

Minnen av Wittgenstein

N.Malcolm

October 3-6 2012

I used to admire Wittgenstein, because of his relation to Russell. Maybe he was even smarter than him. Over the years this initial admiration faded away, and I started to think of him as little better than a philosophical charlatan. What was his Brown and Blue Books other than pretentious stuff, and how could any one take *Tractatus* seriously? He cultivated the style of an oracle, allowing everyone to read into his pronouncements whatever they wanted. But most of all I despise his epigones, those who claim to admire him, they tend invariably to be of post-modernist persuasions, seeing philosophy as not much more than a clever game. Not a search for truth as much as a sarcastic comment on the quest. And to give Wittgenstein his due, he would certainly have been aghast at such a following, and already while still alive, he resented the way he was being trivialized and misunderstood, as well as being plagiarized. Truth seeking as he might have been, he was not above being vain and sensitive to slights.

This is a slight book of recollections of the legend by one of his students and friends, padded out by a complete collection of letters he wrote to the author and to von Wright, his temporary successor at Cambridge, and a biographical sketch by the latter. The book was written in the fifties, just a few years after the death of Wittgenstein, and before he had achieved the cult status he now enjoys, and to some extent actually predicted. (But if a man predicts a lot of things, some of them are bound to come true, but which we can only tell in retrospect.)

The individual that emerges from the recollections of the author is one that is deeply troubled. He seems unable to form real friendships, although he craves them, as well as demand the kind of love and warmth that he is unable to provide himself. Consequently he sees through mere artifice, wanting the real thing, finding it more important than intellectual companionship. As he mostly comes across students, it is among those he finds his family. Not surprisingly his demand for truth is not confined to the logical realm exclusively, but also to the social, where it does not really belong. Nowadays we should have labeled him a typical Asperger. Once he gets into an argument with the author. The latter makes a reference to the national character of the British and Wittgenstein takes great exception to using such a concept at all as 'national character'. What use is there to teach people philosophy if they only can achieve a certain facility with thinking on obtuse technical matters, when they are at a loss how to tackle ordinary questions popping up in everyday life. The fact that those often are messy and unattractive is no excuse for evading them. To Malcolm such a matter seems rather trivial after all, as he was just making small talk, but typical of a certain type of personality, call it Asperger if you want, is that there is no such thing as small talk, all talk is portent. And Wittgenstein did not forgive him right away, on the contrary distanced himself from him, and referred to the incident in a letter a long time thereafter, something that seems to have puzzled its recipient.

The correspondence, although of great anecdotal interest, is basically trivial. The letters are short and intermittent containing little philosophical reflection, what there actually is of the latter, is readily lapped up by the reader. He is obsessed with the reading of detective stories, where he seems to take pride in the fact that the trashier the more he treasures them. On Freud he says that his ideas are very seductive, in fact too seductive, and that it is remarkable that no one points out that the appalling nature of some of his theories is actually the very source for their attractiveness. Of Kierkegaard he has a high regard, but thinks that the man is too deep for him. Whether this is meant as a homage or a sarcasm is difficult to know. Probably both. Of Moore he says that he likes and understands him more and more, but he is not a good man and that he has now warmth precisely because he is a child. His innocence is not the result of a conscious effort, but simply the consequence of a lack of temptation. Innocent people cannot really be good, he seems to imply, no matter how kind and well-meaning they are. Apart from this there is little noteworthy in the correspondence, aside possibly from the fact that when Tolstoy addresses his readers with his philosophical soliloquies he is not at all as impressive as when he turns his back to them and goes on with what he really knows how to do.

Most of the letters are written late in his life, and present a continuous litany of his stupidity, his lack of energy, and how his power to philosophize is slipping. And what should a man do, when he loses the one talent he has? Resigning from the professorship at Cambridge being an obvious step to take, and one which he follows up on. He professes to hate academic life and love the life of a seclude and hermit. Those are romantic phantasies he does pursue, be it in a lonely cabin in Norway, or on the deserted western coast of Ireland.

He is constantly plagued with doubts as to his calling and achievements. One senses, as already noted, that he is not free from professional vanity (unlike Moore in his childlike innocence) and worries that what he has done will not be properly appreciated and credited. He works on his *magnus opus*, which will in due time after his death be published as 'Philosophischen Untersuchungen'. Apart from *Tractatus*, he has not published anything really, but in those idyllic academic times, there was never the pressure to publish, it was enough to have a reputation among those in the know. But the deeper existential question whether it is all worthless cannot leave him. He has standards, and obviously he does not live up to them, if for no other reasons, that he is the one who sets them, and is at liberty to raise them at will.

Nothing like philosophizing is as satisfying to him. It is hard work, very hard work. And I am reminded of a remark by Russell, that to really think you need to concentrate so hard, that most people are not able to do it for more than a few seconds, and the truly great ones only for minutes at a time. Wittgenstein seems to have taken this to heart. No wonder his constant personal frustration. His courses were legendary. Disdainful of preparing notes he wanted authenticity, meaning to think things through and afresh at the lecture itself. A process which necessarily involved long silent sessions, and awestruck students who were confused, bewildered and ultimately exhausted. Malcolm confesses that discussing philosophy with Wittgenstein was exhausting. One wonders because of true mental effort, or simply because of Wittgenstein's demanding personality, which made many of those associating with him terrified. The phenomenon is not unusual in academic

life, its basis is of course a kind of narcissistic vanity. When your self-esteem is so much tied up with your exalted and insecure idea of your mental superiority, anything that can threaten it and reveal it for what is is, is mortifying. Wittgenstein no doubt suffered from it himself, thus he must at least subconsciously understood what the game was all about, and thus able to play it with such devilish aplomb, to which no doubt many indigenous talents helped. Much has been made of his mathematical ability, but that I think is exaggerated by philosophers with no real familiarity with mathematics, but he no doubt had a not inconsiderable technical talent with a predilection for machines and their constructions, which I believe imbued his way of thinking and philosophizing, and, if one wants to be malicious, affected the way he interacted socially. He grew up in a very musical family and was able to perform symphonies and operatic themes by whistling, something which must have impressed people. Three of his brothers committed suicide, and his friends, for good reasons worried, that he too, with his recurrent bouts of depressions may follow suit. Now he was spared that by his diagnosis of cancer of the prostate, which seems to have cheered him up, as it promised that life would soon be at an end.

October 6, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se