"A *picture* held us captive"

On Aisthesis and Interiority in Ludwig Wittgenstein, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, and W.G. Sebald

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A brief summary

Ludwig Wittgenstein's rarely discussed interest in aesthetics (also in the wider sense of *aisthesis* or perception) is paradigmatically manifest in his private notes and in the literary form of his philosophical writings. Furthermore, his keen interest in literature is revealed in his numerous remarks on authors and poets, more frequent than on other philosophers, for instance on Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. Considering the fact that Wittgenstein was intensely reading *The Brothers Karamazov* while finishing his notes for the *Tractatus,* it is not far-fetched to postulate that this novel has influenced the ending of the latter work, especially the non-hypostacizing approach to the subject in the ethical-aesthetic relation to the world. The problem of an adequate representation of interiority (for instance intention), central to later Wittgenstein's anti-Cartesian private language argument, is a major motif in Dostoevsky's novels, as well. Namely, his novels do not express intentionality as informative content within the text, but they "show" it (one might say: aesthetically) and in a non-Cartesian manner by the manner in which the characters' entire perception and engagement with the world is portrayed. The motif of theatricality of bodily expressions of 'inner' intentions and feelings is present throughout Dostoevsky's novels, especially in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Wittgenstein's later ideas on aspect seeing—that perception is closely interrelated with imagination and background knowledge and that therefore the same material stimulus can yield mutually contradicting pictures depending on the aspect under which one is viewing it—are demonstrable in Dostoevsky's novels, which show the discrepancies in mindsets and practices in a rapidly modernizing 19th century Russia.

In the highly theatricalized 19th century, Hegel's analysis of the theatrical mind as expressing emotions and intentions overtly, without necessarily 'truly' feeling them is especially relevant for Russian society of the time. Because modernization proceeded especially rapidly since the Petrine reforms in early 18th century, and in mimicry of western role-models, Russian society displays an especially high degree of theatricality, as it is shown in Potemkin's facades designed to impress foreign dignitaries, as well as the sudden shift to Western style of clothing and manner of legal proceedings. Just like Rameau's nephew in Diderot's play of the same name, whose behavior Hegel analyses as an example of everyday theatricality, several characters in Dostoevsky's novels display a similar theatrical behavior that needs no stage to act the buffoon, like Fyodor Karamazov, or that seeks to manipulate others, like Kolia Krasotkin. This

theatricality demonstrates especially well Wittgenstein's notion of the dependence of 'interiority' on overt public practices and codes, and especially interesting cases in which the changes in these outer frameworks are so rapid that people's 'inner' lives have not yet caught up with the newly establishing outer norms.

In a novel from the brink of the twenty-first century, W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz,* the self is no longer staged and theatricality is no longer the most pertinent category for expressing the relation between the public and the private. Rather, as Jean Baudrillard has diagnosed developments in the late twentieth century, new communication technologies and simultaneous media video coverage of public events have replaced theatricality with a dissolution of the private and the public, the self and the other, in the incessant medialization and the resulting hyperreality. However, far from surrendering to the sea of indifferent information, Sebald's novels seek to circumscribe the real. They do not attempt this along nostalgically realistic and illusionistic lines, rather they go about it by means of presenting images of the past and the insertion of fictional texts as cognitive artifacts of postmemory—of real history. Very much like Dostoevsky's novels, Sebald's works demonstrate that the artificiality of art is not a hindrance to a synopsis of philosophically relevant questions on the relation between the self and larger social, historical and cultural contexts. On the contrary, fictionality provides the "outsidedness" (to use Bakhtin's term) needed to synopsize these relations.

The recurrent mentions of Wittgenstein in Sebald's novels are far from merely ornamental. Rather, the Wittgenstein-motif suggests Sebald's proximity to the former's philosophy, as well: an anti-Cartesian refusal of the opposition between human beings and nature, mind and body, the individual and the social, as well as a more practical approach to language, in which meaning is defined by use as opposed to by reference. Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances—that similarities bind people and phenomena like threads, weaving themselves into a complex textile of resemblances and differences—is both explicitly mentioned in Austerlitz's study of architectural similarities, and it is an aesthetic strategy within *Austerlitz,* in which the main protagonist is juxtaposed and compared with a night-active raccoon and then with Wittgenstein himself. Visual tropes—arguably central to Wittgenstein's philosophy—are present throughout Sebald's novels most obviously in his use of photography, and can be read along the lines of the ethical-aesthetic imperative of empathically rendering suffering visible. For this purpose, both text and images are mobilized, and photographs of actual people and events are cognitive artifacts, used as means for freezing and preserving time. They are employed not merely to tautologically replicate their causal referents (the actual people and places they are pictures of), but to reveal overlooked and elusive aspects of European history.