs at Guy’s Hospital in London, and at a hospital in Newcastle. Wittgenstein found academic life in Cambridge not to his taste, and made frequent trips to Swansea to visit friends, and to Ireland, where he worked constantly on his philosophy in remote parts of the Irish countryside. He eventually resigned his professorship at Cambridge in 1947. In 1949 he was diagnosed with cancer, and he died in 1951 in the house of his doctor, Dr Bevan, aged 62. His last words, according to Mrs Bevan, were “tell them I’ve had a wonderful life”.

Derek Jarman’s film was apparently an artistic success (it gets an impressive 83% of critics’ support and 76% of audience support, on the popular film review aggregator [rottentomatoes.com](https://www.rottentomatoes.com)). From a commercial perspective, though, the film might be seen as a

missed opportunity. Imagine what Peter Jackson or Steven Spielberg would have made of Wittgenstein's life: the high culture of imperial Vienna, the war scenes, the remote and beautiful parts of Ireland, Norway and the Austrian Alps, the Bloomsbury culture of early 20th century Cambridge, the wit and chit-chat of Maynard Keynes and Russell, the stark and impressive house in Vienna, Wittgenstein's passionate devotion to a number of younger men, and his own very public struggle to find contentment. A high production-values movie of the life of Wittgenstein practically writes itself. Perhaps one day someone will make it.

In the years since his death in 1951, many of those who knew Wittgenstein wrote memoirs or descriptions of their encounters with him. These range from a few paragraphs describing the briefest meeting, to full and often insightful analyses of his character by close friends. Many of these memoirs have been published, in a wide variety of places, some more obscure than others. In 1999 F.A. Flowers edited a collection of some of these writings in a volume called *Portraits of Wittgenstein*. Greatly expanded with much additional material, the book has now been republished by Bloomsbury, with Ian Ground as co-editor. It is a wonderful project — endlessly fascinating for philosophers, but it will also appeal to anyone with the most casual interest in 20th century intellectual history. This is the book everyone needs who is interested in Wittgenstein the man.

Many of the contributors to this book are philosophers — including such eminent names as G.E.M. Anscombe, A.J. Ayer, Peter Geach, G.E. Moore and Karl Popper — and others are intellectuals or academics of other kinds — Freeman Dyson, F.R. Leavis and Iris Murdoch, for example. All testify to sheer force of Wittgenstein's personality. "The strongest impression any man ever made on me" von Wright recorded in his diary in 1939 after meeting Wittgenstein. The poignant memoir by Norman Malcolm — one of Wittgenstein's students who had a successful career teaching at Cornell University — is already well-known to philosophers. As in many of these pieces, one thing that comes

across in Malcolm's memoir is how incredibly difficult Wittgenstein was. "It was always a strain to be with Wittgenstein", Malcolm writes, "not only were the intellectual demands of his conversation very great, but there was also his severity, his ruthless judgements, his tendency to be censorious, and his depression". Von Wright concurs: "each conversation with Wittgenstein was living through the day of judgement. It was terrible". Wittgenstein's dismissal of other philosophers was well-known. He once remarked to Leavis that G.E. Moore "shows how far a man go who has absolutely no intelligence whatever". Fania Pascal, a Ukranian Jewish emigrée who lived in Cambridge and taught Wittgenstein Russian, comments in her memoir that "Wittgenstein had a great capacity to wound" but "he could not possibly be aware of the harshness, amounting to cruelty, with which he hit out, never pulling his punches. Nor would he know the fear he inspired in people".

Wittgenstein's influence on his students' lives went beyond that of the usual committed teacher. He himself had doubts about the value of the academic life and conveyed these his students, often persuading them to give up their studies to do something he saw as more worthwhile. Francis Skinner, a shy, intense young man who according to Pascal was "the constant companion of Wittgenstein throughout most of the 1930s", was a brilliant mathematician. Wittgenstein persuaded Skinner to give up mathematics and become an apprentice in a scientific instruments company. Skinner "would never be happy in academic life" Wittgenstein told Pascal; she, on the other hand, wondered whether Wittgenstein had the right to interfere in the lives of his friends and students to such an extent. And yet despite his overbearing and judgmental personality, Wittgenstein inspired love, loyalty and devotion among his students and friends, philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

What, if anything, do these portraits tell us about Wittgenstein's philosophy itself? It is normal in academic philosophy to separate sharply a philosopher's life from their work. Where the lives of philosophers are thought to be philosophically relevant, this is usually

because there is thought to be some connection between one part of their worldview and another. So, to take a striking 20th century example: the worry about Heidegger's Nazism arises because his philosophy is thought to appeal to ideas like *Volk* (for example) which resonate with the Nazi ideology. By contrast, the anti-Semitic remarks in Frege's personal correspondence are not relevant to understanding his ideas about logic and truth, since (unwholesome as they may be) they have no real connection with these ideas.

The situation with Wittgenstein is different. Here the question that fascinates people is not that of the relationship between his different views on various subjects — philosophical and non-philosophical — but the relationship between his philosophy and his life itself. In 2001 a volume of scholarly essays was published by Cambridge University Press on the very question of the relationship between philosophy and biography, with special reference to Wittgenstein. One theme which was explored in depth in Ray Monk's classic 1991 biography is how naturally Wittgenstein falls into the category of "genius", how he aspired to this category himself, and how this influenced his philosophical development. Ramsey wrote in 1929 that "Mr Wittgenstein is a philosophic genius of a different order from any one else I know"; and according to Leavis, Wittgenstein's arrogance was "a manifestation of the essential quality of genius". This palpable impression of genius may go some way to explain how Wittgenstein's charisma shaped the responses of those who knew him. The philosopher J.N. Findlay commented that "the personal impact of Wittgenstein is indispensable to the understanding of his influence... his personality, like his writing, made an immense aesthetic impact, so great indeed that one was tempted to confuse beauty with clarity and strangely luminous expression with perspicuous truth".

But it seems to me that there is another, deeper way in which Wittgenstein's life connects with his philosophy, which has to do with the way he himself dramatised his own personal struggle with philosophy in his later writings. The *Philosophical Investigations* is

written in a personal, at times almost confessional, mode. A lot of it has the form of a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor (not entirely unlike the Martian in Jarman's film). Wittgenstein talks about what *his* own aim is in philosophy and presents himself as almost emotionally engaged with the problems he is discussing. "The real discovery" he writes "is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. The one which brings philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question". The proper way to deal with such "torment" is to undergo a kind of therapy; and it is this therapeutic conception of philosophy which is sometimes seen as one of Wittgenstein's principal intellectual legacies. Philosophy is not a straightforwardly intellectual endeavour in pursuit of the truth, but a struggle with the confusions that our language and thinking throw up. It is comparable to the treatment of an intellectual "disease"; or, in one of Wittgenstein's famous phrases, philosophy is a battle against the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language".

It is here, I think, where the connection between Wittgenstein's life and his philosophy comes in. The metaphors of disease, therapy and bewitchment — and indeed his whole life itself — testify to a conception of philosophy as a struggle which should occupy your whole being. Wittgenstein lay awake at night, he reported to Russell, worrying about logic and his "sins". The combination of the moral and philosophical struggle was expressed in a letter to his friend Paul Englemann as early as 1917: "I am working reasonably hard and I wish I were a better man and had a better mind. These two things are really one and the same. — God help me". On Wittgenstein's conception of how to philosophise, philosophy is something that at once seduces and repels, and the only real achievement in philosophy is to show how you no longer need it.

There is, of course, an alternative way of looking at things. On this alternative, philosophy is a systematic intellectual discipline; an impartial, dispassionate attempt to answer certain abstract questions which have arisen in the history of human thought in

various forms, provoked by various kinds of speculation. Looked at like this, to ask whether time flows (for example) is not to suffer from any kind of intellectual disease which is in need of therapy; it is not to have your intelligence bewitched by language; it is not to misunderstand what Wittgenstein called the “grammar” of the word *time*. Rather, it is to grapple with questions that are at once simple to grasp — what is it for some things to be in the past, and some in the future? — and also of great complexity — how our actual temporal experience of the world is related to the picture of time and space that we have acquired from physics. And of course the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question too; but this is because philosophy aims to be a foundational discipline, and the foundations of philosophy are as much in question as the foundations of other forms of knowledge. That is, after all, what it means to be a foundational discipline.

Wittgenstein’s tendency to see philosophy as a personal struggle, as his individual battle against the bewitchment of his intelligence, is surely what accounts for his utterly unhistorical approach to the subject. Wittgenstein himself would tell people — even with something that seemed like pride — how few of the great philosophers of the past he had read. “Wittgenstein assured me (laughing) that no assistant lecturer in philosophy in the country had read fewer books on philosophy than he had” writes his student Karl Britton, “he said he had never read a single word of Aristotle... he could not sit down and read Hume — he knew far too much about the subject of Hume’s writings to find this anything but a torture”. Few philosophers of the past are discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and when they are mentioned it is usually as an example of some general tendency of human thought towards error, stripped of any historical context, or as an instance of one of Wittgenstein’s former views. This tendency has been reinforced by some of his followers: philosophical problems are frequently declared to be the result of intellectual confusions, but sometimes these supposed confusions are so banal that it is quite incredible that any serious thinker could be taken in by them.

What is so obviously missing from Wittgenstein's later philosophy, then, is any kind of historical conception of the problems of philosophy. Yet surely some such conception is needed. It may be that some philosophical problems arise because of linguistic or conceptual confusions entrenched by the way we speak, and maybe some arise because we are psychologically locked into a certain way of looking at the phenomena (in Wittgenstein's famous phrase, "a picture held us captive"). But most problems have actually arisen as a result of specific historical circumstances and contingencies — for example, because of the need to defend or articulate religious ideas, or from challenges from science, or as a result of the speculations of other philosophers of the past, or because of paradoxes or conflicts in ordinary thinking about the world. Getting to grips with a philosophical question is partly a matter of understanding where the problem comes from — but this requires us to think, to some extent, about the historical construction of the problem, and to take seriously the deeply contingent nature of the philosophical tradition in which we find ourselves.

There are many insights in the later work of Wittgenstein, but the fundamentally Romantic conception of philosophy at its heart — that of a personal struggle, demanding a kind of therapy against the perversion of the intellect by language — ignores by its very nature the historical conditions which bring philosophy into being. It is also not one which fits well with the way philosophy has developed as a largely academic endeavour in Europe since the 19th century, as Wittgenstein himself seemed to appreciate. These days being a philosopher is essentially connected with teaching students as part of a broadly humanistic education, and to explain philosophical problems to students it is necessary to give them some understanding of where these problems come from. Thinking of philosophy as a struggle is pedagogically problematic, to put it mildly. This difficulty already manifested itself in the behaviour of Wittgenstein's own students. The Cambridge logician W.E. Johnson reported plaintively to Leavis: "Here are these young men... they go to

Wittgenstein's lectures in their first week; and at the end of their three or four years they go down, and never know that some other people have done work in that field: there's Venn, there's Keynes, there is even my own work".

More than sixty years after his death, Wittgenstein's compelling literary style, his commanding personality and his extraordinary life still lead some philosophers into an uncritical attitude towards his work and his conception of philosophy. To separate the fascination of his life and character — so richly documented here in this fine volume — from the conception of philosophy it embodies must be the first step towards a proper evaluation of his philosophical achievement.