The ethics of reading Wittgenstein

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The worst readers are those who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole.

–Nietzsche (1879) Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits, Mixed Opinions and Maxims, §137.

[A]ny interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.


We spend our lives ‘reading’ but we no longer know how to read, that is to say to stop, to free ourselves of our cares, to return to ourselves, putting aside the search for subtlety and originality in order to meditate calmly, ruminating, letting the texts speak to us.


The reception of a work, an opus, a text, an oeuvre is itself a philosophical question that stands at the heart of both reading and intellectual criticism in ways that defy the taxonomists, doxographers and historians of philosophy who would like to trace the lines of influence, the place and significance of a thinker by what company (s)he keeps, that is, by whom they read, and, perhaps above all, by who taught them—that is, by a pedagogy of ‘begetting’. It is possible to distinguish between a close textual reading and a new interpretive or disruptive reading. There is room for both styles of reading where ‘reading’, paradoxically, is a kind of ‘writing’, a written interpretation that follows millennia of textual commentary that form the hermeneutical rules and procedures for reading a text and extracting its meaning or truth. The ways we receive texts are determined in large measure by questions of geography, history and culture, as well as personal agency, and the relationship between the text and the intertext. Reading Wittgenstein, or the texts of any thinker, is a complex philosophical problem that disrupts the traditional divide between author and reader and understands both sides of this binary couplet as involved in the creation of meaning.

Wittgenstein, like Nietzsche, was concerned about who would read and understand him. In particular, he was concerned that he might be misinterpreted, especially by those who were closest to him, by his students and colleagues who professed to know what he was saying. He was probably right on this question of misinterpretation. Even Russell who was very close to him misinterpreted the aims of the Tractatus (1961) as Wittgenstein (1974, p. 86) complained in his letters to Russell. Wittgenstein’s aphoristic style of writing and his professed goal to write philosophy as poetry made his work notoriously difficult to fathom. His students became the disciples of his work and were disciplined into his way of thinking through Wittgenstein’s pedagogy and style of thinking but they did not always agree.

In ‘Sketch for a Foreword’ (Culture and Value, hereafter CV, Wittgenstein, 1970, 6e) an early draft of the printed foreword to Philosophical Remarks, Wittgenstein writes: ‘This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written’ (my emphasis). It is a spirit which expresses a certain ‘cultural ideal’ (CV, 2e); one which would not be understood by ‘the typical western scientist’ who, imbued with the spirit of contemporary European and American civilisation, is committed to the form of ‘progress’ and ‘building an ever more complicated structure’. In this age, even clarity is sought only as a means to this end. Wittgenstein finds the spirit of this age both ‘alien’ and ‘uncongenial’. His way of thinking is different: for him ‘clarity [and] perspicuity are valuable in themselves’ (CV, 7e). Clarity
is an aesthetic and ethical ideal; the work of clarification requires courage; it is not ‘just a clever game’ (CV, 19e). The clarity that Wittgenstein is aiming at is, as he says, ‘complete clarity’ which means that ‘philosophical problems should completely disappear’. He goes on to say ‘There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies’ (Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein, 1953/1972, hereafter PI, #133). Wittgenstein’s style of philosophising and the stylistic devices he innovates are designed to command a clear view of the use of words (PI, #5, #122). The ethics of reading for Wittgenstein meant that the reader had to take responsibility for his own thinking. He devises a style of writing that teaches us to read and to think in a particular way: to reject easy assertions, to look beyond the obvious; to understand the partial explanation and intermediate cases of a concept, to listen to the metaphors that cast light on the proceedings, to recognise textual challenges and to accept responsibility for our own acts of understanding and the attempt to make intelligible that which is hidden in the grammar. In the language game of criticism, we should seek clarity but not a correlation of inner processes of mental experiences. I use the notion of ethics to refer to these processes of reading and interpretation.

I have taken the concept of the ‘ethics of reading’ from a number of different and conflicting sources. First, in Levinas’ work reading is an ethical activity involving the appropriation of the Other and naturally involves relationships to the Other (Champaign, 1998). For Levinas, who maintains that ethics is governed and limited by the face-to-face encounter, the Other cannot be mediated through literature (Dougan, 2016). Levinas’ “first philosophy” is responsibility that unfolds into dialogical sociality (Bergo, 2017). Reading is not a neutral activity: “how one reads, approaches and responds to a text, is more than casually significant” (Walker, 2006).

In the traditional liberal sense reading is an ethical relation not just to another—an absent author—through a text or corpus but entails a wider responsibility to the community not to willingly misrepresent or deliberately use a source without due acknowledgement; and, perhaps, more importantly, to construct a reading that is a public interpretation that does no to harm to or misrepresent another who cannot immediately respond or cannot respond at all but only through others. On this liberal account, there are different levels of a philosophical reading: (1) explication centred on clearly stating the author’s position; (2) elucidation, a clarification of what the author means or the meaning of the text; (3) evaluation, assessing the strength of argument and issuing a judgement about the tenability of the position taken; (4) interpretation, beyond these three levels, a philosophical kind of writing. These levels are related to liberal humanist stylistics that hypothesises the truth of meaning is a semantic matter of establishing the author’s intention.

The second source is J. Hillis Miller’s (1987) The Ethics of Reading which is a deconstructive attempt, continuous with Paul de Man’s (1979, p. 206) Allegories of Reading, to develop an ethics that ‘has nothing to do with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor a fortiori, with a relationship between subjects’ but rather with a discursive freedom ‘to block or suspend our more habitual, commonplace habits of judgment’ (Norris, 1988, p. 169); what Pecora (1991, p. 203) calls ‘the play of the critical intelligence … free from the pressure of political engagement with the issues of the day’. I don’t pretend to mediate between these two opposing conceptions: both may be used to different purposes. It may be that the ‘emancipated’ reader or reading can interpret irony, metaphors and other narrative strategies that are part of Wittgenstein’s philosophical repertoire as pedagogical tools, in the Nietzschean sense, that are meant to educate us through suspicion and agonistic or interrogative style (Lachance, 2010).

The third source is Pierre Hadot (1995, 2002) on reading and writing as spiritual practices in ancient philosophy and how they define philosophy as a way of life. Reading and writing were part of the spiritual practices observed by the ancients who practiced philosophy as a way of life that pointed to how regimes of ethical practices affect and transform the self. This sense of ‘ethical’ is enjoined and explained by Hadot in pursuing Wittgenstein in relation to his ‘historical method’. In working out ancient philosophy as an ethics and praxis of discourse, Hadot drew on Wittgenstein and also opened his work up to an interpretation of an ethics of self-transformation (Laugier, 2011).

Wittgenstein’s own thoughts on reading are partially revealed in his list of those he took to influence him the most—an incongruous list of childhood reading and personal engagement with Russell
and Sraffa later at Cambridge: ‘Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos, Weininger, Spengler, Sraffa’ (cited by Stern & Szabados, 2004). There are in Wittgenstein’s case various styles of reading him that make sense of this incongruous grouping of his influences—a consistent German-Austrian counter Enlightenment critique of language and logic—a precision, simplicity and austereness—as well as a spiritual sense of Western decline. The positioning of Russell and Sraffa are exceptions to this cultural reading—the one relating to the early period of the Tractatus; the other, to his conception of language games. Russell is the only English influence, with no mention of G. E. Moore! Frege and Russell both on the logic of language (the difference between Sinn or Sense, and Bedeutung or Reference), and the form of a proposition.

Boltzmann and Hertz were both theoretical physicists who developed a theory of representation or a picture theory of meaning. Schopenhauer (2010) was the author of The World as Will and Representation. He was perhaps one of the greatest philosophical influences in Wittgenstein. I am surprised that Nietzsche did not get a mention in this list. Spengler’s (2006) work The Decline of the West was published in 1918 and had a profound effect on Wittgenstein in terms of civilisational analysis. Karl Kraus’ ethical notion of the Ursprung, as the origin or source of all true value, a concept of pure spirituality, expressible in a language free of both grammatical and ethical errors, had clear parallels to the Tractatus as an ethical project. Adolf Loos’ architecture as free from ornamentation that was part of the modern aesthetic principles of the Vienna Secession and greatly affected Wittgenstein’s sense of style.

Weininger’s place on the list needs careful interpretation, beyond me in this essay. He was the Viennese author of Sex and Character and a cult figure who committed suicide at the age of 23. Wittgenstein followed Weininger’s analysis of the Jewish thought as merely reproductive (as opposed to original), an idea Wittgenstein applied to himself, in a series of remarks in CV in the mid 1930s.

The relationship to Sraffa requires a bit of work. Wittgenstein only met Sraffa after his return to Cambridge in 1929. Sraffa was a socialist economist influenced by Gramsci. The two fell into a series of regular conversations including, most famously Sraffa’s response to Wittgenstein on logical form, when in a Neapolitan gesture of scepticism, he brushed his chin with his hand and asked, ‘What is the logical form of this?’ The incident and the argument reputedly made Wittgenstein rethink his picture theory of meaning spurring an anthropological account of language. The exchange ended abruptly in 1946 when Sraffa no longer wanted the engagement, exasperated by Wittgenstein’s political naivety (Sen, 2003, p. 1242).

In interpretive criticism after the sociological turn the historicity and culture of the reader became more important in understanding the act of producing readings. In order to understand and analyse the reader as a historical and situated construct so as to approach the development of reading publics or reading audiences that depend upon the relations between materiality and meaning and the changing practices of the consumption of text. This set of historical relations is heightened in the reception of a philosophical work of one culture when it is translated and received another culture. In this connection, we might acknowledge the rise of constructivist and subjectivist theories of reading, where meaning is said to reside in the dynamic interplay of reader and text, or is seen to be a result entirely of the reader’s active interpretation. On this model of understanding reading is often viewed as a sociocultural, cognitive and linguistic process in which readers use various systems of knowledge (of spoken and written language, of the subject matter of the text, and of culture) to construct meaning with text, rather than reading it off the page. The development and application of critical methodologies to the analysis of reading or of the production of a philosophical reading also requires some thought as a prevalent and dominant academic or pedagogical practice in the humanities.

In terms of this kind of analysis we may read Wittgenstein against a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence. Given the historicity of Wittgenstein as a reader and an author we might emphasis the atmosphere of fin d’siecle Vienna and Viennese modernism noting the range of contemporary Austrian and European authors, poets, artists and critics across the sciences and humanities that Wittgenstein acknowledged and the select group of philosophers in the Western tradition he referred to. Most importantly, reading Wittgenstein requires recognition of the shape of the logical problems he was working on by reference to Frege, Russell and Moore, and the history of the foundations of mathematics. Ray
Monk’s (2005) How to Read: Wittgenstein insists on Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism as a key to reading him: philosophical understanding then is like understanding a person or a poem. It is an ethical act to become clear and to avoid appropriating the other, reducing him or her to one’s own prejudices. In the case of Wittgenstein, it is more complex because he rereads and comments on his previous work, often self-correcting or engaging in dialogue with himself. The literature is replete with references to ‘reading’ Wittgenstein: how difficult it is to read him, reading the Tractatus or Investigations, Wittgenstein’s reading of Beethoven, reading Cavell or Monk on reading Wittgenstein, reading Augustine through Wittgenstein, reading with Wittgenstein, reading and writing the self in a confessional or self-interrogative way. There is also another sense of reading that is playful and interpretive that is suggestive of new ideas or new questions in philosophy. This is not so much to read Wittgenstein programmatically to find out what he really said or the amount a scholarly interpretation but rather to use Wittgenstein to make an argument, or perhaps to go beyond Wittgenstein in developing a line of thinking. The ethics involved in these choices take different forms. The former is based on the notion of truth in interpretation based on norms of textual faithfulness, on the veracity of sources, on the principle of empathy and on not appropriating Wittgenstein (or whoever) for one’s own purpose to remake him or her in one’s own image (the worst egological appropriation); the latter is definitely more playful, it is not necessarily interested in exegesis or quotation; in some ways it is less reverent and more focused on the argument or the case; it is, in a word, more entertaining, in the broad intellectual sense of openness, and of establishing connections.

Ludwig Wittgenstein against his own intentions has increasingly had an enormous impact on philosophy and thought of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century and yet his philosophy has been picked up and developed mostly by a loyal band of Cambridge students and followers who popularised and developed his way of doing philosophy, in both the analytic style of the Tractatus and ‘poetic’ style of the Investigations. And yet the reception of his work has been uneven partly due to the fact that Wittgenstein only published the Tractatus and one paper on logic in his lifetime. Much of his influence during his own life sprang from the position he occupied at Cambridge as well as a set of personal and professional contacts in Vienna. Along with Frege and Russell, Wittgenstein is regarded as one of the founders of the analytic tradition. Yet, of all philosophers in the analytic tradition, his influence has continued to grow in philosophy of mathematics, and in various post-analytic philosophies, of language, art, politics and religion. Within the analytic tradition Wittgenstein’s role and significance has been subject to intense debate with authors, sympathetic and otherwise struggling to find a commanding and clear overview of his work. It is curious that it is only in the late 1990s, some seventy years after the publication of the Tractatus, that someone of the stature of P.M.S. Hacker (1996) should try to provide a history of Wittgenstein’s complex and ambiguous role in the analytic movement.

Ray Monk (1991), who wrote a stunning biography of Wittgenstein and one of the great philosophical biographies of all time called Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius, suggested Wittgenstein was driven by spiritual as much by intellectual concern. Monk (1996) reviews Hacker’s account beginning with an interpretation of the crisis of a movement that acknowledges its past:

A feeling has been growing that analytic philosophy is in crisis. Once proud and disdainful of other traditions, it has become unsure of itself; uncertain about its past and fearful of its future. One sign of this insecurity is the debate now being conducted among leading analytic philosophers about their own history. Previously, they cared little about this. Confident in the superiority of their methods over those of earlier philosophers, they regarded an interest in history as a perverse preoccupation with the mistakes of the past.

Monk sees Hacker’s (1996) Wittgenstein’s Place in 20th-Century Analytic Philosophy as a useful corrective to Michael Dummett’s (1996) Origins of Analytical Philosophy and ‘the most impressive history of the analytic movement yet written’. He charts Hacker’s diagnosis of the decline of analytic philosophy to show how analytical philosophers have forgotten the later Wittgenstein in the pursuit of theory and more secure status of philosophy as a scientific discipline.

Hacker (2005) provides an account of the origins of analytic philosophy that begins with the revolt by Russell and Moore in the 1890s against Bradley’s neo-Hegelianism, to develop in the 1920s as a form
of Cambridge analysis inspired by Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, later picked up by the logical empiricists in the 1930s who expound variations of verificationism. It was this third phase with the Nazi onslaught and the destruction of the Vienna Circle that those philosophers mostly of Jewish heritage, like Carnap, Feigl, Reichenbach, Hempel, Frank, Tarski, Bergmann, Gödel, fled to the USA to transform American philosophy in the post-war years into different forms of logical pragmatism. Hacker goes on to detail the emergence of postwar Oxford analytic philosophy under Ryle that developed simultaneously with Wittgenstein’s later philosophy including

the work distinguished pupils: for example, his successors in the Cambridge chair, von Wright, Wisdom and Anscombe, those of his students who taught at Oxford, such as Waismann, Paul and (again) Anscombe, and those who transmitted his ideas to philosophers in the USA, such as Ambrose, Black and Malcolm (p. 3).³

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* had inspired a ‘linguistic turn’ where

the goal of philosophy is (a) the understanding of the structure and articulations of our conceptual scheme, and (b) the resolution of the problems of philosophy (to be specified by paradigmatic examples), which stem, inter alia, from unclarities about the uses of words’ (Hacker, 2005, p. 11).

In this way, philosophy was seen to be ‘a contribution to distinctive form of understanding’ (Hacker, 2005). In a footnote, he suggests:

It does not enlarge our knowledge of the world and it does not discover new knowledge of the world or produce confirmable hypotheses or theories about it. But it may give us knowledge of aspects of our conceptual scheme (our forms of representation) by way of realisation of the character of what is, so to speak, before our eyes (Hacker, 2005, Fn 10, p. 11).

In reviewing Gordon Baker’s interpretation of Wittgenstein Hacker (2007) elaborates the characteristic tendencies, interests and lasting achievements ‘about the nature of linguistic representation, about the relationship between thought and language, about solipsism and idealism, self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds, and about the nature of necessary truth and of mathematical propositions’. He continues:

He ploughed up the soil of European philosophy of logic and language. He gave us a novel and immensely fruitful array of insights into philosophy of psychology. He attempted to overturn centuries of reflection on the nature of mathematics and mathematical truth. He undermined foundationalist epistemology. And he bequeathed us a vision of philosophy as a contribution not to human knowledge, but to human understanding—understanding of the forms of our thought and of the conceptual confusions into which we are liable to fall (p. 37).

The difficulty of reading Wittgenstein has in part to do with his intellectual location between Vienna and Cambridge, the intrinsic difficulty of his ideas, the ambit of his thought, and his literary experiments with philosophical forms. Both Hacker and Hans-Johann Glock (2004) clearly do not regard Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* as analytic in any simple sense but rather as ‘much closer to the oeuvres of Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger’⁴ (Glock, 2004, p. 419). The troubled history and place of Wittgenstein in relation to analytic philosophy, it could be argued, sheds more light on the category ‘analytic’ than it does on Wittgenstein’s work and also explains why Wittgenstein transcends the movement and category in various configurations of post-analytic thought.

Glock (2004) entertains the view that Wittgenstein while regarded by Hacker as an analytic philosopher and indeed ‘the moving force behind analytic philosophy in the twentieth century’ (p. 422), there are other variations of what he calls ‘irrationalist’ interpretations (an unfortunate epithet): existentialist (Engelmann, Drury), therapeutic (Bouwsma), aspect (Baker), nonsense (Conant, Diamond), genre (Stern, Pichler) postmodern (Rorty, Lyotard). He provides the following chart only to reinforce against his own intention the division between Wittgensteinian philosophy and analytic philosophy itself (Figure 1).

Frankly, I find Glock’s interpretation rather one-sided especially since the ‘Continental’ and specifically the ‘Viennese’ reading of Wittgenstein has gathered force since Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin’s *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (1973) began to contest Wittgenstein as a place-holder in Cambridge philosophy by emphasising Vienna as the cultural milieu of Wittgenstein’s thought, the critique of culture (Loos, Kraus, Schönberg, von Hofmannsthal, Musil), Fritz Mauthner’s critique of language, and the *Tractatus* as an ethical treatise. By admitting the Viennese hypothesis Wittgenstein’s cultural aspirations and achievements in relation to European modernism become more apparent. The nature of his relationship with
the Vienna circle also becomes more transparent as does Nietzsche’s influence on Viennese modernism, the influence of Otto Weininger and the problem of Jewish self-hatred, the preoccupation with Mach, Boltzmann, Schlick and Neurath, Freud’s therapy and Karl Kraus’ cultural critique. None of these hypothetical lines of inquiry or their historical trajectories can be gleaned from a purely analytical reading.

And in the world of scholarship, not narrowly prescribed by the constraints of analytic philosophy, it can be argued that these productive readings have both legitimacy and deserve greater consideration.

In ‘Wittgenstein’s Reception in America’, Newton Garver (1987) commented that even in America while Wittgenstein’s prestige is enormous ‘his impact has been minimal’. The fact is, Garver claims, ‘Wittgenstein has no significant following’. He goes on to add:

one has to say that Wittgenstein has had little impact on such American philosophers as Carnap, Hempel, Feigl, Grunbaum, Quine, Chisholm, Goodman, Rawls, Kripke, Dworkin, Gewirth, Donagan, Kaplan, Searle—even though they have all noticed Wittgenstein. The exceptions are fewer: Black, Malcolm, Bergmann (selectively), Cavell, and Foot (p. 207).

The fact is a ‘new Wittgenstein’ had emerged, the title of a collection by Alice Crary and Rupert Read, that understands Wittgenstein as putting forward a positive view of philosophy as a kind of therapy. As Crary (2000, p. 1) explains:

Wittgenstein’s primary aim in philosophy is—to use a word he himself employs in characterizing his later philosophical procedures—a therapeutic one. These papers have in common an understanding of Wittgenstein as aspiring, not to advance metaphysical theories, but rather to help us work ourselves out of confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing.

This reading didn’t just appear suddenly but is the lifetime result of steady progress in finding a new way around and through Wittgenstein’s texts, exploring Wittgenstein himself and the intertext and metatextual commentaries. With each attempt the vectors of reading must somehow coordinate and match with other facts; it must cohere. This ‘new’ reading nearly twenty years old is associated with the
work of Stanley Cavell, Hilary Putnam, and Cora Diamond, and is heavily criticised by both Hacker and Glock, on different grounds. Establishing a new interpretation is often a collective responsibility or the result of collaborative endeavour over many years, not necessarily by design.

The ‘new Wittgenstein’ coalesces around a series of common interpretive protocols. Wittgenstein is not advancing theories in philosophy but rather employing a therapeutic method to deconstruct philosophical puzzles; he is helping us to work free of the confusions that become evident when we begin to philosophise. At the same time, Wittgenstein is disabusing us of the notion that we can stand outside language and command an external view, and that such an external view is both necessary and possible for grasping the essence of thought and language. By contrast, Wittgenstein, on the new reading, encourages us to see that our intuitions about meaning and thought are best accommodated ‘by attention to our everyday forms of expression and to the world those forms of expression serve to reveal’ (Crary & Read, 2000, p. 1). This new schema for reading Wittgenstein also puts less emphasis on the decisive break in his thought, represented by the *Tractatus* and the posthumous *Investigations*, to emphasise significant continuities of his thought centring around his therapeutic conception of philosophy (Peters, 2010).

In this collective reading, Cavell’s work stands out for me as faithful to Wittgenstein in style without being slavish; Cavell’s thought is a model of self-exploration without a strong appropriation of Wittgenstein. What makes him attractive to philosophers of education is that he talks of ‘philosophy as pedagogy’ and he makes connections—to pragmatism, to American philosophy, to education, to psychoanalysis, to movies, and to contemporary philosophy including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and the Continental tradition (but not Foucault who did not speak to him). His work is about making connections. At the Harvard seminar for Saito and Standish’s (2012) book on Cavell I presented a paper entitled ‘Philosophy and the Exemplary Text: Cavell’s “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*”’ that was never published because the transcript of the conversation with Cavell based on my contribution was lost and I had misgivings about my paper. I wrote in my notes:

Stanley Cavell, who with Stephen Toulmin, influenced me more than anyone else in making sense of Wittgenstein. By attending this seminar, I had hoped in some small way that I would be inspired to return to what I had written about Cavell and what he had written about Wittgenstein in order to rethink and rewrite it.

In particular, I wanted to focus on Cavell’s (1995) sense of acquiring a language, the power of the question and scepticism as a natural attitude attuned to learning to think, acquiring a voice, being a child, and beginning philosophy anew. I also wanted to remark on what I called the ‘exemplary text’ in philosophy which I identified as Cavell’s ‘Notes and Afterthoughts’, a truly pedagogical text in every sense of the term, one that entered into dialogue with his former self, with Wittgenstein, and with a lifetime of teaching the opening of the *Investigations*. It is to my mind a condensation of grammar, a close reading, a slow reading, a reading that has taken a lifetime, a reading that uses the text to comment upon itself. I wrote in my notes: ‘The ghost of Wittgenstein stalks these pages. Philosophy as a kind of writing; as a kind of reading. As a literary artefact. As a kind of pedagogy’. I wanted to examine the nature of the pedagogical text in philosophy and the way that Stanley Cavell as a distinctively American philosopher returned the origins of American philosophy—Emerson’s transcendentalism and Thoreau’s *Walden*—and engaged with the leading figures of contemporary Continental philosophy. I indicated that the reasons why he ought to be read in this way had to do with his own appraisal of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, in which he rescues an ‘aesthetic-ethical’ Wittgenstein, contextualised in a European intellectual milieu, located at the intersection of romanticism and scepticism and in relation to the question of modernism in the arts. I argued that Cavell regards the *Investigations* as a text rather than a set of problems to be worked through but this is not to deny that there are also problems surrounding, as Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations*, ‘the concepts of meaning, of understanding, of a proposition, of logic, the foundations of mathematics, states of consciousness, and other things’ (1953/1972: Preface, p. vii). I argued: ‘Yet these subjects are not approached in traditional philosophical ways: Wittgenstein does not employ standard or recognisable forms of argumentation nor does he propose theories about them’ (Peters, 2001a). In short, Cavell writes across philosophy even though he might also write out of a tradition. He
is not frightened by prevailing opinion and calls the shots as he sees them. I was immediately drawn to his work in part because of his generosity in making connections to recent French philosophy and the philosophical intertext.

The encounter with Wittgenstein in France can be seen in terms of the wider context of a colloquium on analytic philosophy held at Royaumont in 1958. Recent commentary between Overgaard and Dummett might indicate that the oppositional standoff between analytic and Continental philosophy actually was more pluralistic than first imagined with ‘rapprochement between Oxford “linguistic philosophy” and a certain strand of phenomenological thought’ within the broader context that included ‘continental “analytics”, Anglophone non-“analytics”, French historians of philosophy, “analytic” opponents of Oxford philosophy, Franciscan phenomenologists, and Oxonians who called their work “phenomenology”’ (Vrahimis, 2013, p. 177).

Stanislas Breton (1959) in his *Situation de la philosophie contemporaine* classified Wittgenstein’s work as ‘scientific philosophy’, a form of logical positivism, one of three strands along with Heideggerian and Marxism, defining the three dominant approaches in contemporary philosophy (Helgeson, 2011, p. 339). Breton’s text was emblematic of the marginal regard for Wittgenstein and as Helgeson (2011, p. 340) remarks the *Tractatus* was not translated into French until 1961 although Jean Cavaillès speaks of Wittgenstein as a logical positivist in 1935. This early French misinterpretation of the *Tractatus* and characterisation of Wittgenstein as a logical positivist not only speaks to the lack of interpenetration of English and French thought and its selectivity, but also the relatively closed nature of national traditions within Europe up until quite recently. As Helgeson (2011, p. 340) remarks:

> After this, there is silence. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (the only philosophical book he published while alive) long went untranslated and unread in France. And logical positivism—with which Wittgenstein would be associated in French philosophical circles—had virtually no echo. It is striking that a search for ‘positivisme logique’ in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France yields no results between 1937 and 1951.


Bouveresse occupies the chair of the philosophy of language and epistemology (‘Philosophie du langage et de la connaissance’) at the College de France and has used his analytic work to attack the likes of Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida. One might be forced to assume that Bouveresse was single-handedly responsible for receiving Wittgenstein in the French context in a direct sense and for using a kind of Wittgensteinian analyticity for attacking and polemicising the doyens of French poststructuralism or post-Nietzscheanism.

Collins (2017) in ‘Thinking Otherwise: Bouveresse and the French Tradition’ provides a useful account of ‘bringing Wittgenstein to Paris’ through his *Le Mythe de l’intériorité: Expérience, signification et langage privé chez Wittgenstein* in 1976. While he had contributed earlier articles to *Cahiers pour l’analyse* and *Critique* it was his book that really sparked a growing number of companion studies on different aspects of Wittgenstein’s thought: anthropology, iconography, religion, aesthetics, architecture, music, Freud, modernity and the idea of progress’ (n.p.). Against Descartes’ ideal of the pure ego, Collins (2017) pictures Bouveresse as making an argument close to the point of view of Ordinary Language Philosophy:

> Language was indissociable from ‘thinking’, ‘feeling’, ‘sensing’, and philosophers could not afford to ignore it. Humans learn to think in communication with other subjects; language, the intersubjective medium through which they do so, is key to how they think about themselves and the world. Through language, in other words, thinking is necessarily public (n.p.).

Bouveresse confessed that it was Wittgenstein’s ‘anthropological eye’ that had seduced him. He was not the only one. His friend Pierre Bourdieu was also taken with Wittgenstein, and Bouveresse (1995) had specifically written on Wittgenstein and *habitus*. Bourdieu (1990) was to remark ‘Wittgenstein is probably the philosopher who has helped me most at moments of difficulty. He’s a kind of saviour for times of great intellectual distress’. He was referring in particular to Wittgenstein’s concept of following a rule. Bouveresse championed Wittgenstein who was virtually unknown in France before 1976 and his
vitriolic attacks on Lyotard and Derrida’s postmodern turn probably helped to explain why, in particular, Deleuze responded so violently to the mention of Wittgenstein.

Yet, there is also the clear precedent of Pierre Hadot, a classical and historian of philosophy, who published work on Wittgenstein in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sandra Laugier (2011) comments that Hadot had found in Wittgenstein’s opus an accommodation of the idea of philosophy as an activity. Hadot’s understanding of philosophy as a set of spiritual exercises—as a way of life—found distinct echoes in Cavell and Diamond. Hadot’s (2004) *Wittgenstein and the Limits of Language*, testifies to the fact that Hadot was one of the first French scholars to explore the relationship between logic and language in the thought of Wittgenstein. As early as 1959 in essays ‘Wittgenstein, philosophe du langage (I) and (II)’ (in Critique) Hadot, like Cavell, recognised the overwhelming significance of Wittgenstein’s style for his thought. (Style is a characteristic that I have insisted upon in my interpretation of Wittgenstein and explored in a variety of works—e.g. Peters, 2001b). Hadot (1995) in his conception of philosophy as a way of life latched on to Wittgenstein therapeutic approach and the confessional style arguing that rather than advancing theses philosophy teaches us ways and spiritual exercises. The spiritual aspect of philosophy was never far away from Wittgenstein’s own thinking and what is remarkable is that Hadot, across national traditions and across translation, understood how ethics was central to Wittgenstein and to reading Wittgenstein. Hadot’s reading of Wittgenstein is all the more remarkable for his well-known connection with Foucault. Foucault could not have read Hadot without recognising the influence of Wittgenstein especially in terms of historical method.

Derrida has often been described as the ‘French Wittgenstein’ by a range of commentators including Staten (1984) who claims that Wittgenstein’s method is a ‘regulated leakage across the boundaries of established categories’, whereas deconstruction is ‘a regulated overflowing of established categories’ (p. 24). Yet, while the deconstructive reading of Wittgenstein has been challenged (Shain 2007), it is clear that a number of prominent philosophers including Stanley Cavell, Stephen Mulhall, Richard Rorty, Newton Garver and others have read them together rather than in opposition.

Moreover, Jean-François Lyotard champions Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language games’ as a method in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979/1984) offering in that work and others an explicit political reading of Wittgenstein philosophy of language, a reading that I find attractive as a ‘creative misappropriation’ of his work (Peters, 1989, 1995). The influence of Wittgenstein is not far away from the thought of Pierre Bourdieu especially in regard to understanding the ‘logic of practice’. And it is clear that Foucault was aware of Wittgenstein work but also wanted to turn his philosophy of language to political purposes.

In a little-known paper delivered to a Japanese audience in 1978, Foucault takes up the concept of game in relation to analytic philosophy (and probably Wittgenstein’s influential notion of ‘language-games’, although his name is not mentioned) to criticise its employment without an accompanying notion of power. Arnold Davidson (1997) mentions a lecture ‘La Philosophie analytique de la politique’ in which Foucault (1978) makes an explicit reference to Anglo-American analytic philosophy:

For Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy it is a question of making a critical analysis of thought on the basis of the way in which one says things. I think one could imagine, in the same way, a philosophy that would have as its task to analyse what happens every day in relations of power. A philosophy, accordingly, that would bear rather on relations of power than on language games, a philosophy that would bear on all these relations that traverse the social body rather than on the effects of language that traverse and underlie thought (cited in Davidson, 1997, p. 3).

Language, in Foucault’s conception ‘never deceives or reveals’, rather as Foucault states: ‘Language, it is played. The importance, therefore, of the notion of game.’ He goes on to make the comparison: ‘Relations of power, also, they are played; it is these games that one must study in terms of tactics and strategy, in terms of order and of chance, in terms of stakes and objective’ (cited in Davidson, 1997, p. 4).

In this context, it is perhaps surprising that Gilles Deleuze is so virulent in his condemnation of Wittgenstein. In *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* recorded in 1988 and first broadcast in 1996 Gilles Deleuze is recorded as making the following remark on Wittgenstein:
Pour moi c’est une catastrophe philosophique [...] c’est une régression massive de toute la philosophie [...] S’ils l’emportent, alors là il y aura un assassinat de la philosophie s’ils l’emportent. C’est des assassins de la philosophie. Il faut une grande vigilance.

In English translation, Deleuze refers to Wittgenstein as representing ‘a philosophical catastrophe’, a ‘massive regression’ of all philosophy. The online summary provided by Charles Stivale reads:

Parnet says, let’s move on to W, and Deleuze says, there’s nothing in W, and Parnet says, yes, there’s Wittgenstein. She knows he’s nothing for Deleuze, but it’s only a word. Deleuze says, he doesn’t like to talk about that… It’s a philosophical catastrophe. It’s the very type of a ‘school’, a regression of all philosophy, a massive regression. Deleuze considers the Wittgenstein matter to be quite sad. They imposed <ils ont foutu> a system of terror in which, under the pretext of doing something new, it’s poverty introduced as grandeur. Deleuze says there isn’t a word to express this kind of danger, but that this danger is one that recurs, that it’s not the first time that it has arrived. It’s serious especially since he considers the Wittgensteinians to be nasty <méchants> and destructive <ils cassent tout>. So in this, there could be an assassination of philosophy, Deleuze says, they are assassins of philosophy, and because of that, one must remain very vigilant.<Deleuze laughs>

Yet, despite Deleuze’s outrageous comments there are some interesting similarities between Wittgenstein and Deleuze. They are both against the concept of depth in philosophy—with Freud, Marx and Nietzsche in particular being held in great suspicion—and both believed that the line between philosophy and aesthetics should be erased (Wittgenstein even famously writing, ‘Philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry.’) But in terms of style there is a crucial difference: Wittgenstein was a deliberate and austere minimalist, and Deleuze both preached and practiced a rampant maximalism, believing that philosophy should be about creation and not truth (or, as Žižek might say, about Meaning and not Truth). Also, due to their philosophy of the ‘body without organs’, and the plurality of identities created by such a body, the realm of raw materiality is of crucial importance for Deleuze and Guattari in a way that it simply isn’t for Wittgenstein, although the play of voices in *Philosophical Investigations* speaks to multiple selves. Where for Deleuze and Guattari philosophy is about concept creation. Wittgenstein's notion is more about clarity and the work of clarification, as he says at paragraph 126 in the *Philosophical Investigations*: ‘Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything—since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us’. (Wittgenstein, 1953/1972, #126, e55).

Drawing a parallel between Wittgenstein and Foucault has recently been taken up by Arnold I. Davidson and Gros (2011) who edited seven essays delivered in 2007 at ENS (*Foucault, Wittgenstein: de possibles rencontres*) that focus on a critical approach to traditional philosophy and the way in which philosophical problems employ deductive reasoning, casting doubt on the ways that language does not offer a transparent or complete representation of things or a straightforward representationalism. Some essays in addition, point to the notion of practice as an embodiment of the way discourse and language do not refer to an eternal reality but rather are a product of communitive and cultural practices. The lesson pointed to in regard to the philosophy of the subject becomes clear, where Wittgenstein talks of language games, Foucault emphasises power relations and discursive practices. There are in my view certainly parallels in conceptions of language/discourse, practice/genealogy and the history of concepts. Some argue that Wittgenstein and Foucault are not in direct opposition but there is a divergence between them. Foucault made some textual allusions and direct references to Wittgenstein while Wittgenstein was not unaware of the development of French phenomenology and existentialism. Both reject a causal analysis of phenomena and there are multiple interpretative links that bundle Wittgenstein and Foucault through a third set of influences and sources: Nietzsche, Saussure, and Hadot. Perhaps, most significantly both share a conception of philosophy as a practice and as a set of techniques and exercises to be performed on the self that are seen as capable of a kind of transformation which can change the subject and her own self-understanding—a *hermeneutics* of the Self.

Pascale Gillot and Daniele Lorenzini (2016) have edited a collection entitled *Foucault Wittgenstein: subjectivité, politique, éthique* that is based on a reading that suggests despite the fact they represent two rival traditions, their work resonates and enlightens each other’s, sharing the common ground of a radical critique of the classical notion of subjectivity and a specific way of conceiving and practicing philosophy as a way of being and living. The aim of the book is:
to move the Foucault/Wittgenstein confrontation onto a more explicitly ethical and political ground: a field that had only been barely explored during the 2007 day [seminar devoted to the topic]. But this confrontation is itself only possible that the unearthing of a fundamental theoretical concern common to both authors, namely the rejection of psychologism and the questioning of what could be called a 'philosophy of consciousness'.

What is of interest to me is not only the production of a dialogue of sorts between these two thinkers from different traditions and cultures, but the construction of a disruptive reading of Wittgenstein in a projected relation with Foucault's thought that supplies the missing dimension of power relations in Wittgenstein's work while at the same time thickening the concepts of 'game', 'play' and 'rule following' in Foucault’s work. That this is part of a new French reception to Wittgenstein that in some measure returns to themes first explored by Hadot is entirely fitting. That it constitutes yet a different kind of reading to Cavellian therapeutics is also philosophically interesting in the complexity of interpretation that perpetually seeks new readings in relation to problems and problematisations.

Notes

1. I use the Biblical term ‘beget’ (meaning to procreate, generate or bring forth, especially of Biblical genealogies) here to indicate genealogies and descendants of thought that comprise ‘movements’ or ‘schools’.


3. He suggests:

   This fourth phase of analytic philosophy declined from the 1970s, partly under the impact of American logical pragmatism, the leading figures of which were Quine (much influenced by Carnap) and Quine’s pupil Davidson (influenced by Tarski), and, in Britain, under the impact of Dummett and later of his pupils (p. 4).

4. In Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Postmodernism, Pedagogy (Peters & Marshall, 1999), we view Wittgenstein against the background of Viennese modernism and in relation to the writings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud, to explore the significance of philosophy of the subject (or self) as a tradition in itself and in relation to educational theory.

5. See Bouveresse's webpage at the College de France http://www.college-de-france.fr/default/EN/all/phi lan/index. htm

6. An abecedarium is a means to learn the alphabet. In this case Claire Parnet interviewed Deleuze for seven and a half hours. L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze is a telefilm produced by Pierre-André Boutang, recorded in 1988, first broadcast on Arte in 1996. See the online summary at http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/ABCs.html.

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