

*Wittgenstein in Exile*, by James Klagge

Reviewed by Ben Leubner, August 2011

I recall attending a talk on ethics in 2000 in the course of which the professor giving the talk twice quoted Wittgenstein's 1929 lecture on the same subject. Afterwards, during the period for questions, one man rose and said something to the effect of, "Wittgenstein said that no one would ever understand what he said, which would seem to invalidate your quoting him in support of your argument." While the presenter handled this comment diplomatically, I, at the time a precocious youth, thought to myself, "Well, how could one then presume to understand what Wittgenstein meant when he said that no one would ever understand him?" The obstinacy of the interlocutor and my own precociousness aside, both his comment and my own internal response to it have continued to surface in my mind from time to time throughout the intervening decade, during which the study of Wittgenstein has occupied me in many ways. There is something to the point that this particular questioner made, even if the way in which he made it was gruff and without tact. It is a question of how we can presume to understand Wittgenstein, of how professors of philosophy and Wittgenstein scholars in particular can presume to understand him, when according to him such understanding was, indeed, not likely. This is a paradox at the heart of Wittgenstein studies: one has to be familiar with Wittgenstein's philosophy in order to know and understand what makes it so difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. In order to understand Wittgenstein, that is, we have to understand what hinders us from understanding him.

If we consider Wittgenstein's claim to incomprehensibility valid and not merely dubious, and if we wish to comprehend it, it seems that our own comprehension, to our detriment, must necessarily be, at best, a sort of incomprehension masquerading as knowledge. It's quite a knot, one that I have perpetually reencountered in my own long and involved journeyings through Wittgenstein's writings, and it seems that regardless of how many times I think I have solved it and left it behind for good, it crops up again shortly thereafter. The roots of such knots and confusions, as Wittgenstein knew, run deep and are difficult to combat. According to his philosophy (if I can presume to use such an expression), what is necessary in order to combat them is a clear view, or perspicuous representation, of them. James Klagge's new book, *Wittgenstein in Exile*, provides us with just such a refreshing view of the particular problem of how we understand, or do not understand, Wittgenstein, a view which ought to simultaneously ease and intensify our preoccupation with this question.

Klagge proposes that what constitutes Wittgenstein's incomprehensibility, or at least what constitutes the main difficulty we might have when it comes to understanding him, is not necessarily the complexity of his thought but the spirit of his thinking, which is in part the spirit of exile, or the spirit of an exile. While Klagge does initially call our attention to Wittgenstein's many geographical displacements from the Vienna and Austria of his birth, he does not merely mean exile in this sense. He has something else in mind as well, something that might, to go along with the spirit of exile, be called an exile of spirit. Wittgenstein considered the spirit of 20th Century western civilization to be fundamentally hostile to his own interests; he identified more with the culture of the 19th Century Austro-Hungarian empire, in the vital spirit of which he was raised, even if he

was raised as that culture itself was in its final waning stages. "Since Wittgenstein identified with and felt grounded in this lost culture," writes Klagge, "he commonly expressed the feeling that few . . . would understand him. In effect Wittgenstein was an *exile* -- not from his home-place so much as from his home-time, his cultural home" (24).

The distinction between a civilization and a culture, which I've just made above and which Klagge repeatedly calls our attention to, is a distinction that Wittgenstein was very familiar with from his reading of, and sympathy with, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, according to which a civilization is what a culture becomes once its vital, or artistic, spirit has been extinguished. In his biography of Wittgenstein, Ray Monk relates a comment that Wittgenstein made to Maurice Drury in 1930: "I was walking about in Cambridge and passed a bookshop, and in the window were portraits of Russell, Freud and Einstein. A little further on, in a music shop, I saw portraits of Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin. Comparing these portraits I felt intensely the terrible degeneration that had come over the human spirit in the course of only a hundred years" (299). The notion of degeneration here is pure Spengler (as Monk observes), and it is important to note that by no means is it the human intellect that has degenerated, but the human spirit. Wittgenstein, particularly when in Cambridge, his aversion to which is well-documented, felt himself a transplant. Not only was he a Viennese living in England, but he was also, or so it seems he often felt, a cultured, passionate human being living in an increasingly civilized age of scientific inquiry and mechanical reproduction, what he referred to as "the disintegrating and putrefying English civilization" (Monk 488).

One of the things that characterizes the exile, as Klagge notes, is the difficulty or impossibility of returning home. The home may still be there but the way barred, or the way may be open but the home either no longer there or, if still there, transformed to the point where calling it "home" no longer makes sense. Other complications might be imagined. In Wittgenstein's case, given that his exile was as much temporal as it was spatial, the prospect of return was especially bleak. Not only had the Austro-Hungarian empire dissolved and then finally collapsed, making a physical return in many respects impossible, but it was also difficult for Wittgenstein to recapture, even in fleeting moments, the essence of that culture's spirit, making any sort of significant respite unlikely. One might suggest that all he needed to do was put a Schubert record on the gramophone, but in the gramophone itself, despite its obvious advantages, Wittgenstein already saw the intrusion of civilization into culture, or of science into art: "It is so characteristic that, just when the mechanics of reproduction are so vastly improved, there are fewer and fewer people who know how the music should be played" (Monk 543). It is easy to see behind the philosopher two of whose main aims were to bring words home and to find respite from philosophy the human being who felt he could not return home and for whom respite was a constantly sought, though rarely found, state.

The most frequently quoted passage from Wittgenstein in Klagge's book is the 1930 sketch for a forward which begins, "This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written. This is not, I believe, the spirit of the main current of European and American civilization" (*Culture and Value* 6). One could replace "in sympathy with" with "at home in" here and lose little, I think. The only problem was that there were very few such readers out there. Thus, as Klagge notes,

Wittgenstein's philosophy presupposes, and is always struggling with, "an audience of problematic temperament" (80), readers whose attitudes are not conducive to the right reception of what Wittgenstein is offering and who will therefore necessarily misunderstand him. It even seems that on some occasions his anticipation of the way in which he will be misunderstood prevents him from saying certain things at all, or at least leads him to qualify them even as he says them. In another 1930 draft of a preface, for instance, he writes, "I would like to say 'This book is written to the glory of God,' but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood" (Monk 301). The content of what he says might be perfectly clear, or clear enough, but the spirit in which that content is couched would remain foreign to us, a fact which could be demonstrated not by appeal to our inability to explain it (for an explanation might easily be offered), but by appeal to the manner in which we live, to what we do, which consists all too often of, precisely, the felt need to explain.

"Wittgenstein's own difficulty," wrote Stanley Cavell in an early essay, "is not willful" (165). Indeed, more often than not Wittgenstein laments that it will be his fate to be misunderstood. Aside from a rare instance or two (his defence of the *Tractatus*, for example), he does not seem to brag much about it. Of course, he might have made it easier on his readers, he might have given the same charm to his own thoughts that he saw in the explanations of Freud and Einstein, but this would have constituted a grave betrayal of both the nature of his investigations and the spirit in which they were undertaken. Cavell saw something in common between Freud and Wittgenstein in this regard, that they both wished to "prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change" (184). In Cavell's estimation, then, Freud, too, wished to resist the charm of

explaining things in such a way that they were essentially merely explained away, though Wittgenstein was of the opinion that Freud was not successful in this regard. Or at least, not as successful as Wittgenstein himself was, where success implies a sort of failure. Freud's ideas may have been brilliant and groundbreaking, but they also eventually turned out to be too easy to assimilate and/or dismiss. Whereas Wittgenstein remains unappetizing due to his reluctance to offer theories, Freud, on the other hand, has been quite thoroughly digested by and incorporated into our civilization, proving a sort of compatibility between them. It is hard to say which fate, obscurity or popularity, is worse for an intense thinker in a civilized age, though Wittgenstein clearly felt it was the latter. Better to remain misunderstood than to be embraced for too many of the wrong reasons and without any accompanying inner change. But while Wittgenstein has remained free from the sort of mass appropriation and popularization that, say, Freud and Einstein have enjoyed, many of his ideas, nevertheless, have indeed been put into various forms of circulation antithetical to their spirit. It is on this point, that is to say the current status and future of Wittgenstein's reception and how it ties in to the nature of his exile, that Klagge's book is most insightful.

"I am by no means sure," wrote Wittgenstein in 1947, "that I should prefer a continuation of my work by others to a change in the way people live which would make all these questions superfluous" (*Culture and Value* 61). I have always been fascinated by this remark. Where we would typically think that in order for a thinker's vision to remain alive and to be, at least in part, enacted, his or her work would have to be continued and adhered to by others, with Wittgenstein it seems that the opposite is true: in order for his vision to be enacted (and I have often perplexed myself by asking the

question, "What could be said to be Wittgenstein's *vision*?"), he himself, along with the questions he is asking, must be in an important sense forgotten. It is as if the ideal disciple of Wittgenstein would be someone who has never heard of him, someone who simply lives in such a way that he's never bothered by certain kinds of philosophical questions at all.

The phrase "a change in the way people live," though, implies more than just respite from philosophy. It implies also a change of spirit, the sort of drastic change that Rilke envisions when he declares, "You must change your life." And Wittgenstein's desire, like Rilke's command, pertains, I think, to the individual, not the collective, life. "It is impossible," writes Klagge, "to think of Wittgenstein as a social *reformer*, like Plato" (80). "That man will be revolutionary who can revolutionize himself," Wittgenstein wrote in 1944 (*Culture and Value* 45). His concern was with the individual, with the one or two people who might have already had the same thoughts he was expressing in the *Tractatus*, or with the "one brain or another" into which the light of the *Investigations* might shine. If someone read these books and understood them in such a way that a change in temperament occurred, a change that not only enabled the reader to walk away from them clear-minded but also allowed them to sink into oblivion so as not to be serviceable as crutches, then Wittgenstein would have been successful, which is to say that, to a significant extent, Wittgenstein can only be successful insofar as he is forgotten. But if his influence is waning now, as Klagge asserts that it is, it would seem to be waning not as a result of "a change in the way people live" but rather as a result of the continuation of the way people have been living for some time now, precisely that

way of living that Wittgenstein felt needed to change. We are forgetting him in the wrong way; the questions he was asking are becoming superfluous for the wrong reasons.

Klagge writes, "It surely is true that Wittgenstein had more influence in the 1950s and 1960s than he does now" (143), and he provides several reasons as to why this is the case. The most prominent reason, I think, has to do with the role of science in our civilization, or with the fact that we live in a civilization dominated and presided over by the spirit of science, when one of Wittgenstein's most desperate aims was "to change people's tendency to an idolatry of science" (Klagge 83). Wittgenstein himself possessed, of course, an exceptionally brilliant scientific mind, but he saw in science in general, or in what Klagge calls scientism, what he saw in Freud and Einstein in particular: ideas and explanations that, precisely because they were brilliant, possessed enormous charm and therefore needed to be resisted on some level lest that charm cast a spell over us and lead us on blindly. It was not science itself but the "idolatry of science" which he feared and resisted. If scientism had indeed cast its spell over the 20th Century, then Wittgenstein, as one who somehow remained impervious to that spell, as one who "manufactured [his] own oxygen" (Monk 6), was that wizard constantly in search of the *erlösende* word, the key or redeeming word that would somehow break the spell. If precision at all costs, and in all realms, is the motto of the spell under which we relentlessly labor, then Wittgenstein is the constant brake reminding us that sometimes "a mediocre account suffices, is even to be preferred" (*Culture and Value* 31) and warning us that "it isn't absurd . . . to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific

knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap" (*Culture and Value* 56). But if science is indeed our idol, we would of course disregard this sort of skepticism as naïve and nostalgic, as betokening a preference for romantic vagaries as opposed to exact explanations. In other words, we would not understand Wittgenstein.

It is the prediction of eliminative materialists, notes Klagge, that eventually so-called folk-psychological concepts such as pain and belief must "come to have the status of talk of caloric fluid, phlogiston, and witches" (88), that notions such as "desire, will, and the self will go the way of . . . other primitive scientific concepts . . . They will die, from uselessness or harmfulness, while being replaced by concepts from a more successful scientific psychological theory" (115). But what Wittgenstein seems to have realized is that "human" is itself, or soon will be, one of these primitive concepts, and that if we thus proceed along the lines predicted by eliminative materialists, it will indeed be "the beginning of the end for humanity," insofar as we seem to be slowly abandoning ourselves (our "selves") both for and to technology, and in the name of progress, advancement, and evolution. The eliminative materialist might acknowledge this either stoically or cheerfully, but in either case they have already become part of the machinery of the trap. It does not seem to have occurred to them in the same way it occurred to Wittgenstein that as a result of this course of action "something valuable," as Klagge understatedly puts it, "may be lost" (117), namely our own humanity, by which I do not mean merely our humaneness but our actually being human. In order to account for Wittgenstein's waning influence, then, we might say not that the questions he was asking have become superfluous, but rather that, in our complacency towards the trap that has been set for us, that we have in fact set for ourselves, they've been ignored.

Rilke was one of the three main beneficiaries of Wittgenstein's dispersion of his inheritance, and while it seems that Wittgenstein was less a fan of Rilke's later poetry than he was of the earlier work (Monk 110), there is much in the spirit of Rilke's late masterpiece, *The Duino Elegies*, that seems in accordance with the spirit of Wittgenstein's own work. In particular, and despite the abstraction of much of the poetry, there is a reverence for the sufficiency of ordinary language, and, embedded in that reverence, the idea that the press for more and more scientifically exact and technically precise explanations and expressions is undertaken under the illusion that indefiniteness and/or simplicity are necessarily inferior to scientific exactness when it comes to designating the things of this world, that "75 centimeters" would be preferable to "one pace" (*Philosophical Investigations* §69), "20,407 grains of sand" to "heap of sand" (*Zettel* §392), and a neurological explanation of what is happening in the brain to the designation, "thinking." But Rilke has famously written, in the ninth elegy,

Are we *here* perhaps just to say:

house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window --

at most, column, tower... (69)

And if we were hard pressed to extend this list further, if we absolutely had to add abstract concepts to it, we might add, say, "thought, pain, life, humanity." Are we really *here* to say "neuronal activation vector" instead of "thought" or "mind"? This is not to deny the importance of technical terms and their usefulness within specific fields, but instead to resist the tendency to idolize them, a tendency which leads, in turn, to their usurpation of other terms in other fields, or perhaps simply to the extinction of those other fields, fields like poetry. It is hard to imagine that someone could simultaneously

advocate eliminative materialism and at the same time love poetry, in the spirit of which Wittgenstein thought philosophy ought to be written.

"Wittgenstein," Klagge writes, "claims that the purposes of folk psychology go beyond those of any neuroscientific psychology," that if neuroscience does indeed usurp folk psychology in anything resembling a complete fashion (as Paul Churchland, against the better advice of his teacher Wilfrid Sellars, would have it), it may lead to "profound changes in human nature" (124). It may, in fact, lead to the elimination of human nature itself. Klagge aptly quotes Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*: "We experiment with ourselves in a way we would never permit ourselves to experiment with animals and, carried away by curiosity, we cheerfully vivisection our souls" (121). For "soul" must certainly go the way of "belief," "pain," "mind," etc. In Wittgenstein's view, then, as in Nietzsche's and, as Klagge notes, Goethe's, an overdependence on the methods and techniques of "mechanistic science puts us in a flawed relationship to the world. It is a perversion of the search in wonder that Goethe thought science should be" (112).

No matter, it would seem. As a civilization we press "cheerfully" ahead, captivated and enchanted not only by various new forms of expression but also by the promise of immortality which scientism affords, though certainly the concept of "immortality" is, if anything, a humanist concept, a product of folk-psychology, and therefore something of which we'll have already been robbed by the time we attain it. What prevents us from heeding Wittgenstein's warnings, what keeps us from understanding him? Are we lost too deep within the spell to be resuscitated, is there no *erlösende* word capable of redeeming us? Is the voice of Wittgenstein the voice of an exile, the voice of a prophet in a strange wilderness, unheeded if not unheard? What,

after all, asks Klagge, "did Wittgenstein think that he could accomplish, as the missionary, preaching against the idols?" (81).

The thoughts I have sketched in the preceding paragraphs are thoughts that have been inspired by Professor Klagge's new book. This is not to say that they are his thoughts, or even thoughts that his own thoughts imply, but rather that they are thoughts which his own thoughts have led me to. In other words, *Wittgenstein in Exile* is a thought-provoking book, a book that stimulates one to thoughts of one's own, as Wittgenstein had hoped his own work would do. And there is more in *Wittgenstein in Exile* upon which I have not touched, including, but not limited to, a brief anatomy of exile itself, an exposition of the dynamic between alienation and engagement, and much, much more on Wittgenstein's complicated and ambivalent relationship towards science and scientism. Additionally, Professor Klagge possesses the ability to formulate with greater clarity than I myself have been able to muster thoughts that I have nevertheless frequently had; it is in this regard that I most commend his book.

On many occasions in my readings of Wittgenstein, I have often wondered what metaphysics is if what it does is remove words from their ordinary homes, from the language-games in which they naturally reside. Are those words then holidaying in extraordinary homes? being held hostage by strange captors? have they been removed from the confines of familiar shelters to fend for themselves in a wilderness? These are the impressions that I often get, that what metaphysics does with language constitutes, in some manner, a radical departure from, or grave violation of, ordinary usage. But isn't the language of metaphysics, asks Klagge, itself perfectly ordinary? Isn't it just one

language game among others, the terms which reside in it having their own established uses? "Why don't philosopher's uses of these terms in philosophical discussions provide all the legitimation that is needed?" (35). Suddenly many of the questions Wittgenstein asks, and many of the complaints he makes, do seem superfluous. There is, however, an important answer to this question, an answer which Klagge elucidates as clearly as he elucidates the question itself. If philosophers, or metaphysicians, were content to see their forms of discourse as just one group of language-games among others, everything might be fine. It's the privileging of them, insofar as they're thought to have restricted access to the truth, that's problematic, not only because of the confusion it creates within and across discourses but because of its political implications, as well. A tyranny is always a tyranny of specific discourses. Klagge writes, "The philosopher not only wants to say this or that about private experience, but also wants the statements to have a certain status outside the language game of philosophy -- wants it to be about the world that ordinary people discuss and experience" (35-36). That is, the philosopher wants his or her statements to cover or apply to the everyday world, when it would seem that the initial aim of the language game of philosophy was precisely to remove words from that world, to remove them from their everyday uses and being at-hand in order to see what sort of strange objects they then become. It is not metaphysics itself, for which Wittgenstein, after all, had great respect, but that subsequent, misguided, and egotistic attempt to impose on the everyday world the findings of metaphysics, as if the questions and proclaimed truths it yielded were of the utmost and only importance, that Wittgenstein felt needed combatting (and in scientism no less than in metaphysics), not unlike Kierkegaard before him, who wrote in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

If Hegel had published his *Logic* under the title of Pure Thought, without indication of authorship or date of publication, without preface or notes or didactic self-contradictions, without confusing explanations of things that might better have been allowed to explain themselves; if he had published it as a sort of analogy to the nature sounds heard on the island of Ceylon, as the immanent movements of pure thought itself, -- the act would have been in the spirit of a Greek philosopher . . . But as it is now, the *Logic* with its collection of notes makes as droll an impression on the mind as if a man were to show a letter purporting to have come from heaven, but having a blotter enclosed which only too clearly reveals its mundane origin. (296-297)

"Exile," says Klagge, "is an appropriate status for a philosopher, discomforting though it may be" (75). It behooves the philosopher to remain in exile, to remain a citizen of no community of received ideas, and, by extension, to ensure that his own ideas do not become "received," lest he have to disassociate himself from them, as well. And while the temptation to convert one's status as an exile into a position of authority is perhaps unavoidable, it might nevertheless be resisted all the way, in many forms, not the least of which would be the pseudonymous publication of fragments or the posthumous publication of collections of remarks. If Wittgenstein was a sort of missionary preacher or prophet in a strange land, no one resisted his preachings and his prophecies more strenuously than himself. Scientists should be philosophers, at least in this regard.

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