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### **A vueltas con el atizador de Wittgenstein.**

A pesar de la complejidad incisiva de sus propuestas filosóficas, de su poderosa y concentrada racionalidad lógica, que de tan afilada deriva en ocasiones en una crítica economía de lenguaje nada sencilla de desentrañar, mi interés por Ludwig Wittgenstein viene de atrás, aunque de ninguna manera soy experto con grado alguno en su pensamiento. La celebrada biografía de Ray Monk ("Ludwig Wittgenstein", Anagrama, 1994), por cierto, me pareció una aproximación amena y pedagógica a su vida y pensamiento que, a pesar de ello, no carecía del necesario rigor para enfrentar la tarea. Asimismo, un brillante librito de John L. Casti, "El quinteto de Cambridge" (Taurus, 1998), recreaba un hipotético encuentro entre destacadas figuras del pensamiento contemporáneo (el mismo Wittgenstein, C. P. Snow, Turing, Schroedinger y Haldane) para debatir apasionadamente sobre la posibilidad de la inteligencia artificial, y donde podían apreciarse no sólo las diferencias en los discursos argumentales respectivos, sino también el contraste entre estas marcadas personalidades. Hay incluso una novela policíaca, "Una investigación filosófica" de Philip Kerr (Anagrama, 1996), del todo recomendable, en la que, en medio de una tensa trama negra y futurista, gravita el fantasma del pobre Ludwig encarnado en la implacable lógica de un sutil asesino en serie, el cual toma como apelativo el nombre de nuestro malogrado filósofo. También Randall Collins, en una entretenida y documentada novela, pero literariamente mucho menos lograda, "El caso del anillo de los filósofos" (Valdemar Ediciones, 1988), sitúa a Wittgenstein en el centro de una conspiración criminal de tintes esotéricos, que sirve de excusa para hacer un repaso pintoresco al elenco de grandes intelectos británicos que se cruzaron en la vida de Ludwig (Russell, Keynes, Whitehead,...). Sin embargo, la magnífica novelita de Thomas Bernard, "El sobrino de Wittgenstein" (Anagrama), en realidad apenas evoca a nuestro personaje de un modo directo, es su ausencia lo que resulta más notorio en la misma. Bernard, no obstante, aborda frontalmente la personalidad de Wittgenstein en una novela que todavía no he podido localizar y que tiene por título "Certeza". En fin, más allá de las estrictas fronteras de la academia, el personaje parece que da mucho de sí y, como se puede comprobar, por lo que a mí respecta, he seguido una vía de acercamiento a la figura de Wittgenstein, cuando menos, algo heterodoxa (¿pero dónde quedan su "Tractatus", sus "Investigaciones Filosóficas", sus cuadernos de notas?). Una perspectiva que, desde luego, no resiste un cachetón, analíticamente hablando, aunque sin duda viene a resultar bastante divertida. Y es en este contexto cuando hace pocos días me tropiezo con la anécdota que ha motivado estas letras y con la correspondiente polémica que suscitó en determinados medios escritos (sobre todo, para ser precisos, en el *Times Literary Supplement*). Incidente que todavía me sigue haciendo sonreír, no por ninguna cruel ironía o escepticismo, sino por auténtica deferencia a la humanidad de los personajes intervinientes y a las pasiones que, como en cualquier hijo de vecino, latían tras sus sonados arranques en el fragor de un debate de altos vuelos filosóficos. La anécdota se refiere al encuentro que tuvo lugar en el Cambridge de la posguerra de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el Moral Science Club entre Karl Popper y Ludwig Wittgenstein y a las distintas versiones que de este encuentro han dado los que allí estuvieron presentes. Ambos penetrantes teóricos, ambos austríacos, ambos judíos y, sin embargo, distantes y radicalmente enfrentados en su único y breve cara a cara, hasta rozar lo dramático, lo grotesco o lo cómico, según se mire. La historia, con sus ramificaciones y antecedentes ha sido recogida en un libro de significativo título: "Wittgenstein's Poker" de David Edmond y John Edinow. Y nadie mejor que ellos para resumir el núcleo gordiano de la anécdota en cuestión.

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/158025/202-3259665-8763042>

The correspondence page of the *Times Literary Supplement* is always good for gloves-off, brutal and thoroughly entertaining exchanges between authors and their reviewers or commentators and their critics. But in February and March 1998, a series of seven letters offered the *TLS* reader mystery as well as vitriol. At the heart of the series was the claim that a great philosopher of the last century, [Sir Karl Popper](#) CH FRS FBA, fêted by presidents, prime ministers and Nobel laureates, had lied about his only meeting with another great philosopher, [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#). Was Popper a liar?

Equally intriguing was the fact that the meeting in question had happened over half a century earlier, on the night of October 25, 1946, when Popper had addressed the Cambridge Moral Science Club.

Popper had taken a job at the London School of Economics only a few months before the confrontation. He had spent the Second World War lecturing in New Zealand and was greeted with loud acclaim on arriving in Britain for his book, [The Open Society and Its Enemies](#). This contained an attack on totalitarianism that knocked the foundations from under Marxism as well as the newly defeated Nazism and Fascism. On October 25, however, his deliberate challenge to Wittgenstein, then professor of philosophy, was on quite different ground--it was about the very purpose of philosophy.

Were there real philosophical problems--the conundrum of induction, the relationship between mind and body, the status of knowledge, the question of free will, the understanding of probability and infinity--as Popper argued? Or were these traditional concerns only linguistic puzzles, as Wittgenstein believed, the task of philosophy being to unravel them? Were conventional philosophers spending their lives trying to answer real problems, or were they merely trapped by the confusions of language? It was an argument that reflected the central schism in 20th century philosophy.

**According to the account of the meeting in Popper's autobiography, *Unended Quest* (written 25 years later), he tried to give a list of what he considered to be important philosophical problems. Wittgenstein became more and more agitated, constantly interrupting him and using a fireplace poker to emphasise his interventions. Then, according to Popper, Wittgenstein demanded an example of a moral principle. "Not to threaten visiting lecturers with a poker," replied Popper--whereupon Wittgenstein threw down the poker and left the room, slamming the door.**

But did it all happen as Popper described and others have endlessly repeated? On February 13, 1998, the *Times Literary Supplement* carried a letter in which Peter Geach, a Wittgenstein supporter and eyewitness of the meeting, denounced Popper as a liar. Geach asserted that Wittgenstein had left before Popper uttered his quip. His salvo was prompted by a memoir of Popper by the late Professor John Watkins in which he rehearsed Popper's version of the meeting. In the next edition of the *TLS* Watkins defended his account. Geach then counter-attacked; other eyewitnesses came in with varying accounts of the evening.

This glimpse of such passions still aflame in the supporters of the two philosophers compelled attention. Clearly, an investigation was called for. What had happened and why?

The initial step was to track down the surviving eyewitnesses. The protagonists were dead: Wittgenstein, who was 13 years older than Popper, had died in 1951; Popper had died in 1994. The philosophy dons present had also died. But the rest of the audience were undergraduates and post-graduates, war service making most slightly older than usual. The *TLS* letters yielded three. In the Cambridge University archives was a register of Moral Science Club members for 1946. With the help of their colleges, another six eyewitnesses were eventually located. And what a distinguished set they made: five professors and a High Court judge graced their ranks.

Needless to say all their recollections, patiently dug up for us, differed. Nonetheless, with their memories, the atmosphere of the meeting and of post-war Cambridge came to life. The mesmeric grip exercised by Wittgenstein over his disciples was clear--and how in MSC meetings they backed him like football supporters on the terraces, forming a hostile crowd against which Popper had to battle. The importance of a third great philosopher in the room also became apparent. Bertrand Russell sat between Wittgenstein and Popper, quietly smoking his pipe. Popper believed that Russell was the greatest philosopher since Kant and was desperate to impress him. For Wittgenstein, Russell was some sort of rejected father figure; they had known each other since Russell took Wittgenstein under his wing in the golden days before the First World War.

All this still did not answer the question: why were the interchanges so ferocious? Why was Popper so intent on bringing Wittgenstein down? The circle of inquiry widened. There were the philosophical issues to be clarified and analysed. Then the manners of the protagonists had to be reconstructed. These were not the average run of Cambridge philosophers--well mannered, tolerant, quietly spoken and confidently dull. To be taught by Popper or Wittgenstein or to debate with them was to take your life in your hands. A brutal directness characterised them both. Was this connected with their upbringing and culture? It had to be remembered that these were two Viennese debating amidst the immemorial peace of King's and Cambridge. The former imperial capital of the Habsburg Empire loomed over the story.

Although born a decade apart, both Wittgenstein and Popper were inhabitants of what the satirist Karl Kraus called "the laboratory for world destruction", exposed to the cultural upheaval and political turmoil that led from the last days of the Empire into the maelstrom of Nazism.

Nonetheless, the difference in their circumstances far outweighed the superficial similarities. Ludwig's father, Karl, was a business genius. The Wittgensteins were immensely rich and part of the aristocracy of wealth. And although Ludwig is famous for giving his inheritance to his brother and sisters, he still took advantage of the family property and contacts whenever he felt the need. By contrast, when his lawyer father lost his money after the First World War Popper was plunged into poverty.

Our investigation led us to question whether, from those days, Popper always felt and acted the outsider, his mission in life to attack the accepted and the fashionable. And for an understanding of the confrontation in Cambridge, his exclusion from one Viennese institution seemed particularly significant: the Vienna Circle.

In the late 20s and early 30s, this small discussion group was the centre of the revolution in philosophy which became known as logical positivism. For the Circle's founder, Moritz Schlick, Wittgenstein had a god-like status, even though at this time Ludwig had abandoned philosophy to teach in village schools in Austria. Popper desperately wanted to become a member of the Circle. But in 1932, in another Viennese discussion group, he violently criticised Wittgenstein in front of Schlick.

The Vienna connection prompted a new question: was there a personal and social element in the Cambridge confrontation? It was clear that Popper had an intense dislike of Wittgenstein. Did he see him embodying everything that he resented--fashion, effortless acceptance, wealth, dogma? To explore further the backgrounds of the two men, it became necessary to explore their Jewishness.

Both were products of the most assimilated city in Europe, Vienna. Jewish by descent though Christian by upbringing, both could be accused of harbouring anti-Jewish feelings. Nonetheless, the tragic fate of the Jews of Vienna had brought them face-to-face in Cambridge. In 1937 anti-Semitism had driven Popper out of Austria, where he could no longer teach, to New Zealand. In 1939, with Keynes's help, Wittgenstein gained a British passport, so avoiding German nationality after the Anschluss, the union of Austria and Hitler's Germany. Through a financial deal struck with the Nazis, Ludwig's sisters remained safely in Austria throughout the Second World War. Sixteen of Popper's relatives died.

It can only be conjectured how far Popper was conscious of this when he faced Wittgenstein in 1946. What studies of the Jews of Vienna do tell us is that no matter what the degree of assimilation or acculturation, there was always some bond, some act of recognition between Jews, ever denied a final acceptance by gentile society.

That night in Cambridge saw no ordinary confrontation between two philosophers. It was a clash of history. What had set out as a "Copenhagen" investigation--to discover if Popper lied--had become a story of our time.