

Wittgenstein

and his Times

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© Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited 1982

First published 1982

Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, England

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wittgenstein and his times.

1. Wittgenstein, Ludwig

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192 B3376.W564

ISBN 0-631-11161-1

Printed in Great Britain
at The Blackwell Press Limited,
Guildford, London, Oxford, Worcester.

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*Wittgenstein's Later Work in relation to Conservatism**

J. C. Nyíri

The well-known fact that in Wittgenstein's later philosophy there is a tendency to emphasize the genetic, or historical, aspect of individual mental occurrences, and to regard these as manifestations of social customs and institutions, would not, in itself, justify the attempt to establish a relationship between this philosophy, and certain currents of conservatism. Yet the specific tone of Wittgenstein's analyses, the content of many of his remarks and reflections, and the historical circumstances in which this philosophy came into being definitely invite an interpretation in the light of which there indeed emerge family resemblances between Wittgenstein on the one hand and some important representatives of conservatism on the other. Conservative ideas do not, of course, form a unified and coherent whole; an interpretation along the lines here indicated will present only rough outlines, not a sharp picture – especially

* The present paper is an attempt to elaborate historically some theses which were put forward in my paper "Wittgenstein's New Traditionalism" in *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G. H. von Wright* (*Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 28, nos. 1-2, pp. 501-512), and in my paper read at the 2nd International Wittgenstein Symposium, 1977, Kirchberg am Wechsel (see *Wittgenstein and His Impact on Contemporary Thought*, Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Vienna, 1978, pp. 36-41). I am greatly indebted to Professor G. H. von Wright for his constant help and encouragement, to Dr Lars Heerberg (Helsinki) for sympathetic criticism and to Dr Barry Smith (Manchester) for valuable bibliographical references.

since Wittgenstein's position in respect to the body of conservative literature cannot be satisfactorily determined in the absence of a thorough analysis of his unpublished manuscripts.¹ Still, the interpretation here presented, even if merely an approximation, seems to me to constitute a necessary step towards a more complete picture of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wittgenstein's later philosophy emerged at a time when conservatism – in the form of neo-conservatism – was one of the dominant spiritual currents in Germany and Austria; and Wittgenstein received decisive impulses both from authors who deeply influenced this current and from representatives of the new conservatism itself. Moreover, Wittgenstein dealt with problems which were fundamental problems also of contemporary neo-conservatism – albeit in a manner which was, of course, far deeper and more rigorous than that of the leading neo-conservatives of his day – and he succeeded further in solving these problems, in so far as they were theoretically solvable at all. Any presentation of Wittgenstein's later work that does not allow for these historical and systematic parallels must remain essentially incomplete.

In presenting the later Wittgenstein as belonging to a constellation of conservative thinkers, I shall partly recall influences that are well known but are generally neither sufficiently recognized nor properly interpreted; partly refer to influences and parallels which have hitherto apparently gone unnoticed; and partly point to certain parallels which are, presumably, independent of any direct influence – but which precisely for this reason have, perhaps, an even greater significance. Let me first, however, draw attention to certain problems pertaining to the concept and to the history of conservatism.

The term 'conservative' is used in at least three types of context. People speak of a conservative attitude or mentality, of conservative theory, and of conservative politics. Conservative attitude, theory, and politics are of course by no means independent of each other. Conservative theory comes into being, in

¹ The appendix of Garth Hallett's *A Companion to Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations"* (Cornell University Press, 1977), for example, lists many unpublished manuscript passages where representatives of conservatism are mentioned.

certain social and historical circumstances, as an abstract self-perception of conservative mentality, presenting the latter as the only acceptable or indeed normal one. Conservative theory can take the form of anthropology, social theory, or the theory of history; in its content it can embody very different tendencies, depending on what remains – if anything at all – that is regarded as worth conserving, or even re-establishing. Conservative politics, finally, are upheld by conservative mentality, and directed by conservative theory – though this latter relationship is already a rather difficult one, since conservative mentality and thus also conservative politics have a distaste for any theory. A conservative political creed as such does not exist, and conservative politics change with the times; many of today's conservative aims correspond to liberal ideas of yesterday.

Let us consider more closely the essence of conservative mentality, the source of everything conservative. As recently formulated by Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, the man of conservative character is

devoted to the familiar and mistrustful of all novelties; he holds on to that which obtains, to that which has been tried and tested; he has a decisive preference for the experiences of life as opposed to the constructions of the intellect, and affirms instinctively the durable, the constant, the traditional; he is sceptical of every radicalism, of utopias, and of promises in regard to the future; he always begins with that which is concrete, and would rather underestimate than overestimate his fellow men. . . .²

According to Michael Oakeshott, the well-known English conservative theorist, to be conservative means to have "a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be". To be conservative means to be "equal to one's own fortune, to live at the level of one's own

² Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner "Der schwierige Konservatismus", in G.-K. Kaltenbrunner (editor) *Rekonstruktion des Konservatismus* (Freiburg i.B., 1972), p. 35.

means, to be content with the want of greater perfection which belongs alike to oneself and one's circumstances".³ Yet Oakeshott also observes that in an "arid", unpleasant world, "if the present is remarkably unsettled", the conservative attitude will transform itself into "a search for a firmer foothold", becoming "a recourse to and an exploration of the past".⁴ This is the birth of conservatism as a theory out of conservatism as an attitude. As Karl Mannheim formulated it:

The simple habit of living more or less unconsciously, as though the old ways of life were still appropriate, gradually gives way to a deliberate effort to maintain them under the new conditions, and they are raised to the level of conscious reflection, of deliberate "recollection". Conservative thought thus saves itself, so to speak, by raising to the level of reflection and conscious manipulation those forms of experience which can no longer be had in an authentic way.⁵

This very transformation of forms of experience into theory occurs with the emergence of the conservative reaction against the French Revolution and French rationalism; but also with the emergence of Austrian and German neo-conservatism during and after World War I. It is a characteristic trait of conservative theory that it only emerges in a battle against other theories, theories which typically preach the power of theory, the power of the mind. Conservative theory, preferring the given and the concrete, is always hostile towards any theory as such. Conservatism, as Armin Mohler writes, "congeals into a theory only when a point is reached where it must defend itself against some opposing theory".⁶ The most radical expression of the conservative hostility against theory is the distaste for all abstract concepts: the conservative preference for silence. Mohler writes of the "peculiar dumbness with which everything conservative is stamped".⁷ This silence seems to become ever more compelling as the distance grows between contemporary reality and the

3 M. Oakeshott *Rationalism in Politics* (London, 1962), pp. 168f.

4 *ibid.*, p. 169.

5 Karl Mannheim "Conservative Thought", in P. Kecskemeti (editor) *Essays in Sociology and Social Psychology* (London, 1953), p. 115.

6 Armin Mohler *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932* (Stuttgart, 1950), p. 163.

7 *ibid.*, p. 162.

order of the past – the order that is to be re-established. But, at the same time, the need to possess a guiding theory becomes ever more compelling. The so-called old conservatism of the nineteenth-century spoke simply of an historically developed or indeed divine order which was to be preserved or re-erected. But the German and Austrian neo-conservatives of the twenties and early thirties were no longer acquainted with any traditions that would have been worth preserving; they wanted change, without however knowing – or being able to know – in what direction this change should occur. As K. von Klemperer puts it, “the new conservatism was clearly heading into a dilemma between conserving and destroying, between a positive attitude toward our civilization and nihilism”.⁸ The old conservatism had, philosophically speaking, an ontology as its basis; neo-conservatism, however, is a conservatism from which history has taken away the possibility of an ontology.

There can be no doubt that both in his youth and in his later years conservative attitudes were strongly characteristic of Wittgenstein. It was not by chance that, in his student days, he so very much disliked the lack of reverence displayed by his friends at Cambridge.⁹ Paul Engelmann speaks of his “loyalty towards all legitimate authority, whether religious or social”, an attitude “towards all *genuine* authority [which] was so much second nature with him that revolutionary convictions of whatever kind appeared to him throughout his life simply as ‘immoral’”.¹⁰ The young Wittgenstein, writes Engelmann, “suffered acutely under the discrepancy between the world as it is and as it ought to be according to his light, but . . . tended also to seek the source of that discrepancy within, rather than outside, himself”. And, he goes on, “the person who consistently believes that the reason for the discrepancy lies in himself alone must reject the belief that changes in the external facts may be necessary and called for”.¹¹ Wittgenstein’s conservative attitude is strikingly expressed in his dislike for any language that has not “grown organically”;¹² or in his often

9 “We had no respect”, writes J. M. Keynes in his recollections, “My Early Beliefs”, “for traditional wisdom or the restraints of custom. We lacked reverence, as [D. H.] Lawrence observed and as Ludwig [Wittgenstein] with justice also used to say – for everything and everyone.” (J. M. Keynes *Two Memoirs* (London, 1949), p. 99.)

10 Paul Engelmann *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* (Oxford, 1967), p. 121.

- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 74, 79. In 1946 Wittgenstein still manifested the same mentality:
"If life becomes hard to bear we think of a change in our circumstances.
But the most important and effective change, a change in our own attitude, hardly even occurs to us, and the resolution to take such a step is very difficult for us." (*Culture and Value*, p. 53.)
- 12 "I sometimes had the impression", writes Rudolf Carnap in his intellectual autobiography, "that the deliberately rational and unemotional attitude of the scientist and likewise any ideas which had the flavor of 'enlightenment' were repugnant to Wittgenstein. At our very first meeting with Wittgenstein, [in 1927] Schlick unfortunately mentioned that I was interested in the problem of an international language like Esperanto. As I had expected, Wittgenstein was definitely opposed to this idea. But I was surprised by the vehemence of his emotions. A language which had not 'grown organically' seemed to him not only useless but despicable." (Carnap's recollections are reprinted in K. T. Fann (editor) *Wittgenstein: The Man and his Philosophy* (New York, 1967), p. 35.) As late as 1946 Wittgenstein still speaks of a "feeling of disgust" that he experiences when thinking of Esperanto (*Culture and Value*, p. 52).

voiced disparaging judgement of modern art, especially architecture.¹³

It seems to me that already in the *Tractatus* this attitude had become crystallized into a kind of conservative theory. Yet the conservatism of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is more direct, more pronounced. Its emergence was fostered, first and foremost, by his experiences of the post-war period — experiences of a world-order that had vanished and of deepest homelessness. What Franz Theodor Csokor said of Musil, namely that by the year 1918 he had actually lost his homeland and that he had thereafter sought to re-erect it in his work,¹⁴ applies equally to Wittgenstein. And although it was only after 1930 that Wittgenstein's later philosophy came into being, already in the twenties some of its fundamental features had emerged. A conservative author who at this time obviously had a profound influence on Wittgenstein was the Russian writer F. M. Dostoevsky.

Wittgenstein's admiration for Dostoevsky is well known. One finds important references to it in the writings of Russell,¹⁵ Engelmann,¹⁶ von Wright,¹⁷ Norman Malcolm,¹⁸ and also in Fania Pascal's recollections.¹⁹ M. O'C. Drury quotes Wittgenstein as saying that when he was a village schoolmaster in Lower Austria during the first half of the twenties, he read the *Brothers Karamazov* over and over again, even reading it out loud to the village priest.²⁰ Some of the references emphasize that Wittgenstein was particularly fascinated by the figure of the Elder Zossima. The orthodox institution of the Elders is, according to Dostoevsky's description, a most strictly authoritarian one. When you select an Elder, a religious-spiritual guide for yourself, "you renounce your own will and yield it to him in complete submission, complete self-abnegation. . . . This terrible school of abnegation is undertaken . . . in order, after a life of obedience, to attain perfect freedom" — to escape the burden of spiritual unrestraint.²¹

The idea that true freedom — even that of the spirit — cannot

13 e.g. *Culture and Value*, pp. 6, 79.

14 Franz Theodor Csokor "Gedenkrede zu Robert Musils 80. Geburtstag", in Karl Dinklage (editor) *Robert Musil: Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (Zürich, 1960), p. 354.

15 In his letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell (20 Dec. 1919). See Ludwig Wittgenstein *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore* (Oxford, 1974), p. 82.

16 *ibid.*, p. 27; see also the corresponding remark of the editor *ibid.*

17 G. H. von Wright "Biographical Sketch", in Norman Malcolm *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London, 1958), p. 21.

18 *ibid.*, p. 52. Wittgenstein, Malcolm tells us, "had read *The Brothers Karamazov* an extraordinary number of times; but he once said that *The House of the Dead* was Dostoevsky's greatest work."

19 Fania Pascal "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir", *Encounter* (August 1973) p. 27. Mrs Pascal was Wittgenstein's Russian teacher at Cambridge in the mid-thirties.

20 M. O'C. Drury "Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein", in *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G. H. von Wright (Acta Philosophica Fennica, 28)*, p. 31.

21 I quote from the Munich edition of 1920 vol. 1, p. 43.

but consist in a kind of restraint, is of course one of the basic ideas of conservatism. It influences Wittgenstein's later philosophy in many ways, but can already be discerned in the (originally unprinted) introduction to the booklet *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen*, published in 1926. The aim of this dictionary was "to enable students to inform themselves about the spelling of a word" – for only a dictionary, as Wittgenstein stressed, "makes it possible to hold the student completely responsible for the spelling of what he has written": only through fixed rules can the "orthographic conscience" be awakened.²² That one must "recognize certain authorities in order to make judgements at all", or that one cannot even err – that is, that one loses altogether the capacity for rational thought – if one does not *judge in conformity*²³ with some group or other: such views, worked out in detail in his later philosophy, were obviously already characteristic of the Wittgenstein of the twenties.

It would be interesting to know which edition of the *Brothers Karamazov* Wittgenstein possessed in the twenties. I assume that it was the edition published by Piper Verlag, in the series Dostoevsky's *Sämtliche Werke*. These were edited by Moeller van den Bruck, a leading German neo-conservative thinker, and co-edited by Dmitri Mereschkowski, who wrote the introduction to the *Brothers Karamazov*. The principal concern of Dostoevsky (and of Tolstoy), which is identical with "the principal concern of the whole of Christianity", is, Mereschkowski here suggests, a concern with the "end of the world". "I feel the danger threatening me", remarks Mereschkowski, "of making ridiculous that which is most holy, since for the children of this century, the men of constant mediocrity, of endless 'progress', and 'development' in the world, there is nothing more ridiculous, more stupid, more improbable, more offensive" – than the thought of the end of the world.²⁴ To Wittgenstein, however, this thought did not seem at all ridiculous;²⁵ and his distaste for modes of thinking "characterized by the word

22 Ludwig Wittgenstein *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen*. Edited with an introduction by Adolf Hübner-Werner and Elisabeth Leinfellner (Vienna, 1977), pp. xxv, xxvii.

23 Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty*, §493; cf. *ibid.*, §156.

24 *Die Brüder Karamasoff* (Munich, 1920), vol. 1, p. xiv.

25 "The notion of a last judgement", writes Engelmann, "was of profound concern to him. 'When we meet again at the last judgement' was a recurrent phrase with him, which he used in many a conversation at a particularly momentous point. He would pronounce the words with an indescribably inward-gazing look in his eyes, his head bowed, the picture of a man stirred to his depths." (*Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 77f.)

'progress'""²⁶ is later unequivocally expressed in drafts for a foreword to a book he planned in 1930.²⁷

The neo-conservative Dostoevsky interpretation certainly also played a role in connection with Wittgenstein's well-known yearning for Russia.²⁸ "What we need in Germany is Russia's unqualified spirituality. We need this as a counterweight against a West to whose influences we have been exposed as Russia was exposed; a West that has brought us to this state in which we now find ourselves." Thus run the opening sentences of Moeller van den Bruck's introduction to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in the edition of 1922. The idea that German conservatism, in its transvaluation of all Western values, cannot but turn to the spiritual reserves of Russianism is an idea which constantly recurs in Moeller's writings;²⁹ he himself made a journey to Russia in 1912. And this same contrast between Russia and the degenerate Western civilization is of course a subject which we repeatedly encounter in the writings of Spengler. Spengler was probably the most influential neo-conservative thinker of the post-war years, and that he had an essential influence on Wittgenstein during the very time Wittgenstein's later philosophy actually emerged—that is, in 1931—must now, with the publication of *Culture and Value*, be plainly apparent.

One well-known passage in which Wittgenstein mentions Spengler, is contained in his "Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*", written in 1931.³⁰ But there is another German conservative author who is referred to in the manuscripts from which these "Remarks" were selected: the playwright and essayist Paul Ernst. "Should my book ever be published", wrote Wittgenstein, "its foreword must contain an acknowledgement to the Foreword of Paul Ernst to his edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, which Foreword I should have acknowledged already in the *Log. Phil. Abhandlung*, as the source of the expression 'misunderstanding the logic of language'."³¹ And in the so-

26 *Culture and Value*, p. 7.

27 One of these drafts containing the significant sentence, "I would like to say 'This book is written to the glory of God', but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood", was eventually printed as a foreword to *Philosophische Bemerkungen* (*Philosophical Remarks*).

28 Culminating, in the autumn of 1935, in a journey there; cf. *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, pp. 132–137, and Fania Pascal's recollections.

29 His best-known books were *Das Recht der jungen Völker* (1919) and *Das dritte Reich* (1923). In 1933 Hans Schwarz edited a posthumous volume *Rechenschaft über Russland* (*An Account of Russia*). The author committed suicide in 1925.

30 *Synthese* 17 (1967), p. 241 (*The Human World* 3 (1971), p. 35).

31 Quoted by Rush Rhees "Wittgenstein on Language and Ritual", in *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G. H. von Wright*, p. 469, see also below p. 76.

called Big Typescript (dictated probably in 1933) we find, functioning as a sub-title to some passages on Frazer, the sentence: "Mythology in the forms of our language ((Paul Ernst))." The "Foreword" of Ernst, to which Wittgenstein refers, is actually a postscript in the third volume of Ernst's edition of the *Grimmsche Kinder- und Hausmärchen*,³² where Ernst writes of magical-mythological conceptions arising "from the interpretation of a misunderstood tendency of language" and of "changes in language" accompanied by changes in the "logic of language"³³ – formulae that must have been important not only to the author of the *Tractatus*,³⁴ but indeed to the later Wittgenstein as well. It is possible also that some other formulations which Ernst here applies had an effect on Wittgenstein, perhaps especially on the methodology underlying his comments on Frazer.³⁵ And the last pages of the postscript contain remarks on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky with which Wittgenstein must certainly have agreed, for example with the remark that Tolstoy's "newly invented legends" – obviously, the *Folk Tales* – belong "to the most beautiful works of the human spirit", and might "live for thousands of years, not just as themes, but in the very form which Tolstoy gave them".³⁶

Whether Wittgenstein ever read anything by Paul Ernst other than this postscript cannot be decided on the basis of the material available to me.³⁷ But I consider it appropriate and necessary to refer here in some detail to the theoretical position which was maintained by Ernst in the late twenties, especially since this position – and Ernst's work generally – was certainly not without influence in contemporary Germany. I select his essay "What Now?", published in 1926/27.³⁸ This work, which begins, incidentally, with what is an obviously not wholly justified attack on Spengler,³⁹ deals with the foundations and functions of poetry under "organic" and "unorganic" forms of life. "As a result of the faint awareness", writes Ernst, "that in the disintegration of today" it is almost the peasant alone who "still possesses an organic mode of life, there arises, as is always

32 Berlin, n.d.

33 *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 273, 308.

34 The manner in which the relevant ideas of Ernst may have influenced the argument of the *Tractatus* is examined in Brian McGuinness "Philosophy of Science in the *Tractatus*", in G. Granger (editor) *Wittgenstein et le problème d'une philosophie de la science* (Paris, 1971), pp. 9f.

35 Thus for example Ernst wrote that those "many possible myths which one could work out schematically", one would then "also find in reality" (*Grimmsche Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, vol. 3, p. 291). Wittgenstein believed that "one could very well invent primitive customs for oneself and it would have to be an accident if they were not somewhere or other really to be found" ("Bemerkungen", p. 238 (*Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 28)). Ernst talks of an "association of intuitions" (*Grimmsche Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, vol. 3, p. 272); Wittgenstein of an "association of practices" (*The Human World*, p. 32) (see pp. 98 and 104 below).

36 *Grimmsche Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, vol. 3, pp. 312f. "Those short stories of Tolstoy's will live for ever. They were written for all peoples", Wittgenstein once remarked to Drury ("Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein", p. 31).

37 Engelmann tells about Wittgenstein's acquaintance (during the war)

with Max Zweig, and mentions that Zweig later came under the influence of Ernst (*Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein*, p. 65). It is not altogether impossible that Wittgenstein, too, was to some extent aware of Ernst's theoretical development in the course of the twenties.

38 *Die Horen* 3, (1926/27), no. 2 "What Now?" was reprinted in K. A. Kützbach (editor) *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács* (Emsdetten, 1974). Page numbers refer to the latter volume.

39 "In what follows," writes Ernst, "thoughts occasionally occur which remind one of Spengler's arguments. Here we remark merely that Spengler's "culture" is a fiction, and that his manner of dealing with insights which had been possessed by others long before him — insights which for us today are fatefully important — is one of outrageous diletantism." ("What Now?", p. 189)

the case in times of dissolution, a peasant poetry. This does not, however, emanate from the peasantry, but from members of the other orders."⁴⁰ Ernst then argues that, like that of the peasant, "so also is the form of life of the master an organic one, a form which imbues the whole man".⁴¹ And "only when the life of the master becomes questionable as other forms of life have come to appear possible . . . does there arise a master-poetry".⁴² The "unorganic forms of life" Ernst brings together under the term "bourgeois".

All those forms of life are bourgeois which imbue not the whole man but merely some part of him, and it is within those forms that terms such as profession and status, work and personality, have acquired their contemporary meaning. Here the life of the individual is no longer settled in a natural way, it is no longer simply determined by fixed conditions, like the life of the bees; it must be formed anew at every occasion, and everyone must search for this form himself.⁴³

Ernst believes that the present is characterized throughout by the bourgeois form of life. "It is very clear where man today stands socially. Through the civilization of the last three hundred years an unorganic condition has been created, such as the world has hitherto never seen."⁴⁴ Men have now been "freed of every form-creating constraint, and have been left completely on their own. And it is clear that nothing can come of this except senseless barbarism. — Thus because man needs form and constraint he has come to feel profoundly unhappy, and the yearning which had already arisen amongst the old bourgeois as a result of the schism between culture and reality has acquired a vastly greater power."⁴⁵ And "when men live almost completely unorganically, when society has been almost completely dissolved . . . then God can no longer manifest himself in society as, in good times, he manifests himself in the state, in the church, in discipline and in customs. He manifests himself instead in the individual."⁴⁶

40 *ibid.*, p. 190.

41 *ibid.*, p. 191

42 *ibid.*

43 *ibid.*, p. 193.

44 *ibid.*, p. 194

45 *ibid.*, p. 198.

46 *ibid.*, pp. 200f.

The emergence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is usually, and in a trivial sense correctly, attributed to his return to Cambridge in January 1929. But on the one hand two full years elapsed before Wittgenstein in Cambridge found the subjects and the style which were to become characteristic of his later period. On the other hand, the fact that it was in 1929 when he once more took up philosophy is something which itself stands in need of elucidation. Obviously, if one considers his external circumstances only, the same could just as well have taken place as early as in 1925, when Wittgenstein returned to England for the first time after the war. It appears that Wittgenstein's return to philosophy and the emergence of his later mode of thinking, must be regarded in a broader historical context, the context of the heyday and collapse of Austrian and German neo-conservatism between 1927 and 1933. The economic and political causes of the relevant developments – the economic crisis, beginning in 1929 and culminating in 1931,⁴⁷ and the political defeat of the German neo-conservatives with Hitler's rise to power – can only be mentioned here. But I would like to describe in some detail the neo-conservative spiritual milieu of the time. It seems to be natural to begin this description with a reference to the famous speech given by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal on 10 January 1927, before the students of the University of Munich. He spoke of a process which has advanced in "our questing German mind" – the mind of a people which "for centuries has been no longer rooted in its culture" – a process guided by the knowledge that "life becomes livable only through a system of genuine obligations." This process arose as "an internal opposing force counter to that spiritual upheaval of the sixteenth century which, in its two aspects, we tend to call renaissance and reformation. The process of which I speak is", said Hofmannsthal, "nothing other than a conservative revolution of a magnitude which is hitherto unprecedented in the history of Europe."⁴⁸

In the same year that Hofmannsthal delivered his Munich

47 "The year 1928", writes Klemperer, "was the last year of the prosperity which had marked the German economy since 1924. . . . It was quite clearly an economic and political crisis. . . . The withdrawal of funds from abroad and the effect 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", continues Klemperer, "when Moeller van den Bruck was read, re-read, re-edited 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." (*Germany's New Conservatism*, pp. 125 and 118ff.) 1931 was a year of deep crisis in England also; see the account given by R. Kirk *Eliot and his Age*, (New York, 1971), p. 183.

48 H. von Hofmannsthal "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation". I am quoting from the *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt, 1955), vol. Prosa 4, pp. 411–413. The term "conservative revolution" occurs already in Thomas Mann's essay "Russische Anthologie" (1921); cf. Armin Mohler *Die Konservative Revolution*, p. 18.

speech the lawyer Theodor Böttiger, member of the conservative Berlin *Herrenklub*, published his book, *Variations on a Conservative Theme*. "The conservative", wrote Böttiger, "maintains the thesis that the sum of all human happiness on earth will remain always the same, whilst the believer in progress maintains that a heightening of all values is possible and lies within the power of mankind." But, he argued, no value is raised up without the sinking of another. "The most illuminating thought creates, somewhere, a new obscurity, every remedy creates some new illness, every new happiness some new craving. That there is progress in specific cases is impossible to deny, but seen as a whole, from high above, this is counteracted by a step backwards at some other point."⁴⁹ Robert Musil expressed a similar attitude in his novel published towards the end of 1930, when he wrote that all "progress means a gain in each particular case, but also a severance from the wholeness of things; and this means an increase in power, which leads to a progressive increase in powerlessness . . .".⁵⁰ In Spengler's *Der Mensch und die Technik*, published in 1931, the concept of progress was simply disposed of as the "great word of the last century".⁵¹

In March 1931 the prominent publicist Adolf Grabowsky, later a professor at Basel, published his paper "Conservatism", in which he spoke of an "unintellectual closeness to life" as being characteristic of the conservative attitude. He described this attitude as a natural trait of uncorrupted common sense, remarking, however, that the man of today is typically *not* conservative. One could indeed go so far as to say, wrote Grabowsky, "that they who do think as conservatives constitute a secret order, so secret, that they themselves have normally no idea of their association. However, just as soon as only three profound words have been exchanged, there is established a relationship, both mental and spiritual, within which it is unnecessary to waste words. . . . And thus perhaps for this reason a conservative is silent much more often than are the adherents of

49 Georg Quabbe [Theodor Böttiger] *Tar a Ri. Variationen über ein konservatives Thema*, (Berlin, 1927), pp. 116f.

50 Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* (St Albans, 1968) vol. I, p. 203. There are a number of interesting parallels between Musil and Wittgenstein. I attempted to point out some of them in a talk given in 1975, published in *Literatur und Kritik*, 113 (April 1977), pp. 167-179.

51 *Der Mensch und die Technik* (Munich, 1931), p. 9.

other views." A "silent reverence for the impenetrable" characterizes the conservative attitude, "not only is this reverence silent, however, but so also is that which is impenetrable, and thus our silent reverence is only a reflection of the great silence of all that is impenetrable". The latter, however, is nothing other than the "internal immobility" of all existence. Conservatism, Grabowsky wrote, "has a view of the world that reveals from the outside an incomparable agitation, but from the inside the deepest peace. . . . There is no progress in history, but there is, certainly, a divinity within the world." The religious and the conservative views of the world are, believes Grabowsky, not alien to each other: they are mediated by the concept of reverence – "a central concept of conservatism, the concept which perhaps most clearly distinguishes it from liberalism, democratism, and rationalism". The two world-views are, however, by no means identical. Religion (and Grabowsky is here speaking specifically of catholicism) "presupposes an objectively given and objectively determinable order of being and framework of values. Thus for the catholic truth itself is absolute, whilst knowledge of the truth is relative. For the conservative, the core is not any eternal truth. . . . One could perhaps say that the catholic concept of truth is replaced, within conservatism, by a concept still by far insufficiently discussed: the concept of ceremoniousness."⁵²

In these last-quoted lines of Grabowsky the paradox of the neo-conservative position is very clearly manifested. His insight is that on the one hand man, by his very nature, cannot do without absolute standards, that he needs and ought to observe fixed truths, but that on the other hand all absolute standards have perished historically, are a thing of the past, and fixed truths do not exist at all. This leads to a logical – and emotional – difficulty which is hardly solvable by references to the (otherwise very suggestive) concept of "ceremoniousness". The concept of festive, ceremonious behaviour, of behaviour directed by unalterable rules which could, at the same time,

⁵² Adolf Grabowsky "Konservatismus", *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 20 (March 1931) no. 12. I quote from pages 773, 775, 778–780, 785.

have been quite different, plays of course a central role in, for example, Wittgenstein's comments on Frazer. But in order to bring the logical-anthropological problems surrounding this concept nearer to a solution deeper conceptual analyses were needed. And it is precisely such analyses which, in my opinion, Wittgenstein eventually provided. He saved, as it were, the neo-conservative position from a theoretical catastrophe at a time when, in Germany, it could no longer be saved from a political catastrophe.

Late in 1930 Wittgenstein prepared a draft for a foreword to the book he was planning to write at the time. This draft is something which belongs very clearly to the historical context referred to above and I wish to quote the relevant lines at some length.

This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written. This is not, I believe, the spirit of the main current of European and American civilization. The spirit of this civilization makes itself manifest in the industry, architecture and music of our time, in its fascism and socialism, and it is alien and uncongenial to the author. This is not a value judgement. It is not, it is true, as though he accepted what nowadays passes for architecture as architecture or did not approach what is called modern music with the greatest suspicion (though without understanding its language), but still, the disappearance of the arts does not justify judging disparagingly the human beings who make up this civilization. For in times like these, genuine strong characters simply leave the arts aside and to turn to other things and somehow the worth of the individual man finds expression. Not, to be sure, in the way it would at a time of high culture. A culture is like a big organization which assigns each of its members a place where he can work in the spirit of the whole; and it is perfectly fair for his power to be measured by the contribution he succeeds in making to the whole enterprise. In an age without culture on the other hand forces become fragmented and the power of an individual man is used up in overcoming opposing forces and frictional resistances.⁵³

53 *Culture and Value*, p. 6.

These lines ought clearly to be viewed less as the foreword to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Remarks*, as drafted in 1929–30, than as a prologue to the life-long analytical work which he began precisely at this point. The concept which perhaps occupies the most central place in the relevant analyses is that of following a rule. Now the idea that human behaviour, human speech, and human thought are not, as it were, free-floating but are, on the contrary, constrained by rules, is in itself by no means necessarily a conservative idea. For rules have to be applied, and since they can neither determine their own application, nor be endlessly supported by rules of application, the phenomenon of rule-following seems to point directly to an underlying region of arbitrariness, of irregularity, to a level at which "everything could be justified",⁵⁴ since whatever one does "can . . . be brought into accord with the rule"⁵⁵ "can be interpreted as a consequence".⁵⁶ But Wittgenstein's philosophical achievement was that he supplanted the conceptual framework within which this so to speak anarchistic conclusion can occur, by elaborating another, essentially different one. The basic concepts of the new framework are: training and behaviour, use, custom, institution, practice, technique, agreement. The following of a rule is a custom, an institution, embedded in the agreements, in the correspondences of behaviour within society. The question concerning the interpretation of any rule can be raised – though it need not be – and it should be answered by referring to agreements in behaviour. Rule-following is, in the last analysis, blind: it cannot be explained or justified. And Wittgenstein again and again emphasizes that the agreements which constitute a necessary precondition of all order, all logic and communication through language, and therefore also indeed of thinking in general, are "not an agreement of beliefs",⁵⁷ but agreements, regularities in the *foundations of judgement*,⁵⁸ in the "common behaviour of mankind".⁵⁹ Thus although any given form of life, mode of thought and behaviour, can be superseded by or have superim-

54 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik* (Schriften 6 (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 342.

55 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I, §198.

56 *Grundlagen der Mathematik*, p. 341.

57 *ibid.*, p. 353.

58 *ibid.*, p. 350.

59 *Philosophical Investigations*, I, §206.

posed upon itself other forms of life, it cannot actually be criticized. All criticism presupposes a form of life, a language, that is, a tradition of agreements; every judgement is necessarily embedded in traditions. That is why traditions cannot be judged. "One can only *describe* here" Wittgenstein wrote in 1931 "and say: this is what human life is like."⁶⁰

Thus the familiar passages in which Wittgenstein refers, for example, to "the sickness of a time" which cannot be cured by purposeful action,⁶¹ or to an "order"⁶² that is introduced without having been intended – are not chance remarks embedded within contexts which actually deal with other, quite different problems; they are, rather, exegetic guideposts. All the time Wittgenstein strives to show that the given form of life is the ultimate givenness, that the given form of life cannot be consciously transcended. Wittgenstein is of course perfectly aware of the fact that there are different forms of life, different ultimate givennesses. And that these different forms of life all have the same value, that human nature can manifest itself equally in various forms of life. But there is a human nature, since it is an unalterable anthropological fact – a fact, that is, indeed, a precondition for the existence of logic – that any human being must, in order to be a human being, be constrained by some form of life, by some network of tradition.

Wittgenstein's solution to the neo-conservative paradox was his insight that the possibility of other orders does not in the least weaken the inexorable binding force of our own, although autonomous changes in the latter might of course very well occur. This can very clearly be illustrated by those analyses which one could perhaps call Wittgenstein's sketch of a *theory of mental illness*. These analyses deal mostly with questions pertaining to the following of mathematical rules. Supposing, for example, that someone does not follow the usual rules of counting. The question we must first decide is whether what we have here is just plain error, or a case of mental disorder. And Wittgenstein's introductory answer of course is that there is no

60 "Bemerkungen über Frazers *The Golden Bough*", p. 236 (*The Human World*, p. 30).

61 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, I, App. II-4.

62 *ibid.*, II-83.

sharp line between an abnormal condition and the normal one.⁶³ Yet if the errors become very frequent, the boundary must clearly be regarded as having been overstepped. Now in such cases, where the necessary conformity does not obtain, we can distinguish again two possibilities: the deviations involved are either systematic, or random. Here, too, there is no sharp distinction,⁶⁴ but clear cases can certainly be discerned. And if someone constantly commits random mistakes, if rules have lost all significance for him, then, indeed, he himself must be regarded as mentally lost, as crazy.⁶⁵ Let us suppose, however, that the deviations from the rule have a systematic nature, that is, that someone's reactions are systematically different. In this case the terms 'mental disorder', 'insanity', 'madness', 'feeble-mindedness', are actually misleading, because we have an order here, even if it is an order different from our own. And it is important that the picture of a different order is always combined by Wittgenstein with the picture of a different society, that he therefore regards as truly sick only those modes of behaviour which would not count as normal in *any* society. "One imagines the feeble-minded", writes Wittgenstein in the mid-forties, "under the aspect of the degenerate, the essentially incomplete, as it were in tatters. And so under that of disorder instead of a more primitive order (which would be a far more fruitful way of looking at them). – We just don't see a *society* of such people. – What would a society consisting solely of deaf men be like? Or a society of the 'feeble-minded'? *An important question!* What would, that is, a society be like that never played many of our customary language-games?"⁶⁶ If in our culture, Wittgenstein remarks in 1936, "a child does not perform the transition '20' – '21' upon the suggestive gesture of the teacher, people will treat it as feeble-minded".⁶⁷ But one can very well imagine a tribe in the life of which a certain number, say 20, plays a peculiar role, namely that of "an insurmountable upper limit",⁶⁸ and here the above-mentioned child would of course count as normal. The decisive point however is that, all these considerations

63 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §393.

64 *Philosophical Investigations*, I, §143.

65 *On Certainty*, §217.

66 *Zettel*, §§372, 371.

67 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Eine Philosophische Betrachtung*, *schriften* 5. (Frankfurt, 1970), p. 137.

68 *ibid.*

notwithstanding, we cannot entertain a liberal attitude as regards irregularities in our *own* society. For it is through compelling uniformities that the life of a society becomes ordered, such uniformities determine the boundaries of a society, that is, only through such uniformities does the society as such become constituted. A familiar passage in Wittgenstein's writings runs:

We should presumably not call it 'counting' if everyone said the numbers one after the other *anyhow*; but of course it is not simply a question of a name. For what we call 'counting' is an important part of our life's activities. . . . Counting (and that means: counting like *this*) is a technique that is employed daily in the most various operations of our lives. And that is why we learn to count as we do: with endless practice, with merciless exactitude; that is why it is inexorably insisted that we shall all say 'two' after 'one', 'three' after 'two' and so on.⁶⁹

Someone counting correctly hastens, as it were, "to a common meeting point with everybody else".⁷⁰ Our technique of counting, the system of rules in which we move, is of course not unalterable. But new rules would have to emerge from the old ones *organically*, so to speak. We switch over to a different technique "not because we tell ourselves that it will work this way too, but because we feel the new technique to be identical with the old one".⁷¹

That Wittgenstein's conceptual analyses can in fact be regarded as a kind of foundation of conservatism is manifested in an interesting way by a parallel which I will now, in conclusion, briefly describe. I am referring to the amazing similarity between certain reflections of Michael Oakeshott and those of Wittgenstein. Whether the distinguished philosopher of history and political scientist who taught at Cambridge between 1925 and 1940 and was active there also after 1945, in fact stood under the temporary influence of Wittgenstein, whether he ever attended Wittgenstein's lectures or studied the notes taken at

69 *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, I-4.

70 *ibid.*, II-69.

71 *ibid.*, III-36.

these, cannot be decided on the basis of the material available to me. I am not aware of any reference to Wittgenstein in Oakeshott's writings; in the lists of Wittgenstein's students prepared by the Wittgenstein Archives in Tübingen⁷² Oakeshott's name does not occur. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's dictations "The Blue Book" and "The Brown Book" were, as is well known, widely copied and were rather easily available, especially at Cambridge. The question of a possible or actual influence is, however, in the present context, almost without interest. For the fact that Wittgenstein's later philosophy definitely permits of a conservative interpretation is in any case sufficiently illustrated by the parallels in question.

The essays of Oakeshott with which we shall be concerned here were written towards the end of the 1940s. The main tenet of these essays is the criticism of rationalism in general, and of rationalism in politics in particular. Rationalism is, for Oakeshott, the view according to which human actions, society, and institutions can and ought to be planned and guided by an authority independent of them: autonomous reason. The rationalist, Oakeshott tells us, believes "in the open mind, the mind free from prejudice and its relic, habit. He believes that the unhindered human 'reason' (if only it can be brought to bear) is an infallible guide in political activity. Further he believes in argument as the technique and operation of 'reason'; the truth of an opinion and the 'rational' ground (not the use) of an institution is all that matters to him."⁷³ Oakeshott in contrast to the rationalist realizes that human activity "is always activity with a pattern", with a pattern which is not, however, "superimposed", but which is "inherent in the activity itself". Elements of this pattern, writes Oakeshott, "occasionally stand out with a relatively firm outline; and we call these elements customs, traditions, institutions, laws, etc."⁷⁴ The rationalist has a false picture of the mode in which reason influences our actions and, indeed, has a false picture of reason; he has a false picture of the

72 *Katalog zum Wittgenstein-Nachlass* (Februar 1978) Anhang 2.

73 M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London, 1962), pp. 3f.

74 *ibid.*, p. 105.

way in which one learns and applies the rules guiding one's actions. Oakeshott writes:

"There will always remain something of a mystery about how a tradition of political behaviour is learned, and perhaps the only certainty is that there is no point at which learning it can properly be said to begin. The politics of a community are not less individual (and not more so) than its language, and they are learned and practised in the same manner. We do not begin to learn our native language by learning the alphabet, or by learning its grammar; we do not begin by learning words, but words in use."⁷⁵

All knowledge is, fundamentally, practical knowledge: "its normal expression is in a customary or traditional way of doing things, or, simply, in practice." Practical knowledge can "neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired".⁷⁶ We cannot explain any rules to someone who does not already possess the ability to apply some rules; "the rules of a game" cannot be imparted to an empty mind.⁷⁷ Thinking and doing, thinking and speaking are not separate activities specifically influencing each other: "rationality" is "a quality of the conduct itself", "no action is by itself 'rational', or is 'rational' on account of something that has gone on before. . . . 'Rationality' is the certificate we give to any conduct which can maintain a place in the flow of sympathy, the coherence of activity, which composes a way of living".⁷⁸ To say that a man "has a desire for something is only another way of saying that he is being active in a certain manner", and when a poet, for example, is searching for an appropriate expression, he does not know what he wants to say until he has actually said it. "The 'corrections' he may make to his first attempt are not efforts to make words correspond more closely to an already formulated idea or to images already fully formed in his mind."⁷⁹

75 *ibid.*, p. 129.

76 *ibid.*, p. 11.

77 *ibid.*, p. 12.

78 *ibid.*, p. 109.

79 *ibid.*, pp. 104, 72.

It is hardly necessary to refer here to parallel passages in the writings of Wittgenstein – the reader must certainly have noticed likenesses both in content and in formulation. It is not only similarities which meet the eye, however, but also an important difference. The passages quoted from Oakeshott are the logical *starting points* of his arguments, they serve as premisses to large-scale conclusions about society and history. In the writings of Wittgenstein, however, the corresponding passages are themselves the conclusions, the *results* of penetrating, rigorous analyses. It is, I believe, in the implications of this difference that Wittgenstein's significance for conservatism consists.