LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, sometime Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge and Fellow of Trinity College, is dead. His only published work, apart from a short address to the Aristotelian Society in 1929, was his celebrated *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the English version of which appeared in 1922. To have written that book, accepted as it is on all sides as novel, profound and influential, would have been enough to make him one of the most important philosophers of this century. Many others have since developed and reacted against the numerous obscurely expressed but fruitful suggestions with which that book is packed. But in the last twenty or so years of his life Wittgenstein turned his back on the *Tractatus* and went on to produce and to teach at Cambridge a whole new way of philosophizing. None of this later work has been published. Yet its effect on Australasian and American philosophy and its enormous effect on philosophy in Britain is apparent to anyone familiar with it who compares the sort of thing philosophers used to write twenty years ago with what very many of them write today. It is perhaps even more evident if one compares the technique of oral discussion then and now. This effect Wittgenstein produced by teaching, each year, a small group of students at Cambridge. It was natural, therefore, that to those outside his immediate environment he should seem to be a mysterious figure.

This short notice does not attempt to give an account of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, merely to say something about the
surroundings of that philosophy: to give, while memories are fresh, something that would partly answer such questions as What sort of man was Wittgenstein and how did he teach? It is possible that these personal impressions may be misleading; the man and his philosophy were complex.

There was nothing mysterious about Wittgenstein. He was a University figure and there was plenty of uninformed personal gossip about him; this was fluff. What mattered was the work to which he gave his energy. He used to lecture two afternoons a week during term, starting usually at two. In recent years the lectures used to last for two hours, but in the thirties they went on longer—sometimes for more than four hours. Some years they were held in Wittgenstein's room, high over the gate of Whewell's Court, sometimes in a small classroom in Trinity or in someone else's rooms. When you entered his room for a lecture you found some fifteen or twenty wooden chairs and one deck chair facing the fireplace, before which stood a black iron anthracite stove. To the right below the window a trestle table with papers. On the mantelpiece a low-powered bulb on a retort-stand. Behind you a small bookcase with two or three books. Wittgenstein stood waiting, occasionally glancing at a watch which he pulled out of his breast pocket. A short, slightly-built man in grey trousers, open-necked shirt and suede golfing jacket. His face was ruddy and very deeply lined, the eyes sharp blue and the hair (in the thirties) brown and curly. The audience would consist of all those who were taking the Moral Sciences tripos seriously, about the same number of those who had recently taken the tripos, one or two other undergraduates, a philosophy don, perhaps a maths don, one or two research students from overseas.

Each year the lectures were on some philosophical problem—on the "other minds" puzzle, for example, or on the status of mathematical propositions. But whatever the problem, such was Wittgenstein's technique, by the end of the year most of the main philosophical issues would have been touched on and illuminated, directly or by implication. The technique
was at first bewildering. Example was piled up on example. Sometimes the examples were fantastic, as when one was invited to consider the very odd linguistic or other behaviour of an imaginary savage tribe. (E.g., “Suppose the members of the tribe decorate the walls of their houses by writing on them rows of Arabic numerals—and suppose that what they write is exactly what would be written by someone doing arithmetical calculations. They do it exactly right every time, but they never use it except for internal decoration—never use it in computing how much wood they need to build a hut or how much food they need for a feast, and so on. Would you say they were doing mathematics?”) Sometimes the example was just a reminder of some well-known homely fact. Always the case was given in concrete detail, described in down-to-earth everyday language. Nearly every single thing said was easy to follow and was usually not the sort of thing anyone would wish to dispute. (“I shan’t say anything that you won’t all immediately agree with”, said Wittgenstein once, “and if you do dispute something I’ll drop it and go on to something else.”)

The considerable difficulty in following the lectures arose from the fact that it was hard to see where all this often rather repetitive concrete detailed talk was leading to—how the examples were interconnected and how all this bore on the problem which one was accustomed to put to oneself in abstract terms. The story of the tribe was interesting enough; one could agree that in real life one mostly did arithmetic as part of such operations as making a chair or buying groceries, and that for pure mathematicians the great thing about mathematical calculations was often their charm. But one often felt like making such a protest as: “What I want to know is, are mathematical propositions synthetic a priori?—and what has all this to do with my problem?”

Wittgenstein once, in lectures, gave the following sort of description of his procedure. (Here and elsewhere what appears as a long quotation is not a transcription of something taken down at the time but is a reconstruction from memory of approximately what was said.) “In teaching you philosophy
I'm like a guide showing you how to find your way round London. I have to take you through the city from north to south, from east to west, from Euston to the embankment and from Piccadilly to the Marble Arch. After I have taken you many journeys through the city, in all sorts of directions, we shall have passed through any given street a number of times—each time traversing the street as part of a different journey. At the end of this you will know London; you will be able to find your way about like a born Londoner. Of course, a good guide will take you through the more important streets more often than he takes you down side-streets; a bad guide will do the opposite. In philosophy I'm a rather bad guide..."

Usually at the beginning of the year Wittgenstein would warn us that we would find his lectures unsatisfactory, that he would go on talking like this for hours and hours and we would get very little out of it. Plainly he was sensitive to the sort of audience he had. He wanted a small group of people who, knowing what was in store for them, were prepared to put in a full strenuous year with him learning philosophy. Visitors, even distinguished visitors, who wanted to attend a few lectures to "find out what sort of thing Wittgenstein is doing" were not welcome, but anyone was welcome who seriously wanted to learn philosophy (and not just to hear Wittgenstein). And, if we had to work hard, Wittgenstein worked tremendously hard. He spoke without notes. Each lecture was obviously carefully prepared—its general strategy planned and numerous examples thought up. But in the lectures he thought it all through again, aloud. Members of the class would chip in briefly from time to time, though usually to make a suggestion in response to some question which was posed. At times Wittgenstein would break off, saying "Just a minute, let me think!!" and would sit for minutes on end, crouched forward on the edge of a chair, staring down at his upturned palm. Or he would exclaim with vehement sincerity: "This is as difficult as hell!!"
At first one didn’t see where all the talk was leading to. One didn’t see, or saw only very vaguely, the point of the numerous examples. And then, sometimes, one did, suddenly. All at once, sometimes, the solution to one’s problem became clear and everything fell into place. In these exciting moments one realized something of what mathematicians mean when they speak of the beauty of an elegant proof. The solution, once seen, seemed so simple and obvious, such an inevitable and simple key to unlock so many doors so long battered against in vain. One wondered how one could possibly have missed it, how anyone else could possibly fail to see it. But if one tried to explain it to someone else who had not seen it one couldn’t get it across without going through the whole long, long story. Wittgenstein once described the situation in philosophy thus: “It is as if a man is standing in a room facing a wall on which are painted a number of dummy doors. Wanting to get out, he fumblingly tries to open them, vainly trying them all, one after the other, over and over again. But, of course, it is quite useless. And all the time, although he doesn’t realize it, there is a real door in the wall behind his back, and all he has to do is to turn round and open it. To help him get out of the room all we have to do is to get him to look in a different direction. But it’s hard to do this, since, wanting to get out, he resists our attempts to turn him away from where he thinks the exit must be.”

Wittgenstein held that no answer to a philosophical question was any good unless it came to a man when he needed it. This involved an attempt to make you see that you really did need such an answer. Add to this that he “hoped to show that you had confusions you never thought you could have had”. It would be fair to say that he tried to work his way into and through a question in the natural order and in the non-technical way in which any completely sincere man thinking to himself would come at it. (“You must say what you really think as though no-one, not even you, could overhear it.” “Don’t try to be intelligent; say it; then let intelligence into the room.”) Whether this ideal is realizable in the form
of a book is, in the opinion of many, not yet known; whether, if it were, the book would look much like what we think of as a philosophy book is discussable.

Wittgenstein was not, it seems clear, in any conventional sense a religious man. He never gave any extended presentation of his views on religion, nor, if he had done so, would it have been possible to summarize them without being misleading. The following may, however, give some clue to his attitude: A student in a mood of deep depression, for which he felt that Wittgenstein's philosophy was in some way responsible, went to Wittgenstein and explained: "Life seems to me pretty pointless and futile. In a few years I shall have ceased to exist. And it's no consolation that human life will go on. It may be millions of years yet, but in time the sun will cool down, life will become extinct, and it will all be as if life had never been." Wittgenstein replied: "Suppose you were sitting in a room, facing a door which was completely black. You sit and stare fixedly at it, impressing on your mind its total blackness, and saying to yourself sombrely over and over again, 'That door is black! That door is black!' After a bit you could easily begin to feel miserable about it, and to feel that it was the blackness of the door that was the melancholy fact which had produced your gloom."

He had complete respect for religious people, and for those non-philosophers who do their chosen job and follow their chosen way of life as well as they can. At times he would even try to persuade students who hoped to become professional philosophers to give it up and take a "decent" job, such as that of a mine manager or a farmer. He felt, apparently, that the life of a philosopher was a very strenuous and a very, very exacting one, not to be entered upon lightly but soberly and advisedly. He had a horror of slickness—of philosophical opinions arrived at by any process other than an honest whole-hearted strenuous endeavour to find out the truth for oneself. He had no time for those who held philosophical opinions because they were fashionable, or because some eminent philosopher had advanced them—especially no
time for those who held opinions for the reason that Wittgenstein had advanced them. (In a similar way he spoke with great respect of Freud, whom he described as a great man, but had little time for most of Freud’s followers.) For example, at a time when the “Verification Principle” was fashionable in many quarters, he remarked at the Moral Sciences Club: “I used at one time to say that, in order to get clear how a certain sentence is used, it was a good idea to ask oneself the question: How would one try to verify such an assertion? But that’s just one way among others of getting clear about the use of a word or sentence. For example, another question which it is often very useful to ask oneself is: How is this word learnt? How would one set about teaching a child to use this word? But some people have turned this suggestion about asking for the verification into a dogma—as if I’d been advancing a theory about meaning.”

As a philosopher Wittgenstein seemed to work in almost complete independence of other philosophers other than the members and past members of his class. In lectures he hardly ever mentioned anyone else by name, nor did he quote or discuss what anyone else had written, except that once or twice he would discuss a point from someone’s writings which he said he had been told of. He chose his friends and companions from among those around him who, judged by his own austere standards, seemed to him to be serious in their devotion to philosophy. He was known to speak against those whose conversation “came neither from the heart nor from the head”.

It cannot be said that Wittgenstein was happy about the effect of his work. Rightly or wrongly, he appeared to believe that philosophical questions were very much harder than, in his view, many philosophers thought. He spoke about the “lack of deep puzzlement” in the work of a well-known philosophical movement. Some other philosophers whose work was plainly influenced by some of his teaching he was heard to describe (on slight evidence) as “more linguists than philosophers”: in his view they did not come at problems in a natural way but rather fitted situations into prepared
linguistic boxes. Which of these ways of philosophizing is preferable, and whether they should be as sharply distin-
guished as Wittgenstein appeared to distinguish them, will, no doubt, be keenly debated for some time.

It is not the purpose of this memoir to speak of Wittgen-
stein's activity outside philosophy. He was a man of great aesthetic sensibility. His lectures were delivered in spare and vivid prose. His occasional comments on pictures were those of a man who had an insight into what the artist was trying for. For a short time he had considered music as a career. About a don who criticized Blake he said, "He can't under-
stand philosophy; how could you expect him to understand a thing like poetry?".

There are many sorts of human excellence. Not least among them is the excellence of one who devotes his whole life, giving up all else, to the attempt to do one single thing supremely well. That Wittgenstein did. How far he succeeded, those who come after us will tell.