

WITTGENSTEIN Y EL MODERNISMO:
UN ENCUENTRO EN LA TERCERA FASE

Wittgenstein and Modernism: An Encounter of the Third Kind

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Abstract

In earlier works, the author has twice discussed Wittgenstein's work in relation to the modernist Geist that prevailed during his time. In the first, it was argued that the *Tractatus* was a modernist cornerstone, and then the idea was advanced that Wittgenstein's later thought exemplified an essential modernist trait. Without contradicting these claims, a criticism is now offered on the aestheticism crucial to modernism and also to Wittgenstein's thought.

Keywords

Wittgenstein, modernism, *Tractatus*, criticism, aesthetics

Resumen

En el pasado, dos veces trabajé discutiendo sobre el trabajo de Wittgenstein en relación con el *Geist* que prevalecía en su época. Argüí, primero, que el *Tractatus* era una piedra angular y entonces continué la idea de que el último pensamiento de Wittgenstein ejemplificaba un esencial tratado modernista. Sin contradecir estos propósitos, ofrezco ahora una visión crítica del esteticismo crucial para el Modernismo y también para el pensamiento de Wittgenstein.

Palabras clave

Wittgenstein, Modernismo, *Tractatus*, teoría crítica, estética

An autobiographical introduction

Both modernism and Wittgenstein's philosophy are topics to which I find myself incessantly returning: consuming, thinking and reading about modernist art – modernist literature, theatre, visual arts, architecture and music; trying to understand (but also struggle with) the modernist charm, its historical uniqueness and enigmatic power; and reading Wittgenstein (and about him), thinking – or training myself to think – along his lines of thought, resisting him. Wittgenstein's main oeuvre was written in Europe during the heyday of Modernism, and it is quite clear that he was aware of the uniqueness of the historical moment he was active in. His numerous remarks about contemporary art, music and literature, as well as his political insights, certainly attest to this. In the past, I have twice discussed Wittgenstein's work in relation to the modernist *Geist* that prevailed during his time. My first attempt was an elaborate argument, which aimed both at uncovering a deeply entrenched modernist dogma and at presenting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as the clearest expression of modernist philosophy (including that dogma, of course). This argument is the core of my book, *Modernism and the Language of Philosophy*. But as I kept reflecting on the Wittgenstein-modernism issue, I came to embrace a different approach. A volume of essays I had the privilege to edit, entitled *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, offered many perspectives from which the Wittgenstein-modernism linkage was addressed. Through my involved reading of these essays, I came to realize that no clear-cut and definitive analysis could capture that linkage, and that its lack was essential, because both Wittgenstein's oeuvre and modernist artworks show us that in order to gain understanding we need hesitation, instability, doubts, a variety of attempts at articulation and the refusal of tempting (positive or negative) solutions. Approaching the question about Wittgenstein's relation to modernism in this vein emphasizes the *Later Wittgenstein*, rather than the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and offers a softer, more «feminine» line of interpretation to the modernist legacy, which is usually thought of as rather «masculine». These terms, «feminine» and «masculine», are not drawn from either the Wittgensteinian or the modernist core-glossary. They gain their importance and explanatory force from a *post-modernist* perspective. Indeed, the post-modernist view-

point has helped me in my analyses *throughout* my years of reading and loving Wittgenstein and modernism; but in the present, third encounter, I'd particularly like to appeal to some post-modernist insights in order to criticize a notion appealed to by Wittgenstein and the modernist artists and thinkers alike: that of aesthetic sensitivity. My talk will hence consist of necessarily elaborate presentations of my first two encounters with the Wittgenstein-modernism linkage, and then an inconclusive postmodernist musing.

First Encounter

By «modernism» I refer loosely to a movement which united artists, writers and literary critics who worked, roughly, since the end of the 19th Century until the outbreak of the second world war. Notoriously, one of its agreed characterizations is that it defies characterization. But it is quite common to theorists of modernism to identify it by its incessant examination and destabilization of the medium of expression («form») and its role in effecting content. Read thus, as essentially dialectical, self-reflective and self-critical, modernism is philosophical to the core. Yet one of the fundamental ideas adhered to by modernists is the claim that their own works should not be classified as philosophical, but rather be seen as the proper *heir* of traditional philosophy, because the kind of truth *sub specie aeterni* sought by philosophers cannot be *straightforwardly* articulated and hence is better expressed by the arts. In their attempts at articulating this truth, philosophers allegedly use an improper linguistic tool, and as a result they are left devoid of tongue, speechless.

It is crucial to see that the modernist conception of language which left traditional philosophy mute was distrustful towards everyday language as well. A quick mention of Joyce, Beckett, Woolf, Mallarmé, Rilke and also – and significantly – Benjamin reminds us that this is so. Ordinary language, being informational and instrumental in essence, was conceived by modernists as essentially stale and irrelevant for anything *real*. Indeed, for this reason *realism* itself was rejected as fraudulent. Thus Clement Greenberg writes that for modernists, realistic art was taken as illusionist, as one which had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art.¹ Michael Bell, writing on the metaphysics of modernism, goes even further and emphasizes the modernist resistance to *concepts* as such: conceptual and theoretical analyses, he argues, were not seen by modernists as able to convey the kind of multifaceted truth they sought.² Following Nietzsche, any part of language that was conceived a mere passive representation was looked at as unreflective and inadequate for expressing the real richness of experience. Images (including literary images, metaphors) were found much more suitable for this purpose. A similar idea is expressed by Fredric Jameson, when he argues that with mod-

1. C. Greenberg, (1965) “Modernist Painting”, reprinted in F. Frascina, F. and Ch. Harrison, Ch., *Modern Art and Modernism – A Critical Anthology*, London, Paul Chapman Publishing, 1982, 6.

2. M. Bell, “The Metaphysics of Modernism”, in M. Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 10.

ernism we see a movement «away from positive content, and from the various dogmatisms of the signifier», towards an acknowledgement of «the gap between signifier and signified».³

While putting in doubt the ability of language to perform its traditional role of *representing* a firm reality, modernists emphasized its enormous capacities for *creating*. And they tried to express, to «perform», show, *present*, what both ordinary language and the language of philosophy had failed to *represent*. Their reflections were therefore expressed in artistic practice, in a spontaneous and subliminal way. The language of literature, or poetry – artistic language – is a language that is conscious of the true nature of language, they thought, and artists are the only ones who, in their extraordinary combinations of forms and words, succeed in touching the real. Thus modernists did not only understand how tightly content and form were interwoven; they saw how *non-neutral* was technique, or medium, and hence were aware of the connection between their new attention to and re-evaluation of form (or technique) and the need to rethink the nature of the different registers of language and their relations to man and world.

All these post-*modern* (rather than post-modernist) themes adhere to a sharp distinction between the language of empirical discourse (including both ordinary and scientific discourses) and any linguistic form that expresses the creative, world-shaping dimensions of language. As for philosophy, contrary to certain trends in the 19th century, which drew philosophical investigations closer to those of psychology, history, or the natural sciences, modernists took it to be a *sui generis*. A logical or ethical reflection had to be independent of other intellectual disciplines. But it is precisely this purist requirement of autonomy that eventually forced philosophy into a non-existent territory and its sentences were presented as a sham.

This modernist picture of real and imagined linguistic territories is of course perfectly depicted in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The book was published almost simultaneously with Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* and Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. As I read it, the book presents a definitive analysis of the Cartesian-Kantian-Fregean vision of man's place in the world and the possibilities and limits of reflecting about it. The *Tractatus* is modernist because it maximally crystallises and expresses *modern* thought (i.e., «traditional philosophy»), and by doing just this – annuls it. It develops the Frege-Russell notation as a manifestation of the Western tradition's requirements of world and thought: a realist metaphysics (remember that «solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism»); a logocentric view of thought; and a conception of language as necessarily based on representation. These are the three prerequisites for any conceivable philosophy, and they are intimately connected.

The Tractarian draughtsman – as the epitome of traditional philosophy – is required to delineate the limits of thought and of language, and for this he needs to have a stable picture of the world: «If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true. In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false)» (T 2.0211, 2.0212). The world has to have substance, and objects

3. F. Jameson, *The Prison House of Language*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972, 195.

must make up this subsistent, unalterable substance. Language reflects this stable metaphysical picture. Indeed, despite the few mentions of the intricacy and liveliness of everyday language (4.002, 5.5563), the language conceived of in the *Tractatus* is altogether straightjacketed. Since the sense of a proposition cannot depend on whether another proposition was true, «to have meaning *means* to be true or false: the being true or false actually constitutes the relation of the proposition to reality, which we mean by saying that it has meaning (*Sinn*)» (NB 113). Thus, the metaphysical requirements we pose to «reality» dictate also our account of language, and then we project them back from language onto reality. «A proposition must restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no. In order to do that, it must describe reality completely» (T 4.023). The interconnected requirements of complete description and bivalence affect, in turn, the structure of the proposition. A genuine proposition has to be «logical», uncontaminated by vagueness, evasive meaning or subjective interpretations. It must be analysable into simple components. Thus realism and representationalism are one and the same, reflecting the requirements of traditional logico-philosophical discourse.

But here comes the sting. As we learned from Nietzsche, especially in his early «On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense», throughout Western philosophy, it is language that introduces God – the transcendent stabiliser – in order to secure truth, and eventually itself in return. For language acquires its own stability from the *stipulated correspondence* to the stable reality it fathoms. And so it is in the *Tractatus* as well. The assumed isomorphism between language and reality, the bivalence of propositions, the metaphysics of simple objects, all depend on a matching «external» I, a metaphysical subject, that is, however, nowhere to be found (5.633). Realism and representationalism turn out to be justified only at the cost of establishing them on what they exclude. Hence the tension in reading the *Tractatus*. It at the same time affirms «and» denies realism, logocentrism and representationalism.

Thus, philosophical discourse completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. It is for this reason that the famous distinction between saying and showing is so crucial. This, more than any other traditional distinction, gives modernism its *raison d'être* – or better, its *mode d'emploi*, its mode of *action*. Frege's attention to the necessary distance between language and world, sign and object, established the representational function of language by alienating, for the first time, the representing subject from the represented object. Since Frege, *Logos* excludes immediacy: neither subject nor object could «speak for itself», present itself, in the logical-linguistic realm. What needs to be captured immediately cannot be captured by any proposition in language, a proposition with sense and reference. Rather, it «shows itself» in the very «action» of people using language. It is hence *ergos*, rather than *logos*, that is the proper medium for reflection *sub specie aeterni*, for reaching the origin sought by philosophers. Read in this way, the say/show distinction is but another catchword for the old *logos/ergos* one, the word/deed distinction. And «in the beginning was the deed». Philosophy, in its *logical*, conceptual aspirations, is found inherently inadequate to accomplish the job it took upon itself, since words-*cum*-representations cannot overcome the distance from their references. Showing, presenting, performing, acting – these are the ways to overcome it. From this the distance is short for concluding that it is art, not philosophy, which eradicates the necessary abyss immanent to the representational medium.

Thus, the Tractarian decisiveness about the act of cancellation, the finality and purity of its results, the definitive silence, are strongly anchored in the fundamental assumptions regarding the principles that are implicitly embedded in every station of Western thought, and the total collapse of philosophical language in the *Tractatus* is conditioned upon accepting these principles. Whether Wittgenstein embraced them and took the picture he drew to be true but unsayable (as «orthodox» interpreters read him), or wished to expose their barren nonsensicality (as so-called «therapeutes» do), he certainly believed that his *Tractatus* caught the essence of philosophy and of language «as traditionally conceived». It is therefore not a coincidence that the say/show distinction is the one traditional distinction that «therapeutic» interpreters of Wittgenstein are not happy to treat as nonsensical. Whether Wittgenstein «seriously» showed us the inexpressible logical structure of the world, or, alternatively, only «ironically» pointed at the futility of this notion, philosophy's impotence is certain and final, and it «seriously» lays a heavy burden on showing, acting, presenting. This is how we get the core of modernism.

Before I move on to my second station, it is important to linger on just a little bit on the philosophical practice of the modernist artists themselves. Formally, as Greenberg proclaims, «modernist art does not offer theoretical demonstrations. It could be said, rather, that it converts all theoretical possibilities into empirical ones...» Its philosophical position «has been altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice and never a topic of theory».⁴ I've just explained the reason for this. Yet many modernists felt that it was not at all easy to come to terms with the burden of theoretical silence, especially since their art *was* essentially philosophical through and through. As a result, we find in the work of some modernist artists an equivalent to Wittgenstein's puzzling ladder: a use of words which *eo ipso* annul themselves. Thus we have a series of modernist manifestos – futurist, surrealist, imagist, etc. – and reflective essays, like those written by D.H. Lawrence and Bertolt Brecht, complementing the artistic deeds with somewhat anti-theoretical theoretical reflections. Alternatively, the modernist ladder manifested itself in the suspicion artists directed towards their own artworks and a doubt concerning their ability to use them for expressing what they wished. Rilke supplies us with a fine example, for the steps in «Die Treppe der Orangerie – Versailles» (1906!) lead nowhere, or towards an inexpressible outside, precisely like the famous Tractarian ladder: «Even so this flight of steps ascends in lonely / pomp between pillars bowing eternally: / slowly and By the Grace of God and only / to Heaven and nowhere intermittently;». In the later works of Mallarmé, as Hans-Jost Frey shows, «the poem as something that comes into being is completely incompatible with what it expresses. If what it expresses were actually true, then it could not have come into being. In this way, everything that is expressed is questioned by the fact that it is expressed, just as, on the contrary, the positivity of expression is itself questioned by what is expressed. The ontological status of the poem... constitutes itself as its own annulment».⁵

4. C. Greenberg, «Modernist...», *op. cit.*, 9.

5. Frey 1996, 58.

Second Encounter – Plurality and Aesthetic Sensitivity

This tension concerning the need to articulate what cannot be articulated uncovered what I believed to be – in my first encounter with the Wittgenstein-modernism linkage – a *modernist dogma*: despite their radicalism, modernist thinkers and artists cling to the traditional belief that the logocentric assumptions of philosophy are essential to it: that any philosophical attempt must yield to a saturated, static, «logical» conception of concepts, a stable reality and its definite representation. In this they virtually concurred with the academic classification of the writings of Hamann and Nietzsche, for example, as literary rather than philosophical. From a post-Tractarian perspective, it is evident that the *Tractatus* did «not» reach an «unassailable and definitive» truth; it did *not* annihilate philosophical language. And that is primarily because the metaphysical-methodological dogma concerning the nature of philosophy – which it took for granted – is false. Indeed, Wittgenstein was the first to acknowledge that. In G.E. Moore's recollections from his conversations with Wittgenstein, the latter is quoted as calling what he was doing «philosophy», yet «saying that it was not the same kind of thing as Plato or Berkeley had done, but that we may feel that what he was doing 'takes the place' of what Plato and Berkeley did» (PO 96). His was a «new subject», in which the finality is gone, and the limit-drawing Tractarian draughtsman with the confident hand and sharp logic is replaced by a «weak draughtsman», that all he can produce is a series of [grammatical] sketches, sometimes «badly drawn». I am of course quoting here Wittgenstein's own metaphors in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*. Explicitly acknowledging his former philosophy as dogmatic, he understood that instead of requiring that as a philosopher he should occupy a nonexistent place, and hence disappear, he should rather be everywhere, in constant move, changing locations and postures: «A thinker is very much like a draughtsman whose aim is to represent all the interrelations between things» (CV 12e), he remarked in 1931 – a formative period of his later thought. With the change from ethereal logic to earthly grammar a new philosophical époque was opened.

Does this change mean that the later Wittgenstein deserted his early modernism? I used to believe that it does; that Wittgenstein's acknowledgement of his former dogma led him out of the modernist stage. I no longer believe that this is so. Rather, I now think that his philosophy developed into a more mature and subtle form of modernism, one that does not break off at the «failure» of representation but emphasizes the «creativity» of the linguistic medium as a philosophical tenet. Thus, form and content are interwoven in Wittgenstein's *later* writings in a totally different way from that of the *Tractatus*. Language is no longer modelled upon a previously tailored notion of abstract, logical «thought» which digs its own grave: it is stripped off its traditional role of neutrally representing a firm reality, prior to and independent of the linguistic means of its expression. When we read Wittgenstein's later remarks – and here it is crucial to read beyond the *Investigations* – we see the idea of «entrenching philosophy more firmly in its own language» getting its purest expression. Even a passing remark such as «Sometimes a sentence can be understood only if it is read at the *right tempo*. My sentences are all supposed to be read slowly» (CV 57, 1947) reveals a new and radical kind of interest in language, very different from the earlier version. But such an interest in the «materiality» of language, needless to say, is thoroughly modernist.

So, the focus on the topic of modernism still seems to me useful for noticing less familiar aspects of Wittgenstein's interest in language. In that volume on Wittgenstein and modernism, Garry Hagberg compares Wittgenstein's interest in language as being written and read to that of Henry James, emphasizing Wittgenstein's self-consciousness about the possibilities of small linguistic errors that quickly grow into large philosophical ones, and of the impulses to miscast what we know and what we would say in the interest of a formerly-laid-down theory. In a different vein, David Schalkwyk's interest in modernism makes him read Wittgenstein's later writing as revealing immanent inner tensions between the situatedness of the philosophical search for meaning and the uncanniness of language as home. Both these suggestions (and others in that volume, e.g. those of Élise Marrou and David MacArthur) make it absolutely clear that Wittgenstein's later conceptions of language, of aesthetics and of philosophy combine the basis on which everything else is built.⁶

In what way? It is certainly not accidental that what we need here are Wittgenstein's own words rather than a paraphrase. Let me start by quoting one of Wittgenstein's most famous remarks, written in 1933-4: «I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written as a form of *poetic composition*... I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do (CV 24). This quote is crucial for understanding what it was, in Wittgenstein's unique approach to language, which could reveal unnoticed tensions and lead to a novel attitude towards them. Consider the following paragraph from *The Blue and Brown Books*:

What we call 'understanding a sentence' has, in many cases, a much greater similarity to understanding a musical theme than we might be inclined to think. But I don't mean that understanding a musical theme is more like the picture which one tends to make oneself of understanding a sentence; but rather that this picture is wrong, and that understanding a sentence is much more like what really happens when we understand a tune than at first sight appears. For understanding a sentence, we say, points to a reality outside the sentence. Whereas one might say 'Understanding a sentence means getting hold of its content; and the content of the sentence is *in* the sentence'. (BB 167, § 17)

This insight on understanding sentences through an internal gaze, which strengthens the linkage between content and form in language, is further developed and exemplified in *Philosophical Investigations*:

Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a spoken sentence is closer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why is just this the pattern of variation

6. Cf. Garry L. Hagberg, "A Confluence of Modernisms: Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigation and Henry James's Literary Language"; David Schalkwyk, "Wittgenstein and the Art of Defamiliarization", Élise Marrou, "We Should be Seeing Life Itself': Back to the Rough Ground of the Stage" and David MacArthur, "Art" – all in A. Matar (ed.), *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, N.Y.: Bloomsbury, 2017.

in intensity and tempo? One would like to say: *Because I know what it all means*. But what does it mean? I'd not be able to say. As an 'explanation', I could compare it with something else which has the same rhythm (I mean the same pattern). (One says, *Don't you see, this is as if a conclusion were being drawn* or *This is, as it were, a parenthesis*, and so on. How does one justify such comparisons? – There are very different kinds of justification here.) [...]

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) / In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.) / Then has «understanding» two different meanings here? – I would rather say that these kinds of use of «understanding» make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding. / For I *want* to apply the word «understanding» to all this.

But in the second case, how can one explain the expression, communicate what one understands? Ask yourself: How does one *lead* someone to understand a poem or a theme? The answer to this tells us how one explains the sense here. (PI 527-533)

All these reflections demonstrate the grammar of the new philosophical époque. They betray the uneasiness Wittgenstein felt upon realizing the necessary but also impossible consequences of the Linguistic Turn for philosophy. Whereas the Turn was practiced so well – celebrated – by modernist artists, a thorough and honest philosopher like Wittgenstein could not but admit the philosophical tension existing between the Turn's basic insight – the primacy of language in any investigation into essence – and the philosophical responsibility towards logos, thought, argumentation. Taking the Linguistic Turn seriously involves realizing – «against» Frege and Russell – that language is not an artificial «front» which gains its meaning from a deeper, more genuine «pure thought»; any appeal to thought as detached from the language which carries it betrays a retreat to the traditional misconception of language as based essentially on passive representation of an external realm. Coming to terms with the Turn means realizing the interdependence between the two indispensable kinds of «understanding» – prosaic and poetical, logical and musical. But how is it possible to offer grammatical «explanations» which do not transgress the realm of language in its richness? How, on the other hand, are logos or Thought preserved when we focus our gaze *in* the sentence? How does the «new subject» «take the place» of what Plato and Berkeley did? And, since Wittgenstein himself admits that philosophy «cannot» be written as a form of poetic composition, could he at all do «what he would like to be able to do»?

Obviously, a response to these questions cannot be given by concentrating on one kind of explanation – the conceptual one – and laying aside the other (the «poetical»). Both senses of «understanding» are necessary in order to convey philosophical insights, and none is marginal, secondary or inferior in relation to the other. And it is crucial to see that both models of «explanation» apply to «every» sentence, differences being only in degree or in context: Wittgenstein rightly speaks in general of «understanding a sentence in language». No sentences can be cut off from their «tempo» and «tone», and hence adopting the Linguistic Turn

entails treating the content of «every» sentence as partly embedded «in» the sentence, i.e., as untranslatable in full into a logical, ordered and allegedly «clear» conceptual array.

Wittgenstein's reluctance from talking about philosophical explanation is worth a mention now. In the above quotes, he uses this term either within scare-quotes or with an immediate correction, replacing «explain the expression» by «communicate what one understands». Indeed, the whole sequence of paragraphs functions as a philosophical «description», in accordance with Wittgenstein's proclaimed decision to offer «description alone» and «do away with all “explanation”» in philosophy (PI 109). Rather than premises and conclusion, we are offered a forceful analogy on our way towards grasping the idea of language's autonomy. We are «shown» the connection between linguistic and musical content and «are reminded of» music's autonomy. But in order to see what is shown to us, a particular aesthetic sensitivity is needed:

We say that someone has the *eye of a painter* or the *ear of a musician*, but anyone lacking these qualities hardly suffers from a kind of blindness or deafness. / We say that someone doesn't have a *musical ear*, and *aspect-blindness* is (in a way) comparable to this inability to hear.⁷

If we lacked this kind of sensitivity, we would simply miss the point and fail to understand what was communicated to us. The shift from a linear explanation to multi-focal descriptions is radical; it is not only a shift in methodology, structure and philosophical language, but also in the sort of skill required in order to exercise them. It is for this reason that we get innumerable comparisons between what the philosopher is trying to do and what an artist does; or between philosophical and aesthetic sensitivities. This idea is familiar enough from all of Wittgenstein's later writings, but it is developed especially in his Lectures on Aesthetics from 1938. Let me quote at some length from these important lectures, so we can develop the musical ear needed for the point I wish to make later:

One asks such a question as 'what does this remind me of?' or one says of a piece of music: 'This is like some sentence, but what sentence is this like?' Various things are suggested; one thing, as you say, clicks. What does it mean, it 'clicks'? Does it do anything you can compare to the noise of a click? Is there the ringing of a bell, or something comparable? (LA, III, 1, p. 19)

There is a 'Why?' to aesthetic discomfort not a 'cause' to it. (II 19, p. 14)

I very often draw your attention to certain differences, e.g. in these classes I tried to show you that Infinity is not so mysterious as it looks. What I'm doing is also persuasion. If someone says: «There is not a difference», and I say: «there is a difference» I am persuading, I am saying «I don't want you to look at it like that.» Suppose I wished to show how very misleading the expressions of Cantor are. You ask: «What do you mean, it is misleading? Where does it lead you to?» [...] «I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another.

7. Quoted in R., Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Duty of Genius*, London, Vintage Books, 1990, 538.

I am honestly disgusted with the other... (Much of what we are doing is a question of changing the style of thinking.) (III, 35, 37, 41, p. 27f.)

This last quote indicates that the sensitivity Wittgenstein appeals to is needed for conveying «any» philosophical content and is not at all restricted to aesthetics. Think for example of his appeal to our imagination in his discussion of rule-following, regarding the minute differences in cases of «being guided», in PI 172: when your eyes are bandaged, when you are unwilling to go, when you're dancing, etc. A sensitivity to something that is very delicate and evasive is needed here.

The last part of Wittgenstein's Lectures on Aesthetics focuses almost entirely on the notion of gesture and the intricacy in appealing to it for conveying an intention, description or judgment. For «gestures no less than words are intertwined in a net of multifarious relationships» (RFM VI 48, p. 352). Wittgenstein has in mind something similar to his frustration about doing philosophy as poetry when he exclaims: «How curious: we should like to explain our understanding of gesture by means of translation into words, and the understanding of words by translating them into a gesture. (Thus we are tossed to and fro when we try to find out where understanding properly resides.)» (Z 227)

The appeal to gesture – especially in this vein – is typical of modernism as well. It is central especially for Benjamin and Brecht, who also acknowledge its complexity. For all three thinkers, it forms part of the rejection of representation, or better, a «meta-rejection». As Greenberg notes, the fact that modernist painting has abandoned the representation of recognizable objects is dependent upon its rejection, in principle, of «the representation of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit». ⁸ It is the change in «the kind of space» that makes the appeal to showing, to gesture, both indispensable and unstable. But such a deep change entails the instability of any appeal to «recognizable objects» as we ordinarily take them for granted in «the kind of space» that is recognizable. It is indeed what Schalkwyk referred to by talking of the «uncanniness of language as home».

I find this analysis totally convincing. I am persuaded by it. I am aware, of course, of the bitter disagreements among Wittgenstein's scholars regarding his notion of the ordinary. Reading the later Wittgenstein alongside modernist writers made me see the force in Cavell's interpretive approach, which takes the ordinary to be a goal rather than something that is already given. According to Cavell, we have to struggle – to engage in a quest – in order to reach it. Although Wittgenstein declared already in the *Tractatus* that «our language is in order as it is» (T 5.5563), it doesn't mean that we understand «our language» without reflection. The commonsensical realist assumption underlying our everyday understanding and description is exposed, indeed in «both» stages of Wittgenstein's philosophy, as suspicious and dogmatic. It resonates the traditional way of seeing the world that Wittgenstein – as any other modernist – wished to overcome. It is hence not at all accidental that Wittgenstein chose Plato and Berkeley as the philosophical links preceding his «new subject»: all three

8. C. Greenberg, «Modernist.», *op. cit.*, 6.

philosophers insist, albeit in radically different ways, on the importance of the distinction between reality and appearance. The grammatical appeal to aesthetic elucidations and the admission of an inherent, perennial philosophical failure marks the dramatic «kink» in the history of philosophy, in Wittgenstein's words.

Third Encounter

I believe that this approach offers a convincing critique of and an alternative to traditional metaphysics and its correlating philosophy of language. I take very seriously Wittgenstein's determination to eschew dogmatism, and I believe that realism – the «kind of space» we take for granted in «common use» – reflects a deeply entrenched dogma. Now, an important reason for this preference of mine (and I believe of Wittgenstein as well) is its political aspect. Alienation (estrangement, *Verfremdungseffekt*), a device that offers a de-familiarized, even uncanny alternative to how people are used to think, see and talk, is not only a famous Brechtian dramatic instrument but a hallmark of modernism in general: in Joyce's hyperbolic language, Kafka's parables, Artaud's theatre of cruelty, Picasso's cubism and Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, etc. At least for some of its proponents, the rejection of the ordinary way of looking at the ordinary involved political motivations.

During the 1930s, a heated debate took place in Germany among several Marxist artists and theoreticians. In exile before the war, Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno polemized against each other over the nature and the political significance of expressionism, formalism and other modernist literary forms. Some of these texts were translated and published in 1977 in a volume entitled *Aesthetics and Politics*. I'm mentioning this volume now because its main thread touches precisely upon the issue which concerns me in my third encounter with the Wittgenstein-modernism connection.

Large parts of that debate revolve around Lukács' defense of realism (e.g. in the works of Gorky, Mann and Rolland) as contributing to the struggle of the working masses, and around his attack on avant-gardist writing (like Joyce's) which – according to Lukács – has nothing liberating or edifying about it, despite its alleged progressiveness. Lukács' conservatism notwithstanding, his articulation of the tension that pervades avant-gardism, in relation to its liberating force, has been made a central focus of aesthetic controversy on the left ever since. Perry Anderson, who introduces some of the essays in *Aesthetics and Politics*, remarks about it that «the contradiction between “high” and “low” genres – the one subjectively progressive and objectively elitist, the other objectively popular and subjectively regressive – has never been durably overcome, despite a complex, crippled dialectic between the two».⁹ My present hesitation deals with this tension as it pertains to Wittgenstein's modernism; but I'll start with Brecht.

Although he naturally criticizes Lukács' conclusions, Brecht seems at first to concur with his basic sentiment towards realism:

9. Anderson in E. Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and...*, *op. cit.*, 66.

It is obvious that one must turn to the people, and now more necessary than ever to speak their language. Thus the terms popular art and realism become natural allies. It is in the interest of the people, of the broad working masses, to receive a faithful image of life from literature, and faithful images of life are actually of service only to the people, the broad working masses, and must therefore be absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular.¹⁰

However, in what sounds to my sensitive ear as a very Wittgensteinian remark, he continues by noting that realism is not necessarily what we ordinarily think it is. «For time flows on... Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change (82)». Brecht's conclusion is that for art to be of service to the people, it must reject what is customarily taken too much for granted, but is eventually deceitful: our everyday concepts. These

must first be thoroughly cleansed before propositions are constructed in which they are employed and merged. It would be a mistake to think that these concepts are completely transparent, without history, uncompromised or unequivocal. («We all know what they mean – don't let's split hairs».)¹¹

These concepts – those that come out of «ordinary use» – get their meaning and justification from the suppressed ideology of the ruling classes. Thus, for example, we find in them a remarkable unity «between tormenters and tormented, exploiters and exploited, deceivers and deceived». The concept of realism should be reexamined according to this insight. For «realistic», as Brecht would like to use this term, does not mean faithful to what we are used to see, but rather «unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power... making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.» And for achieving this, «we shall not bind the artist to too rigidly defined modes of narrative». On the contrary. Brecht knows that we endow art with the power to transform people; it could not do so if it was simply a non-reflective reflection of what they already know.

Now we can go back to Wittgenstein. I think that when Wittgenstein expresses the wish to be read slowly, he wants – among other things – to warn us against reading too simplistically his declaration about bringing «words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use» (PI 116). If indeed, as I've claimed in my Cavellian «second station», his objection to linear argumentation has to do with his appeal to aesthetic sensitivity, then his «new subject» may certainly be read as aiming at «unmasking the prevailing view» in the political sense of these words. And indeed, several of his interpreters went as far as presenting Wittgenstein's later philosophical method as Marxist «par excellence». My reluctance from fully adopting such an approach has to do with the question of the politically liberating power of modernism.

10. Brecht in E. Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and...*, op. cit., 80.

11. Brecht in E. Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and...*, op. cit., 80.

In «Modernism and Gender», Marianne Dekoven analyses the complex relations between the modernist and the feminist movements. She argues that, in light of the rise of women power during the same period of time, modernist writers were particularly preoccupied with gender issues, and that quite often this preoccupation «resulted in the combination of misogyny and triumphal masculinism that many critics see as central, defining features of modernist work by men».¹² These features include the advocacy – in writing, architecture, painting and sculpture – of firm, rigid, dry, terse and clean forms, against the soft and messy femininity of the Victorian era. When I thought of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as modernist, that was the kind of modernism I had in the back of my mind. But modernism's famous ambivalence is expressed also with regards to this issue. If we focus on modernist writing, in particular, we see that it excelled in reflective doubts, plurality of voices, the dismantling of a hegemonic gaze and of the controlling authorial voice – in short, in the introduction, indeed the celebration, of what may be identified as feminine. A parallel duality imbues contemporary discussions of the colonial and post-colonial traits of modernism. On the one hand, post-colonial writers uncover the problematic treatment by modernist artists and writers of the «primitive» and the centrality of the white, «rational» European man – Frazer's *Golden Bough* is an important example in our context; on the other, they point at the beginnings of an acceptance of the Other as bearing a legitimate viewpoint, as it is expressed, perhaps, at least partly, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and of course in Wittgenstein's poignant remarks on Frazer.

I have argued above that the modernism of the *Tractatus* retained at least some logocentric dogmas. And so it is with Frazer. The later Wittgenstein could read the prejudice in Frazer's descriptions; he exposed Frazer as a paradigmatic logocentric writer, whose «narrow spiritual life» led to his inability «to conceive of a life different from that of the England of this time!» (PO 125). Wittgenstein's «musical ear» was sensitive enough to hear that, to bring to light the deceptiveness of the dogmas which hid beyond Frazer's «ordinary». As he remarks in his Lectures on Aesthetics, an attention to «what we call a culture of a period» is needed here (I 25, p. 8).

My problem is that this sensitivity itself relies on the perspective of a «qualified» judge, whose aesthetic sensitivities are developed enough for overcoming the treacherous «ordinary». Thus, a circle of confidants is formed, such that only those belonging to this circle know when something «clicks». Alongside the traditional «domination by reason», we get a new «domination by aesthetic sensitivity» of those who have the needed ear and eye for identifying «the right tempo» and «the right tone». Wittgenstein is quite aware of this, and he explicitly mentions those people «who can't express themselves properly» and their unsophisticated use of words.

In what we call the Arts a person who has judgement develops... We distinguish between a person who knows what he is talking about and a person who doesn't... In music this is more pronounced... We use the phrase 'A man is musical' not so as to call a man musical if he says

12. M., Dekoven, «Modernism and Gender», in M. Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 174.

'Ah!' when a piece of music is played, any more than we call a dog musical if it wags its tail when music is played. (LA I 17 p. 6)

Wittgenstein even acknowledges the linkage between the aesthetic sensitivity and class, and immediately tries to broaden the circle of «confidants»:

There are lots of people, well-offish, who have been to good schools, who can afford to travel about and see the Louvre, etc., and who know a lot about and can talk fluently about dozens of painters. There is another person who has seen very few paintings, but who looks intensely at one or two paintings which make a profound impression on him. Another person who is broad, neither deep nor wide. Another person who is very narrow, concentrated and circumscribed. Are these different kinds of appreciation? They may all be called 'appreciation'. (LA I, 30, p.9)

However, once aesthetic sensitivities are developed within a circle of confidants who were exposed to «high», avant-gardist art within the «culture of the period», once such a sensitivity becomes a prerequisite for overcoming the ordinary as we ordinarily see it, we reach the uncomfortable result that the liberating perspective is retained almost exclusively by those whose everyday existence is far from that of the «working masses». This is true of avant-gardism as it is true of Wittgenstein.

I was writing this paper in my beloved reading room at the British Library. And while every moment I spent there was delightful, I could not but notice the overwhelming whiteness of the researchers; the justified assumption, when I see a black person in the corridor, that he or she are most likely employees of the Library (and not necessarily librarians). That reading room represents, for me, the kind of community of aesthetically sensitive writers which challenges the radicalism of modernism. For it is, precisely as Anderson put it, subjectively progressive but objectively elitist. Cavell, in *The Claim of Reason*, seems to be aware of this uncomfortable situation:

The epistemological problem of society is not to discover new facts about it; the facts... are there to be had. The problem is for me to discover my position with respect to these facts – how I know with whom I am in community, and to whom and to what I am in fact obedient... We obey the logic of conspiracy, though we believe this to be true only of *others*... Rousseau's discovery is... of a new me of ignorance. Marx and Freud will call this ignorance unconscious, the former of our social present, the latter of our private pasts; but these will prove not to be so different. (Both speak of this ignorance as the result of repression).¹³

But where does Cavell take the newly liberated awareness of our being – not only politically, but also epistemologically – part of a community, which we recognize as ours? I must admit that this is where I got lost.

13. S., Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, 25f.

For me, at any rate, this comment only reinforces the tension I address here. And what I find particularly inspiring in *post*-modernist discourse is its honesty and openness regarding the problem pointed at. True, post-modernism bred a lot of relativistic jargons and positions that I cannot find at all appealing. I am still guided by the modernist wish to capture the world «sub specie aeterni» and share Wittgenstein's belief that there is a way of doing this «other than the work of the artist»; indeed, even that «thought has such a way» (CV 5). However, if it does have such a way, it cannot be monopolized. Thought cannot «obey the logic of conspiracy» and be taken over by a circle of privileged confidants. If it «flies above the world» and observes it «from above, in flight», what it observes is an irreducible array of judgements, which are founded on numerous and conflicting experiences of the «ordinary» and condone this notion with various meanings. What we need, therefore, is a way of bringing together the required cultivated aesthetic sensibility, the undoing of the hermetic gaze and the introduction of a «weak draughtsman» instead, and most importantly, the ability to transcend one's deceitful «ordinary» in a way that opens itself to the differences «between tormenters and tormented, exploiters and exploited, deceivers and deceived». What we need, perhaps, is Brecht's anti-realist version of «realism», namely, what is

intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well / relating to traditions and developing them / communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation.¹⁴

As strange as this may sound, perhaps this vision is not that far, after all, from Wittgenstein's «new subject». But both modernist visions – Brecht's as well as Wittgenstein's – are merely programmatic; that's their main problem.

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