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Ludwig Wittgenstein as a Conservative Philosopher

J.C. Nyíri

Describing Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) as a conservative may be justified if we look at his social values in the context of his writings. Conservative thinking is an extremely complex phenomenon. The German neo-conservatism of the 1920s and 1930s to which Wittgenstein's later thought was related, differs essentially from the older German conservatism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But there are fundamental ideas which are common to both currents and which characterize all theoretical and political movements that have identified themselves, or have been identified, as "conservative." This "enduring kernel" of conservatism has been summarized in Klaus Epstein's *The Genesis of German Conservatism*:

Conservatives insist that the systematic application of reason to political, economic and religious problems usually leads to disastrous results. . . . Conservatives assert, moreover, that man's cumulative experience with rationalism teaches that its erosion of the traditional bases of civilized conduct—religion, habit, and reverence for established custom—has unintentionally unchained primitive human drives for wealth, power, and pleasure on a scale unparalleled in history. . . . The eternal facts of frustration and suffering, previously accepted as parts of God's plan for maturing and regenerating man, are inexplicable to the impatient hedonism of modernity. . . . [Conservatives] believe that the individual reasoner should humbly subordinate his personal opinions to the collective wisdom of the race as expressed in customs and traditions. The habit of deference to what exists and reverence for what has developed are deemed more valuable human qualities than intellectual

skill at constructing syllogisms.

Conservatives . . . tend to emphasize the importance of variety, whereas their opponents stress general norms; they proclaim the need for compromise in a pluralistic universe, whereas their opponents seek the triumph of "right reason" everywhere and at all times; and while willing to acquiesce (albeit reluctantly) in natural historical changes, they insist that the artificial human manipulation of history can only affect society for the worse.¹

Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner speaks of characteristically conservative intuitions that seem to transcend the specific historical or social circumstances in which they may emerge. According to Kaltenbrunner, conservatism may be defined as

the insight into the conditions of enduring institutions and of non-catastrophic social change, that what is at any given stage institutionalized and transformed remains dependent upon concrete historical circumstances. . . .²

This structure of conservative thought is related to a corresponding anthropology. "One cannot speak of conservatism without speaking of human beings, without considering what it is that belongs to the *essence* of man. . . ." This conservative anthropology first made its appearance as a response to social and cultural problems created by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Karl Mannheim, in his essay "Conservative Thinking" (1927), understood by "conservatism" an integrated body of sentiments: "general attitudes and feelings which go together and which lead to specific modes of thinking." The essential hallmarks of conservative experience and thought are: "adherence to what is immediately present and practically concrete"; the related tendency "to grasp what exists with limitations," and a certain mode of experience which Mannheim describes thus:

If the conservative experience is called upon to form a comprehensive picture of the whole, then this picture will be like that *total view* of a house which is achieved if one regards it comprehensively from all sides, corners and edges, relating all its perspectives to concrete centers of life. The total view of the progressive, in contrast, seeks the *basic outline* by searching for a non-intuitive, rationally analyzable connection.³

Conservative theory characteristically develops in confrontation with other theories, and specifically with those theories which assert the supremacy of intellect. The conservative individual, with his preference for the concrete, for what is given, is usually hostile to theory, and is naturally averse to abstract concepts in general. Conservatism, as Armin Mohler writes, "congeals as theory only at that point where it must defend itself against an opposing theory." Mohler writes of the "strange muteness which marks everything conservative," a muteness which, from the conservative point of view, is experienced as the necessary way of avoiding mere speculative prattle.

The fundamental traits of conservatism here described are present in Wittgenstein's later writings, and even serve as their defining mark; this is especially true of his writings at Cambridge between 1919 and 1931. The *rejection of a rationalist scheme of explanation* is a guiding idea throughout his philosophical investigation. The respect for what exists, for the historically given, is expressed not merely in those programmatic remarks which draw attention to the purely descriptive task of philosophy, but in Wittgenstein's analysis in general. As a matter of principle, he accepted the authority of everyday language. Wittgenstein showed an ability to sense the concrete multiplicity of human phenomena, and illustrated Mannheim's descriptions of the conservative way of experiencing reality. This can be seen clearly in Wittgenstein's observation in *Philosophische Untersuchungen*:

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with

¹Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1966), 13.

²Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, "Der schwierige Konservatismus," in *Rekonstruktion des Konservatismus*, ed. Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner (Freiburg, 1972), 45.

³Karl Mannheim, "Das konservative Denken," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 57 (1927), 98; see also Paul Gottfried "Kunst und Politik bei Burke und Novalis," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, XIX, 2 (1974), 240-251.

additions from various periods; and this is surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.⁴

The picture evoked was already implicit in a remark that Wittgenstein made in 1931: "General explanations of the world and of language do not exist" (110:201f).⁵

Wittgenstein's thought is not only conservative in its style, but also contains the elements of a *conservative anthropology*. His later writings, beginning with his manuscripts of 1929-1931, convey an image of man which stands in obvious contrast to the liberal rationalist outlook. The concept of the human subject acting by the light of his own sovereign reason, reveals itself as absurd in the face of the realization that the meaning of a word is not a mental image, but the use to which the word is put. Thinking, believing, expecting, and hoping are not private mental processes; mathematical insight is grounded in exercise, in drill; every action is ultimately unrelated to any kind of rational reflection.

Wittgenstein's conservative anthropology employs predominantly negative formulation: it moves like all conservative thinking, within a system of concepts that is partly alien to the conservative mind, that has been partly borrowed from the rationalist worldview to which it is opposed. Thus it is entirely explainable that Wittgenstein engages "in a struggle with language" (110:273) and that he must set his hopes on the "inexpressible" (153a:130). By 1930, what is inexpressible seemed more inaccessible to reason than Wittgenstein had believed earlier. The historical surroundings of the younger Wittgenstein had still preserved traces of an established order—which was seen to embody a conservative social theory. The world in which Wittgenstein lived after the War was altogether different: to an Austrian conservative such as himself, it may have appeared to be entirely alien.

Fania Pascal, who taught Wittgenstein Russian at Cambridge in

⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1958) 48. An English translation, *Philosophical Investigations* appears on alternate pages with the German text.

⁵This passage, like others in the text, come from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*, which the author has consulted in the Wittgenstein Archive at the University of Tübingen. Parenthetical page references in the text follow the numbering in the archival collection of Wittgenstein's unpublished comments and reflections.

the mid-1930s, writes that "At a time when intellectual Cambridge was turning Left, he was still an old-time conservative of the late Austro-Hungarian Empire."⁶ Just as Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872), the playwright and contemporary of Beethoven, possessed a "simplicity and purity . . . that he sought in vain to keep alive amid his contemporaries," so Wittgenstein glorified pre-War Austria during the troubled decades after the War.⁷ "The Austrians," he wrote to Bertrand Russell in 1921, "have sunk so miserably low since the War that it is too dismal to talk about."⁸

Wittgenstein's reverence for Grillparzer, who was Austria's greatest playwright, represents one more element of his conservative worldview. It may be explained as an attitude inherited from his maternal family, the Figdors, and especially from his grandmother Fanny Figdor, who had been personally acquainted with the writer. But there was also a spiritual affinity that drew the conservative Wittgenstein to the conservative Grillparzer. Franz Grillparzer was important to Wittgenstein as a defender of traditionalist values.

Paul Engelmann mentions a work by Grillparzer which particularly appealed to Wittgenstein, the play *Ein treuer Diener seines Herrn*, written in 1828. Engelmann stresses the importance for Wittgenstein of the "self-sacrificing loyalty" that the hero of this piece displays. A loyalty of this kind, as Engelmann has made clear, was a trait that marked Wittgenstein's attitude toward life in general.⁹ The theoretical expression of this attitude in his later remarks often recalls lines from Grillparzer's writings. Wittgenstein believed that one must "recognize certain authorities in order to be able to make judgments at all," authorities such as one's *school*, or an inherited picture of the world: these are basic moral principles in relation to which every doubt is hollow. In a similar vein, Grillparzer has the Emperor Rudolf, who dominates the tragedy *Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg* (1848), praise "this whole whose justification is that it exists":

⁶Fania Pascal, "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir," *Encounter* (August, 1973), 23.

⁷J.P. Stern, "Das Werk Grillparzers," *Wort in der Zeit*, IX, 6 (1963), 47.

⁸Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letters to Russell, Keynes, and Moore*, ed. G.H. von Wright (Oxford, 1974), 97.

⁹Paul Engelmann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Briefe und Begegnungen* (Vienna, 1970), 67.

Wie

Test not the foundations; improve them not!
Your human work destroys the spiritual prop,
Doubt begets doubt; and once reverence is broken,
It lives again only as ambition and fear.

In the tragedy *Libussa* which he completed the same year as *Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg*, Grillparzer appeals to:

A single power that unites opinions: namely,
Reverence which does not rest upon proof.

This attitude of reverence before that which cannot and should not be proven, characterized Wittgenstein's criticism of rationalist approaches to ethics. For example, he remarks, "Good is what God commands," and not: God commands the good because it is good. The course of "every explanation 'why' something is good" must at some point come to an end.¹⁰ His attitude here contrasted sharply with the attitude typical among other modern philosophers. One may apply to Wittgenstein a eulogy bestowed on Grillparzer: "He never revolted, but constantly rebelled, and indeed from a conservative inclination, as a believer in a hierarchical order and as a defender of traditional values."¹¹

Between 1929 and 1931 Wittgenstein wrote of Grillparzer in at least three places—all of them reproduced in the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*.¹² The last of these entries is by no means clear, although it does become more intelligible in the context of Wittgenstein's notebook. It is part of a single thought, which is taken up in three successive paragraphs. If one wonders what idea connects these three passages—which concern the qualities and the history of the Jews, the Nordic and the Alpine peoples and the "power of language to make everything the same"—then the answer is the idea of an *original multiplicity*. Philosophical rationalists deny the kind

¹⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein *und der Wiener Kreis. Gespräche aufgezeichnet von Friedrich Waismann*, ed. B.F. McGuinness (Frankfurt, 1967), 115. This work is Volume Three of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Schriften* and will hereafter be cited as *Gespräche*.

¹¹Joseph Roth, "Grillparzer: Ein Porträt" in Joseph Roth, *Werke*, IV (Vienna, 1937), 306.

¹²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen: Ein Auswahl aus dem Nachlass*, ed. G.H. von Wright (Frankfurt, 1977), 43.

of diversity which conservatives affirm. In the passage cited, Grillparzer is just a name; for no reference is made to his thinking.

Yet this is not so in the remaining two passages. One of them is an entry from November 7, 1929:

The [quality of the] good Austrian (Grillparzer, Lenau, Bruckner, Labor) is especially difficult to understand. It is in a certain sense *more subtle* than everything else, and its truth is never based on plausibility.

Among the entries of the next day, we find a passage on philosophy and the confusion of language, which is also included in the *Philosophische Bemerkungen*:

In philosophy it is always a matter of the application of a series of utterly simple basic principles that any child knows; the enormous difficulty comes from applying these in the confusion which our language creates. It is never a question of [looking for] the latest results of experiments with exotic fish or at developments in mathematics. The difficulty of applying simple basic principles shakes our confidence in the principles themselves (107:186).¹³

Wittgenstein alludes to the opposition between the concrete use of language and speculative chatter in quoting an epigram from Grillparzer:

How easily one moves amongst that which is great and distant,
How hard to grasp that which is near and particular:
Instead of learning sensitively, quietly, from the grammarian,
You are set in awe by the man of freedom.¹⁴

Three pages further in his notebook we find an entry that has also been included on page 41 of the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*:

¹³See also Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, ed. Rish Rhees (Oxford, 1964), #33.

¹⁴Franz Grillparzer, *Werke*, ed. August Sauer (Vienna), Section I, Vol. XII, 86. The editorial board of *Continuity* is responsible for this and other translations of Grillparzer that appear in the text.

Language prepares for everyone the same traps; the monstrous network of passable detours. And so we see one person after another traveling the same roads, and we know where he will turn off or continue on without noticing the fork. I ought to put up signs wherever the wrong ways fork off in order to help people over the perilous points.

The entries in this notebook appear to have been set down as they first occurred to Wittgenstein. They are original formulations, and thus the quotation from Grillparzer and the passage cited above were parts of a sequence of ideas. The most important points of contact between Wittgenstein and Grillparzer may have been a shared hostility toward formal philosophy. This point of contact was rooted in their common orientation toward everyday language and in a shared hostility toward theorizing in general.

Grillparzer wrote of his love for his Austrian mother tongue, which he was forced to desert in all of his poetic works for the High German written language. He liked to think that he had discovered the superiority of the Austrian dialect over High German: "Words of the Austrian dialect that show themselves through their occurrence in the Old Language to be Proto-German" is a typical heading in his notebooks.¹⁵ Grillparzer complained that he was not permitted to compose his poetry in a "language which is truly my own."¹⁶ This dilemma is obviously part of the motivation underlying Grillparzer's feeling for the virtue of "silence" and his skeptical attitude about the power of language which he expressed in accordance with his conservative instincts. He disparaged the philosopher as a wordmonger who would "skim through a couple of his mad predecessors and read a few poets in order to be able to write a work in his field."¹⁷ Grillparzer's disparagement of philosophy developed gradually into an absolute rejection of theory as such. But while he was skeptical of theory, he also recognized its value "in the struggle against false theory which has a corrupting effect upon the immediate activities of life." Wittgenstein, too, believed that the "task of philosophy" consists of "repudiating false theory."¹⁸ We are again

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Section II, Vol. X, 274.

¹⁶Gerhart Baumann, *Franz Grillparzer: Sein Werk und das österreichische Wesen* (Freiburg, 1954), 32.

¹⁷Franz Grillparzer, *Werke*, Section II, Vol. XII, 34.

¹⁸Walter Seitter, *Franz Grillparzers Philosophie* (Munich, 1968), 88.

reminded of Wittgenstein when Grillparzer exhorts the philosopher: "Use no words . . . in any other meaning than that which has become already accepted!" To do otherwise "is to develop concepts by subterfuge."¹⁹ The words Grillparzer believed must be properly used were "faith," "holy," "God," "freedom," and "progress." He opposed the liberal interpretation of freedom as a natural right: "It is remarkable that what the new Germany is calling the highest possession of man, the free intellect, was regarded by the ancients as a sign of madness." This remark was made in 1843 in explaining a passage cited from the Roman writer Lucian.²⁰ In *Libussa*, a play about the founding of the city of Prague, he returns to the problem of limits:

He who knows his own limits, is free.

He who imagines himself to be free is the slave of his madness.

Freedom is not the inherent condition of man:

It is in fact ridiculous to speak of natural (inborn) rights. A right is nothing other than an expression of force that I am not allowed to vent without being hindered by others. How can something belong to the nature of man which originates not in him but rather in others?²¹

Or, as Rudolf II puts it in the play *Bruderzwist*:

If you desire a right, as something primordial,
Then return to man's original condition.
But God established order,
And so there was light; and the animal became man.

Contrasting divine order with human freedom, Grillparzer exalted ideals that were different from those of the "new age." "There is nothing," he wrote in 1850,

that one hears more often these days than such expressions as

¹⁹Franz Grillparzer, *Werke*, Section II, Vol. XIII, 280.

²⁰*Ibid.*, Section II, Vol. XI, 68.

²¹*Ibid.*, Section II, Vol. XI, 120.

"the new age," "the new time," which refer to our own time. These expressions from the very beginning have been cock-eyed. For since nature remains the same, as do the foundations of human nature, nothing considered wholly new should escape our suspicion of being false. The proposition that what is old does not return is certainly solid; yet its opposite *nihil novi in mundo*, is just as true: there is nothing new under the sun. Continual change effected on the basis of old foundations is the law of all existence. And this implies a rejection not of what is new, but of impetuous, incoherent, and sudden change.²²

In the poem "Men of Progress" Grillparzer yearns for a return to the "time of self-limitation." In *Libussa* he refers to the progressive man who, by inventing new means to exploit nature, swallows up everything in his path, and ultimately will "be swallowed up by the universe." Seitter, in quoting Grillparzer that "the progress of the world is not so rapid as people are presently wont to imagine," points to lines from Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* that closely parallel Grillparzer's remark.

It would, nevertheless, be wrong to consider Grillparzer simply a typical conservative of the nineteenth century. When speaking of "the conservatism of Grillparzer's anthropology," we should point out that Grillparzer's conservatism was not just a yearning for the restoration of an old, vanishing world. Rather, he was "prophesying a modern world, the ascendancy of which he could feel in himself and which he followed with bitterness. . . . The epoch that was coming to its end he identified with 'Altösterreich'."²³ Grillparzer's conservatism was, therefore, in no sense a blind adherence to the given, but rather a critique of the present in the name of ideals which had no anchoring in reality—neither in the present nor in the irretrievable past that he saw was fading. Grillparzer was seen by Wittgenstein as a *precursor of the new conservatism*, rather than as a follower of the old. Joseph Roth considered Grillparzer a "peculiar example of a conservative revolutionary of a kind known to Austrian

²²*Ibid.*, Section II, Vol. XI, 210.

²³Heinz Politzer, *Franz Grillparzer oder das abgründige Biedermeier* (Vienna, 1972), 326.

history."²⁴ This description is only partly true. Around 1930 not only in Austria but also in Germany there arose a veritable wave of neo-conservatism or revolutionary conservatism. Grillparzer's self-avowed disciple Ludwig Wittgenstein belonged to that wave. Wittgenstein was influenced by a number of neo-conservative forerunners and figures: e.g., Spengler, Dostoevsky, and almost certainly Moeller van den Bruck. The ideas which affected him gained adherents, in some cases, well before 1930, but it was following the economic crisis of 1929 that neo-conservative thinking became most widely disseminated. As Klemens von Klemperer observes in *Germany's New Conservatism*:

[1928] was the last year of the prosperity which had marked German economy since 1924. . . . It was quite clearly an economic and political crisis. . . . The withdrawal of funds from abroad and the effects of the stock market crash in New York in 1929 had direct repercussions upon German industry as well as agriculture. The figures for the unemployed passed the two million margin for the first time in the winter of 1928-1929, and soared up to nearly six million at the end of 1931. . . . These were the days when Moeller van den Bruck was read, reread, reedited in popular editions, and all but canonized, when Spengler was eagerly debated. . . . The neo-conservatives were the intellectuals of the Right who pointed toward the long-range spiritual roots of the crisis.²⁵

The expression "conservative revolution" occurs already in 1921, in a reference by Thomas Mann to Nietzsche and Russian literature.²⁶ Dostoevsky's pronouncement, "We are revolutionaries out of conservatism" was cited by Moeller van den Bruck in his introduction to *The Devils*, in the German collected edition of Dostoevsky's works.²⁷ Dostoevskian ideas, which descended through Moeller, served as Wittgenstein's most basic introduction to the intellectual world of neo-conservatism. Dostoevsky's contrasting of Russia with the

²⁴Joseph Roth, *Werke*, IV, 311.

²⁵Klemens von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism. Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1957), 125.

²⁶Thomas Mann, *Rede und Antwort. Gesammelte Abhandlungen und kleine Aufsätze* (Berlin, 1925), 236.

²⁷F.M. Dostojewski, *Die Dämonen* (Munich, 1921), XVIII.

degenerate civilization of the West is also a recurrent theme in the work of Oswald Spengler, one of the most learned and widely studied neo-conservative thinkers of the postwar years. Western culture, viewed in terms of its own mode of thought, was, according to Spengler, only one culture among many. Since the onset of the modern age, the West had fallen into decay, and it was now Russia, or Russianness (*Russentum*) that represented the "spring" of a new culture as opposed to "winter" of the "Faustian" (Western) nations. The "culture" of the West by now had given way to an expansive but spiritually sterile "civilization."

Wittgenstein, too, at the beginning of January 1931, spoke of our "half-degenerate culture" and praised Russia, whose "passion" still promises to achieve something against which our "chatter" will be powerless.²⁸ Spengler's influence can be clearly seen in several passages printed in the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. One familiar reference to Spengler occurs in Wittgenstein's remarks that "[t]he quest for a clear representation (of reality) is of fundamental significance to us. It characterizes our way of conceptualizing the manner in which we see things."²⁹

Another German conservative author to whom Wittgenstein refers is the dramatist and essayist Paul Ernst. "If my book is ever published," Wittgenstein writes, "then my foreword should discuss the foreword by Paul Ernst to Grimm's *Fairy Tales* . . ." (110:184). The "foreword" by Ernst to which Wittgenstein is here referring is actually an epilogue printed in the third volume of his edition of the *Grimmsche Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. This epilogue is not the only piece by Ernst that Wittgenstein had read: there is at least one remark, written in 1931, that mentions Ernst but does not refer to the same piece.

Ernst's conservative attitude is especially evident in his essay of 1926/1927, "Was nun?" "Men today," he observes, "have been freed from every form-creating constraint, and have been left completely on their own. And it is clear that nothing can come of this except for senseless barbarism." Moreover, when "men live without organic ties, when society has been almost completely dissolved . . . then God can no longer manifest Himself in society. In good times He manifests Himself in the state, in the church, in discipline and in

²⁸*Gespräche*, 142.

²⁹*Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 241.

customs, but now He can only manifest Himself in the individual."³⁰

In 1930 Wittgenstein, in preparing the drafts of possible forewords to the text of *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, laments that where the course of "European and American civilization" tears everything along with it, the "value of the individual" is no longer capable of expressing itself in social institutions and in social actions "as it does in the age of great culture":

Culture is like a great organization, that assigns to everyone who belongs to it a place where he can work in the spirit of the whole and by which his strength can be properly measured. In times of non-culture energies fritter away and the strength of the individual is worn down by opposing forces and friction.³¹

There are obvious affinities between the neo-conservative tendencies in interwar Germany and Austria and Wittgenstein's thoughts between 1929 and 1931. To what extent, however, was the history of German neo-conservatism in the 1920s and 1930s a part of Wittgenstein's own personal fate? An answer to this question may be ventured in one sentence: Wittgenstein must have been intensely interested in the outcome of at least one particular discussion within neo-conservatism, that of the *German-Jewish problem*. This discussion, which affected Wittgenstein personally, was of considerable interest to neo-conservatives as a group.

S.M. Bolkosky, in his book *The Distorted Image*, estimates that the number of anti-Semitic books published in Germany between 1929 and 1932 was over nine hundred. He puts the number of German-Jewish counter-publications at double this number.³² Among the writings with special significance was the issue on "The Jewish Question" that the periodical *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* put out in September 1930, with contributions from both Jewish and anti-Semitic authors. One essay, by the "conservative revolutionary" Ernst Jünger, bearing the title "On Nationalism and the Jewish Question," is particularly relevant for our study. Jünger pokes fun at "that strange flowering of cultivated conservative prose

³⁰Paul Ernst, "Was nun?" has been reprinted in *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács*, ed. K.A. Kutzbach (Emsdetten, 1974), 198.

³¹*Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 20.

³²S.M. Bolkosky, *The Distorted Image. German Jewish Perceptions of Germans and Germany, 1918-1935* (New York, 1975), 49.

that nowadays frequently flows from Jewish pens." Bitter declamations in defense of culture, witty and ironic attacks on the bustle of civilization, an aristocratic snobbism, "the farce [of becoming a] Catholic. . . ." The Jew, according to Jünger, "certainly cannot complain about the attention given to him by those powers who believe themselves to be the representatives of our present-day conservative thinking." Nonetheless, the Jew is "not the father, but the son of liberalism. In absolutely every aspect of German life, both good and bad, Jews play no creative role."³³

Already in the nineteenth century, Richard Wagner considered Jewishness (*Judentum*) the "bad conscience of our modern civilization." According to Wagner:

The Jew in general speaks the modern European languages only as an acquired one. This does not allow him to express himself properly and independently, in accordance with his essence. A language, its expression and its development, is not the work of individuals but of a historical community. . . . In [our] language and art Jews only repeat what others say. They affect the art of others, but are unable to compose or create authentic works of art.³⁴

Later Otto Weininger, himself a Jew, spoke of his group's "necessary lack of genius" or "of any truly fixed and original conviction." Gerschom Scholem, in discussing the emancipation of German Jews, complained of their readiness to disown their Jewish nationality and to identify themselves resolutely with German history:

Out of the objects of enlightened tolerance there arose not seldomly full-blown prophets who were on the point of speaking out in the name of Germany herself. The attentive reader of the German reactions to this process, with all its acrobatics, readily perceives a tone of astonishment and of—friendly or nasty—irony pervading its expressions The liberals had hoped for a resolute and progressive self-dissolution of the Jews. The conservatives, with their consciousness of history,

³³Ernst Jünger, "Über Nationalismus und Judenfrage," *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* 27 (Sept. 1930), 843.

³⁴Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen in zehn Bänden*, ed. W. Golther (Berlin, n.d.), V, 85.

were forced to adopt a more reserved attitude They began to hold against the Jews that they are all too easily able to sacrifice their own consciousness. This willingness of Jews to assimilate was welcomed—indeed demanded—even while it was being offered as an argument for the Jewish lack of substance.³⁵

This charge of a Jewish lack of substance was raised often among German Jews in the early twentieth century. As George L. Mosse wrote in his *Germans and Jews*:

The turn of the century was marked by a new and deep-seated wave of anti-Semitism and Jewish exclusion, a reflection of the increased impetus of German Volkish thought. The stereotype of the Jew was presented as the antithesis of that genuineness for which the Germans longed. Jews were described as intellectual, and therefore artificial. They lacked roots, and thus rejected nature. They were urban people, possessed of special aptitudes for expanding ever more the hated capitalist society. Many Jews felt that this was a just image, and many of the young people, especially, thought they saw it exemplified by their parents. . . . As early as 1901, speakers at a Berlin Zionist meeting called upon Jews to "cut loose from Liberalism." The liberal political parties of the bourgeoisie for which the masses of German Jews had cast and were casting their votes must be repudiated. The rationalism and materialism for which they stood must be rejected.³⁶

It was of course not only in Germany but also in Austria and other German-speaking regions that Zionism had acquired volkish, or populist, traits. One finds such traits in Herzl, Buber, and even Kafka. German Jewish assimilationists also exhibited volkish neo-conservative tendencies, as Bolkosky points out:

To prove themselves deserving of civil rights and social equality German Jews would have to prove themselves German.

³⁵See Gerschom Scholem's remarks in *Deutsche und Juden*, ed. Nahum Goldmann (Frankfurt, 1967), 27.

³⁶George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the Search for a 'Third Force' in Pre-Nazi Germany* (London, 1971), 81.

The tragic dilemma of German Jews was that to achieve these German rewards they had to identify with those elite, conservative groups who denied that liberal ideals of social equality, civil rights, and emancipation were German.³⁷

The question that arose repeatedly among neo-conservatives concerned the connection between bourgeois-liberal progress—"civilization"—and Jewishness. This question obviously concerned Spengler who noted that "At the moment when the civilized ways of the European-American world-cities shall have arrived at their full maturity, the destiny of Jewry—at least of the Jewry in our midst (that of Russia is another problem)—will be achieved." The city-dweller whom Spengler depicted was

a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitic city-dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, irreligious, clever, unfruitful, deeply contemptuous of the peasantry (and especially of its highest form, the landed aristocrat), and thus [representing] a stride towards the unorganic, towards the end. This type substitutes a cold sense of facts for reverence for inherited tradition, for whatever is organic.³⁸

Others repeatedly affirmed that an irreverence for tradition did not belong to the *essence* of Jewishness. Rudolf Kaulla, for example, in his work, *Der Liberalismus und die deutschen Juden: Das Judentum als konservatives Element*, wrote that

Form signifies tradition, the preservation of that which obtains. Form belongs to what one calls the "culture" of a people, formlessness is characteristic of those who do not take this culture seriously. Form has an integrating function, formlessness dissolves. A vivid illustration of the dangers of "modernism" are the Jewish religion and its fate . . . Judaism has been captured by the Enlightenment, which has modernized some of its old forms, while putting others aside.³⁹

³⁷S.M. Bolkosky, *The Distorted Image*, II.

³⁸Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich, 1918-1922), I, 45.

³⁹Rudolf Kaulla, *Der Liberalismus und die deutschen Juden. Das Judentum als konservatives Element*. (Leipzig, 1928), 37.

Wittgenstein dealt often with the problem of the Jewish mind in the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. This fact was stressed by G.H. von Wright in his lecture "Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times," which was presented simultaneously with the publication of the *Bemerkungen*, and which may be seen as an introduction to them. I wish here to enlarge upon von Wright's discussion through an analysis of material from the *Vermischte Bemerkungen* written between 1929 and 1931. The first such passage, which appears on page 72 of Notebook 107, reads:

The tragedy consists of the fact that the tree does not bend, but breaks. Tragedy is non-Jewish. Mendelssohn is probably the most untragic of all composers.⁴⁰

That Wittgenstein is here ascribing to himself the traits that he sees in Mendelssohn is clear, since he adds, immediately after the passage concerning Mendelssohn, another comment in which he mentions his own untragic "ideal." A few manuscript pages later he writes:

Mendelssohn is like a man who is happy only when everything is happy or good when everyone around him is good, and in any case not like a tree which stands fast, as it stands, whatever may take place around it. I myself am similar in this way and am inclined to be so. (107:120).⁴¹

Wittgenstein mentions Mendelssohn in several other places: for example, on page 98 of Notebook 107, he speaks of a certain "Englishness about him." Two years later, in September 1931, he writes: "Mendelssohn's music, where it is perfect, is musical arabesque. This is why we have a sense of embarrassment at his very lack of rigor."⁴² Although it may not be immediately clear from the citations themselves, both of these remarks refer to the Jewishness in Mendelssohn. Does not Weininger, after all, whom Wittgenstein admired, speak of the "similarity that Wagner noted between the Englishman and the Jew?"⁴³ Wagner, in his essay "On Jewishness in

⁴⁰This entry can also be found in *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 12.

⁴¹See also *Vermischte Bemerkungen* 13.

⁴²*Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 37.

⁴³Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (Vienna, 1923), 422.

Music," wrote that Mendelssohn excited him only

when he offered to our phantasy, which seeks to be more or less entertained, nothing other than the displaying, laying out, and interlacing, of the smoothest and most refined and artistically polished figures, as in the ever-changing stimuli of color and shapes of the kaleidoscope, but never where these figures are intended to take the form of deeper and more rigorous sensations of the human heart.⁴⁴

In Mendelssohn's case, high seriousness led merely to "extravagant and whimsical shadow-images."

Wittgenstein's remark on Mendelssohn precedes this revealing passage in the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*:

The Jew is measured in Western civilization by a yardstick that does not apply to him. That Greek thinkers were not philosophers nor scientists in the Western sense; that the Olympic participants were not athletes is clear to many people. But the same is true of Jews. And since the words of our language serve absolutely as our yardstick, we are always unjust to them. And so they are sometimes overrated and at other times disparaged. Spengler is correct not to list Weininger among Western philosophers (111:195).⁴⁵

The idea that Jews are to be measured not by Western but by Oriental standards had in fact become an established argument against their total emancipation and assimilation. The poet and popular novelist J.P. Hebel, who was also one of Wittgenstein's favorite authors, explained that there was a "distinguishing mark" "which the climate of the land where the Bible was written has impressed upon its children" and which has by no means disappeared. Jews have remained entirely true to the "influence of their homeland" and have "more character and strength," Hebel believed, than the people of the West.⁴⁶ Wittgenstein praised Hebel for observing that "a great part of our lives . . . is a—pleasant or unpleasant—stumbling about through words and that our wars are mostly . . .

⁴⁴Wagner, *N*, 79.

⁴⁵See also *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 37.

⁴⁶J.P. Hebel, *Werke* (Karlsruhe, 1847), III, 214.

wars of words."⁴⁷ Hebel may also have captured Wittgenstein's interest because of his positive comments on Jewish character.

Wittgenstein's reference to Spengler alludes to a passage in the *Decline of the West* in which Spengler speaks of three Jewish saints of the last centuries—"who can be recognized as such only through the color-wash of Western thought-forms."⁴⁸ He refers, in particular, to Otto Weininger:

whose moral dualism is a purely Magian conception and whose death in a spiritual struggle of essentially Magian experience is one of the noblest spectacles ever presented by late religiosity. This is something which Russians may be able to experience, but which neither the Classical nor Faustian soul is capable of.⁴⁹

The concept of a "Jewish saint" crops up in Weininger's own work, albeit in a negative sense: "In the Jew, almost as much as in the Woman, good and evil are not differentiated from each other; there is certainly no Jewish murderer, but neither is there a Jewish saint."⁵⁰ Wittgenstein, who follows Weininger on this point, observes that "There is only Jewish 'genius' in a saint but the greatest Jewish thinker is a mere talent (myself, for example)."⁵¹ These sentences occur at the beginning of that remarkably instructive paragraph in which Wittgenstein speaks of his "merely reproductive" thinking and of "Jewish reproductivity" in general, before providing a list of thinkers who had influenced him. On page 26 of the Notebooks there begins—in reference to the "furtiveness and secretiveness of the Jews"—that sequence of three remarks which were discussed above, as an expression of Wittgenstein's conservative style of thinking.

Wittgenstein's interest in Jewish mind and Jewish character may have been personally motivated. Not only did he think a great deal about his own Jewish ancestry,* but he also believed that he saw in

⁴⁷Quoted in Martin Heidegger, *Hebel der Hausfreund* (Pfullingen, 1977), 18.

⁴⁸Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, II, 395.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, II, 396.

⁵⁰Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter*, 411.

⁵¹*Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 43.

*Although Wittgenstein was raised a Catholic, both of his parents were of Jewish extraction.

himself what were characteristically Jewish traits. The existential problem caused by his Jewishness can be gauged, for example, by the dream which he describes on December 1, 1929. The central character in this dream is an evil man who had disowned his Jewish descent. His name is given by Wittgenstein alternatively as "*Vert-sagt*" and "*Vert-sag*," but is written also as "*Verzagt*" and interpreted by Wittgenstein as "*verzagt*" (disheartened). There is, however, a more obvious interpretation, which Wittgenstein fails to give: that he (who is not of course *versagt*: betrothed) is worried by the fact that as a human being and as a philosopher he has *versagt* (failed), and that it is *versagt* (denied) to him, as a Jew, that he should create a profound work. After this dream, almost a year went by before the theme of Jewishness resurfaced in Wittgenstein's writings. In the meantime he had made decisive theoretical advances and had completed a book which, because it had been written by a partial Jew, did not fit into "the stream of European civilization" (107:206).⁵²

Wittgenstein's draft foreword, from which these words have been extracted, dates from November 6, 1930. One day earlier Wittgenstein had mentioned in his notebooks certain passages from Renan's *History of the People of Israel* which have been published in the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. When Wittgenstein speaks here of primitive man and primitive peoples, he is in fact referring to the ancient Jewish people. If he had wanted to concern himself simply with primitive peoples and customs, he would certainly not have chosen Renan as his guide. His driving motive seems to have been personal, which becomes clear from the second passage: "When Renan speaks of the *bon sens précoce* of the Semitic race (an idea that had occurred to me already a long time ago), what he has in mind is the unpoetical, the quality of turning directly toward what is concrete: what characterizes my own philosophy" (109:202). However much Wittgenstein may have disagreed with some of Renan's conclusions, he must have found the perspective from which Renan viewed the Jewish problem to be profoundly interesting. In the foreword to his book, Renan had characterized "the founders of Christianity" as

⁵²*Ibid.*, 21.

⁵³Quotations from this work are translated from the German edition which Wittgenstein consulted: Ernst Renan, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, trans. E. Schaelsky (Berlin, 1894), I, 4.

"direct descendants of the prophets" and had acknowledged the opposition between Christianity and the "liberal rationalism of the Greeks": "Christianity will leave behind an ineradicable trace; liberalism will no longer rule the world alone."⁵³ "The history of the Jews and of Christianity," he goes on,

has been the joy of a full eighteen centuries, and even though half-conquered by Greek rationalism they still possess an astonishing power for ethical betterment. The Bible in its different forms remains, in spite of everything, the great book, the comforter of mankind. It is not impossible that the world, in becoming exhausted by the repeated declarations of the bankruptcy of liberalism will once again become Judaeo-Christian. . . .⁵⁴

On December 12, 1930 the problem of Jewishness came up again when Wittgenstein quoted a passage from Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (110:5).⁵⁵ This work belongs to the same creative period in Lessing's life as *Nathan der Weise*, a play which treats the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in terms of natural interdependence. Wittgenstein had written to Engelmann on October 11, 1920, "Yesterday I was reading *Nathan der Weise*: I find it superb." One characteristic passage from the play runs somewhat as follows:

Monk: Nathan! Nathan! Thou art a Christian! —By God, thou art a Christian! —A better Christian there never was!
Nathan: Veritably! For what in thine eyes doth make me a Christian, maketh thee in mine eyes a Jew!

Wittgenstein saw Jews as belonging to Western civilization, but also standing outside it. He again underscores the abstractness of Jewish thinking in commenting on *Orpheus*, a play done by his friend Paul Engelmann. He associates Engelmann's work with a "stylized" and "abstract" theater of the future, "which perhaps Jews would be the only ones to attend" (153a:129).⁵⁶

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, I, 6.

⁵⁵See also *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 5.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

The theme of Jewishness dominated Wittgenstein's thinking, especially around 1930, and was bound up with ideas about the role of common sense and the inexpressible which permeate his later writings. Most of his references to Jews are impressionistic and have no special claims to validity: for example, his assertion that "the Jew is a wasteland, but beneath the thin layer of rock, there lie the fiery masses of the spirit" (153a:161). One cannot find the incorporation into his work of a specific current of thought that might be considered traditionally Jewish. Yet Wittgenstein's interest in Jewishness is not merely a psychological or biographical fact. His observations included neo-conservative views that were *common* to Catholic and Jewish cultures, but alien to Protestantism. The Catholic author Carl Maria Kaufmann, in his essay "Katholizismus und Judentum," observed: "Whereas from the point of view of dogma, a deep gulf divides the Jewish from the Catholic religion and perhaps still more from Protestantism, there are nevertheless many points of contact between Catholics and Jews."⁵⁷ The same collection in which Kaufmann's essay appeared contained an article by Leo Baeck that presented Judaism as:

a religion of commandment and of the deed . . . The word, even the word of confession, and the expression of faith in general, has less weight within it than does action.

According to Baeck:

God is only an attempt to make the inexpressible capable of expression. This ultimate futility is sensed with such an intensity that one covers over with silence the ancient word for the eternal God. For him who seeks to find his way on this earth, it is only the deed that fulfills God's command, that becomes a manifestation of Him.

Jewish religion is a "religiosity of the deed," and "wherever a Jewish community has preserved the old forms of life," there exist

manifold customs and practices, many quite minute; one who perceives them from the outside may suppose that these

⁵⁷See *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, 27 (September, 1930), 835.

customs conceal and strangle religion, but he who possesses and practices them discovers that they protect religion and that they consecrate everyday life.⁵⁸

The Catholic Church also considers faith to be spiritually insufficient. That which is good must express itself as continuing activity, through the observance of religious and ethical prescriptions.

Wittgenstein's conservative attitude reflected the power of his Catholic upbringing and his awareness of his Jewish ancestry. It expressed itself in his Austrian traditionalist suspicion of Protestant subjectivity. In expressing this feeling, Wittgenstein followed the Austrian traditionalist Grillparzer, who believed that,

[B]y making faith absolute, Protestantism cuts itself off from the will and action of the whole man. Grillparzer believed that [Protestantism] "destroyed Christianity as a religion from the ground up irretrievably." He attributed the "destructive power within Protestantism" to its "groundlessness" and considered Catholicism "the only internally cohesive Christian confession."⁵⁹

This view expressed by Grillparzer found eloquent and repeated support in Wittgenstein's *Vermischte Bemerkungen*.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 830.

⁵⁹Walter Seitter, *Franz Grillparzers Philosophie*, 175.