Ludwig Wittgenstein – Private Notebooks 1914–1916 edited and translated by Marjorie Perloff

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The late Marjorie Perloff's edition and translation of Wittgenstein's 1914–1916 private notebooks is intended to show the connections between Wittgenstein's personal (spiritual, ethical, aesthetic) preoccupations and the ostensibly more abstract philosophical questions about logic and language that came to dominate his writings. These, so Perloff, are revealed through the surprising and unexpected ways in which the coded remarks on the left-hand (or *verso*) side of these notebooks begin to converge with the uncoded, 'public' entries on the right-hand (or *recto*) side, culminating in a correspondence that, in Perloff's view (2022:13), also sheds further light on the genesis and evolution of the *Tractatus*.

The texts on which this edition is based are three manuscripts dating from the period 9 August 1914 and 10 January 1917. Perloff prefaces each with an Editorial Note and fascinating photographs, e.g., of the *Goplana*, on which Wittgenstein manned the searchlight; the bookshop in Tarnow, where he picked up Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief*; the artillery workshop train to which he was transferred in the autumn of 1915, and many others.

Wittgenstein's notebook entries certainly have an immediacy that second-hand biographical summaries lack. They show that this 25-year old infantryman who had asked to be sent directly to the front was also struggling with appalling living conditions, a malicious and uneducated crew, personal depression, and a suicidal frame of mind. He slept badly because of bedbugs and found the heat unbearable and the food inedible. One day, in the freezing rain, he was commanded to run practically naked to the navigating bridge. "I was sure that now I would die", he later recorded (p. 37). He would go without rest for thirty hours, sleep with his boots on, or stay in the same clothes for days on end. There were many cases of dysentery. When he wanted to work on philosophy, he initially had to read and write on a small wooden suitcase. Even worse,

however, was the behaviour and character of his *Kameraden* – "a bunch of swine" whose "unbelievable crudity, stupidity & malice" led him to conclude that "there is not a single decent fellow in the whole crew" (p. 39). The notebooks reveal just how hard it was for Wittgenstein *not* to get drawn into his comrades' malevolent squabbles: "The situation here is a test of fire of one's character, precisely because it takes so much strength not to lose one's temper & one's energy" (p. 31).

But there were graces, too: the discovery of Tolstoy' *Gospel in Brief*, which he would soon carry around with him like a talisman; a much-awaited letter from David Pinsent (p. 119); regular trips to a café in Krakow, whose "respectable atmosphere" he enjoyed (p. 95); slow but steady progress with his philosophical work – all this helped to lift his spirits. Moreover, it looked as if the personal *aggiornamento* for which he had been hoping might finally be happening. On 4 May 1916, he writes:

> In response to my request, I may be sent to the observation post tomorrow morning. Then the war will finally begin for me. And – it may be – my life too! Perhaps the proximity to death will bring me the light of life! (p. 171)

Just over three weeks later, he records: "Yesterday, I was fired at. I fell apart! I was afraid of death! I now have such a strong wish to live!" (p. 185).

It is around this time, too, that the philosophical tone of the third notebook (MS 103) gradually begins to change, with reflections on God, fate, ethics, aesthetics, and the meaning of life appearing on the *recto* pages of the manuscript. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself now admits: "*Yes, my work has expanded its reach from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world*" (p. 187). Ray Monk rightly points out that, if Wittgenstein had followed Russell's advice and already published the (unfortunately lost) first version of the *Tractatus* – mentioned in a letter to Russell on 22 October 1915 –, then

> it would have contained almost everything the *Tractatus* now contains—except the remarks at the end of the book on ethics, aesthetics, the soul, and the meaning of life. In a way, therefore, it would have been a completely different work. (Monk 1990: 582)

But does it follow that, as Perloff (2022: 156) insists, "what made the decisive difference was surely the experience in battle Wittgenstein was now to undergo"? Even if, sometime in 1916, Wittgenstein's thoughts on logic began to move in a new direction, that movement surely unfolded as well against the background of his pre-war study of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the deep impact of Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief*, and the extended philosophical conversations with the interior designer and pacifist Paul Engelmann, whose acquaintance he made in the autumn of 1916. To be fair, Perloff does not claim that there is a straightforward correspondence between the *verso* and the *recto* entries, only that

these begin to converge in the late spring of 1916. And so they do. But what, exactly, does this tells us about the connection between "[Wittgenstein's] experience in battle" and his philosophical development, between his personal trials (e.g., at the observation post) and the realization, "*I can make myself independent of fate*", or "*To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.*"? (181) The trouble is that even where autobiography and philosophy are intimately connected, that intimacy rarely mirrors the logical relation between the premises and the conclusion of an argument, of a straightforward movement of thought from "I came under heavy fire at the observation post" to "Therefore, the solution to the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of the problem." (179)

In her Introduction to the *Private Notebooks*, Perloff writes:

> The translator of the *Private Notebooks,* finally, has to respect Wittgenstein's own silences. "Of what one cannot speak" includes not only the philosophical generalizations and abstractions he so devastatingly deconstructs, but also his private life. (p. 18)

Even so, she insists in the Afterword that, while Wittgenstein's expression of (homo-)sexual desire is "always oblique", it is nevertheless "unmistakable",

> as when, in an entry of December 21, 1914, he writes of kissing the letter he has just received from his adored Cambridge friend David Pinsent […] and there are telling allusions to gay rendezvous, as when Wittgenstein records his frequent visits to the baths in Krakow […] (p. 199)

The problem is that, even leaving aside Wittgenstein's own attitude towards the temptations of the flesh – "[they are] odd because now I am getting more than a little exercise" (p. 129) or "it cannot go on like this" (p. 133) – Perloff's "allusions" tend to fuel precisely the kind of speculation Wittgenstein's literary executors wanted to avoid. Take, for example, his reaction to Pinsent's letter. Are we seriously to believe that there was an "unmistakable" erotic dimension to the fact that he kissed it, indeed that he *also* rushed to the baths for a gay rendezvous the very next day? Given that wartime deliveries could often take weeks or even months, Wittgenstein's gesture is hardly surprising. On the contrary, and as his 1931 remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough* illustrate, it is a perfectly natural response:

> Kissing the picture of a beloved. This is *obviously* not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object represented by the picture. It aims at some satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather, it does not *aim* at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied. (Wittgenstein 1967: 236–7, my translation)

As for Wittgenstein's "frequent" visits to the baths, MSS 101 & 102 record exactly five occasions during the period 23.11.14–15.1.15., roughly once a fortnight. Is this enough to

arouse suspicion? Nor is there any reason to read entries like "In the evening, to the bath" or "Bathed" as "telling allusions to gay rendezvous". And yet, when pressed on this point in interview, Perloff insisted that this was exactly what they were. Given the cultural taboos of the time, however, one would never have *talked* about such homoerotic encounters (Perloff 2023). But this makes the bathroom entries elliptical by stipulation. Wouldn't it be far more plausible to assume that what Wittgenstein means here is exactly – and no more than – what he says?

Finally, a comment on the translation. While Perloff's rendering of the (Austrian/German) text is largely accurate, it also contains some embarrassing howlers (here italicized) e.g.,"Nur eines ist von Nöten!" (Only one thing is *necessary*!) is rendered as "Only one thing is *notable*!" (p. 47); "Die Vorgesetzten sind grob & dumm" (The *superiors* are crude & stupid") as "The *regulations* are crude & stupid" (p. 47); and "der Knoten zog sich immer mehr zusammen" (The knot became steadily *tighter*) as "The knot has become steadily *less tight*" for (p. 64). Elsewhere, "auf dem Marsch in die Feuerstellung" (on our march to the firing line) is translated as "crossing the *marsh* into the firing line" (p. 188), and "*eine Art und Weise*" (a way in which) as "an *art and method*" (p. 188). I should add, however, that when these and other infelicities were subsequently brought to Perloff's attention, she graciously acknowledged them, sincerely apologised for the fact that they had slipped through the net, and vowed to correct them for the projected paperback edition of the book.[1]

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[1] Personal correspondence from Marjorie Perloff, dated 5 April 2023.