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Notes and Fragments

WITTGENSTEIN AS A MODERNIST PHILOSOPHER

by MICHAEL FISCHER

MUCH ATTENTION HAS RECENTLY been given to Martin Heidegger and his disturbing relationship to fascism. I want here to look at another philosopher in this context: Ludwig Wittgenstein. As a source of insight into the politics of modernism, Wittgenstein would seem to have at least three strikes against him. His explicit political pronouncements are rare; his relationship to literary modernism is unclear; and the political implications of his philosophical writings are notoriously difficult to assess. Perhaps for these reasons, discussions of modernism usually omit Wittgenstein, and discussions of Wittgenstein usually ignore modernism. Stanley Cavell is an important exception to this tendency, and his early essays collected in *Must We Mean What We Say?*¹ will be my starting point here. I will be reviewing in very general terms how Cavell defines modernism; how his definition encourages us to read Wittgenstein as a modernist philosopher; and, finally, how aligning Wittgenstein with modernism can shed light on its troubling politics.

Cavell's comments on modernism initially concern painting, sculpture, and music. He is interested in how modernist forms of these arts touch off radical uncertainty in their audiences. According to Cavell, when we confront a sculpture by Anthony Caro, a painting by Morris Louis, or a composition by Arnold Schoenberg, we wonder, not whether the particular piece is *good* art but whether it is art at all. Fraudulence, in other words, is always a possibility risked by modernist art, not a threat that disappears over time when the work commands a high price or an academic following or is housed in museums or heard in concert

halls. Commenting on the vain hope that time will tell whether a given work is really art, Cavell skeptically asks

What will time tell? That certain departures in art-like pursuits have become established (among certain audiences, in textbooks, on walls, in college courses); that someone is treating them with the respect due, we feel, to art; that one no longer has the right to question their status? But in waiting for time to tell that, we miss what the present tells—that the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art. (pp. 188–89)

We trust that a given modernist piece is art—we cannot know for sure—and that trust can always be betrayed. That is the risk we run in experiencing such art, the risk that arises when we feel that someone always has the right to question the work's status as art: hence the many legendary stories of the riots and walkouts and outrages that have marked the reception of modernist art when audience members angrily suspect that they have been taken in or used. "It is as though," Cavell writes, "the *impulse* to shout fraud and storm out is always present, but fear of the possible consequence overmasters the impulse" (pp. 205–6). From this point of view, we may keep quiet, or stay seated, out of anxiety rather than conviction. We fear that in rejecting a work, we may be exposing ourselves, revealing our own lack of sophistication or taste, not the work's. Put a bit differently, we do not know whether our attention to the work is justified by the work or by what others say about it.

Because the reception of modernist art is so uncertain, manifestoes and prefaces typically try to influence our response to it, as if the art does not simply benefit from explanation but stands in need of it. For me, Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* illustrates this problem. Like the modernists discussed by Cavell, Wordsworth suspects that his readers will "struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness" when they encounter his work: "they will look round for poetry" and be disappointed by Wordsworth's prosaic style.² To orient these readers, to help them feel more at home with what he has done, Wordsworth reluctantly writes a preface, hoping to explain his poetry but not explain it away by assimilating it to poetry as his readers conventionally regard it. According to Wordsworth, we appreciate his poems not when we are ready to add his work to the existing canon but when we are willing to reconceive poetry along the lines of his work. As Wordsworth puts it, anticipating the all-or-nothing claims of most modernist artists, "if

my conclusions are admitted, and carried as far as they must be carried if admitted at all, our judgments concerning the works of the greatest poets both ancient and modern will be far different from what they are at present both when we praise and when we censure" (p. 324).

According to Cavell, this need to explain modernist art derives from its well-known difficulty, which in turn results from the feeling of artists that tradition no longer determines in advance what will count or survive as serious art. Modernist artists do not so much break with tradition as respond to its collapse. By defeating conventional expectations, they must create the taste that approves of their work. Cavell calls this the "burden of modernism." He feels that serious composers, for example, have all but lost their audience because the atonal procedures they find necessary to carry on their art insure that the work will not be immediately comprehensible to an audience (p. 187). Contemporary music will become comprehensible—it will find an audience—when and if individuals risk hearing it as music, not noise. These are the all-or-nothing stakes risked by modernist art. In Cavell's words, "genuine responses to art are to be sought in individuals alone, as the choice or affinity for a canon of art and a canon of criticism must be made by individuals alone; and . . . these individuals have no audience to belong [to] as sanctioning, and as sharing the responsibility for, the partiality they show for the work of individual artists and particular critics. . . . This suggests one way of putting the modern predicament of audience: taste now appears as partialness" (p. 206), that is, as something that divides people as well as brings some individuals together.

The partialness some readers show Wittgenstein's work begins to suggest his modernism. When we feel partial toward something, our preferences seem subjective; and Cavell thinks that Wittgenstein's work, like modernist art, elicits a personal response from its readers. These readers typically react in extreme ways, either seeing themselves as disciples of Wittgenstein or rejecting his work as philosophy altogether. As with modernist art, there doesn't seem to be any middle ground. In Wittgenstein's case, his writing appeals to what we ordinarily say and encourages us, each one of us, to discover what we regard ordinary or natural. In philosophizing from everyday language, Cavell notes, "one feels empirical evidence about one's language to be irrelevant to one's claims" (p. 95). Instead of arriving empirically at what we ordinarily say, Wittgenstein analyzes himself, what he finds natural or strained. His writing is thus confessional and "in confessing," Cavell suggests, "you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you" (p. 71).

Cavell does not find conventional philosophical reasoning to be argument, or proof in the *Investigations*. But he does hear Wittgenstein exhorting his readers to examine themselves (“look and see,” Wittgenstein typically implores us). Instead of demonstrating a thesis, Wittgenstein thus invites us to go and do as he has done—namely, to engage in the introspection that his writing carries out.

In saying that Wittgenstein’s writing “exhorts,” “implores,” and “invites” its readers to know themselves, I am emphasizing the vulnerability of Wittgenstein’s work. As with modernist art, nothing guarantees that readers will take up Wittgenstein’s tasks—no tradition, institution, or audience can insure that his writing will be read or counted as serious philosophy. Cavell consequently worries about what he calls the inheritability or teachability of Wittgenstein’s thought. The problem becomes one of teaching others, or oneself, to produce and test the examples that Wittgenstein’s writing depends on. As Cavell puts it, “what is wanted really is a matter of conveying ‘the hang’ of something, and that is a very particular dimension of a subject to teach—familiar, for example, in conservatories of music” (pp. 103–4) but, I would add, foreign to other forms of teaching, say in a university philosophy or literature department, which likes to think of itself as certifiably transmitting knowledge, not the elusive “hang” of a precarious art.

In Cavell, this anxiety about the teachability of Wittgenstein’s ordinary-language philosophy deepens into an anxiety about the transmissibility of culture itself. Cavell calls this our helplessness or powerlessness to insure that others will carry on our form of life. Nothing guarantees that others—nothing guarantees that we—will go on sharing interests, expectations, and responses, that we will go on, for example, finding the same things humorous, dull, or shocking. Nothing insures the perpetuation of our form of life, above all “not the grasping of universals nor the [mastery] of books of rules” (p. 52). “It is,” Cavell concludes, “a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying” p. 52—terrifying in its apparent groundlessness and vulnerability.

The apprehensiveness that I have been describing about the inheritability of culture motivates much early modernist writing. In his famous essay on *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot speaks of making the modern world possible for art, as if the very survival of art were in question. This worry about the persistence of literature even appears in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” an essay often accused of casting tradition in fixed spatial terms. Reading “Tradition and the Individual Talent” with Wittgen-

stein's modernism in mind, I am struck by the fragility of the tradition that Eliot is charged with reifying. Eliot explicitly states that tradition "cannot be inherited," like handed-down possessions you must simply be there to receive: "if you want [tradition] you must obtain it by great labor." What this labor will look like is for Eliot an open question. He warns that "it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations": "Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum." Anyone adopting Eliot's view of tradition will accordingly "be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities."³ What counts as tradition, what work will sustain it, and where this work will take place are decisions that writers must make on their own. Museums and universities cannot exempt us from making these decisions; neither can the existing canon of literary masterpieces define what counts as literature (the past, Eliot says, is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past, echoing Wordsworth's claim that new creative work does not simply extend tradition but redefines it). Because the present constructs the past that it relies on for guidance, there is something inevitably circular or self-sustaining about carrying on tradition. As Richard Shusterman puts it in one of the best recent books on Eliot's criticism, tradition for Eliot is thus an open-ended, essentially contested concept.⁴ It is not one of those ideas that William James disparagingly called "magic words" or "solving names," the possession of which allows you to end your metaphysical quest and quit improvising. To paraphrase James, tradition appears in Eliot less as a solution than as a program for more work.

Nevertheless, everyone must admit that "magic words" and "solving terms" appeal to Eliot and to other modernists. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* and other works, Eliot longs for a uniform culture, settled agreement on what constitutes knowledge, and an authoritative church guaranteeing consensus on values. Reading Eliot in light of Wittgenstein's modernism helps us recover the anxiety, the vulnerability, and the weariness with risk that bring about Eliot's wish for a final solution to culture's precariousness. It is as if he wants to make the modern world not simply possible for literature but forever safe. His solution is to make the modern world less modern. Most literary critics today rightly recoil from this solution and repudiate Eliot's elitism, ethnocentrism, and profascism. But Eliot will pay whatever it costs to insure what he calls "continuity and coherence in literature and the arts"—so great is his anxiety over the future. He consequently longs for a stable, ho-

mogeneous culture where we all read the same books, and he disparages "a negative liberal society" in which, he warns, we have no agreement on a body of knowledge which all educated persons should acquire. In such a society, he laments, "the idea of wisdom disappears, and you get sporadic and unrelated experimentation."⁵ The open-ended, unsponsored experimentation that once sustained tradition now apparently jeopardizes it.

Wittgenstein helps us understand this longing for security because he shares it; he feels it in himself. In the *Investigations*, he speaks of the "dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy" and he notes our desire for secure boundaries and fixed "rules [that] never let a doubt creep in, but stop up all the cracks where it might."⁶ Following Cavell, I earlier called the *Investigations* a confession; the book also resembles the kind of dialogue of the mind with itself that Matthew Arnold found "exclusively modern" (and disturbing).⁷ In this dialogue, Wittgenstein constantly acknowledges his own attraction to absolutism and tries to ward it off by returning to the admittedly rough ground of everyday language usage. For him, sticking to the subjects of our everyday thinking is the only way to keep our heads up, not bowed in skeptical defeat or metaphysical worship.⁸ I find it especially important that in Wittgenstein there is no magic, once-and-for-all cure for dogmatism, only endless, specific, occasional recoveries from its temptation. He reminds critics of Eliot's politics to watch out for their own preoccupation with purity. Pointing out the limitations of someone else's position does not guarantee sensitivity to the limitations of our own. In Wittgenstein's terms, it is one thing to criticize Eliot and another, equally difficult thing to avoid being dazzled by the ideal that attracted him.

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1. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

2. William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1967), p. 321. Subsequent references are inserted in the text.

3. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 38, 40, 39.

4. See Richard Shusterman, *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chap. 7.
5. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society: Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, pp. 289, 290.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), sections 131 and 84.
7. Matthew Arnold, "Preface to First Edition of *Poems*," *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 203.
8. *Philosophical Investigations*, section 106: "Here it is difficult as it were to keep our heads up,—to see that we must stick to the subjects of our every-day thinking, and not go astray and imagine that we have to describe extreme subtleties, which in turn we are after all quite unable to describe with the means at our disposal."