Declining decline: Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture

Stanley Cavell

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Granted a certain depth of accuracy in citing an aspect of Spengler as an enactment of an aspect of Wittgenstein's thought, Wittgenstein's difference from Spengler should have depth. One difference can be characterized by saying that in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein *diurnalizes* Spengler's vision of the destiny toward exhausted forms, toward nomadism, toward loss of culture, or of home, or community; he depicts our everyday encounters with philosophy, with our ideals, as brushes with skepticism, wherein the ancient task of philosophy, to awaken us, or bring us to our senses, takes the form of returning us to the everyday, the ordinary, every day, diurnally.

The idea of a philosophy of culture signals something fundamental, if not yet quite surveyable, in Wittgenstein's teaching, internal to it; it is a way of seeing the teaching. This means that I do not take Wittgenstein's observations (those I know, say those collected in Professor von Wright's admirable collection of passages from Wittgenstein's unpublished manuscripts, translated under the title *Culture and Value*) on, for example, music and Jewishness and originality and architecture and Shakespeare, to constitute Wittgenstein's claim as a philosopher of culture. In themselves those observations are on the whole not as interesting as those to be found on these or similar subjects in the pages of, let us say, Theodor Adorno's cultural criticism, and certainly not in those of Hannah Arendt, let alone in comparable pages of Kafka or Freud, or those of Nietzsche or Marx, figures of something like Wittgenstein's intellectual distinction and force. Wittgenstein's remarks on so-called cultural matters of the sort I cited are primarily of interest because it is Wittgenstein who has made them. That is no small matter to understand; it requires us to ask who or what Wittgenstein is, and what then constitutes his claim as a philosopher of culture, and how that is internal to his teaching.

To say what such questions entail will be my way of heeding Professor von Wright's caution in his Preface to *Culture and Value* that 'these notes can be properly understood and appreciated only against the background of Wittgenstein's philosophy'. I should add at once that by 'Wittgenstein's philosophy' or 'Wittgenstein's teaching' I will always, and almost always
exclusively, mean what is contained in *Philosophical Investigations*. One may object to this procedure that one cannot understand that work without seeing it in its development from the *Tractatus* and from the work of the 1930s. That may be so; so may the reverse. My subject here, however, can only be the *Investigations*, as I have inherited it in the philosophical work I do. Of the differences in my way of seeing the *Investigations* from the ways of others that I am familiar with, certain differences of emphasis are of immediate pertinence in sketching, even in a few strokes, what I mean by saying that there is a perspective from which Wittgenstein's philosophy may be seen as a philosophy of culture. I think of them as different directions of answer to the questions: What is the everydayness or ordinariness of language? and What is a form of life?

I. Everyday as Home

I continue to be caught by Wittgenstein's description of his itinerary as asking oneself: 'Is the word ever actually used this way in the language-game which is its original home?' (§116). It expresses a sense that in philosophy (wherever that is) words are somehow 'away', as if in exile, since Wittgenstein's word seeks its *Heimat*. 'What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.' Wir führen die Worter . . . We as opposed to 'philosophers' (to that side of ourselves); and, I think, the way we 'bring' them as opposed to the way philosophers 'use' them. (From which point of view is the idea of 'use' seen here, from that of philosophy or that of the everyday? Is the everyday a point of view? Is thinking so itself a philosophical distortion? Then perhaps there is a suggestion that to think of the daily round of exchange as 'using' words is already to surmise that we misuse them, mistreat them, even every day. As if the very identifying of the everyday may take too much philosophy.) It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein's practice if we translate the idea of bringing words back as leading them back, shepherding them; which suggests not only that we have to find them, to go to where they have wandered, but that they will return only if we attract and command them, which will require listening to them. But the translation is only a little better, because the behavior of words is not something separate from our lives, those of us who are native to them, in mastery of them. The lives themselves have to return.

II. Life Forms

Wittgenstein's idea of forms of life is, I believe, typically taken to emphasize the social nature of human language and conduct, as if Wittgenstein's
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mission is to rebuke philosophy for concentrating too much on isolated individuals, or for emphasizing the inner at the expense of the outer, in accounting for such matters as meaning, or states of consciousness, or following a rule, etc.; an idea in the line of business with what he calls practices or conventions. Surely this idea of the idea is not wrong, and nothing is more important. But the typical emphasis on the social eclipses the twin preoccupation of the Investigations, call this the natural, in the form of ‘natural reactions’ (§185), or in that of ‘fictitious natural history’ (p. 230), or that of ‘the common behavior of mankind’ (§206). The partial eclipse of the natural makes the teaching of the Investigations much too, let me say, conventionalist. When he says, ‘That [agreement in language] is not agreement in opinions but in form of life’ (§241), a conventionalized sense of form of life will support a conventionalized, or contractual, sense of agreement. But there is another sense of form of life that contests this. Call the former the anthropological sense, or horizontal sense. Contesting that, there is the biological or vertical sense. Here what is at issue are not alone differences between promising and fully intending, or between coronations and inaugurations, or between barter and a credit system, or between transferring your sword from one hand to the other and giving your sword into the hands of another; these are differences within the plane, the horizon, of the social, of human society. The biological or vertical sense of form of life recalls differences between the human and so-called lower or higher forms of life, between, say, poking at your food, perhaps with a fork, and pawing at it, or pecking at it. Here the romance of the hand and its opposable thumb comes into play, and of the upright posture and of the eyes set for heaven; but also the specific strength and scale of the human body and of the human sense and of the human voice.

III. The Investigations as a Depiction of our Times

(i) Let us see whether we can now sketch what I called a perspective from which a writer of the Investigations is a philosopher – even a critic – of culture. I start here from a variation on a question Professor von Wright poses in his paper ‘Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times’. Von Wright asks whether ‘Wittgenstein’s attitude to his times’, while naturally essential to understanding Wittgenstein’s intellectual personality, is also essential in understanding Wittgenstein’s philosophy (op. cit., p. 118). Von Wright describes the attitude in question, for good reason, as Spenglerian, and he sees the link between the attitude and the conceptual development of the philosophy in ‘Wittgenstein’s peculiar view of the nature of philosophy’. Because of the interlocking of language and ways of life, a disorder in the former reflects disorder in the latter. If philosophical problems are symptomatic of language
producing malignant outgrowths which obscure our thinking, then there must be a cancer in the Lebensweise, in the way of life itself. (p. 119)

Given my sense of two directions in the idea of the form of life, the appeal here to 'a cancer in the way of life' makes me uneasy. 'Way of life' again to me sounds too exclusively social, horizontal, to be allied so directly with human language as such, the life form of talkers. And the idea of a cancer in a culture's way of life does not strike me as a Spenglerian thought. 'Cancer' says that a way of life is threatened with an invasive, abnormal death, but Spengler's 'decline' is about the normal, say the internal, death and life of cultures. I quote three passages from the Introduction to The Decline of the West.

I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history . . . the drama of a number of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its own life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in its own image; each having its own idea, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death . . ..

[E]very Culture has its own Civilization. In this work, for the first time the two words, hitherto used to express an indefinite, more or less ethical, distinction, are used in a periodic sense, to express a strict and necessary organic succession. The Civilization is the inevitable destiny of the Culture. . . . The 'Decline of the West' comprises nothing less than the problem of Civilization.*

These cultures, sublimated life-essences, grow with the same superb aimlessness as the flowers of the field. They belong . . . to the living Nature of Goethe, and not to the dead Nature of Newton. I see world-history as a picture of endless formations and transformations, of the marvelous waxing and waning of organic forms.

I am not in a position to claim that Wittgenstein derived his inflection of the idea of forms of life from Spengler's idea of cultures as organic forms (or for that matter from Goethe's living Nature), but Spengler's vision of Culture as a kind of Nature (as opposed, let us say, to a set of conventions) seems to me shared, if modified, in the Investigations.

Nor, similarly, as I have implied, do I think that the Investigations finds disorder in language. I, of course, do not deny that Wittgenstein may earlier have thought this; if he did, then in his progression to the Investigations he became more Spenglerian. Or he may have remained ambivalent about it; then take what I am here reporting as my impression of his Spenglerian valence. This means that I think the griefs to which language repeatedly comes in the Investigations should be seen as normal to it, as natural to human natural language as skepticism is. (Hume calls skepticism an incurable malady; but here we see the poorness of that figure. Skepticism, or rather the threat of it, is no more incurable than the capacity to talk, though that too chronically causes us sorrow.)
griefs to which language comes are not disorders, if that means they hinder its working; but are essential to what we know as the learning or sharing of language, to our attachment to our language; they are functions of its order.

(ii) When Wittgenstein finds that '[p]hilosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (§109) he is, as I understand him there, naming language less as the efficient cause of philosophical grief, than as the medium of its dispelling. One may perhaps speak of language and its form of life – the human – as a standing opportunity for the grief (as if we are spoiling for grief) for which language is the relief. The weapon is put into our hands, but we need not turn it upon ourselves. What turns it upon us is philosophy, the desire for thought, running out of control. That has become an inescapable fate for us, apparently accompanying the fate of having human language. It is a kind of fascination exercised by the promise of philosophy. But philosophy can also call for itself, come to itself. The aim of philosophy's battle, being a dispelling – of bewitchment, of fascination – is, we could say, freedom of consciousness, the beginning of freedom. The aim may be said to be a freedom of language, having the run of it, as if successfully claimed from it, as of a birthright. Why intellectual bewitchment takes the forms it takes in the *Investigations* we have not said – Wittgenstein speaks of pictures holding us captive, of unsatisfiable cravings, of disabling sublimizings. He does not, I think, say very much about why we are victims of these fortunes, as if his mission is not to explain why we sin but to show us that we do, and its places.

I assume this is not exactly how others read the passage about the battle against bewitchment. But how close it is to, and distant from, a more familiar strain of reading may be measured by a small retranslation of a sentence from a passage two sections earlier (§107): 'We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk.' It is important to me – speaking of closeness and distance – to recall here Kierkegaard's stress on walking as the gait of finitude; and to note that for a similar cause walking is a great topic of Thoreau's. Wittgenstein's passage continues in German as follows: 'Wir wollen gehen; dann brauchen wir die Reibung.' Professor Anscombe translates: 'We want to walk; so we need friction.' This takes our wanting to walk as a given; but suppose, as in Kierkegaard and in Thoreau, walking is specifically a human achievement, a task in philosophy. I change the connective: 'We want to walk; then we need friction.' Now this makes our wanting to walk as conditional – I might almost say as questionable – as our need for friction: If we want to walk, or when we find we are unable to keep our feet, then we will see our need
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for friction. The philosopher portrayed in the *Investigations*, confronted by unsatisfied interlocutors, has to show them their dissatisfactions, their loss of progress. This is not, to be sure, *making* someone want; it is at most helping them to allow themselves to want, but turned around the point of genuine need. May not such a role be one occupied by a philosopher of culture?

(iii) Noting that both Wittgenstein and Spengler write of a loss of human orientation and spirit that is internal to human language and culture, not an invasion of them, I cannot use an idea of the distortion of language and culture as what von Wright calls a 'link' between Wittgenstein's writing and Spengler's. But von Wright's sense of a link from Wittgenstein's philosophy to a Spenglerian attitude to his times still needs accounting for. I understand such a sense in two stages. It takes it as essential for a philosophy of culture to present its attitude to its times, the attitude that motivates the philosophy; and it takes Wittgenstein's attitude to be difficult to articulate, or difficult to assume. Since I have in effect claimed that there is a perspective from which the *Philosophical Investigations* may be seen as presenting a philosophy of culture, I have implied that its attitude to its time is directly presented in it, as directly as, say, in Spengler, or as in Freud or Nietzsche or Emerson. Then the difficulty in articulating the difficulty of Wittgenstein's attitude is the difficulty of finding this perspective.

Yet—so I will claim—the perspective is the one that will sound impossibly direct. My claim is that the *Investigations* can be seen, as it stands, as a portrait, or say as a sequence of sketches (Wittgenstein calls his text an album) of our civilization, of the details of what Spengler phrases as our 'spiritual history' (op. cit., p. 10), the image of 'our own inner life' (ibid., p. 12). Then how shall we describe the details of the *Investigations* so that they may be seen to express 'an attitude'—that is, so that the sequence of sketches appear as details, details as it were of one depiction, a depiction of a culture?

I have meant various of my accounts of the events in the *Investigations* as instances of such descriptions. The way I note the book's recurrence to ideas of disorientation and loss and turning is such an instance; another is of its scene of ice as posing the choice between purity and walking; another is of its characterization of philosophy as the bearer of fascination (bewitchment) which it itself must challenge. (I believe I can be trusted to know that there are those who will take such considerations to be merely literary. Perhaps I should say explicitly that I can speak only for those who take Wittgenstein's work to be the work of a major [meaning what?] writer, and sense that his philosophy demanded this writing of itself. The merely literary is as impertinent to such writing [call it literature] as it is to anything [else] you may call philosophy.) Let us fill in some more details.
(iv) The *Investigations* is a work that begins with a scene of inheritance, the child's inheritance of language; it is an image of a culture as an inheritance, one that takes place, as is fundamental to Freud, in the conflict of generations. The figure of the child is present in this portrait of civilization more prominently and decisively than in any other work of philosophy I can think of (with the exception, if you grant that it is philosophy, of *Émile*); it discovers or rediscovers childhood for philosophy (the child in us) as Emerson and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard discover youth, the student, say adolescence, the philosophical audience conscious that its culture demands consent; youth may never forgive the cost of granting it, or of withholding it. The child demands consent of its culture, attention from it; it may never forgive the cost of exacting it, or of failing to.

The pervasiveness and decisiveness of the figure of the child in the *Investigations* is determined by Wittgenstein's heading his book with Augustine's paragraph that sets the scene of inheritance and instruction and of witnessing or fascination. Augustine's words precisely set the topics of Wittgenstein's book as a whole, so the scene of his words pervades the book. I recite them: when, my, elders, name, some object, accordingly, move, toward, I, saw, this, grasped, called, sound, uttered, meant, point, intention, shown, bodily movements, natural language of all peoples, expression, face, eyes, voice, state of mind, seeking, having, rejecting, words, repeated, used, proper places, various sentences, learnt, understood, signified, trained, signs, express my own desires. Abstracting the topics this way, the final one seems to stand out oddly against the rest — language as the expression of desire — since it is never separately questioned and since it must be assumed in all the events and adventures of language to follow; it is assumed in the opening example of the book, the presentation of the primitive, somewhat surrealist but perhaps otherwise unobjectionable 'Five red apples' as well as in the definitely objectionable 'When I say "I am in pain" I am at any rate justified before myself' (§289), in which, in reaching to speak outside language-games I can, I think, be described as desiring to make my desire inconsequential, as it were to extinguish the relentless play of my desire, which Freud takes as the goal of desire altogether (in his idea of the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). The *Investigations* ends, roughly, with an investigation of interpretation (seeing as) in which the possibility is envisioned that we lose our attachment to, our desire in, our words, which again means losing a dimension of one's attachment to the human form of life, the life form of talkers.

(v) Along the way there are parables and allegories of language and of philosophy, as for example in the scene, following that of the apples, of the builders. Since the scene of the builders exemplifies a language more
primitive than ours and is also part of a primitive idea of the way language functions, it is one enactment of what happens to the mind in the straits of philosophy. It is essential that we can, or can seem to, follow Wittgenstein's direction to 'conceive' what he has described there 'as a complete primitive language'.

Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones; there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out; — B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. — Conceive this as a complete primitive language. (§2)

One may well sometimes feel that it is not language at all under description here since the words of the language (consisting of 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam') seem not to convey understanding, not to be words. (The feeling is expressed in R. Rhees' 'Wittgenstein's Builders', in his Discussions of Wittgenstein.) But while this feeling is surely conveyed by the scene, and must be accounted for, we need not take it as final, or unchallenged, for at least three lines of reason: (1) There are to begin with a pair of competing ways to take the scene, either as presenting something most remarkable or as something quite unremarkable, say as hyperbolic or ordinary; as there are of taking Augustine's words themselves. (Spelling out this doubleness of reaction was for years my way of beginning the teaching of the Investigations. Certain of its consequences are reported and developed in the first half of Warren Goldfarb's 'I Want You to Bring Me a Slab', Synthese 56 [1983], pp. 265-82.) One way of taking the scene pictures the builders as early humans, Neanderthalish, moving sluggishly, groaning out their calls; the other as men like us, but in an environment in which we can as it were realistically account for the 'truncating' of the calls, say an environment full of noise and activity (as a realistic building site will be; Wittgenstein does not say there are no others around and no equipment). In the former case you may not just want to say that understanding is exhibited, but why should we not say, what the idea of describing a primitive language must itself be designed to exhibit, that there is understanding exhibited of a primitive kind? Is this empty? But isn't it what shows up in imagining the movements and voices as sluggish, as 'early'? — the language, the behavior, the understanding are all of a piece, are of a primitive form of (human) life. (A child can be said to have just four words, but then imagine that stage of life with those words, imagine the happy repetitions, the improvised shrieks and coos, the experimental extensions of application, etc. The child has a future with its language; the builders have next to none. Instead of the feeling that the builders lack understanding, I find I
feel that they lack imagination, or rather lack freedom, or perhaps that they are on the threshold of these together.) (2) Something is understood by the builders, that desire is expressed, *that* this object is called for. (This is a claim that one can, for example, readily imagine certain kinds of confusion and correction between the builders.) Therewith an essential of speech is present, a condition of it, and not something that can, as new words are taught, be taught. (3) A further, non-competing interpretation of the builders is as an allegory of the ways many people, in more developed surroundings, in fact speak, forced as it were by circumstances to speak, with more or less primitive, unvaried expressions of more or less incompletely educated desires – here the generalized equipment and noise and the routines of generalized others, are no longer specifiable in simple description. (Is it theory that is wanted?) This may be seen as a kind of political parody of the repetition (or say the grammar) without which there is no language.

(vi) Now take all this, the events of the *Investigations* – from the scene and consequences of inheritance and instruction and fascination, and the request for an apple, and the building of what might seem the first building, to the possibility of the loss of attachment as such to the inheritance; and these moments as tracked by the struggle of philosophy with itself, with the losing and turning of one's way, and the chronic outbreaks of madness – and conceive it as a complete sophisticated culture, or say a way of life, ours. (I assume it is not certain that one can do this, or is doing it. But I do, I guess, assume that it is not essentially less certain than that one can imagine the case of the builders as a complete primitive culture.) Then I will suggest, without argument, that what Wittgenstein means by speaking outside language-games, which is to say, repudiating our shared criteria, is a kind of interpretation of, or a homologous form of, what Spengler means in picturing the decline of culture as a process of externalization.

Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture. . . . Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion . . . death following life, rigidity following expansion, petrifying world-city following mother-earth. They are . . . irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again . . . a progressive exhaustion of forms . . . This is a very great stride toward the inorganic . . . – what does it signify? The world-city means cosmopolitanism in place of 'home' . . . . To the world-city belongs [a new sort of nomad], not a folk but a mob. (Op. cit., pp. 24–25)

Granted a certain depth of accuracy in citing an aspect of Spengler as an enactment of an aspect of Wittgenstein's thought, then Wittgenstein's difference from Spengler should have that depth. I will characterize a difference by saying that Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* *diurnalizes*
Spengler’s vision of the destiny toward exhausted forms, toward nomadism, toward the loss of culture, or say of home, or say community: he depicts our everyday encounters with philosophy, say with our ideals, as brushes with skepticism, wherein the ancient task of philosophy, to awaken us, or say bring us to our senses, takes the form of returning us to the everyday, the ordinary, every day, diurnally. Since we are not returning to anything we have known, the task is really one, as seen before, of turning. The issue then is to say why the task presents itself as returning – which should show why it presents itself as directed to the ordinary.

(Re)turning creates in the Investigations, I keep insisting, a quite fantastic practice, and I have done nothing here to describe the way of the practice, but only to indicate what the stake in it is and why it is difficult to describe. Wittgenstein directs us at one point to the ordinary by demanding: Don’t say ‘must’, but look and see (cf. §66). Since he is there speaking about our insistence on an explanation of how a word refers, he is in effect asking us at the same time to listen, to hear the word – as if he is prescribing philosophy in the face of a mismatch between the eye and the ear, causing a spiritual nausea. This way of placing his prescription is meant to register why the stake is one from which morality – or say morality in isolation from philosophy, from the demand to turn around our needs, not merely redistribute their satisfactions, deep as that need is – cannot command and will not deliver us. This as it were pre-moral, philosophically chronic demand (this destiny) is a piece of the intellectual fervor in the Investigations for which we started out seeking an account.

(vii) In giving us the means to conceive completely of our sophisticated culture (completely: without end) the Investigations does not paint mimetically the circumstances of our way of life, though it conveys the unmistakable impression that our patterns or modifications of the human form of life are undermining that life, deforming it. (If we say that the human life form is the life of the mind, then we have to ask what it sees in itself that drives it to cast itself under.) Here I propose that we take the famous description in the Preface to the Investigations – ‘this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time’ – to be naming the time in question as what is conceived and depicted by and in the work as a whole, in its apparent empty-handedness (My knowledge is completely expressed in the explanations I could give [cf. §75]); its apparent denials, its embarrassments (Explanations come to an end somewhere, This is simply what I do [cf. §§1, 217]); and madness. Its declaration of its poverty is not a simple expression of humility but a stern message: the therapy prescribed to bring light into the darkness of the time will present itself, will in a sense be, starvation; as if our philosophical spirit is indulged, forced to the point of death. And Wittgenstein is fully clear in showing his awareness that his
reader will (should) feel deprived by his teaching (What gives the impression we want to deny anything? What we are destroying is nothing but structures of air [cf. §§118, 305]).

(viii) I have said in effect that the *Investigations* can be seen as a philosophy of culture, one that relates itself to its time as a time in which the continuation of philosophy is at stake. Now, in closing, I ask whether there is reason to insist that the book is to be taken so, that it so to speak seeks this perspective on itself.

For an answer I go back to another remark of Professor von Wright's: '[I think that] Wittgenstein's attitude to his time [a Spenglerian attitude of censure and disgust] makes him unique among the great philosophers' (op. cit., p. 10). The philosophers von Wright compares Wittgenstein with are Plato and Descartes and Kant and Hegel. The Spenglerian attitude – say a question directed to the drift of one's culture as a whole that evinces radical dissent from the remaining advanced thought of that culture – would not make Wittgenstein unique among writers such as Montaigne and Pascal and Rousseau and Emerson and Nietzsche and Freud. So it is worth considering that the sense of Wittgenstein's uniqueness, which I share, comes from the sense that he is joining the fate of philosophy as such with that of the philosophy or criticism of culture, thus displacing both – endlessly forgoing, rebuking, parodying philosophy's claim to a privileged perspective on its culture, call it the perspective of reason (perhaps shared with science); anyway forgoing for philosophy any claim to perspective that goes beyond its perspective on itself. This is its poverty of perspective. But what makes this poverty philosophy?

I say that the philosophy lies in the practice, the commitment to go on in a certain way, call this discontinuously, which is to say, not in an endless deferring of claims that might as well be a gesture toward infinity, say transcendence; rather in a particular refusal of endlessness, in an unguardedness, an openness. It is the practice that constitutes diurnalization, a way or weave of life to challenge the way or weave that exhausts the form of life of talkers. This is how I understand Wittgenstein's claim to give philosophy peace (§133). It is not that philosophy is to be brought as such to an end, but that in each case of its being called for, it brings itself to an end.

(ix) In conceiving of the *Investigations* as the portrait of a complete sophisticated culture, two features bear on the conception of philosophy's poverty. First, in beginning with the words of someone else – in choosing to stop there, in hearing philosophy called upon in these unstriking words – the writer of the *Investigations* declares that philosophy does not speak first. Philosophy's virtue is responsiveness. What makes it philosophy is not
that its response will be total, but that it will be tireless, awake when the
others have all fallen asleep. Its commitment is to hear itself called on, and
when called on — but only then, and only so far as it has an interest — to
speak. Any word my elders have bequeathed to me as they moved obscurely
about me toward the objects of their desires, may come to chagrin me. All
my words are someone else’s. What but philosophy, of a certain kind,
would tolerate the thought? The second feature of the Investigations bearing
on its poverty is that in the culture it depicts nothing is happening all at
once, there is no single narrative for it to tell. What is of philosophical
importance, or interest — what there is for philosophy to say — is happening
repeatedly, unmelodramatically, uneventfully.

But the claim that a philosophical practice of the ordinary, not a morality
or a religion apart from that practice, is what Wittgenstein throws into the
balance against the externalization or nomadism of culture — a practice that
he knows must only doubtfully be listened to — places him structurally in
the position of a prophet. Doesn’t this mean that his students are put into
the position of heralding a prophet? Is this becoming to philosophy?

What is true is: in the culture depicted in the Investigations we are
all teachers and all students — talkers, hearers, overhearers, hearsayers,
believers, explainers; we learn and teach incessantly, indiscriminately; we
are all elders and all children, wanting a hearing, for our injustices, for our
justices. Now imagine a world in which the voices of the interlocutors of
the Investigations continue on, but in which there is no Wittgensteinian
voice as their other. It is a world in which our danger to one another grows
faster than our help for one another.

NOTES
G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953). Unprefixed references are to this work.
Wittgenstein and his Times (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).
5 Ibid., pp. 17–18.

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Stanley Cavell, Department of Philosophy, Emerson Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge,
Mass. 02138, U.S.A.