

**Book Review**  
**LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN:**  
**THE DUTY OF GENIUS**  
by Ray Monk

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The great advantage that any biographer has over his subject is that of hindsight: he knows how his subject's story ended, and so is able to mould it into a meaningful whole. Ludwig Wittgenstein was more than usually aware that although life can only be understood backwards, we are in the unfortunate position of having to live it forwards. "After someone has died", he once said, "we see his life in a conciliatory light. His life appears to us with outlines softened by a haze. There was no softening for him though, his life was jagged and incomplete. For him there was no reconciliation, his life is naked and wretched." Wittgenstein, arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, who produced two works - *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* and *Logical Investigations* - of seminal importance, was, as the above remark implies, a profoundly unhappy man. Desperate for love, and unable to find a satisfactory outlet for the expression of his own turbulent emotions, he was frequently assailed by thoughts of suicide. The harvest that was philosophically so rich was, it seems, sown with the seeds of despair. One of the main tasks facing the biographer of such a thinker is to square the intellectual achievements of his life with the starkness of its existential contours.

Ray Monk's recently published book, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, fulfils this task with admirable clarity. Highly praised by the critics, it has deservedly won a major literary award for young writers. The book is of interest not only because Wittgenstein has had a profound influence on almost all aspects of twentieth century thought, ranging from the philosophy of mathematics through to theology, but also because its author, Ray Monk, has combined his career as a writer with that of a Theory of Knowledge teacher at an international school in London.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in 1889 into an immensely wealthy and privileged Viennese family of Jewish extraction, and he was from an early age acquainted with many of the great figures of his era. The composer Johannes Brahms was a friend of the family; one of Wittgenstein's sisters had her portrait painted by the artist Gustav Klimt; and Wittgenstein himself patronised the architect Alfred Loos and the poets Georg Trakl and Rainer Maria Rilke. Although steeped in the cultural life of *fin-de-siecle* Vienna, Wittgenstein himself received a largely technical education. He went to a *Realschule* in Linz which, by one of those strange quirks of history, was also attended by Adolf Hitler, his exact contemporary. (There is no evidence, says Monk, that the two had anything to do with each other). He then went on to study aeronautics at the

University of Manchester in England. However, his increasing obsession with the philosophy of mathematics soon led him to abandon his studies in Manchester and transfer to Cambridge, where he became a protege of the philosopher, Bertrand Russell, and a friend of the economist, John Maynard Keynes. Very soon it became apparent, to Russell at least, that the next great step forward in philosophical logic was to be made by Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's early work was concerned with the foundations of mathematics and logic, and with the attempt to plot the limits of language. This latter task is important because the limits of language are thought by many to determine the limits of the thinkable, and hence the limits of the knowable. The nature of Wittgenstein's work was, however, transformed by his experience of the First World War, in which he fought for Austria with exemplary courage on the Italian front. The *Tractatus*, which was originally intended to be a book purely about language and logic, was transformed into one that combined these issues with questions concerning ethics and the meaning of life.

The *Tractatus* was published in 1921. With an arrogance that is typical of, and perhaps even necessary for, the great philosopher, Wittgenstein wrote in the preface to the book: "The truth of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe myself to have found on all essential points the final solution to the problems." With admirable consistency he then abandoned philosophy and, having in the meantime committed "financial suicide" by giving away his share of the family fortune, he became in turn an elementary school teacher, a gardener in a monastery and an architect. His brief teaching career in a remote Austrian village is of particular interest: while his emphasis on learning through experience is likely to arouse our sympathy, his frequent use of corporal punishment - ear-boxing and hair-pulling - is not.

Given his lack of sympathy for less gifted children, especially the mathematically inept, it is perhaps fortunate that Wittgenstein did not remain a school teacher for long. Occasional meetings with other thinkers, together with an increasing dissatisfaction with his own earlier views, eventually tempted him back to full-time philosophy. In 1929 he returned to Cambridge, where, despite his dislike of its rarified and rather precious intellectual atmosphere, he spent much of the remainder of his life, dying there in 1951. Many of his later philosophical reflections, developed over this period, stridently attack his own earlier held views. Perhaps the two most famous arguments of the later Wittgenstein are: first, the claim that language has no single essence, but consists rather of a whole variety of "language games" each grafted onto a different "form of life"; and, second, the so-called "private language argument" in which Wittgenstein claims that language, and so to some extent consciousness, is an essentially social phenomenon. While Socrates saw the philosopher as a midwife, making us aware of knowledge that is already implicit within us, for Wittgenstein he is essentially a therapist, philosophy being "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." The *Philosophical Investigations*, in which such views are expressed, was published posthumously in 1953.

Wittgenstein was not only a philosophical genius, but also a writer of the first rank. The sparse, lunar landscape of the *Tractatus*, that consists of a series of numbered propositions unsullied by extensive argument, has a haunting beauty; and the *Investigations*, where the style shifts from the oracular to the seemingly mundane, is peppered with brilliant similes and memorable analogies. The common thread that unites these two works, superficially so different, is, as Monk emphasises, the distinction Wittgenstein makes between *saying* and *showing*. Much of his thought tatters on the brink of silence, and, for the early Wittgenstein at least, questions concerning ethics and the meaning of life are considered to lie beyond the limits of language. About the *Tractatus*, he once wrote to a friend: "My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part which is the most important." This remark makes it clear that Wittgenstein was no English positivist; and Monk is careful to emphasise the Germanic roots of much of his thought - the influence of Schopenhauer on the later sections of the *Tractatus*, and of Goethe and Spengler on the analogical thinking that is central to the *Investigations*.

Wittgenstein thought that ultimately philosophy is not so much about what one believes, as about how one lives. Monk takes as his biographical *leitmotiv* the thesis of a little remembered Viennese thinker, Otto Weiniger, whose central claim was that genius "is the highest morality and therefore... everyone's duty". If one is not a genius then, said Weiniger, one has little right to live at all. With tragic consistency, Weiniger took his own life at the age of twenty three. His ideas, however, had a profound and lasting impact on Wittgenstein, who was himself constantly haunted by the feeling of being *de trop* in the world. For a brief period his spiritual *angst* was stilled by Russell's recognition of his genius; but, despite his awareness of his abilities, his own self-assessment was never high. Even his claim in the *Tractatus* to have found the solution to all major problems was qualified by the rider that, "it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved". In 1921, the year the *Tractatus* was published, we find him saying, "I ought to have done something positive with my life, to have become a star in the sky. Instead of which I remained stuck on earth and now I am gradually fading out."

If neuroticism can be defined as the inability to tolerate ambiguous situations, then Wittgenstein was an exemplary neurotic. He may have been "cold steel in the hands of passion", a mixture of the logically rigorous and the emotionally obsessive, but in a sense his was also a futile passion. Believing that if a thing were not perfect, then it was worthless, he combined his individualistic belief in the duty to develop oneself to the limit, with an essentially Stoic ethic of grim endurance. But he could not fail to be overwhelmed and dispirited by the impossibly high ideals he strove in vain to exemplify. Never one to be easy on himself, his sense of his own irredeemable sinfulness is reflected in his chilling picture of judgement: "We are our own worst enemy. God may say to me: 'I am judging you out of your own mouth. Your own actions have made you shudder with disgust when you have seen other people do them.'" Moreover, his enduring self-obsession did not make him an easy man to be with. In conversation, he was dogmatic and would brook no disagreement: a colleague once commented tersely,

"He discusses". And the close friendships that he did develop - almost exclusively with intelligent and sensitive young men - often had an alarmingly one-sided intensity about them. As for the vast majority of mankind, he seems to have been unable to understand them, and he found it hard not to feel disgusted by their animal appetites and lack of self-control. So it is perhaps not surprising that he failed to share Bertrand Russell's enthusiasm for political reform. "Just improve yourself", he was fond of saying, "that is all you can do to improve the world."

Wittgenstein once confided in a friend, "I feel on the whole lonely and am afraid of the months and years to come". His personal tragedy was, one feels, that these words could have been written at almost any time during his adult life. The immense difficulties that he experienced in relating satisfactorily to others, together with his tortured awareness of his own shortcomings, make his dying remark, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life", all the more moving.

Working with private diaries and letters, together with the published philosophical works, Ray Monk has done a tremendous job in weaving together the biographical details of Wittgenstein's life with the development of his philosophical ideas. And he has done this in a way that makes Wittgenstein accessible to the interested teacher and student alike. Throughout the six hundred page book, rich in explanation and anecdote, we feel ourselves to be in the hands of a philosophically competent and thoughtful guide. Wittgenstein's main ideas are clearly explained in a language that is precise without being pedantic; and we are never left with the feeling that we have been patronised. Although the biographical material is sometimes unpromising, Monk avoids being judgemental, and he succeeds in casting it in a sympathetic light that enables us to make sense of Wittgenstein's life as a whole. His book would make a very useful addition to any school library.

*Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* is published in hardback by Jonathan Cape.