

**Wittgenstein, the True**  
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Monk, R. Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius. Ed. Jonathan Cape. (London and New York: Free Press, 1990).

Wittgenstein has this in common with James Joyce: he has kept the generations of academics busy. The singularity of his thought and style which has won over the greatest minds of his time (Russell, More, Frege for example), always resists, no doubt as he wished absorption by the "philosophical journalism" he abhorred. But there is the legend of Wittgenstein. Even at Cambridge, home of British elevated thought, where eccentricity is tolerated, even recommended, the behavior of the Viennese philosopher was disconcerting, and not only because he was a foreigner. The surprising destiny of this heir of high ranking family, the force of conviction his genius conveyed, his abrupt manner, sometimes going so far as to threaten, in relations with his peers, all contributed to give a romantic aura to a life that appeared to be a succession of moments of intense elation in which his work was accomplished and depressive phrases accompanied by extreme efforts to survive

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universe of discourse. The personality of Wittgenstein, for most of those to whom he was close, seems to have posed an enigma, including those closest or the most open-minded to his perpetual putting into question the game of social conventions. The intractable aspect of his conduct was so intimately linked to philosophic work that, already in his lifetime, he imposed respect and sometimes even a sort of cult amongst all those who grasped the proper genius of the philosopher-logician and his refusal of the seeming. The rigor with which he applied his thought to his life was perceptible to all those who circled around him, sometimes at their expense.

Along with erudite commentaries on his oeuvre, testimonials and biographies have multiplied, whether it be to perpetuate an encounter to transmit what is unique and striking for the interlocutor, and not only that he was a philosopher, or to account for his exceptional, and, indeed, in some aspects surprising, destiny. Wittgenstein died in 1951, and since the end of the 1960s, when his philosophy was divulged outside the circles of specialists, the biographies multiplied. The latest, that of Ray Monk, appeared in 1990.

It is, in effect, a biography, and as such it does not escape the law of the genre; it privileges the description of

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personality traits over the oeuvre. The author is, however, product of the seraglio of British universities and, as they say, mathematician of increase (a Lytton Strachey tendency it seems). Which is to say that the book is brisk, easy to read, and clearly written (including the reporting of the most arduous episodes and theoretical debates on the foundations of logic to which the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus brings a response). Less philosophic than the remarkable little book of Christiane Chauviré,<sup>1</sup> but more condensed than the monumental and weighty biography of McGuinness,<sup>2</sup> it has the merit of not being prudish without falling into unverified equivocal detail, and of being clear on the homosexual choices of Wittgenstein.

But, as Lacan points out in Séminaire XVII, in the chapter concerning Wittgenstein, the truth is often sister to *jouissance*,<sup>3</sup> and in the perilous work of biography the fantasy of the author, (it is often, moreover, this which renders the book novelistic and thus easy to read), shows through and even dominates the description. Here, at least, it is admitted: Monk indicates in the last pages of the post scriptum what he has intended to do: "To draft this book, I had had free access to all the coded remarks in the possession of the literary executors (of Wittgenstein), and permission to cite them at liberty. I chose

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to cite practically all the remarks which clarify in one way or another the emotional, spiritual and sexual life of Wittgenstein."

The result is a dense book with passionate respect, but one that exudes a diffuse sentimentalism which holds more to the interpretation through the biography than to the content of these famous coded remarks which bear, rather, the minimalist mark of their author. The psychobiography of Gide is richer for two reasons: on the one hand, it borrows from the autobiography that the writer disseminated in his oeuvre, and, on the other, Delay knew well what he was looking for.<sup>4</sup> But, without Lacan, would we know how to discover the lines of structure in it?<sup>5</sup> This is not the case with Ray Monk who sees the psychosis of Wittgenstein after the style of a neurotic. As a result, in spite of the author's sympathy for his personage, the singular dimension of the sexual, spiritual, and emotional life of the logician is degraded to the level of an alternative lifestyle (politically correct, as one says in the U.S.). Lacan reveals in it, finally, much more in a few lines when, in Séminaire XVII, he evokes the "psychotic ferocity" of the professor of Cambridge and his attempt to make the whole truth fit into discourse. If one reads the biography of Mink with this key, it sheds new light, putting

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into relation a mass of details taken from the philosopher's life, from his correspondence, or from the testimonials concerning him.

There are, in effect, a profusion of gripping facts and anecdotes in this work. It is clear that they do not explain why Wittgenstein was a genius, in his Tractatus, of calling into question theories such as Bertrand Russell's "type theory,"<sup>6</sup> and of inventing a new status for logic. What is illustrated, moreover, in the recounting of this life is the extreme liberty of the psychotic subject indicated by Lacan. A series of decisions, clear, unchallengeable, give witness to a particular relation to alienation in signification, permitting Wittgenstein ruptures without grief: the abandoning of his fortune, tireless battles for the integrity of his oeuvre, resigned acceptance of the deaths of his nearest and dearest. Wittgenstein's bond to his peers appears as entirely determined by the elaboration of his oeuvre and his thought and by the care to make the work equivalent to the name, a rigid designator where the statement and its enunciation can be one.

Monk clarifies, in particular, the phase immediately after the war, during which Wittgenstein, then a parish school-teacher, made the famous turn in his philosophy. This turn

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brought him little by little to the analysis of games of language and feeling, which is to say, to a more supple conception of the relation of the subject and the object and of the link between philosophy and truth. He indicates notably how a turn was put into effect for him by a completely secular conversion, but one which suspends his oeuvre from the certitude of a referential truth, leaving Wittgenstein the task of indicating how the rules of uses of the descriptions of the world are constituted. In parallel, one can seem thanks to Monk's biography, how Wittgenstein's position in the world takes on a less persecutive tone and permits him to keep himself aloof from the temptation of suicide which was ever so present. One recounts that when he returned to Cambridge in 1930, John Meynard Keynes, who was a supportive and a very faithful friend, while also being a perspicacious admirer, wrote: "Well, God has arrived. I'm going to meet his train at quarter to five."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chauviré, C. Ludwig Wittgenstein, (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> McGuinness, B. Wittgenstein, (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, J. Le Séminaire, Livre XVII: 1969-1970, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (Paris: Seuil, 1991), pp. 61-77.

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<sup>4</sup> Delay, J. La Jeunesse d'André Gide, 2 vols., (Paris: Gallimard, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, J. "Jeunesse de Gide ou la Lettre et le Désir: sur un livre de Jean Delay et un autre de Jean Schlumberger," Écrits, (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 739-764.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, B. and A. N. Whitehead, Principia Mathematica, 3 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

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