A Note on Wittgenstein and Nietzsche

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0. Introduction

It is well known that Wittgenstein's thought was influenced in a number of respects by the religious writings of Tolstoy. We are all familiar with Russell's story about Wittgenstein buying a copy of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* in a bookshop in Tarnow in August or September 1914. We have all heard that among his fellow soldiers he was known as "the one with the Gospel". And we have all heard of Wittgenstein's reference to Tolstoy in his letter to the despairing Ficker: "You are living, as it were, in the dark and have not found the saving word. […] Are you acquainted with Tolstoi's *The Gospel in Brief*? At its time, this book virtually kept me alive" (Monk 1990,132). Less well known is that, while in Cracow – and just a few months after buying Tolstoy's reconstruction of Christ's teachings – Wittgenstein procured a copy of Volume 8 of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Works*. It is unclear whether the Volume 8 referred to was that of F. Koegel's *Gesamtausgabe* (1895–1897) or that of A. Seidl's *Grossoktav Ausgabe* (1899–1913). Both contain the same selection of texts written in Nietzsche's last active year (1888), including the works that are known in translation as *The Case Wagner* and *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche's condensed summary of his philosophical views. Nietzsche himself described *Twilight* as "a very stringent and subtle expression of my whole *philosophical heterodoxy*"(SL 311). Volume 8 of Nietzsche's works also contains *The Antichrist*, which contains in turn his summary critique of Christianity – more generally, his "Revaluation of all values!"

We know that Wittgenstein at least dipped into the works Nietzsche wrote in 1888, and that they made a deep impression on him. On 8 December 1914, Wittgenstein noted: "Am very troubled by his animosity towards Christianity. For his writings also contain an element of truth" (GH,49-50). Some two decades later, Nietzsche's capacity to trouble Wittgenstein had not diminished. T. Redpath tells us that discussions he had with Wittgenstein left him with the impression that Wittgenstein had read a lot of Nietzsche. On the subject of the writing talent of philosophers, Redpath asked Wittgenstein which philosophers he considered the most impressive authors. Wittgenstein's prompt reply was "Nietzsche". Redpath goes on to say: "When I told him I had read a certain amount of Nietzsche and asked what he thought of his general world view, he said that he didn't think there was much 'consolation' to be had from it – it was 'too shallow'" (Redpath 1990,41-42). Evidence that Wittgenstein's responses here were not just plucked from thin air can be found in his own notes, among which we find many direct and indirect references to themes characteristic of Nietzsche's philosophy. Indeed, there is a great deal to suggest that over the years Wittgenstein read widely – even if only sporadically – in Nietzsche's works.

In the following I shall offer a few examples of these direct and indirect references. I shall however refrain from drawing any forceful conclusions on the possible extent of Nietzsche's influence on Wittgenstein. That being said, in light of these examples and other considerations I find it hard to avoid the impression that an element of influence does exist and that it may well run deeper than has hitherto been assumed. It is a possibility. But back to Redpath.

1. Is Wittgenstein's Wagner Nietzsche's Wagner?

Redpath's conjecture that Wittgenstein was to some extent familiar with Nietzsche's thought finds support in a number of comments on the French composer Georges Bizet. The impression of these is that Wittgenstein thought highly of Bizet. Moreover, Wittgenstein mentions that Bizet's compositions appealed to Nietzsche as a kind of "Southern music", in contrast to Richard Wagner's "Northern music" (Redpath 1990,56). This remark is a reference to Nietzsche's comparison of the two composers in the aforementioned pamphlet *The Case Wagner* and to his use in making that comparison of meteorological phenomena and Nordic and Mediterranean scenery as metaphors. If we follow this lead by taking a closer look at Wittgenstein's occasional remarks about Wagner, we notice that the latter show very clear parallels to Nietzsche's critique of Wagner in his text on that composer.

Let me summarise Nietzsche's position. In *The Case Wagner*, the eponymous composer is described as "a typical decadent". Or, as Nietzsche puts it in his comparative remarks: Bizet redeems us into and is a redeemer of life's abundance, whereas Wagner's art redeems us from life, the life that is marked by infirmity and weakness. The same is also apparent in Wagner's style (a literary decadence), especially in its tendency to disintegrate and in its use of rhapsodic and fragmentary forms. His style is characterised by a lack of organic (unified) structure and relies instead on the arrangement of its component elements to achieve unity. For Nietzsche, Wagner's talent lay in his evident ability to invent and exploit small thematic units, to make them conspicuous and imbue them with life. "Once more: Wagner is admirable and gracious only in the invention of what is smallest, in spinning out the details. Here one is entirely justified in proclaiming him a master of the first rank, as our greatest *miniaturist* in music" (CW 171). But this comment also indicates the limits of Wagner's talent, to the effect that he is incapable of creating a dramatically – epically – coherent whole from these miniatures. And this Nietzsche views as a characteristic of literary decadence: "[T]he anarchy of atoms, disgregation of the will" (CW 170). Here the organising force is in decline. Nietzsche writes: "How wretched, how embarrassed, how amateurish is his manner of 'development', his attempt to at least interlard what has not grown out of each other" (CW 170). "The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, calculated, artificial, and artifact –" (CW 170).

Turning now to Wittgenstein, we find that he shares Nietzsche's scepticism about Wagner's talent. For example, Wittgenstein considers Wagner's use of irony to be lacking in depth, in contrast to that of Beethoven (CV 55). Wagner's irony often assumes a bourgeois aspect (CV 81). Nietzsche would have said a decadent aspect. The two philosophers agree that Wagner is an unusually skilful composer, but he is not an extraordinary artist. Wittgenstein notes: "Genius is what makes us forget skill. Where genius wears thin skill may show through. (Overture to the Mastersingers.)" (CV 43). Moreover, Wittgenstein agrees with Nietzsche's claim that "Wagner is *no* dramatist" (CW 175). In Wittgenstein's words: "In the days of silent films all kind of classical works were played as accompaniments, but not Brahms or Wagner. Not Brahms, because he is too

abstract" (CV 25). But apart from restating Nietzsche's crucial point, that Wagner's works show a lack of epic coherence, Wittgenstein also paraphrases Nietzsche's idea that Wagner's works show greatness only in terms of their loosely connected miniatures. In 1941 Wittgenstein wrote: "Wagner's *motifs* might be called musical prose sentences. And just as there is such a thing as 'rhyming prose', so too these *motifs* can be joined together in melodic form, without their constituting *one* melody. Wagnerian drama too is not drama so much as an assemblage of situations strung together as though on a thread which, for its parts, is merely *cleverly* spun and not inspired as the motifs and situations are" (CV 41).

2. Miscellaneous remarks

We find many other examples in a similar vein. Several of them refer or allude to philosophical themes or lines of argument that are central to Nietzsche's work. In some cases Nietzsche is referred to explicitly, as for example when Wittgenstein attempts to characterise his own thought and its place in the history of ideas. He refers to Nietzsche as an obvious point of comparison. In 1931 Wittgenstein wrote: "There are problems I never get anywhere near, which do not lie in my path or are not part of my world. Problems of the intellectual world of the West that Beethoven (and perhaps Goethe to a certain extent) tackled and wrestled with, but which no philosopher has ever confronted (perhaps Nietzsche passed by them)" (CV 9). On the subject of Nietzsche's achievements, and referring to the concept of nihilism and the overarching programmatic intention of the 1888 works, Wittgenstein wrote several years later: "Our age is truly one of the revaluation of all values. (The procession of humanity turns a corner & what was formerly an upward direction is now a downward direction etc.) Did Nietzsche have in mind what is now happening & does his achievement consist in having anticipated it & finding a word for it?" (DB 35-36).

I could add further examples to support the claim that Wittgenstein was familiar with more than just the 1888 works. One striking point in this respect concerns the *Tractatus*, insofar as we can ask whether that work's dramatic concluding remark, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (TLP 7) – which is also anticipated in the foreword to the *Tractatus* – can be viewed as taking up the same theme as introduced by Nietzsche – "*Where silence is demanded*" (HAH II 218) – or as a reformulation of the opening words, written in 1886, of the foreword to the second part of *Human, All too Human*, where Nietzsche writes: "One should speak only when one may not stay silent; and then only of that which one has overcome – everything else is chatter, 'literature', lack of breeding" (HAH II 209).

It is remarks such as these that tend to be ignored in the first of four typical responses to the question "Wittgenstein and Nietzsche?". This is superbly illustrated by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, who fail to discuss Nietzsche in their celebrated work on the intellectual and culture-historical background to Wittgenstein's philosophy. It is an omission that is rendered all the more striking by more recent studies of Viennese culture, studies that accord Nietzsche a place as an obvious and significant variable. A different response from that of Janik and Toulmin can be found in isolated monographs and inquiries that seek to establish linkages of a more structural kind between Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, first emphasized by Eric Heller. Perhaps the most recent example is provided by S. Mulhall – who also brings in M. Heidegger. Mulhall writes: "these thinkers wish to retain or reconstruct an originally Christian conception of ourselves as in need of redemption from our selves" (Mulhall 2005,120). In addition to these two approaches there is the more common trend of impressionistic comments about the similarities between the two philosophers. Here I am thinking of remarks like that of Bernard Williams, in which he views Wittgenstein and Nietzsche as sharing "a particular idea, that the ego or self is some kind of fiction" (Williams 2006,303-304).

3. Is "the inexpressible" (that which "shows itself") in the *Tractatus* the same as Nietzsche's "sign language" in *The Antichrist*?

The fourth and final approach to the question "Wittgenstein and Nietzsche?" is exemplified by Ray Monk, who, as is well known, seeks to establish that Wittgenstein was *directly* "influenced" by Nietzsche, and more precisely by *The Antichrist*. Monk views Wittgenstein's purchase of Volume 8 of Nietzsche's *Werke* as significant and explores the impact of this literature. Despite being troubled by Nietzsche's animosity towards Christianity, Wittgenstein acknowledges that Nietzsche's analysis contains an element of truth, although he does not relinquish the view that Christianity is "the only sure way to happiness". – "But what if someone spurns this happiness?! Might it not be better to perish unhappy in a hopeless struggle with the external world? Yet such a life is without meaning. But why not lead a meaningless life? Is it unworthy? […] But what must I do to prevent my own life being lost to me?" (GH 50). – Here Wittgenstein appears to be reflecting on the alternative offered by Nietzsche's philosophy of life. Which means he reflected on whether or not that alternative might be a source of help in coping with an unbearable and meaningless life.

Wittgenstein's reflections on this topic are concerned not with the extent to which Christianity or Nietzsche's alternative is true when viewed as a theory or an intellectual conviction, but rather with the ways these "philosophies" might help to heal the "sick soul" when viewed as concrete and practical approaches to life. This approach corresponds to that of Tolstoy in *The Gospel in Brief*, but also resembles the perspective that Nietzsche suggests, when, in *The Antichrist*, he makes the point that Christianity is not an intellectual attitude so much as a practice: "It is not a 'faith' that distinguishes the Christian: the Christian *acts*" (A 606). "It is false to the point of nonsense to find the mark of the Christian in a 'faith' […]: only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* […]. Not a faith, but a doing […]. To reduce being a Christian, Christianism, to a matter of considering something true, to a mere phenomenon of consciousness, is to negate Christianism" (A 612-613). It is this emphasis in *The Antichrist* that leads Wittgenstein to conclude that there is some truth to Nietzsche's account. Monk writes: "The idea that the essence of religion lay in feelings (or, as Nietzsche would have it, *instincts*) and practices rather than beliefs remained a constant theme in Wittgenstein's thought on the subject for the rest of his life. […] [I]n the words and figure of Christ, [Christianity] provided an example, an attitude, to follow, that made suffering bearable" (Monk 1990,123).

Monk's argument can be taken further by noting that the view of Christ as an example to be followed leads our attention to Nietzsche's reconstruction and characterisation of "the type of the Galilean". In addition to the descriptions of Jesus in *The Antichrist* as "a free spirit", a "holy anarchist" and "this anti-realist", he is also characterised as "a symbolist par excellence". In Nietzsche's view, the pe-

culiarity of Jesus' statements is that they have to be viewed as a form of "sign language". In other words: "For this anti-realist, that not a word is taken literally is precisely the presupposition of being able to speak at all". When taken literally, the word *kills*. "The concept, the *experience* of 'life' in the only way he knows it, resists any kind of word, formula, law, faith, dogma. He speaks only of the innermost: 'life' or 'truth' or 'light' is his word for the innermost – all the rest, the whole of reality, the whole of nature, language itself, has for him only the value of a sign, a simile" (A 605).

With these formulations in mind, we can elaborate Monk's point. For one of the things which *The Antichrist* connects with the notion of religion as a kind of practice is the idea of a special form of linguistic usage: that of indirect "symbolism". Which brings us to the question of whether there is a relationship between the familiar distinction in the *Tractatus* between the scientific / descriptive sentences and the stammering articulations of "the feeling" (TLP 6.45), of that which is in principle "inexpressible", and typical of religious sentences. To put it another way: is there a line of connection – or are we dealing merely with a chance similarity – between, on the one hand, Nietzsche's description of "this great symbolist [Jesus]", who "accepted only *inner* realities, as 'truths'", and who understood "everything natural, temporal, spatial, historical, only as signs, as occasions for parables"(A 607), and, on the other, Wittgenstein's view "that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental" (TLP 6.421) and his description of language's ability to *show* this aspect of experience (*a*theoretically and non-empirically) in its running against the limits of language? Is there a line of connection between Nietzsche's talk of "an existence that was swimming in symbols and incomprehensibilities"(A 603) and Wittgenstein's talk of "the mystical feeling" (TLP 6.45), "the inexpressible [, which] *shows* itself" (TLP 6.522)? One thing is certain: with the *Tractatus*' description of the mystical in mind, we immediately grasp Nietzsche's characterisation of Jesus as the great symbolist.

4. Is Wittgenstein's St Paul Nietzsche's St Paul?

I shall conclude by briefly pointing out that also Wittgenstein's remarks on St Paul bear certain resemblances to the polemic comparison in *The Antichrist* of the apostle with Jesus. Nietzsche portrays St Paul as being of "the opposite type to that of the 'bringer of glad tidings'," as "the genius in hatred" (A 617), and as the figure who reformulates Christian practice as theory and dogma. A theoretical or doctrinal exposition constitute St Paul's "means to priestly tyranny" (A 618), his will to power. Parallel to this we could place, firstly, Wittgenstein's veneration for Tolstoy's interpretation of the Gospel message as a matter of intimate, simple, shared existence, and secondly his apparent agreement with Tolstoy's critique of the way the church has institutionalised practice and faith and turned them into dogma and that writer's aversion to the established church as an agency of (political) power.

Wittgenstein rehearses these ideas in a variety of ways. Several of them are sounded in the following remarks, which conclude with an echo of Nietzsche's declaration – in the 1888 works – that the sense of smell, the nose, is one of the most "magnificent instruments of observation" (TI 481). In 1937 Wittgenstein wrote: "The spring which flows gently and limpidly in the Gospels seems to have *froth* on it in Paul's Epistles. Or that is how it seems *to me*. […] [T]o me it's as though I saw human passion here, something like pride or anger, which is not in tune with the humility of the *Gospels*. It's as though he *is* insisting here on his own person, *and doing so moreover as a religious gesture*, something which is foreign to the Gospel. I want to ask […]: "What might Christ have said to Paul?" […] In the Gospels – as it seems to me – everything is *less pretentious*, humbler, simpler. There you find huts; in Paul a church. There all men are equal and God himself is a man; in Paul there is already something like a hierarchy; honours and official positions. – That, as it were, is what my NOSE tells me" (CV 30).[†]

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[†] My thanks to Peter Cripps for his translation of this paper.