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## “A small, shabby crystal, yet a crystal”: A life of music in Wittgenstein’s *Denkbewegungen*

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Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Denkbewegungen* contains some of his most distinctive remarks on music: ones which bear witness not only to the level of his engagement in thinking about music, but also to the intimate connection in his mind between musical acculturation, the perils of modernity, and the challenge, very personal to Wittgenstein, of philosophizing amidst what he believed was a dissolution of the resemblances responsible for uniting his culture’s ways of life.

In this study, I shall offer a close reading of what I take to be certain quite singular remarks on music presented in that text, situating these in the broad context of his intellectual and philosophical development during his middle-period (1929-1936) and beyond. My strategy is threefold: I aim to explicate how Wittgenstein’s thinking about and through music, as documented in his diary entries, integrates with (a) certain trajectories in his philosophical development which became more pronounced at that time, (b) his deep sense of cultural lamentation, and (c) his personal development as a philosophical expositor. This allows me to focus on what appears to me to be a central, overarching theme in *Denkbewegungen* itself: the unique way in which thinking about music becomes conducive to Wittgenstein’s grappling with “the problem of life” – the problem, that is, of seeing one’s life as meaningful while denying the possibility of establishing any objectively understood meaning in life, including in respect of the value of one’s own work. Wittgenstein wrote in his notebook on 29.6.1930 that the problem of life can be announced as solved only on pain of self-deception – something which can nevertheless be avoided if one recalls that life was still possible before any such “solution” was found (CV 6). Significantly, Wittgenstein

saw an analogy here with philosophizing: the very idea of “a solution to the problems of logic (philosophy)” amounts to the same mistake.

On 28.4.1930, Wittgenstein wrote in his diary:

I often think that the highest I wish to achieve would be to compose a melody. Or it mystifies me that in the desire for this, none ever occurred to me. But then I must tell myself that it's quite impossible that one will ever occur to me, because for that I am missing something essential or the essential. That is why I am thinking of it as such a high ideal because I could then in a way sum up my life; and set it down crystallized. And even if it were but a small, shabby crystal, yet a crystal. (MT, p. 9-10)

The enormous importance, both emotional and cultural, that Wittgenstein attached to the art of music, and its connection to the way he sees his life, to his desires and his sense of failure, takes the form of a complex metaphor which weaves together the art and craft of composing a melody as an aesthetic ideal, the structural integrity and perfection of a crystal, and life itself. Summing up one's life, seeing it as a unified whole, is an aesthetic ideal, which requires the skill, ingenuity, creativity, perhaps even genius, of a great composer. Such a through-composed life can be rendered precious, like a crystal. Setting it down thus crystallized betokens a sense of fulfilment and relief, indeed a sense of meaning, understood in terms not only of attaining structural integrity and comprehension, but also of attaining one's personal goals and purposes. Yet the text makes it clear that such relief, and a sense of fulfilment, is not, and actually cannot be, within reach. This is an acute statement of the absence of meaning in Wittgenstein's life: “I am missing something essential or the essential” (*ibid.*). There is not enough even for “a small, shabby crystal”.

This singular entry is bookended, on the preceding and following days, by other remarks related to music which broaden the canvas for the melody/crystal/life metaphor. On the day before (27.4.1930), Wittgenstein wrote an interesting entry about Frank Ramsey (MT, p. 8). That entry highlights three important themes: characterizing, giving reasons by means of comparison, and having a cultured sense of taste. Firstly, Wittgenstein characterizes Ramsey, where such characterization serves to draw in significance, to reveal something, in a quite specific way. In this

case, Wittgenstein draws out an aspect of Ramsey by describing or attributing to him a mode of response to Beethoven's late-vintage music – a connoisseur's choice, to be sure. Secondly, this characterization takes the form of a comparison attributed to Ramsey (the musical experience is compared to the opening of the heavens), and Wittgenstein finds this particularly illuminating. Thirdly, Ramsey's musical choice, and his reaction to the music, establish him as belonging to what Wittgenstein called “a very high culture” (LC I:22). Ramsey's character is emblematic of that culture: “To describe what you mean by cultured taste, you have to describe a culture” (LC I:25); “Appreciating music is a manifestation of human life” (CV 80).

On the day that followed the melody/crystal/life metaphor (29.4.1930), Wittgenstein continued that train of thought by considering the demise of such “very high culture” as he experienced it himself. He wrote about a critic's disrespect for the music of Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner (MT, p. 10-11). He then continued, a day later (30.4.1930), with a passage that not only resounds in comparisons and physiognomic characterization, but also contrasts the compositional skill of Johannes Brahms with the depletion of contemporary spirit (MT, p. 11-12). Wittgenstein's pronounced concern regarding cultural decline, and with it his sense of an all-encompassing loss of sensitivities, appreciation, and abilities for making refined distinctions and judgments, is directly related to his eager reading of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* at precisely that time.<sup>1</sup> No more than a week after having penned the above entries, on 6.5.1930 he noted that he was reading Spengler's book and that “Much, perhaps most of it, is completely in touch with what I have often thought myself” (MT, p. 16-17).

Situated amid this particular train of thoughts, Wittgenstein's *Angst* concerning what appeared to him to be the absence of meaning in his life, as captured in his melody/crystal/life metaphor, bespeaks an acute sense of being alone. Following Eliot Deutsch,<sup>2</sup> I understand aloneness, as contrasted with togetherness and belonging, as a state of separation from whatever is taken by one to be the primary domain of one's existence, typically in relation to one's culture, other persons and social institutions. We exist in virtue of some, if not many, kinds of interdependent relations with others, with a sustaining human environment, and with what is taken to be sacred in some sense. In such a context, Wittgenstein's metaphorical portrayal of his

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<sup>1</sup> See Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*.

<sup>2</sup> See Eliot Deutsch, “Loneliness and solitude”.

predicament aligns itself with the clear sense of alienation that permeates *Denkbewegungen*, as well as with some of his other contemporaneous writings. According to Deutsch, “alienation is the state of being shut off from what, among the primary domains of our existence, is perceived to be a rightful place of belonging, whether experienced as an acute existential estrangement or as something put forward abstractly as a conception of human condition [...] One is alienated from others when one is locked into one’s own world. One is alienated from oneself [...] when one is unable to give expression to, or grow into, what are taken to be one’s authentic capabilities and possibilities”.<sup>3</sup>

Wittgenstein’s metaphor amounts to a self-portrayal as alienated from himself. The textual context of the metaphor suggests that his predicament is a function of both changing cultural conditions and inherent modes of human interaction and communication. Thus, the main question I shall address in this study is twofold: What is that essential thing Wittgenstein believed he was missing, and how did he enable himself to confront this deeply personal challenge? Answering this requires that we delve in a more detailed manner into the aforementioned themes, closely interwoven in *Denkbewegungen*, and set them in their appropriate intellectual and philosophical context.

## Music in *Denkbewegungen*: a thematic analysis

The first thing to observe about the remarks relating to music in *Denkbewegungen* is the fact that, with just a few exceptions, they appear mostly in the first part of the diary (1930-1932). The two parts differ substantially in their character and the circumstances of their entries. The first, written while Wittgenstein was lecturing extensively in Cambridge, seems to be more expressively reserved, perhaps more cerebral in its outlook on life’s events. The second, written when he was away (1936-1937), is much more anguished, and raises in a powerful and distinct way themes and issues pertaining to religious faith and the problem of life. I maintain that a possible connection between the two parts of *Denkbewegungen* can be found in the way in which the various themes in Wittgenstein’s diaristic writing in relation to music are subsumed under the overarching theme

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

of self-knowledge and the problem of life, as featured in his original melody/crystal/life metaphor. In this context, therefore, the uniqueness of *Denkbewegungen* in respect of his overall oeuvre lies in the concrete reciprocity between the personal and the philosophical that is exhibited as he seeks to articulate the philosophical connection between music and self-expression at a deeply personal level.

A striking demonstration of this quality, and of the unique interplay of the philosophical and the personal in his non-philosophical writing, is found in a private letter to Rudolf Koder, written late in 1930:

The only possibility for getting to know a piece of music is indeed this: you play it and thereby notice distinctly that you play this or that passage still without understanding. You can then either not listen any further to the voice (inside you) and play the piece with no understanding as before, or listen to the voice, and then you will be prompted to play that passage again and again and, as it were, investigate. The less indolent you are, the further this will go, that is to say, the more passages will emerge for you as still not really felt. For the inner voice will be encouraged to speak by listening to it, and more or less brought to silence by ignoring it. The more you listen the more you will hear, and voices that would have been hardly audible at first will then speak more and more distinctly and new ones will turn up. Thus, the indolence of every man shies away and one has a sort of feeling: as soon as I'm willing to let these voices in, who knows where they could eventually bring me. And yet one can only say: listen carefully and follow what it says to you, and you will see, you will then hear more and more distinctly, and *you will know more and more about yourself*.<sup>4</sup>

Here the distinctive characteristics of Wittgenstein's aesthetics are already on display: the primacy of playing, of *musizieren*, the aptly collaborative nature of one's attempt to draw in significance (the “inner” dialogue is there, even if I am playing for myself in solitude); the actual phrasing and

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Alber (ed.), *Wittgenstein und die Musik*, p. 37–38 (my translation; my emphasis). I am grateful to Alexander Wilfing for advising me concerning this translation.

re-phrasing of a passage in order to characterize it; the realization that a certain phrasing and characterization of a certain passage may elude me; the investigative nature of making such comparisons; the daring choice to take on a specific phrasing as an invitation to traverse a whole field of possibilities, enabling meaningful distinctions between right and wrong, in hope of reaching one that would necessitate itself, to see in the score something I had not seen before; the richness of character which ensues from such traversing and the sense of deepening as an articulation of possibilities that serves and instances further possibilities for characterization of what may be heard; and finally, most importantly, what such deepening can teach me about myself, how phrasing and characterizing change me in return. For Wittgenstein, understanding music is enmeshed with human life in the most personal way. He is very explicit that there is a choice to be made, that an effort is required; indeed, even courage is called for.

The remarks relating to music in *Denkbewegungen* correspond closely to two major philosophical themes which arose for Wittgenstein in the 1930s. The first of these pertains to aesthetics as a mode of conceptual inquiry conducted through the production of illuminating comparisons, similes and characterizations that afford us an understanding of why the pieces of an aesthetic puzzle fit together to form a system or a unified whole. The second concerns philosophical issues pertaining to culture, in the sense of a heightened sensitivity to both the resemblances which unite a culture's ways of life and their demise. These two major themes are intrinsically connected, and in the ensuing two sections I shall discuss them in detail. The remarks, which are relevant to our discussion, can be related to four distinct thematic categories (see the table in Figure 1 below):

### (A) Aesthetics / Comparisons

Wittgenstein's conception of aesthetics in the 1930s underscores the idea that aesthetic explanations and reasons are given in the form of comparisons and further descriptions. Comparisons give rise to further possibilities for characterization, and may serve to elicit consent. Typically, in such remarks he is attempting to illuminate an aspect of a given subject matter by means of a simile or paraphrase. For example: "The three variations before the entrance of the choir in the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony [by Beethoven] could be called the early spring of joy, its spring and its

summer” (MT, p. 63-64; item 24 in the table below). Such comparisons may bear directly on cultural critique, and so are related also to category (C) (e.g., item 26); alternatively, they may bear directly on issues pertaining to self-expression, and so are related to category (D) (e.g., item 33).

### **(B) Physiognomy / Characterizing**

This is a sub-group of “aesthetics/comparisons”. Passages in this thematic cluster pertain to physiognomy (i.e. that of persons, things, and even names), offering characterizations of persons or their creations. Typically, the passages relate musical or otherwise aesthetic sensitivities to human character (e.g. the aforementioned passage on Frank Ramsey; item 2), or vice versa (e.g., item 27). Remarks of this sort can relate to the theme of cultural critique (e.g., item 18) or, on rare occasions, to that of self-expression, as in the remark where Wittgenstein characterizes himself as “Peter Schlemihl”, the unfortunate fictional character without a shadow (e.g., item 16).

### **(C) Cultural critique**

Passages in this thematic cluster relate specifically to the significant impact that reading Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* had on Wittgenstein, and also to other writers and issues which Wittgenstein brings up in relation to his evaluation of the changing conditions of Western culture, their impact, and the prospects associated with them. As noted before, there is significant cross-reference between this group and the previous two. In fact, some of Wittgenstein’s most unique and significant remarks on music belong to this intersection (e.g., items 15, 21). I discuss them at length in the following sections. Of particular interest are also the passages at the intersection with the next category (“self-expression / the problem of life”), where Wittgenstein reflects upon his life or his abilities in relation to the cultural conditions of the time (e.g., items 10, 12, 32).

### **(D) Self-expression / The problem of life**

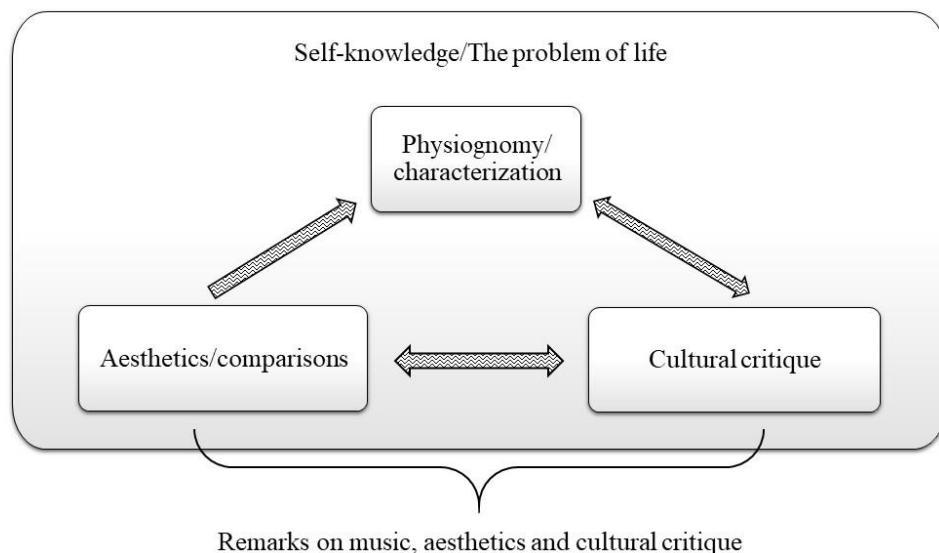
The problem of life, as Wittgenstein understood it consistently throughout his career, is the problem of seeing one’s life as meaningful while denying the possibility of establishing any

objectively understood meaning of life, including the value of one's work. As I suggested in my introduction when discussing his melody/crystal/life metaphor (item 3), this is an overarching theme in *Denkbewegungen*, which is shown in a particular light in the context of his remarks on music, aesthetics and cultural critique. Here we encounter the themes of vanity, being true to oneself, intellectual frustration and a sense of loss that are typical of *Denkbewegungen* – in particular with reference to the trepidations of writing or what I call (in the final section of this study) “the problem of composing”. Passages in this thematic cluster are quite diverse, including as they do both indirect and direct reflection on self-knowledge (e.g., items 6, 35), on self-characterization (e.g., items 12, 16), and on self-doubt as it pertains to his ability to write or think productively (e.g., items 37, 44).

Number	Page	Beginning	Category
1	3-4	Often I feel	D
2	8	He had an ugly mind	B
3	9-10	I often think	D
4	10-11	Today Mrs. Moore	A, C
5	11-12	On yesterday's matter	B, C
6	13-14	I am often pained	D
7	16-17	Reading Spengler Decline	C
8	19-20	It's a shame that Spengler	A, C
9	27	One often thinks	D
10	28	Style is expression	A, C, D
11	28-29	Gretl once made	B, C
12	29	Loos, Spengler, Freud	B, C, D
13	30	I think that today	C
14	30	Aside from the good	D
15	41	I shouldn't be surprised	A, C
16	45	Again and again	B, D
17	46	In the metropolitan	C
18	46	What would the great	B, C
19	53	Our age is really	C
20	53-54	In art, too	A, C
21	59-61	The music of past	A, C
22	62	My sister Gretl	B, C
23	62-63	Can one say	B, C
24	63-64	The three variations	A
25	65-66	The professor of mathematics	A
26	72	Beethoven is a realist	A, C
27	76-77	Music composed at the piano	B
28	77-78	The composer's writing	B
29	78	In Brahms the colors	A
30	78-81	A tragedy could always	A, C
31	85	When for a change	B
32	86	Through education	C, D
33	88	As in philosophy	A, D
34	89-90	An English architect of musician	B
35	90-91	This is the state	D
36	91-92	I speak far too easily	D
37	98-99	My thoughts rarely come	D
38	99	The melodies of Beethoven	B
39	100	Strange to see	A
40	100-101	I am somewhat in love	D
41	102-103	What I perform	B, D
42	104-105	I have often	B, D
43	105-107	If Brahms's instrumentation	A
44	122-123	There is something	A, D
45	155-157	Last night the following dream	B, D

**Figure 1:** thematic analysis

**Category (B)** is a sub-category of (A). Categories (A) and (B) are related to the philosophical theme of aesthetics as a mode of conceptual inquiry; category (C) is related to the philosophy of culture. Some of the remarks on music belong to more than one thematic category. Categories (A), (B), and (C) are subsumed thematically under category (D). The remarks which belong to category (D) serve to connect Wittgenstein's thinking about music to his thinking about the problem of life. The thematic relations between the different categories are represented schematically in Figure 2 below. In the last two sections I explain how, and in what sense, categories (A)-(C) are subsumed under category (D), and in a way which highlights the analogy that Wittgenstein conceived between himself and Gustav Mahler.



**Figure 2:** thematic relations

## The context of aesthetics

Wittgenstein's explicit foray into aesthetics, and also his thinking about the philosophy of culture, around the time of the penning of the diary entries that make up the first part of *Denkbewegungen*, are vividly captured in his Cambridge lectures of 1930 to 1933. The set of classes specifically on aesthetics from May 1933 are quite unique, and are comparable to only one other such set, which Wittgenstein offered in the summer of 1938. The differences between the two are not without interest, but a proper comparison lies beyond the scope of the present study. The context and the content of the 1933 lectures corresponds closely to the diary entries delineated in the previous section, setting them up appropriately in their philosophical context and accounting for their tone.

The lectures make it very clear that Wittgenstein's discussion of aesthetics is not invested in any of the traditional, theoretically oriented approaches to the subject. For Wittgenstein, aesthetics is neither a theory of beauty, committing itself to some general definition of the term, nor something pertaining exclusively to the fine arts. "It's not true that 'beautiful' means what's common to all the things we call so: we use it in a hundred different games", he said. "If you want to construct a grammatical game roughly parallel to use of word, you have to look at what sort of discussion you could have about the beauty of an object" (M 9:13). Wittgenstein conceived aesthetics as a mode of discussion, or rather as the cultivating of a mode of discussion, which concerns what he variously calls "aesthetic controversy", "aesthetic enquiry" or "aesthetic investigation", and "aesthetic puzzle" or "aesthetic puzzlement". An "aesthetic controversy" occurs always *in situ*: it concerns something concrete that needs to be resolved, worked out, corrected or agreed upon for a particular purpose – hence an aesthetic discussion is always particular, addressing a tension arising in the case at hand. For Wittgenstein, *musizieren* affords the most typical examples. "What is an actual aesthetic controversy or enquiry like?", Wittgenstein asks, "not what philosophers think it is like; but how e.g. musicians use 'beautiful', if they use it at all, in a discussion. [...] In aesthetic controversy 'beautiful' & 'more or less beautiful' are hardly ever used; whereas words like 'correct' 'right' are: e.g. that doesn't look quite right yet" (M 9:19).

Thus, Wittgenstein sets himself the task in these lectures of clarifying the mode of discussion appropriate to aesthetics, which he understood in terms of the attempt to remove some form of aesthetic puzzlement or other. Moreover, he pursues his discussion in a rather idiosyncratic context framed by three sources: Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Sigmund Freud's *Jokes*

*and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, and James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The first two of these also receive an acknowledgment in *Denkbewegungen*. In addition to the repeated references to Spengler which I have already noted, there are also references to Freud's ideas, including specifically his treatment of *Witz* (e.g., MT, p. 18-19). I have argued elsewhere at some length that Spengler's influence played an important role in Wittgenstein's critical response to the Romantic conviction that music affords access to a unique knowledge of ourselves as human beings.<sup>5</sup> The name of Spengler is conspicuously absent from the lectures as a whole, although the presence of his influence is undeniable – in particular in the context of Wittgenstein's discussion of aesthetics, where the notion of comparison is at the center of his methodological reflections. It could be the case, as Joachim Schulte suggests, that Wittgenstein felt it advisable to refrain from bothering his British audience with the names of controversial German intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein proceeds to explicate the unique character of aesthetic discussions by means of a contrast between experimental psychology and psychoanalysis. This is clearly one of the most striking features of his 1933 lectures on aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> The upshot for him is that whereas psychology has “a tendency to explain away” (M 9:39), “aesthetics like psychoanalysis doesn't explain anything away” (M 9:45). The uniqueness of aesthetics lies in the nature of the explanations (reasons, justifications) that are offered and accepted in the attempt to address, and possibly remove, a given instance of aesthetic puzzlement. Contrasting the modes of explanation in psychology and psychoanalysis allows him to spell out the conversational, non-hypothetical and therein immanently human character of aesthetics.

Wittgenstein's discussion of differences between psychology and psychoanalysis is motivated by an intriguing twofoldness that he finds in Freud's psychological investigation of “*Wit*” (*Witz*). Wittgenstein maintains that Freud's explanation can satisfy us in two absolutely distinct ways. Firstly, like any scientific theory, it can satisfy us by helping to predict certain things. Such causal explanations hinge upon general explanatory principles, inductively inferred on the basis of observations. Freud's hypothesis is that there is something common to all jokes – that “it's part of essential mechanism of a joke to conceal something, & to make it possible for subconscious to express itself” (M 9:44). Hypothetically, this is the meaning of “joke” (M 9:38). The mechanism

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<sup>5</sup> Eran Guter, “Wittgenstein on Musical Depth and Our Knowledge of Humankind”.

<sup>6</sup> See Joachim Schulte, “Wittgenstein's remarks on aesthetics and their context”.

<sup>7</sup> See Craig Fox and Eran Guter, “On not explaining anything away”.

is externally connected to the particular case of telling this or that joke, and the explanation taken to be being afforded by the mechanism will only satisfy us insofar as future experience confirms it.

Secondly, though, the very same explanation may also satisfy us by prompting our *agreement* that this is what happened: “analyst suggests,” says Wittgenstein, “Wasn’t it as if someone had said so & so, & wasn’t this what produced queer effect on you? And: when subject agrees, he must be agreeing that this is the reason (not the cause)” (M 9:43). The satisfaction that we derive from the explanation, rendered as a representation, is non-hypothetical: we have been offered a paraphrase of the particular joke itself. Wittgenstein’s important upshot is that “[the subject’s] agreeing doesn’t shew that he thought of the reason at the time; he didn’t. To say that he was doing so sub-consciously is a mere picture: it tells us nothing as to what was happening when he laughed. It may be a good expedient to talk of sub-conscious processes; but it gets its meaning from the actual verifying phenomena; which are what are interesting” (M 9:43).

The crux of Wittgenstein’s distinction between psychology and psychoanalysis is his distinction between hypothesis and representation. Hypothesis transcends the particular cases, which the general laws, posited by the hypothesis, cover. Representation, on the other hand, is un-hypothetical in the sense of affording a mere picture as a useful device, which “enables [one] to overlook a system at a glance” (M 9:38). It inheres in the particular case by means of paraphrasing, giving good similes, which result in a collective arrangement of (often surprisingly) similar cases. “Criterion of correctness of aesthetic analysis must be agreement of person to whom I make it”, says Wittgenstein: “Freud’s remark that we don’t know why we laugh /when hear a joke/ points to the puzzle which gives rise to aesthetics. But aesthetics does not lie in finding a mechanism” (M 9:46). In the last analysis, according to Wittgenstein, “Freud’s discoveries are in fact merely of striking ways of expressing certain facts, & seeing them in a system: not causal explanations” (M 9:47). And “what Freud says sounds as if it were science, but is in fact a wonderful representation” (M 9:50). Indeed, for Wittgenstein, “Freud on ‘Wit’ is a good example of an Aesthetic investigation” (M 9:45); “it is aesthetic in so far as it isn’t hypothetical” (M 9:37).

Thus, Wittgenstein extends the notion of aesthetics far beyond its traditional (and current) use. His point is primarily methodological. While causal explanations turn a blind eye to the manifold verifying phenomena in human interaction, aesthetic explanations preserve them in their

fullness: “I say all Aesthetics is of nature of giving a paraphrase, even if same words also express a hypothesis. It is giving a good simile” (M 9:37). The “criterion of correctness of aesthetic analysis must be agreement of person to whom I make it” (M 9:46). That is why Wittgenstein maintains that aesthetics does not explain anything away. What is unique about aesthetic explanation is that it calls for reasons, not causes. “Aesthetic craving for an explanation is not satisfied by a hypothesis”, he says: “This is what I mean by saying Aesthetics is not Psychology” (M 9:39). “What is a reason in Aesthetics?” he asks: “A reason for having this word in this place rather than that; this musical phrase rather than that” (M 9:30; cf. PI 527-535); “a reason consists in drawing your attention to something which removes an uneasiness” (M 9:33). A reason, in this sense, addresses what presents itself as a necessity, an experience of meaning: e.g. “Why is this note absolutely necessary?” (M 9: 31). Yet, as Juliet Floyd has aptly put it, “seeing possibilities and necessities is bound up with knowing and seeing things and properties and laws of things; but to fix the very possibility at stake in a discussion, we need a proper characterization, not merely a form of words or a conventional flag. We need to draw a possibility in, make it *alive*.<sup>8</sup> According to Wittgenstein, we draw a possibility in, and characterize, by drawing comparisons, illuminating a field of possible projections of a concept and a potential development of the mode of characterization:

By making a person hear lots of different pieces by Brahms, you can make him see what he’s driving at. All that Aesthetics does is to draw your attention to things: e.g. “This is a climax”. It places things side by side: e.g. this prepares the way for that. You can make a person understand a composer, by drawing attention to a contemporary author: e.g. Brahms is like Keller. Aesthetics may say: Try to find Keller in Brahms. Like: try to see this as a colour. It may make you hear a thing differently: just as you may find the head in a puzzle-picture. A solution must speak for itself. If when I’ve made you see what I see, it doesn’t appeal to you, there is an end. (M 9:31)

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<sup>8</sup> Juliet Floyd, “Aspects of aspects”, p. 373-374.

The nature of aesthetics, in the sense expounded by Wittgenstein in the 1933 lectures, stands out in this segment. Characterization involves presenting phenomena, laid out side by side, independently of the causally determined sequence of events, in a creative, fitting order, which enables one to see things with understanding. In that sense, aesthetics is descriptive (M 9:23). A comparison is an articulation of possibilities, which invites further comparisons and re-phrasings, serving and instancing possibilities for the characterization of what can be seen and said. The open-endedness of the discussion, its flow, is regulated by manifold, nuanced, patently incalculable “verifying phenomena” of the parties involved. In Juliet Floyd’s words, “with success, the ‘face’ of what is characterized shines through in a comprehensible and communicable way, affording us ways to see likenesses and differences, and ways to go on discussing and drawing out from the articulation further aspects of what is characterized that are there to be seen in and by means of it”.<sup>9</sup> In aesthetics, there is always a sense in which “I can go on” (M 9:29). Yet success is never guaranteed. “Aesthetic discussion is like discussion in a court of law”, Wittgenstein says: “You don’t say ‘This is bad or good’, but try to clear up circumstances; & in the end what you say will appeal to the judge” (M 9:39).

The importance of aesthetics is found primarily not just in delineating and clarifying this mode of discussion, but also, and significantly, in Wittgenstein’s urge to cultivate it. Fitting characterizations, when a solution to an aesthetic puzzle “speaks for itself”, are important because they enact resemblances which unite a culture’s ways of life. They embody what Wittgenstein would later call “agreement in forms of life” (PI 241). Agreement in forms of life is not the same as agreement in opinions: the former is a condition for the latter. Where there is agreement in opinions there is already agreement in forms of life, which enables us to speak also of differences in opinion, and to adduce reasons and justifications; yet no such grounds can be brought forth for the form of life itself, for the primacy of the practice. On this level there is neither opinion nor difference – only attunement. In the words of Stanley Cavell: “The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. That a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually *attuned* top to bottom”.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, we

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 32.

can see, in the display of comparisons and characterizations in *Denkbewegungen*, some brief, circumscribed snapshots of what Wittgenstein would later describe as the “bustle of life”: that very complicated, constantly repeating filigree pattern “which, to be sure, we can’t copy, but which we can recognize from the general impression it makes” (RPP II 624-626).

## Aesthetic ideals amid cultural decline

Spengler’s influence on Wittgenstein’s conception of aesthetics is encountered most conspicuously in the latter’s use of the term “ideal” in the lectures. According to Wittgenstein, in aesthetics, a way to answer a puzzle “is to make a synopsis possible” (M 9:31). His point is that the comparisons in which aesthetic explanations consist are illuminating insofar as the expressed facts and phenomena are ordered in such a way that we can see them “within a system” (M 9:41, 47), having gained a synoptic view of them (M 9: 33). According to Wittgenstein, this is made possible by our having an ideal before our minds: “Aesthetic reasons are given in the form: getting nearer to an ideal or farther from it” (M 9:36). Ideals come into aesthetics as objects of comparison for the purpose of seeing something anew, a possibility: “you would need to describe the instances of the ideal in a sort of serial grouping” (AWL 36). They are facilitators of aesthetic discussion. However, Wittgenstein denies that any such ideal has an essence: ideals do not have “something in common called ‘ideality’” (M 9:19). An ideal (of a face, for example, or of a certain balance in polyphonic music) changes with time, and yet each time we should say “this is the ideal” (*ibid.*). We identify an ideal by virtue of some special role which it plays in the lives of certain people (M 9:20). “The ideal is the tendency of people who create such a thing” (M 9:22), so to find what ideal we are oriented towards, we must look at what we do.

Wittgenstein’s notion of an “ideal” is related to Spengler’s notion of a “prototype” (*Urbild*) – albeit critically. In an extended passage from 19.8.1931 (CV 21-22) Wittgenstein criticized Spengler’s dogmatism in sorting cultural epochs into families, ascribing properties which only the prototype possesses to the object viewed in the light of it. It is noteworthy that both Spengler’s morphology of world history and Wittgenstein’s criticism thereof found their original inspiration in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s morphological method, as manifested in his conception of the

“primal plant”, famously introduced in the latter’s *Italian Journey* (See M 9:33). The purpose of Goethe’s morphological method was to display the essential structure common to all natural species – to find unity in natural diversity. He believed that the investigation of “primal phenomena” was the general goal of all natural-scientific endeavor, and the notion of “prototype” was supposed to denote a clear representation of a single primal phenomenon, a step which was necessary in order to set the natural phenomena in order.

In the 1930s, Wittgenstein considered himself a follower of Goethe’s ideas about the metamorphosis of plants, in the realm of the philosophy of language (VWVC 311). However, in his interpretation of Goethe’s ideas, Wittgenstein denied the status of primal phenomena as common ancestors to all species (in any developmental, historical or genetic sense) and restricted the notion of a prototype to a mere regulative idea, the primacy of which is due to its heuristic use in providing the “logical space” for all possible relevant instances.<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein’s point was that the conceptual relations within the prototype – relations which can be expressed as grammatical or conceptual necessities – need to characterize the whole discussion and determine its form; however, they do not and cannot shape the phenomena being discussed themselves. “The only way namely for us to avoid prejudice – or vacuity in our claims”, Wittgenstein wrote in 1937, “is to posit the ideal as what it is, namely as an object of comparison – a measuring rod as it were – within our way of looking at things, & not as a preconception to which everything must conform” (CV 30).

According to Wittgenstein, an aesthetic ideal is not some simple representational standard – a perceived token of something, or even a matter of fact – that directs us and which we try just to duplicate in our own artistic activity. Artistic achievement lies not in replicating a prototype, but in attuning ourselves to one another creatively by means of the ideal. Facilitating an aesthetic discussion, ideals are used to develop a cultured sense of taste, artistic sensibilities and judgments that in turn manifest them. In his lectures, Wittgenstein says:

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<sup>11</sup> See Gordon Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, Baker, *Wittgenstein, Understanding and Meaning*, p. 307-334; Sabine Plaud, “Synoptic views vs. primal phenomena: Wittgenstein on Goethe’s morphology”; Joachim Schulte, “Goethe and Wittgenstein on Morphology”.

When one describes changes made in a musical arrangement as directed to bringing the arrangement of parts nearer to an ideal, the idea is not before us like a straight line which is set before us when we try to draw it. (When questioned about what we are doing we might cite another tune which we thought not to be as near the ideal.) [...] To see how the ideal comes in, say in making the bass quieter, look at what is being done and at one's being dissatisfied with the music as it is. (AWL 37)

The aesthetic ideals of a culture provide for tradition and nourish new creations and cultured judgments. As we have seen, for Wittgenstein, ideals are used against a specific cultural background of measuring and judging various achievements. They allow us to characterize the topography of culture by yielding an overview that can be rendered in a comprehensible and communicable way, affording us ways to draw meaningful distinctions between right and wrong, likenesses and differences, and also ways to go on discussing and drawing out – via such characterization – further aspects of what is there to be seen in and by means of it. This sort of “measuring rod” is a value-laden measure: one which will not suit cultural practices and sensitivities entirely different from ours.

This intrinsic relation between ideals and cultural cohesion makes them particularly sensitive to, and indicative of, changes in cultural conditions. The demise of aesthetic ideals is emblematic of a dissolution of the resemblances which unite a culture’s ways of life. Wittgenstein voiced this deeply Spenglerian concern in the “Sketch for a Forward” to *Philosophical Remarks*, which he penned on 6-7.11.1930 (CV 8-11). He was unequivocal in what he wrote: “The spirit of [the prevailing European and American] civilization the expression of which is the industry, architecture, music, of present day fascism & socialism, is a spirit that is alien & uncongenial to the author” (CV 8). For Wittgenstein, culture at its height enables different people at different times and places to pool their cultural efforts and make use of their tasteful and creative powers in a common spiritual bond: “Culture is like a great organization which assigns to each of its members his place, at which he can work in the spirit of the whole, and his strength can with a certain justice be measured by his success as understood within that whole” (CV 8-9). The time of civilization, meaning “a time without culture”, shows itself in a disintegration of culture into a host of disjointed efforts and non-discriminating judgments: “forces are fragmented and the strength of the

individual is wasted through the overcoming of opposite forces & frictional resistances” (CV 9). It is the disappearance of concentrated and shared efforts to observe a way of life and contribute to “the same great end” – one that would enable human beings to express and experience something exalted or even sacred: a breakdown of the cohesive forces formerly embodied both in the observance of a shared tradition and in the attempt to work in a common spirit.

Wittgenstein’s cultural pessimism, as expressed in his 1930 “Sketch for a Forward”, and with it his somber realization that his work was destined only for those still capable of resounding in sympathy with the spirit of culture and its aims, sheds particularly interesting light on the framing of his discussion of aesthetics (in his 1930-1933 lectures) within the broader context of his cultural critique (in particular as regards progress in science, and scientific thinking). In his first Michaelmas Term lecture of 1930, given in the first week of October of that year and just a few weeks before writing his “Sketch for a Forward”, he told his students:

There have been great philosophers; but now, for the first time, there can be skilful ones. This doesn’t mean that progress has occurred; but that style of thinking has changed = nimbus of philosophy has been lost. Compare Architecture – what might happen to it. Architect has a nimbus compared to Engineer. To some degree a house can be determined by calculation: but calculation leaves a certain margin, which architect fills in by sense of beauty etc.. In case of bicycle or locomotive there is hardly any room for personal freedom: & so there might be with a house. In that case there would be no more architects. In some cases there is no room for expression of personality – none for nimbus. The moment a method is found, one way of expressing personality is lost. And there’s no reason to be sorry for this. General tendency of this age is to take away possibilities of expression: which is characteristic of age without a culture. But a great man remains just as great. Philosophy is reduced to matter of skill: but it’s very difficult to acquire any skill. You can’t acquire it by hearing lectures: only way is to discuss. (M 5:2)

Wittgenstein highlights the fact that in an age without culture, philosophy has been reduced to a matter of skill, and a very complicated skill at that. It is no longer the lofty cultural project known

to us from yore: the “nimbus of philosophy has been lost”. He maintains that “our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress” (CV 9). Hence, Wittgenstein says in the lecture, the fact that a style of thinking has changed in a way exhibiting the form of progress does not mean that progress has occurred. Skillful philosophizing epitomizes progress, whose typical activity is “to construct a more and more complicated structure” (CV 9). This results in limiting possibilities of expression, “which is characteristic of age without a culture”— “The moment a method is found, one way of expressing personality is lost”; certain means of expressing human value disappear (CV 9).

The reference in the lecture to the nimbus of the architect was, of course, a deeply personal one for Wittgenstein. The analogy is quite straightforward: the nimbus of philosophy, like that of architecture, has to do with possibilities of self-expression, in particular the enabling and embodying of expression in prevailing cultural conditions – that is, the manifestation and appreciation of a cultured sense of taste. In this striking passage, Wittgenstein unequivocally ponders the possibility of philosophy in the current age. Under the long shadow of progress, as the activity of constructing more and more complicated structures becomes relentless, “even clarity is only a means to this end & not an end in itself” (CV 9). “For me”, wrote Wittgenstein, “on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself. I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible buildings transparently before me” (CV 9). There is a surprising link here that I wish to underscore, between the ideals of clarity and transparency and the quest for surveyability and self-expression. These connections stand sharply opposed to what is prescribed by the form of progress: compulsive over-structuring and obfuscation, and with it, a fragmentation into calculable objects that leaves no room for the expression of personality – “none for nimbus”. This link points directly to the aims and purposes of Wittgenstein’s aesthetics as explicated here in the previous section. The question remains positively open in the lecture whether there remains any room for other ways of expression that could still be cultivated by means of discussion, in the sense of a cultivation of that which remains incalculable and could yield surveyability – any room for an aesthetic residue of open-ended, nuanced, dynamically rich human conversation. Wittgenstein seems quite determined here. Indeed, he kept this urge until his last years. In 1949 he wrote: “Scientific questions may interest me, but they never really grip me. Only *conceptual* & *aesthetic* questions have that effect on me. At bottom it leaves me cold whether scientific problems are solved; but not those other questions” (CV 91).

The complex connection between clarity and transparency, and surveyability and self-expression, affords an insight into one of Wittgenstein's most intriguing and singular remarks on music, which is found in *Denkbewegungen*, written around exactly that same time on 4.10.1930:

I shouldn't be surprised if the music of the future were in unison [*einstimmig*]. Or is that only because I cannot clearly imagine several voices? Anyway, I can't imagine that the old large forms (string quartet, symphony, oratorio, etc.) will be able to play any role at all. If something comes it will have to be—I think—simple, transparent. In a certain sense, naked. Or will this apply only to a certain race, only to one kind of music (?) (MT, p. 41)

There is an obvious allusion in this passage to Richard Wagner's 1861 essay on the music of the future, though this of merely nominal significance and probably ironic. There is nothing in what Wittgenstein describes here that bears any resemblance to Wagner's musical ideal. It should be noted right at the outset that, for Wittgenstein, the music of the future is patently not modern music, not music of the present day, and the thought presented here strongly envisions an ideal that would mark the beginning of a new cultural epoch (cf. CV 73). Again, the influence of Spengler is unmistakable. For Spengler, the future always transcends the current epoch and it is always marked by a return to the simplest, most basic expression of life. Wittgenstein's suggestion that the music of the future might not continue from currently predominant, culturally entrenched musical formats, which embody a complexity of voices, can be related to various passages in Spengler, among them the following one: "Imitation stands nearest to life and direction and therefore begins with melody, while the symbolism of counterpoint belongs to extension and through polyphony signifies infinite space".<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein's suggestion also reflects Spengler's conviction that any belated return to the simplest forms of expression is bound to also reveal their limitations. The idea that the "old large forms" have exhausted their resources is also traceable to Spengler's worry that when a culture enters its final phases, artists simply work with the hollow forms of the old culture,

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<sup>12</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, vol. 1, p. 229.

without understanding its essence. Spengler wrote: “Pure civilization, as a historical process, consists in a taking-down of forms that have become inorganic or dead”.<sup>13</sup>

Wittgenstein’s vision of the music of the future as music in one voice brings together the philosophical themes which he expounded elsewhere both in writing and in his lectures: namely, simplicity and transparency as conditions for understanding. He also invokes the intimate notion of nakedness, which betokens self-expression. Such music in one voice epitomizes the foundational idea of attunement, of being in agreement throughout, that constitutes the praxeological grounds for setting up ideals as “measuring rods” for a culture – a new culture, perhaps. Again, Wittgenstein seems to be pointing with this complex image to the urgency, perhaps even the inevitability, of cultivating such an aesthetic discussion. As I have argued elsewhere, we may find in this diary entry, in this context, an elliptical version of his much later view of musical meaning as an internal relation that binds together musical gesture and the whole range of our language games (see CV 59-60).<sup>14</sup> The peculiar use of the metaphors of transparency and nakedness can be interpreted in terms of his increasing emphasis on the idea that music is physiognomic, intransitively transparent to human life. The gift of *musizieren* marks our capacity to make increasingly nuanced comparisons between multiform human practices, as we chart the unexpected topography of the resemblances that give unity to the ways of life of a culture. In such a context, self-expression is patently unbounded. For Wittgenstein, the goal of self-expression is intrinsically related to one’s being affiliated to a given cultural tradition, and to the ideals posited within it.

Nevertheless, for Wittgenstein the time of civilization, as an age without a culture, is marked by a “general tendency [...] to take away possibilities of expression” (M 5:2). In his “Sketch for a Forward” he acknowledges “the disappearance of the arts” (CV 8): “Even if it is clear to me,” he writes, “that the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value but simply of certain means of expressing this value, still the fact remains that I contemplate the current of European civilization without sympathy, without understanding its aims

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<sup>13</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, vol. 1, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> See Eran Guter, “The good, the bad, and the vacuous: Wittgenstein and modern and future musics”. I also offer another interpretation of Wittgenstein’s idea of “music in a single voice” as monophony in the musicological sense, relating it to Wittgenstein’s longtime interest in church modes.

if any” (CV 9). In particular, he singles out “what is called today modern music” as something which he approaches “with the greatest mistrust (without understanding its language)” (CV 8).

In yet another quite special remark in *Denkbewegungen*, written on 27.1.1931, Wittgenstein offers some concrete, intricate thoughts about the limitations of self-expression in modern music:

The music of all periods [insertion: the music of the past] always appropriates certain maxims of the good and the right of its own time. In this way we recognize the principles of Keller in Brahms etc etc. And for that reason [insertion: good] music, which is being conceived today or that has been conceived recently, which is therefore modern, seems absurd; for if it corresponds to any of the maxims that are articulated today, then it must be rubbish. This sentence is not easy to understand but it is so: no one is astute enough to formulate today what is correct, and all formulations, maxims, which are articulated are nonsense [*Unsinn*]. The truth would sound entirely paradoxical to all people. And the composer who feels this within him must confront with this feeling everything that is [insertion: now] articulated and therefore [his music] must appear by the present standards absurd, timid [*blödsinnig*]. But not absurd in a dressed-up sense (for after all, this is basically what corresponds to the present attitude) but vacuous [*nichtssagend*]. Labor is an example of this where he created something really significant as in some few pieces. (MT, p. 59-61; my translation)<sup>15</sup>

Wittgenstein maintains that music in the time of civilization is bound to seem deficient or absurd. At the heart of this diary entry we encounter his conviction that the transition to the modern shows itself in some sort of constraint – an inability to conceptualize the transition away from the kind of cultural cohesion, which the “Keller-in-Brahms” example epitomizes. This is the same example which, as I pointed out in the previous section, Wittgenstein used in his lectures on aesthetics to highlight the nature of aesthetic discussion – in terms of the idea of characterization by means of illuminating comparisons (M 9:31). Here, Wittgenstein’s point is that there is something, for sure,

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Nimrod Reitman for advising me concerning this translation.

to be grasped and expressed amid cultural decline, but we are not astute enough to conceptualize it. The kind of cleverness which, according to Wittgenstein, we seem to lack, is not a matter of mental capacity, but rather a matter of education and tradition: an acquired ability to comprehend cultural codes. We have become constrained by the incommensurability that obtains between us and the past, and hence run up against a paradox: even if we knew “the truth”, we probably would not be able to comprehend it. Wittgenstein’s irony is glaring: “The truth would sound entirely paradoxical to all people.”

For Wittgenstein, this condition marks the onset of a bifurcation and conceptual tension in modern music: two sorts of music, which correspond to two sorts of absurdity. There is music that reflects a constraint on seeing that we do not comprehend (hence *unsinnig*, or nonsensical), and there is another sort of music that reflects a constraint on seeing what we do not comprehend – on seeing through (hence *blödsinnig*, or timid, diffident). The first sort of modern music corresponds to the nonsensical maxims and formulations actually articulated in European civilization. For Wittgenstein, as we have seen, this primarily means the form of progress. Such music is absurd in a superficially attractive sense – and it is rubbish, he says. The other kind consists in denouncing such nonsensical maxims and formulations, but it ends up being vacuous, or vacant – absurd, for sure, but only because it cannot pass as absurd in the other, “dressed-up” sense, which enjoys some sort of social recognition. Such vacuous modern music bespeaks short-sightedness. It gropes for something which it cannot express. This is the genuine but limited – and in a sense, myopic – significance that Wittgenstein attached here to some of the works of the blind organist Josef Labor (1842-1924), a protégé and friend of the Wittgenstein family in Vienna.

Wittgenstein’s distinction between nonsensical modern music and vacuous modern music clearly maps onto a similar distinction occurring not only in Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, but also in the writings of the Viennese music theorist Heinrich Schenker, whose outlook on cultural decline closely aligns with Spengler’s in various ways.<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein himself became familiar with Schenker’s theorizing through conversations with his nephew, the musicologist Felix Salzer, who began studies with Schenker in Vienna in 1930. The conversations took place in part between 1930 and 1933, and there are a number of references to Schenker’s ideas in the writings and

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<sup>16</sup> See Byron Almén, “Prophets of the Decline: The Worldviews of Heinrich Schenker and Oswald Spengler”.

lectures of Wittgenstein during that time.<sup>17</sup> The limiting of self-expression in nonsensical modern music is exemplified by the composers who, during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had claimed to be engaged in an emancipation of dissonance in the name of progress. Wittgenstein clearly had no patience for such artificially constructed musical gesticulation, which Schenker's theory explained as symptomatic of the inability of these composers to bind their empty sonorities together as elaborations of a single chord. Already, in 1910, Schenker had stated that music, like the once-great cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, now lay in ruins. He openly despised the compositional practices of Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, Max Reger, and Arnold Schoenberg. For example, he had accused Richard Strauss of trying to mask the primitive design of his music with heavy orchestration, with noise and polyphonic clatter, and of resorting to vulgar, extra-musical narratives in order to solve problems of musical continuity.

Similarly, Spengler lambasted the artificial constructivism of what he took to be “a faked music, filled with the artificial noisiness of massed instruments”.<sup>18</sup> Concerning Max Reger, he wrote: “In the real command of a language there is a danger that the relation between the means and the meaning may be made into a new means. There arises an intellectual art of *playing* with expression, practiced by [...] Reger in music”.<sup>19</sup> For Wittgenstein, as well as for Spengler and Schenker, such progressive music was plain “rubbish”: that is, something which, insofar as it presented itself as non-musical clatter, was not interesting even from a merely technical perspective – indeed, “attractively absurd” for all the wrong reasons.

Vacuous modern music, “the unattractively absurd”, is exemplified in the diary entry by the music of Josef Labor. Wittgenstein portrays the “vacuous modern composer” as a sort of tragic figure who, in good conscience, shuns the illusions and perils of progress and yet is patently barred from artistic greatness. I have already noted Spengler’s concerns regarding artists working with just the hollow forms of the old culture, without understanding its essence. Schenker was similarly concerned with classicist epigones, and clearly did not want composers to start producing superficial imitations of Brahms. For Wittgenstein, vacuous modern music was the product of reproductive artists: it first and foremost evidenced a lack of genius, and hence also of character

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<sup>17</sup> See detailed discussion in Eran Guter, “‘A surrogate for the soul’: Wittgenstein and Schoenberg”; “The good, the bad, and the vacuous: Wittgenstein on modern and future musics”.

<sup>18</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, vol. 1, p. 194.

<sup>19</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, vol. 2, p. 136-137.

and courage (CV 43-44). The adjective “timid” (*blödsinnig*), which Wittgenstein used to characterize such music-making, captures this precisely. The opposition of the vacuous modern composer to the contemporaneously predominating slogans (pertaining to progress) was commendable, but their inability to express what they themselves could no longer understand exacted a heavy social price: as modern, it was bound to appear ludicrous.

Ultimately, in this intriguing passage from *Denkbewegungen*, we see Wittgenstein rejecting both the noble yet vacuous reworking of old forms by the conservative composer and the base contrapuntal tinkering with harmony of the progressive composer, considering them both symptomatic of cultural decline.<sup>20</sup>

### Gustav Mahler as *alter ego*

Read in context, Wittgenstein’s musings on the state of, and prospects for, modern music foreground their own connectedness with the overarching theme of self-expression. He understood modern music in terms of a limiting of possibilities of expression – specifically construed as expression of personality, and in terms of personal freedom. The difficult task of composing music

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<sup>20</sup> As Wittgenstein’s diary entry makes very clear, his rejection of what he considered to be modern music was categorical. Other commentators remain sympathetic to the possibility that Wittgenstein may have left some room for a positive acknowledgement of modern music, perhaps of other kinds. These suggestions have their merit, yet in general, as I have argued elsewhere, such a view, qua an argumentative strategy, seems to involve some sort of *ad hominem* fallacy. (See Eran Guter, “Wittgenstein, modern music, and the myth of progress”). Garry Hagberg has argued that Arnold Schoenberg’s theorizing and compositional practice move along lines deeply analogous to those laid down by the Wittgenstein of the *Blue and Brown Books* and also the *Philosophical Investigations* (See Garry Hagberg, “Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, linguistic meaning and music”). For an elaborate discussion of the discrepancy between Wittgenstein’s conception of the relation between language and music and Arnold Schoenberg’s, see Eran Guter, “‘A surrogate for the soul’: Wittgenstein and Schoenberg”. More recently, Béla Szabados has offered a veritable splurge of superficial affinities between Wittgenstein and Schoenberg, some of them blatantly misguided: e.g. lumping Schoenberg together with Wittgenstein as an “anti-theorist” (see Béla Szabados, *Wittgenstein as Philosophical Tone-Poet*, p. 178-182). I have already criticized this sort of “bold brush-stroke” mode of interpretation in my aforementioned paper. Meanwhile, Katrin Eggers’ more general suggestion that Wittgenstein left the door open for new musical languages rests on a misinterpretation of the philosophical point of Wittgenstein’s “ancient city” metaphor (PI 18), reading it as if it denoted a mereology, and thereby assuming that music can be conceived literally as a “district” within language which, arguably, could be “expanded” by the new procedures and ideas of modern music. (See Katrin Eggers, *Ludwig Wittgenstein als Musikphilosoph*, p. 81-90, 126-127). This does not sit well with anything that Wittgenstein actually said about the relation between music and language. At any rate, there is no textual or biographical evidence showing that Wittgenstein ever changed his mind about modern music since penning this singular diary entry in 1931.

amid cultural decline (that will exhibit genius rather than mere talent) is one that requires the courage to penetrate through what appears as a dissolution of the resemblances uniting a culture's ways of life by rendering this unfathomable condition expressible and intransitively understandable. It is an aesthetic search for surveyability, enabled by new ideals. In Wittgenstein's mind, this task for the composer is analogous to his own search for a new style of philosophizing, appropriate to the time of civilization. Wittgenstein's genuine worry that "no one is astute enough to formulate today what is correct" (MT, p. 60) resonates strongly with Spengler's similar worry that the philosophers of his day did not have a real grounding in actual life, that they had not acquired the necessary reflective understanding of the time or its many built-in limitations that philosophizing in a time of civilization requires.<sup>21</sup> This worry impinged directly on Wittgenstein's attitude toward the problem of life – in particular, his doubts about his ability to philosophize and the value of his own intellectual contributions.

Against this backdrop it becomes imperative to single out Wittgenstein's attitude toward Gustav Mahler, the only truly modern composer apparently significant enough in Wittgenstein's eyes to be worthy of real attention. One might, of course, easily be led astray by some of Wittgenstein's abusive comments on Mahler's music, declaring as he did, on one occasion, that it was worthless, and that "obviously it took a string of very rare talents to produce this bad music" (CV 76). Yet I have argued that Wittgenstein's harshly critical attitude toward Mahler as a composer was more philosophically complex than downright negative: he evidently did not like Mahler's music, but nonetheless attributed philosophical significance to it.<sup>22</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright recalled that Wittgenstein said there was something initially incorrect in the architecture of Mahler's music.<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that the simile of "architecture" is not uncommon in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. In particular, he often referred to the architecture of mathematical systems, making the general point that a mathematical proposition can only carry any weight, and be of any use, insofar as there also exists a practice: otherwise it is no more than "a free-floating piece of mathematical scaffolding" (BBE MS 121, p. 41-42). For Wittgenstein, Mahler's music, undeniably unpalatable to him, was still neither merely "nonsensical modern music" nor "vacuous

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<sup>21</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, vol. 1, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> See Eran Guter, "Wittgenstein on Mahler"; "The good, the bad, and the vacuous: Wittgenstein on modern and future musics".

<sup>23</sup> Reported by Enzo De Pellegrin from a personal interview with G. H. von Wright, which took place in Helsinki, Finland in early summer of 1999. I am grateful to Dr. De Pellegrin for sharing relevant segments from this interview.

modern music". He felt that it behooved him to get to the bottom of its significance: to get to grips with the occurrence and import of Mahler's musical *Scheinarchitektur* in the time of civilization. For him, Mahler was a limiting case in the history of Western music. Indeed, he said of Mahler that "you would need to know a good deal about music, its history and development, to understand him".<sup>24</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that Wittgenstein's remarks on Mahler reveal an intimate link, in Wittgenstein's mind, between the puzzle of Mahler and his grappling with his own predicament as a philosopher, and even with his effectiveness as a teacher (CV 48). These remarks, which feature a remarkable consistency of tone and substance, were written between 1931 and 1948, thereby showing that this very personal, acute struggle with his musical alter ego was in fact never resolved. The first two remarks were written in 1931. One is a diary entry from *Denkbewegungen*, the other taken from Wittgenstein's pocket notebook (MS 154) which he used to carry around, stopping occasionally to note down reflections on various issues. The two remarks should be read in conjunction.

When for a change the later ones of the great composers write in simple [variant: clear] harmonic progressions [variant: relations], they show allegiance to their ancestral mother [*Stammutter*]. Especially in these moments (where the others are most moving) Mahler seems especially unbearable to me & I always want to say then: but you have only heard this from the others, that isn't (really) yours.

Soiling everything with my vanity. (MT, p. 85)

A picture of a complete apple tree, however accurate, is in a certain sense much less like the tree itself than is a little daisy. And in the same sense a symphony by Bruckner is infinitely closer to a symphony from the heroic period than is one by Mahler. If the latter is a work of art it is one of a *totally* different sort. (But this is actually itself a Spenglerian observation.) (CV 20)

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, p. 71.

Interestingly, these remarks show Wittgenstein wrapping his mind around Schenker's music theory as he had understood it from Felix Salzer. There is some heavy editing in the diary entry that specifically concerns the musical terminology involved. Wittgenstein seems to have fluctuated between such terms as "harmonic relations" and "harmonic progressions" (opting for the latter eventually). Yet it seems clear that Wittgenstein's own metaphorical term, "ancestral mother" (*Stammutter*), serves as a placeholder for Schenker's complex terminology for describing primary musical phenomena (e.g., *Ursatz*, *Urlinie*, etc.). It is also clear that the very idea of an "ancestral mother" as a measuring rod which enables one to gain an overview of similarities and differences between compositional practices of different composers is tantamount to an "ideal" in Wittgenstein's sense, as explicated here in the previous section. Wittgenstein's criticism of the moments of "simple music" in Mahler directly concern what is "initially incorrect" in Mahler's musical "architecture". Mahler's mature works display significant ambivalence in the area of harmony and tonal relationships. While his music often appears deceptively conservative, employing undisguised dominant relationships that still play an essential structural role, his compositional procedures push tonality to the brink of dissolution. In this sense, Mahler's "simple music" is indeed contrived and disjointed, the product of an incredibly sophisticated, refined and titillating – yet ultimately abstract – design. Wittgenstein's claim that a Bruckner symphony is much closer to a Beethoven symphony than one by Mahler certainly complies with Schenker's theoretical perspective.

This sort of technical explication of Mahler's deviancy is complemented by conflicting intuitions such as typify Wittgenstein's self-doubt: there is the accusation concerning being inauthentic, and the immediate doubt about the validity of this accusation – a sort of balance-of-terror between vanity and indolence. The personal, self-critical aspect of Wittgenstein's charge against Mahler – "you have only heard this from the others, that isn't (really) yours" – becomes apparent once we look at the immediate context of the second remark in MS 154. The train of thought in the preceding pages of the pocket notebook, leading to the remark on Mahler (CV 16-20), consists of some of Wittgenstein's notoriously self-directed and agonizing ruminations about his "Jewishness" – in the sense of his having mere talent (and not genius, the ability to create new ideas), being really "only reproductive in my thinking", having "never invented a line of thinking",

and just working with ideas provided by someone else, lacking courage. And yet, he characterizes his (“Jewish”) mind as the ability “to understand someone else’s work better than he understands it himself” (CV 17). Significant, in the light of our preceding discussion, is the fact that he wrote that “What I invent are new *comparisons*” (CV 16). Spengler was clearly an intellectual source for this self-doubt, as well as for its matching bout of vanity. Wittgenstein portrays Mahler’s deviancy by suggesting the metaphor of the picture of an apple tree and the little daisy. Mahler’s music is like a *trompe l’oeil* picture: it invites us to engage in a completely different set of games of participation. Thus, Wittgenstein voices a Spenglerian observation that a Mahler symphony might be a work of art of a totally different sort, embodying an entirely different kind of spiritual enterprise, for which our aesthetic measuring rods are inadequate.

The following remark on Mahler was written in 1937 in code, a fact which speaks volumes about its personal sensitivity:

Lying to oneself about oneself, lying to oneself about one’s own inauthenticity, must have a bad effect on one’s style; for the consequence will be that one is unable to distinguish what is genuine and what is false. This is how the inauthenticity of Mahler’s style may be explained and I am in the same danger. If one is putting up a show to oneself, this must express itself in the style. The style cannot be one’s own. Whoever is unwilling to know himself is writing a kind of deceit. Whoever is unwilling to plunge into himself, because it is too painful, naturally remains with his writing on the surface. (Whoever wants only the next best thing, can achieve only the surrogate of a good thing.) (BBE MS 120, 72v)

This passage sharpens and deepens the thematic structure that emerged in the two previous remarks. The intimate link with Mahler’s art is now exposed in the relative privacy of the coded remark. The accusation concerning inauthenticity is now connected explicitly with the concept of style, yet in the specific context of music. Musical style is a mode of expression, the manner in which a work of music is executed. The concept of musical style denotes a unique fusion of formal features and cultural practices: “Style manifests itself in characteristic usages of form, texture, harmony, melody, rhythm and ethos; and it is presented by creative personalities, conditioned by

historical, social and geographical factors, performing resources and conventions.”<sup>25</sup> What is important for our discussion is the fact that Wittgenstein’s explicit reference to musical style when considering his own style lends unexpected support to internalist readings of Wittgenstein’s text, on which Wittgenstein’s style of writing is an essential part of his philosophical method, and his method and style are internally related.<sup>26</sup> Externalists, meanwhile, tend to construe the concept of “style” loosely as lumping together all those aspects of Wittgenstein’s writing which they regard as not germane to the expository project of explicitly stating his problems, or laying out his arguments. Hence style becomes something akin to Frege’s concept of “tone”. Yet by his own admission, Wittgenstein’s own understanding of “style” (akin to musical style) was much more robust.

For Wittgenstein, a style denotes a deep sense of urgency and commitment in one’s life, but also a pattern of human life. In this non-subjectivist sense, style necessitates itself: it is “one’s own”. In *Denkbewegungen* he wrote: “Style is the expression of a general human necessity. This holds for a writing style or a building style (and any other). Style is general necessity viewed sub specie aeterni” (MT, p. 28). There is an allusion here to Spengler’s inflated contention that “style is [...] the revelation of something metaphysical, a mysterious having to, a fate”. However, Wittgenstein understood the concept of style in terms of fittingness and attunement: “Writing the right style means, setting the carriage straight on the rails” (CV 44). In a late passage from 1947, Wittgenstein elaborated on this issue in a way that relates to his critique of “vacuous modern music” as this was explicated in the previous section here, and also to his own reproductive manner as the architect of the house that he built for his sister in Vienna (cf. CV 43):

You can as it were restore an old style in a new language; perform it afresh so to speak in a manner [alternative: a reading] that suits our times. In doing so you really only reproduce. I have done this while building. What I mean is *not* however giving an old style a new trim. You don’t take the old forms & fix them up to suit today’s taste. No, you are really [alternative: in reality] speaking, maybe unwittingly, the old language, but speaking it in a

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Pascal, “Style”.

<sup>26</sup> See David Stern, “Wittgenstein’s texts and style”.

manner that belongs to the newer world, though not on that account necessarily one that is to its taste. (CV 68-69; I modified the translation)

According to Wittgenstein, authentic style is a mode of expression that fits the current ways of life, even if it does not fit contemporary taste. This does not relieve the tension which the two 1931 remarks on Mahler embody: the inability to determine whether Mahler's "simple music", the speaking of the old language, is inauthentic per se, or perhaps set in a manner that belongs to a newer world, giving rise to a work of art "of a *totally* different sort". The coded 1937 passage deepens the penetration of this double-edged sword by endowing the charge concerning the inauthenticity of Mahler's style and, by the same token, also Wittgenstein's fear about the inauthenticity of his own style, with the sort of recursive quality that the notion of self-deception brings with it. In his own view, he shares a predicament with Mahler: they both might be positioned in such a way as to be incapable of distinguishing between what is genuine and what is false. This self-deception is portrayed in this passage as a lack of courage to know oneself, an acknowledgment of an unwillingness to manifest true genius. Elsewhere, Wittgenstein writes: "One might say: 'Genius is courage in one's talent'" (CV 44). Once again, the characteristic balance-of-terror between vanity and indolence is displayed. Interestingly, in this context, Wittgenstein's self-reproach is also levelled directly against his alter ego, Gustav Mahler. In a sense, his frustration at Mahler appears to stem from an understanding that this prodigious composer had ultimately fallen short of creating authentically valuable works. Clearly, what is at stake here pertains to the problem of life: a painful acknowledgement of the inability to ascertain the value of one's achievements.

The last remark on Mahler was written in 1948, shortly before Wittgenstein's death (CV 76-77). It is a fairly extensive passage, which palpably shows that Wittgenstein never got to the point of resolving the inner tensions that Mahler's persona and music had come to embody for him, and which pertained to his own style of philosophizing in an age without culture, and to his grappling with the problem of life. The passage from 1948 is by far the most verbally abusive in terms of what appears as a downright negation of the worth of Mahler's symphonies by Wittgenstein. Still, this rhetoric is actually set in the text as the antecedent of a conditional, the consequent of which is then challenged in the remainder of the passage. In fact Wittgenstein, who

once again openly situates himself in Mahler's predicament, forcefully repeats and elaborates the points already made in the coded passage from 1937 and in the previous 1931 remarks: one cannot see oneself from within an overview, and therefore one can always (mistakenly) render one's otherness as some sort of excellence. Very tellingly, Wittgenstein contends that "even someone who struggles against vanity, but not entirely successfully, will always deceive himself about the value of what he produces" (CV 77).

Ultimately, the problem afflicting Mahler as a composer, and Wittgenstein as a philosopher and writer, is a problem of incommensurability, which pertains to the cultural presuppositions for making value distinctions in the first place: "If today's circumstances are really so different, from what they once were, that you cannot compare your work with earlier works in respect of its genre, then you equally cannot compare its value with that of the other work" (CV 77). Wittgenstein remained undecided about a fundamental question that bore on his attitude toward the problem of life. The question, as Yuval Lurie has nicely put it, is "whether the spiritual progression of our culture is still continuing (and it is us who are being left behind), or whether the culture has disappeared (and we are the only ones left to notice it)".<sup>27</sup>

## The problem of composing

In my interpretation, the thematic concerns of Wittgenstein's remarks on music in *Denkbewegungen* gravitate toward "the problem of composing", which Wittgenstein introduced via his melody/crystal/life metaphor (MT, p. 9-10). This metaphor can now be unpacked in a fruitful way. The problem of composing resonates very strongly with his critical musings on modern music generally and Mahler's art in particular. The context laid out here in the preceding sections enables us to see that the issue of compositional style took center-stage in Wittgenstein's personal development, in particular with regard to his own skepticism about possibilities for the expression of personality and self-valuation in an age without a culture. In *Denkbewegungen*, and in other contemporaneous writings, he openly reflected on his inability to compose well. He regarded the *Tractatus* as containing "kitsch": that is, "passages with which I filled in the gaps and

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<sup>27</sup> Yuval Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit*, p. 150.

so-to-speak in my own style” (MT, p. 30-31), admitting that it is now difficult to evaluate how much of that book is filled with such “kitsch”. Around the same time, he also admits that he does not know how to begin writing a book. “I should like to begin with the original data of philosophy, written & spoken sentences, with books as it were” (CV 11); yet such a through-composed text seems to evade him: “Everything is in flux”, he complains, “And perhaps that is the very point at which to begin” (*ibid.*). The problem is clearly related to the daunting task of setting his movement of thought in writing. “[Being] in love with my sort of movement of thought in philosophy”, he confessed, “does not mean [...] that I am in love with my style. That I am not” (MT, p. 100-101). “My style is like a bad musical sentence” (CV 45; I corrected the translation), he wrote some years later.

Wittgenstein’s melody/crystal/life metaphor gives a concrete sense to this inability or lack in respect of something essential that Wittgenstein felt within himself. For him, composing a melody was an ideal, yet melodic quality itself proved quite elusive. A melody calls for a sense of cohesiveness, otherwise it may just sound like a broken chord, and the treatment of intervals is a crucial task for anyone seeking to compose one. It requires continuity, i.e. more steps than leaps, while where the latter are concerned dissonant ones are especially troublesome as they require compensatory stepwise moves in the opposite direction. Tonal organization is yet another crucial feature, and the compositional syntax must meet certain harmonic criteria if it is to achieve a sense of closure – of coming back home. In short, one needs to be in superb control of the entire compositional process in order to produce a well-crafted melodic result.

Taking this rather simplistic explication of the task of composing a melody as a point of reference, one can readily see how this metaphor captures and circumscribes what Wittgenstein the writer, the philosophical expositor, would have seemed to have lacked, at least in his own mind, in respect of his writing, his personal life, and his philosophy: steady, regular step-by-step progression, a sense of cohesiveness, and a feeling of home. There are too many dissonant leaps there. The syntax is dysfunctional. Wittgenstein was a “bewitched writer”, as Jaakko Hintikka dared to call him at one time.<sup>28</sup> The melody/crystal/life metaphor suggests how daunting the

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<sup>28</sup> Hintikka went as far as suggesting that the condition of dyslexia could perhaps be seen as some sort of key for unlocking the strangeness of Wittgenstein’s mode of philosophical exposition. See Jaakko Hintikka and Anna-Majja Hintikka, “Wittgenstein the bewitched writer”.

problem of composition was for Wittgenstein at the time. It was emblematic of his deeply personal worry that he could not grasp his life as a whole, and hence could not experience meaning in it. The metaphor of the crystal invokes not only the sense of a highly ordered structure of the kind that neither Wittgenstein nor anyone else can realistically expect to achieve in their life and work, but also a sense of the metamorphic nature of the daunting task of setting down one's life as a crystal. Wittgenstein's deep worry was that in this sense he was just too far away from being at all adept at rendering his own life meaningful and valuable.

A further unpacking of this metaphor becomes available when we read it in terms of a rewarding parallel with another singular set of remarks on music in *Denkbewegungen* – this time a relatively rare foray on Wittgenstein's part into musicological technicalities, complete with concrete musical examples, which stands out in the diaristic context (MT, p. 76-78, 106). This pertains to his complex remarks concerning some deep differences of compositional approach between Brahms and Bruckner, written a few months apart during the second half of 1931 – remarks which offer a glimpse into a surprising philosophical turn amidst his agonizing over the problem of composition. It is also perhaps worth noting that Wittgenstein actually copied the first remark in this set into MS 153a (1931), with some minor changes (see CV 14).

Brahms is said to have composed with pen and paper (or at the piano), while Bruckner is said to have composed exclusively by hearing within, and imagining the full orchestra playing. For Wittgenstein, this difference “must bear a completely different character, & create a completely different sort of impression” (MT, p. 76). It is noteworthy that Wittgenstein's discussion of these issues shows the palpable influence of Heinrich Schenker on him at that time. Brahms's characteristically extensive motivic developments exemplify an emphasis on the conscious, highly directed stage of the compositional process, which Schenker called “reflection” (*Reflexion*), while Bruckner's way of composing seems to emphasize the stage of “inspiration” during which, in Schenker's view, that process is unconscious and creative. Wittgenstein appears to be suggesting that in Bruckner the process of development is out of phase with the creative process of inspiration. “The composer's writing of the notes should provide some insight about this,” Wittgenstein writes, “And indeed Bruckner's writing was, I believe, clumsy & ponderous” (MT, p. 78-79).

In these passages, Wittgenstein's idiosyncratic use of the term "color" gives an important clue to the actual issue at hand: creativity. Wittgenstein maintains that Brahms' themes are black and white, colorless, while Bruckner's are already colorful. Brahms' orchestral colors are "trail markers", writes Wittgenstein (MT, p. 79). That is, they are not rooted in the themes but rather function externally as a means for marking structural divisions, where the actual compositional process is bound to lose sight of the big picture. Thus, in Wittgenstein's mind, there is a price to pay for the belabored continuity, "the strength of the musical thinking in Brahms" (CV 27), "the overwhelming skill" (CV 29) of Brahms the great melodist – "the last great master of German music", as Schenker often referred to him. The price is a lack of authenticity: Brahms' colors come across as peculiar sound effects, "while one senses Bruckner's sounds as the natural clothing of the bones of these themes" (MT, p. 107).

In a sense, the very idea of creative, free-spirited "hearing within", as opposed to the directing of all one's efforts at crafting seamless continuity by means of developing variation, seems to have alleviated Wittgenstein's *Angst* over the problem of composing a melody. Strikingly, shortly before penning that entry on Brahms and Bruckner, Wittgenstein expressly entertained this very thought when, after admitting that he was in love with his own movement of thought but not with his own style, he added: "Perhaps, just as some like to hear themselves talk, I like to hear myself write?" (MT, p. 101). Wittgenstein the writer, the philosophical expositor, could see himself moving away from the Brahmsian ideal of "motivic through-composition" into the open: into a way of viewing things, rather than a view of things. A new task presented itself: to own a style of philosophical exposition akin to hearing within – that is, to align the process of developing a written text with his very own creative movement of thought.

By August 1938, Wittgenstein was already writing the following in the first version of the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*:

The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination.--And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. (PI viii)

The ideal of cohesiveness, pertaining both to a mode of writing and to a mode of thinking creatively and essentially a matter of what one produces, gave way to a fundamentally aesthetic mode of conversation, which is essentially a matter of collaborative activity: making something surveyable – a way of representing that allows us to see things together and helps locate the reasons for our puzzlement in particular cases.

We may conclude by saying that aesthetics, which for Wittgenstein always bespeaks the human capacity for *musizieren*, provided Wittgenstein not only with a new way of thinking philosophically, but also, and significantly for the present study, with a way of handling the problem of life, particularly as expressed in the context of *Denkbewegungen* – as the problem of composition, of the need to own one's style authentically. Reading through *Denkbewegungen*, we see Wittgenstein attempting to pull away from the agonizing problem of composition as his philosophy becomes an open invitation – sincerely offered, though not without trepidation – to engage in *musizieren*. Instead of self-deprecatingly wishing to set down his life as a crystal, he gradually came to grant himself the latitude required to more fully note and appreciate its many and varied aspects.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> While working on this study, I benefited greatly from stimulating discussion with, and insightful comments from, my colleagues involved in the *Denkbewegungen* research project, during our two conferences on the topic held at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Cracow in 2018. I am indebted to Inbal Guter for penetrating musicological advice concerning some of Wittgenstein's obscure remarks on musical matters, and would also like to thank Eitan Lavon for creating the graphics for this chapter.

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