

Ludwig Has Left the Building

The brief face-off between Wittgenstein and Popper reverberates to this day.

By Jim Holt

ENCOUNTERS between great literary figures are often anti-climactic. The one time that Marcel Proust and James Joyce crossed paths, for example, each reportedly inquired of the other whether he liked truffles, received an affirmative answer, and that was that. When great philosophers bump into each other, however, the results can be more dramatic. Take the sole encounter between Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Karl Popper (1902-94). It occurred the night of Oct. 25, 1946, during a meeting of the Moral Science Club in a small and crowded room in Cambridge, England. Though lasting only 10 minutes, it ended up becoming a famous bit of philosophical lore. Wittgenstein was presiding over the meeting; Popper was the invited speaker, addressing the question "Are there philosophical problems?" Supposedly Wittgenstein got so angry at Popper's remarks that he picked up a poker from the fireplace and began waving it around in an intimidating way. Then he stormed out of the room. At some point Popper, pressed to give an example proving his claim that there were valid moral rules, said something like, "Thou shalt not threaten a visiting lecturer with a poker."

This face-off makes for a great anecdote, but can it sustain a whole book? I wouldn't have thought so before reading "Wittgenstein's Poker." David Edmonds and John Eidinow, both journalists with the BBC, were shrewd enough to spot three terrific angles. First, there is the biographical/historical angle: how did two characters like Wittgenstein and Popper, both of them refugees from the morbid culture of *fin de siècle* Vienna, come to confront each other in the phlegmatic cloister of Cambridge? Second, there is the detective angle: precisely what happened that night, and why are the surviving witnesses still squabbling about it? Finally, there is the purely intellectual angle: what does the fleeting clash between Wittgenstein and Popper say about the schism in 20th-century philosophy over the significance of language? Can we declare one of the antagonists the victor?

At the time of the poker incident, Wittgenstein was regarded as a sort of deity, at least in Cambridge. "God has arrived," John Maynard Keynes said. "I met him on the 5:15 train." Other philosophers were bewitched by Wittgenstein's incandescent genius, his austere ways, his devotion to rigor and clarity and — not least — his good looks and

eccentric mannerisms. (Disciples could not resist imitating his way of clapping his hand to his forehead and shouting "Ja!") His "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," written in the trenches during the First World War, inspired awe with its lapidary, numbered propositions on logic, language, solipsism and the unsayable.

Popper, by contrast, was a homely, ordinary-seeming fellow whose most important work, "The Logic of Scientific Discovery," had yet to appear in English and whose chief intellectual attribute was — unexcitingly — common sense. Whereas Wittgenstein was homosexual (the authors decline to join the controversy over just how active he was), Popper had an adored wife, albeit one whom he could never bring himself to kiss on the lips.

Even their common Viennese origin set these two men apart. Wittgenstein came from the patrician class. His family's home was a palace where the likes of Brahms, Mahler and Klimt were routinely received. When his father, a steel magnate, died in 1913, Wittgenstein became the richest man in Austria and one of the richest in Europe — at least until he gave his fortune to his siblings and took up an ascetic existence. Popper, the son of a lawyer, had a thoroughly bourgeois upbringing; the deprivations he experienced as a Viennese schoolteacher in the 1930's were not self-imposed. Both Wittgenstein's and Popper's families had converted from Judaism, and "Wittgenstein's Poker" gives an especially absorbing account of the uneasy existence of assimilated Jews in Vienna, the seedbed for Hitler and the Holocaust. One arresting detail: to secure non-Jewish status for his sisters so that they could escape Nazism after the Anschluss, Wittgenstein and one of his brothers had to turn over a staggering 1.7 metric tons of gold to the Third Reich, equivalent to 2

percent of Austria's gold reserves.

Despite their differences, Wittgenstein and Popper did have an important trait in common: their "sheer awfulness," as the authors put it, with slight understatement. Popper was a wrathful bully in argument, unable to brook dissent. But Wittgenstein's manner was "unearthly, even alien"; he inspired fear even in those who loved him, and his astuteness of character could cause men and women alike to burst into tears. A tortured soul, obsessed with his own sinfulness, he thought constantly of suicide. (Three of his four brothers had died by their own hands.) The authors, in foreshadowing the poker incident, note that Wittgenstein had a history of shaking sticks at people. They neglect, however, to connect this with a more disquieting incident: when he briefly taught school in a poor Alpine village between the wars, he was forced to resign over allegations that he had repeatedly struck a sickly student, causing him to collapse.

And there was another element that night at the Moral Science Club that promised good theater: Popper, the outsider, was gunning for Wittgenstein. He hated Wittgenstein's idea that philosophy was merely a kind of therapy aimed at releasing us from the confusion caused by the misuse of ordinary language — that its purpose was, in Wittgenstein's round phrase, "to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle." Popper passionately believed that philosophy should be concerned with genuine problems — the relationship between mind and body, the ideal structure for society, the nature of science — and not just linguistic puzzles. "I admit that I went to Cambridge hoping to provoke Wittgenstein . . . and to fight him on this issue," he later wrote. And, as the authors show, Popper was egged on to the battle by Bertrand Russell. Russell had been an ardent champion of the young Wittgenstein, agreeing with him that language pictured the logical structure of reality. But when Wittgenstein renounced the metaphor of language-as-a-picture for the new one of language-as-a-tool, Russell professed to find his subsequent philosophizing "completely unintelligible."

The philosophical bits of "Wittgenstein's Poker" are simple enough to enlighten the beginner and breezy enough not to bore the expert. If Wittgenstein was preoccupied with language, the authors explain, Popper was preoccupied with "openness." The mark of a scientific theory, he held, was that it be open to the possibility of falsification by evidence; the mark of a good society was that it be open to change of government without bloodshed. The book also contains a creditable account of some of the harder problems that Popper thought philosophers should be grappling with, like probability and infinity — both of which, we learn, came up during the poker incident.

As for what else happened, of the 30 or so dons and students in the room that night, nine have survived to give testimony to the authors. Did Wittgenstein brandish the poker menacingly at Popper, or did he merely shake it for emphasis? Did Wittgenstein leave the room after having words with Russell, or when Popper made the crack about not threatening visiting lecturers with pokers? Although none of the witnesses could agree on these terribly important points, the authors nevertheless manage to come up with an enthralling reconstruction of the episode.

So who won on Oct. 25, 1946? If you mean whose legacy has prevailed, the easy answer is Wittgenstein's. In a 1998 poll of professional philosophers, Wittgenstein was ranked fifth among the all-time greats, after Aristotle, Plato, Kant and Nietzsche, and ahead of Hume and Descartes. Popper may remain the favorite philosopher of Margaret Thatcher and his former student George Soros (who says that he made his billions by investing along Popperian lines), but his influence in the academy, never great, is fading. In another sense, though, Popper is the victor. As the authors acknowledge, it is his vision of philosophy that has largely prevailed. Today philosophers carry on as if there are indeed real philosophical problems, problems that transcend the use and misuse of language. (Wittgenstein's attempt to reduce the mind-body problem to a linguistic puzzle, for example, now strikes most philosophers as forced and unconvincing.)

In the culture at large, of course, it is Wittgenstein who dominates. "The invocation of Wittgenstein in a stream of literary and artistic works," the authors write, "is a striking confirmation of the hold he exercises long after his death." Their "Wittgenstein's Poker" now takes its place on the shelf next to such titles as "Wittgenstein's Ladder," "Wittgenstein's Nephew" and "Wittgenstein's Mistress." Against which the Popperians have nothing to set, I suppose, except "Mr. Popper's Penguins." □