

Aphorism and the subversion of culture: From Lichtenberg to Wittgenstein

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The line of German-language aphorists that begins with Lichtenberg and passes through Nietzsche effectively dies with the last, Wittgenstein. In their hands, the aphorism is a form of expression employed to communicate a moral sensibility at odds with wider trends that came to dominate European thought and culture during the Enlightenment, trends that might fairly be said to continue to the present day. Like Lichtenberg, Wittgenstein uses aphorism to carve out a third alternative between the rationalist and romantic frameworks of thought and value recognized during their own lives, an alternative that could not be described within the confines of more familiar academic styles of writing. The aphorisms of Lichtenberg and Wittgenstein convey an alternative vision of meaning and understanding that is itself at odds with both the English essay and the German dissertation, both of which expect a systematicity antithetical to the vision itself. Wittgenstein's distaste for modernity is often misunderstood as equivalent to the retrograde social ideals of Oswald Spengler and Otto Weininger, two controversial thinkers whom Wittgenstein did indeed admire, but from whom he differed on fundamental issues. By attending to the sort of thinking that emerges from Wittgenstein's use of aphorism, one sees that Wittgenstein's vision is more hopeful. Spengler argues that we are in the winter of our civilization, a time of spiritual withering in which authentic religious faith is impossible and art unavoidably sterile because of the natural cycle of birth, flourishing and death through which all civilizations pass. The death of religion and art are, for Spengler, an historical inevitability. Wittgenstein shares Spengler's despondency over the spiritual emptiness of early twentieth-century European civilization, but none of his historical determinism and little of Spengler's dismal assessment that individuals cannot transcend their context. Wittgenstein employs aphorism to spur the reader to change his way of thinking, most especially his thinking about what constitutes meaning. Wittgenstein is known as a philosopher of language, and he was indeed centrally concerned with the meaning of words, but he extended his basic insights to the meaning of art, ritual, human gesture, and much else. Wittgenstein employs Lichtenberg's method of aphoristic writing because it almost uniquely has the capacity to spur his readers to become aware of the implicit assumptions and habits of thought that blind them to the real nature of meaning and to the meanings that are possible in art, religion, and other spiritually significant domains of life.