

## 7. A Scale of Humanity: Cavell on Mahler and Wittgenstein

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There is no doubt that Ludwig Wittgenstein hated the music of Gustav Mahler. One cannot avoid his abusive remarks on the composer, as he says that “obviously it took a string of very rare talents to produce this bad music” and ponders caustically whether Mahler should have burnt his symphonies or else should have done himself violence so he would not write them at all.<sup>1</sup> Yet one ought not to dismiss Mahler too easily as merely another symptom, alien and uncongenial in Wittgenstein’s eyes, of cultural decline, of the disintegration of the resemblances which unify a culture’s way of life. Wittgenstein may have disliked Mahler’s music, but disliking may still leave open the question about, and the need to come to terms with, one’s urge to misunderstand, something that Stanley Cavell repeatedly flagged as a site for philosophy.

Indeed, Mahler was a genuine problem for Wittgenstein, a limiting case among composers, and that had to do very much with Wittgenstein’s own relation to his times, with the specificity of his, and Mahler’s, situatedness in *Zeit der Unkultur*, an age without culture. There was something important to understand about Mahler’s music for sure, something that one ought to see, but the age without culture bestows itself upon us as a condition of myopia. For how could Mahler make sense of realizing his own otherness? “Should he have written [his symphonies] and realized that they were worthless?” asked Wittgenstein — “But how could he have realized that?”<sup>2</sup> It was the urge to come to terms with the specific sort of myopia pertaining to Mahler that made Mahler philosophically important for Wittgenstein.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 76.

2. *Ibid.*, 76.

Among the notable readers of Wittgenstein, Cavell was perhaps the only one who observed the importance of Wittgenstein's grappling with this condition of myopia pertaining to Mahler. In his essay "A Scale of Eternity,"<sup>3</sup> Cavell probes into what he dubbed Mahler's "Cassandra-like fate" — being blessed with a perfect capacity for telling or expressing the truth and cursed with the fate of forever being misunderstood — in relation to Wittgenstein's predicament (in his own eyes) as a philosopher in an age without culture. Cavell observes that both Mahler and Wittgenstein were concerned with the maddening and distortion of life, a concern which gives rise to a yearning to hear the music in human life and in language. Both exhibit the kind of fear of inexpressiveness or suffocation, and a twin fear of uncontrollable expressiveness and exposure, which are fundamental to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

I propose to take a closer look at this nexus of ideas, which portrays Mahler (reasonably, I contend) as a sort of musical alter-ego for Wittgenstein. In the following discussion, my aim is to establish the following claims. First, Wittgenstein's little studied middle-period diary entries on modern and future music lend support to Cavell's intuition about Mahler's otherness vis-à-vis Wittgenstein. I will argue that, for Wittgenstein, Mahler's music did not fit any of the 'commonplace' absurdities of musical decline. Secondly, Cavell's observation is augmented by his reading (contra Georg Henrik von Wright) of Wittgenstein's diurnalized Spenglerian view of cultural decline. I will argue that, from Cavell's perspective, Mahler's unique promise as a composer may be portrayed as being endowed with the uncanny ability to pronounce the absurd truth of the normal, internal death of high culture music in the West. Thirdly, Wittgenstein's frustration with Mahler had little to do with the simplistic point that he did not care for his music, and everything to do with Mahler's failure (in Wittgenstein's eyes) to capture an artistic after-image of the breakdown of similarities that unify our form of life. I will argue that from Cavell's point of view, this amounts to a failure to revolt against cultural decline by embracing it — a failure Wittgenstein feared he shared with Mahler.

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3. Cavell, "A Scale of Eternity," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 279-85.

Wittgenstein's attitude toward Mahler shows a duality, which, in its general form, is quite typical of his Viennese upbringing.<sup>4</sup> For the Viennese elite, Mahler embodied an irresolvable conflict between his social role as a conductor, a guardian of *high culture* musical tradition, for which he was generally revered, and his quest as a modern composer to give voice to his situatedness in a history of music, which may have reached the limits of its own history. As a composer, Mahler was often lambasted by audience and critics alike for creating music which is both vulgar in its soundscape and irreverent with respect to the requirements of traditional symphonic structure. This conflict took on a particularly acute shape when Mahler's conducting seemed to have succumbed to his composer's whims, investing the structure of the music he performed with so much attention to detail and complexity to the point that its basic design diminished. On occasions Mahler even gave himself artistic license to retouch and reorchestrate Beethoven scores as befits modern times. This eventually resulted in a great scandal in the Vienna Philharmonic, which drove him to resign in 1901 from his position as conductor of the orchestra.

Against this backdrop, it is instructive to lend an ear to nuances in Wittgenstein's responses to Mahler. Wittgenstein's remarks on Mahler's excellence as a conductor may strike a familiar tone, but, interestingly, they concern not so much his prowess in interpreting the works of the great masters of the past, as his rapport with his players, his ability to communicate, to mutually tune-in, to open up anew a field of possibilities for characterizing. When Mahler was not on the podium, says Wittgenstein, the orchestra would collapse, not being able to keep on working on a level which was perhaps not natural to them.<sup>5</sup> But when he was there, he was unsurpassed in this ability to allow his players to make contact with one another in the playing. For Wittgenstein, that was a mark of the human excellence of one whose expertise lies in knowing human beings.<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein wrote to Ben Richards about

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4. See Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), ch. 11.

5. See Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 43.

6. A proficient knower of human beings is endowed with a sensibility to the physiognomy of the human; capacities to perceive and judge the nature, moods, dispositions, and states of mind of other human beings, which to a certain extent we can teach one another. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 239-40, §355-61, and my discussion in "Musicking as Knowing Human Beings," in *Intercultural Understanding After Wittgenstein*, ed. Carla Carmona, David Perez-Chico, and Chon Tejedor (London: Anthem, 2023), 77-91.

Mahler: “Normally, of course, one couldn’t from the gestures of a conductor say much about him, but in this particular case, if you look at those wonderful movements you can see what an extraordinary man this was!”<sup>7</sup>

We need to bear in mind that Wittgenstein’s philosophical thinking about music was largely shaped and regulated throughout his career by the master simile of language as music.<sup>8</sup> The simile brings to the fore all that is fluid, non-mechanical, embedded in ways of life, incalculable and indeterminate in language, first and foremost gesture and expression. It afforded Wittgenstein a spring of powerful analogies, images, and after-images for his career-long philosophical exploration of meaning and understanding, and most pertinently, the communicability of aspects. For him, there was no point in thinking about music without specific characterization, no point in thinking about musical sound apart from its embeddedness in a specific human gesture and its many elaborations in thought, speech and feeling, that is, apart from what Wittgenstein considered to be the preconditions, the lived, embodied realities, of musical intelligibility. Cavell underscored the importance of the master simile of language as music for Wittgenstein by speaking of the philosophical promise of “understanding without meanings” as “a particular form of communication, of revelation, one in which the demand for expression is put to the test (a matter that should open up anew, as in Wittgenstein’s work, the concept of expression). To say that music puts expression to the test is to ask wherein lies my conviction in my own understanding if I cannot justify it to others (which is not the same as convincing others).”<sup>9</sup>

For Wittgenstein, Mahler certainly put expression to the test. And he did so at a time in the history of the West, when “general tendency of this age is to take away possibilities of expression: which is characteristic of age without a culture.”<sup>10</sup> For Wittgenstein, culture at its height enables different people at different times and places to pool their cultural efforts and make use of their tasteful and creative powers

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7. Wittgenstein and Ben Richards, “*I think of you constantly with love...*”: *Briefwechsel Ludwig Wittgenstein – Ben Richards 1946-1951*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Innsbruck: Haymon, 2023), 134 (underlined in original).

8. I discuss this extensively in my new book. See Guter, *Wittgenstein on Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

9. Cavell, *Here and There*, 254.

10. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein: Lectures, Cambridge 1930-1933, From the Notes of G. E. Moore*, ed. David Stern, Brian Rogers, and Gabriel Citron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5:2. The reference is to the original pagination in G. E. Moore’s notes.

in a common spiritual bond.<sup>11</sup> An age without culture shows itself in the disintegration of culture into a host of disjointed efforts and non-discriminating judgments. It is a breakdown of the cohesive forces formerly embodied both in the observance of a shared tradition and in the attempt to work in a common spirit. A disintegration of the similarities that would unite a culture's way of life by enabling human beings to express and experience something exalted or even sacred. Wittgenstein maintained that this breakdown is shown in the disappearance of the arts as we have known them in the time of "Great Culture," as "genuine and strong characters [*Naturen*] simply turn away from the field of the arts" in pursuit of endeavors which are reducible to matters of skill and method.<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein said:

To some degree a house can be determined by calculation, but calculation leaves a certain margin, which architect fills in by sense of beauty etc. In case of bicycle or locomotive there is hardly any room for personal freedom: & so there might be with a house. In that case there would be no more architects. In some cases there is no room for expression of personality — none for nimbus. The moment a method is found, one way of expressing personality is lost.<sup>13</sup>

Wittgenstein's grasp of the condition of modernity as loss of "nimbus" sets the stage for his analysis of the variety of manifestations of myopia pertaining to the modern music of his time, which he approached, as he candidly admitted, "with the greatest mistrust (without understanding its language)."<sup>14</sup> In a rarely discussed remark from 1931, Wittgenstein offered what I maintain is a surprisingly nuanced philosophical outlook on the modern music of his time and the vagaries of not understanding its language.<sup>15</sup> The passage opens with a pronouncement of "nimbus" in cultural times,

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11. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8-9.

12. *Ibid.*, 8.

13. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein*, 5:2.

14. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8.

15. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought: Diaries, 1930-1932, 1936-1937," in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 67-69. I rely here on my own translation of this remark, which preserves what I take as crucial semiotic ambiguities in Wittgenstein's original German. See my full translation and my discussion of this passage in Guter, "The Good, the Bad, and the Vacuous: Wittgenstein on Modern and Future Musics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 4 (2015): 425-39.

saying that the music of all cultural periods always appropriates certain maxims of the good and the right of its own time. In a sense, this is a *logos* within cultural relativity, that is, what human beings have in common within different cultures: they possess a basic common human spiritual nature, which they manifest differently through different cultures. Wittgenstein repeats one of his favorite examples: in Western late Nineteenth-Century high-culture this is how we recognize the principles of Swiss poet Gotfried Keller in the music of German composer Johannes Brahms.<sup>16</sup> It is an illuminating comparison for us as members of this culture — one that yields ways to see further likenesses and differences, and ways to go on discussing and drawing out from the articulation further aspects of what is characterized that are there to be seen in and by means of it — because within a culture human beings share a common spiritual nature that enables them both to partake in culture and to express themselves in a singular cultural way. This is precisely what we lose sight of in an age without culture when character is reduced to intellect and expression of personality gives way to scientific methods. And for that reason, according to Wittgenstein, the very idea of having “good” (that is real, natural, singular, and authentic) modern music is absurd. Such music would inevitably embody a philosophical paradox, for it needs to cohere with the disintegration of the resemblances which unify a culture’s way of life and allow for the aesthetic feat of illuminating comparisons.

For Wittgenstein, the transition to the modern shows itself in some sort of constraint on our ability to conceptualize that very transition. Acknowledging the transition “doesn’t mean that progress has occurred; but that style of thinking has changed.”<sup>17</sup> The very notion of ‘progress’ evinces obfuscation, as Wittgenstein reminds us by means of the quote from Nestroy, which serves as a motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*: “The trouble about progress is that it always looks much greater than it really is.”<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein’s point is that there is something, for sure, to be grasped and expressed amid cultural decline, but we are not astute enough to pronounce new ideals amid the breakdown of ideals. We have become constrained

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16. See Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), IV:32, n.

17. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein*, 5:2.

18. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, xxvii.

by the incommensurability that obtains between us and the past, and hence run up against a paradox: even if we knew “the truth,” we probably would not be able to grasp or convey it. Wittgenstein’s assertion that “the truth would sound entirely paradoxical to all people” immediately suggests Spengler’s similar worry that the philosophers of his present day did not have a real standing in actual life, that they had not acquired the necessary reflective understanding of the time or its many built-in limitations, which philosophizing in the time of civilization requires.<sup>19</sup> This prompts Wittgenstein to suggest a bifurcation between two sub-types of the absurd, hence also between two kinds of myopia pertaining to modern music, which corresponds to a familiar distinction between progressive romantics and classicist epigones among early modern composers as found both in Spengler’s writings and in the music theory of Spengler’s Viennese ideological comrade-in-arms, Heinrich Schenker.<sup>20</sup>

One kind of absurd, Wittgenstein suggested, is music that “corresponds to any of the maxims that are articulated today.”<sup>21</sup> Presumably, all such maxims are derived from the idea of progress. “Our civilization is characterized by the word progress,” Wittgenstein maintained, “Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress.”<sup>22</sup> The form of progress prescribes compulsive over-structuring and obfuscation, and with it, a fragmentation into calculable objects. Its typical activity is “to construct a more and more complicated structure.”<sup>23</sup> The tendency is to render progress as something that transcends epochs, not just a certain “style of thinking.” Thus, the adherence to progress reflects a constraint on seeing that we do not comprehend. For that reason, Wittgenstein calls the kind of music which adheres to progress “nonsensical” (*unsinnig*). To this category belong composers such as Richard Strauss and Max Reger, whose music, Spengler averred, is “a faked music,

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19. Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 69-67. See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 1: Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), 42.

20. Wittgenstein became acquainted around that time with the music theory of Schenker through conversations with musicologist Felix Salzer (Wittgenstein’s nephew), who studied with Schenker in Vienna from 1931 until the latter’s death in 1935. For a survey of the affinity between Spengler’s and Schenker’s worldviews, see Byron Almén, “Prophets of the Decline: The Worldviews of Heinrich Schenker and Oswald Spengler,” *Indiana Theory Review* 17 (1996): 1-24. For a discussion of the textual evidence for Wittgenstein’s familiarity with Schenker’s music theory, see Guter, “The Good, the Bad, and the Vacuous.”

21. Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 67-69.

22. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 9.

23. *Ibid.*

filled with the artificial noisiness of massed instruments.”<sup>24</sup> For Schenker, such romantic progressive composers had no other choice but to try masking the primitive design of their music with heavy orchestration, with noise and polyphonic clatter, and often to resort to vulgar, extra-musical narratives to solve problems of musical continuity. For Wittgenstein, as for Spengler and Schenker, such socially engaging, nonsensically absurd modern music was nothing but “rubbish.”<sup>25</sup>

The other kind of absurdity in modern music corresponds to a downright negation of the form of progress, which, for Wittgenstein (as well as for Spengler and Schenker), was as emblematic of cultural decline as embracing the form of progress. If the latter reflects a constraint on seeing *that* we do not comprehend, the former reflects perhaps an even more frustrating constraint on seeing *what* we do not comprehend, on seeing through. “The composer who feels this within him,” Wittgenstein wrote, “must confront with this feeling everything that is [now] articulated and therefore [his music] must appear by the present standards absurd, timid [*blödsinnig*]. But not engagingly absurd (for after all, this is basically what corresponds to the present attitude) but vacuous [*nichtssagend*].”<sup>26</sup> To the category of such vacuously absurd modern music belong classicist epigones, who continued to produce musical imitations in the style of Brahms well into the Twentieth-Century. Spengler contended that when a culture enters its final phases, artists simply work with the hollow forms of the old culture, without understanding its essence. Similarly, Wittgenstein believed that ideas could become worn out in time, no longer usable, and in this context, he commented: “I once heard Labor make a similar remark about musical ideas.”<sup>27</sup> Strikingly, the single composer he names in regarding the category of vacuously absurd modern music is Josef Labor, who was a protégé of the Wittgenstein family and music teacher for Ludwig’s siblings.<sup>28</sup>

Returning to the case of Mahler, it is eminently clear that Mahler’s music does not sit well in any of these two categories, both from a purely historical-musicological perspective, and, even more striking, from Wittgenstein’s own perspective as evinced by his remarks on Mahler. It goes without saying that Mahler’s music cannot belong

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24. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, 194.

25. Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 67-69.

26. *Ibid.*, 69. Translation modified.

27. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 24.

28. Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 69.

together with Labor's in the category of vacuously absurd modern music. Mahler was anything but a classicist epigone. However, Mahler was also not progressive like Richard Strauss, whose music Wittgenstein despised so deeply that he would not even enter the concert hall when it was played.<sup>29</sup> According to Morgan,<sup>30</sup> as advanced modern composers both Strauss and Mahler were compelled to respond to the atmosphere of crisis brought on by the progressive deterioration of the pitch and rhythmic conventions of "common-practice" tonality, in particular to the neutralization of musical materials, the leveling out and increasing interchangeability of all musical statements, which was a result of the rampant hyper-chromaticism and concomitant tonal decentralization of musical language at the beginning of the Twentieth-Century. But they responded to this challenge in very different ways. Whereas Strauss opted to develop an ever more exaggerated range of musical gestures, which strained the already weakened foundation of tonal music to its breaking point, Mahler "approached the problem from an entirely different direction. As if realizing that Western music history [...] had reached the limits of its own history — had become, that is to say, incapable of continuing to generate consistently progressive evolution — [he] fashioned a new type of music based on older and simpler models largely neglected by the main tradition."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Mahler's highly advanced music seemed strangely outmoded and historically regressive — he was neither brashly progressive like Strauss nor a lackluster conservative like Labor. Indeed, as Wittgenstein observed about Mahler, "you would need to know a good deal about music, its history and development, to understand him."<sup>32</sup>

It is instructive to set Wittgenstein remarks on Mahler's music against the customary critique, which was lashed out at Mahler at the time. Contemporary critics and the public often judged Mahler's symphonies to be both blatantly vulgar or 'lowlife' in substance and disorderly in form. These two aspects are interrelated. Mahler's response to modernity capitalized on introducing musical materials as if from the world of everyday life, the soundscape (real or reimagined) of the common

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29. Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig, 1889-1921* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 124.

30. Robert P. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler: Mutual Responses at the End of an Era," *19th-Century-Music* 2, no. 1 (1978): 72-81.

31. *Ibid.*, 75.

32. John King, "Recollections of Wittgenstein," in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 71.

people, which, unaccommodated to the requirements of traditional symphonic structure, disrupt the pristine purity and autonomy of the revered classical order. In Mahler's music, Morgan explains, "folk and popular elements are no longer neutralized, as in earlier composers, but appear undisguised — in their own clothing, as it were. The sense of intrusion from a foreign musical realm becomes an essential component of the compositional statement, and reflects a radically new conception of the nature and limits of serious musical language."<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein clearly acknowledged the formal deviancy in Mahler's music. He disapprovingly noted that there was something initially incorrect in the architecture of Mahler's music.<sup>34</sup> Yet I take it as a remarkable fact that he said absolutely nothing against the most characteristic, and the most publicly deplored feature of Mahler's musical language: its activation of the vernacular. Instead, Wittgenstein put his finger on something much deeper concerning Mahler's musical language, which troubled him philosophically: the defamiliarization of simplicity. Defiantly opposed to progressive modern composers, who drew on the chromatic saturation of the tonal field, Mahler's modernism retained tonality in the strict, functional sense as an active force. As Morgan points out, it is by means of that very retention of tonality that its transformed historical meaning is reflected in Mahler's music in such a remarkably pointed way.<sup>35</sup> Wittgenstein seems acutely aware of this subtle point as he echoes the standard Viennese charge against Mahler concerning banality: "When for a change the later ones of the great composers write in simple harmonic relations [alternative: progressions], they are showing allegiance to their ancestral mother. Especially in these moments (where the others are most moving) Mahler seems especially unbearable to me & I always want to say then: but you have only heard this from the others, that isn't (really) yours."<sup>36</sup>

The poignancy of Wittgenstein's observation is even more evident when we contextualize it by means of Cavell's interpretation of Spengler's influence on

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33. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler," 74.

34. Wittgenstein told this to G. H. von Wright. See Guter, "A small, shabby crystal, yet a crystal': A Life of Music in Wittgenstein's *Denkbewegungen*," in *Wittgenstein's Denkbewegungen. Diaries 1930-1932/1936-1937: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Ilse Somavilla, Bożena Sieradzka-Baziur, and Carl Hamphries (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2019), 103, n. 136.

35. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler," 73-74.

36. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 93.

Wittgenstein.<sup>37</sup> At the core of Cavell's interpretation there is a basic agreement with Von Wright's contention that under the influence of Spengler, Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy became intimately allied to a way of viewing contemporary civilization and that this intimate connection is shown in the way in which *Philosophical Investigations* expresses a sense of its own time.<sup>38</sup> Yet Cavell sharply disagreed with Von Wright about the character of Wittgenstein's emulation of Spengler's point of view on cultural decline, especially pertaining to Cavell's understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical project.<sup>39</sup> Whereas Von Wright opted to view cultural decline in terms of an abnormal cancerous condition that has invaded our ways of life, Cavell rejected this image of a cultural malignancy, underscoring the stubborn normalcy or everydayness of cultural decline, nothing that "Spengler's 'decline' is about the normal, say the internal, death and life of cultures."<sup>40</sup> According to Cavell,

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, [...] 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.<sup>41</sup>

Cavell's emphasis on the normalcy and mundanity of Spengler's notion of exhausted forms not only affords a way of framing Mahler's otherness as a modern composer in Wittgenstein's ears, but also allows an appraisal of the question, which was so important for Wittgenstein, concerning Mahler's authenticity as a composer in, or better — *for* an age without culture. Therein, I shall argue, lies another sense of

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37. See Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

38. See Georg Henrik von Wright, "Ludwig Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times," in *Wittgenstein and his Times*, ed. Brian F. McGuinness (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

39. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

40. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 336.

41. *Ibid.*, 345.

myopia pertaining to the condition of modernity, which Cavell dubs “a Cassandra-like fate.”<sup>42</sup>

According to Spengler, each culture has certain forms of expression, which are unique to that culture, and in which its artistic accomplishments manifest themselves. These forms of expression are commonly shared and understood by members of the culture. Through these forms, culture members communicate and share their perception of the world and characteristic responses to the world in a living way. Such forms of expression hold the members of the culture together as a unifying force, and the perspective of high culture is enshrined within these forms. Spengler contended that when cultures decline into civilizations these expressive forms become exhausted, depleted, overused and ultimately meaningless. The unified cultural perspective which they prescribe and impose dissipates. They lose their prominence and fascination, and even their accessibility and comprehensibility. As a result, great accomplishments, such as those which have been carried out within those forms of expression, are no longer possible. This is essentially the predicament of the composer of vacuous modern music, according to Wittgenstein.<sup>43</sup> The revolt of such a composer (someone like Josef Labor) against decline is timid, foolish in a sense, as his diminished creative power remains in the confines of rigidified forms of expression, evincing inability — which is also lack of courage, since the composer knowingly confines himself — to see through these decrepit confines onto the changing scale of humanity. It is for this reason, I suggest, that Wittgenstein says that such music is *nichtssagend*, vacuous — literally: saying nothing.

By contrast, Mahler’s modernism is transgressive. Encountering those “simple harmonic progressions” — a token of cultural avowal of a musical “ancestral mother” — in Mahler’s music evoked in Wittgenstein a sense of the uncanny. “That isn’t (really) yours,” Wittgenstein derided Mahler.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the long stretches of “simple music” in Mahler’s symphonies give rise to a kind of paradox due to what Morgan calls “a process of ‘defamiliarization’,”<sup>45</sup> as Mahler transforms the overly familiar or habitual — something we heard or may have heard before — distancing it so as to

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42. Cavell, *Here and There*, 279-80.

43. See Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 67-69.

44. *Ibid.*, 93.

45. Morgan, “Ives and Mahler,” 76.

rekindle its expressive force. “What initially sounds familiar always ends up sounding very different from what we actually expected,” Morgan maintains, “the paradox implicit in this conjunction supplies the crucial point: what seems strange and extraordinary on one level does so only because, on another, it is so familiar and ordinary.”<sup>46</sup> Mahler’s transgression epitomizes the profound change into civilization that is brought about by the exhaustion of form of expression, according to Spengler. As forms of expression become uninhabitable in the time of civilization, the perspective of individuals becomes externalized with respect to those forms. Spengler wrote:

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.<sup>47</sup>

Mahler’s defamiliarization of the ordinary may very well be seen as approximating a full-fledged manifestation of such externalized perspective, hence the most philosophically challenging artistic embodiment of an age without culture, complete with a revolutionary new way of conceptualizing the standing of a musical work within a newly forming scale of humanity — what a musical composition is, how it relates to the surrounding world, the types of material appropriate to it, and the way these materials are to be combined and organized.

Wittgenstein was acutely aware of Mahler’s transgressive new art and its connection with Spengler’s view. “A picture of a complete apple tree, however accurate, in a certain sense resembles it infinitely less than does a smallest daisy,” Wittgenstein wrote in 1931, “and in this sense a symphony by Brucker is infinitely more closely related to a symphony from the heroic period than is one by Mahler. If the latter is a work of art it is one of a *totally* different sort. (But this observation itself

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46. Ibid.

47. Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, 31.

is actually Spenglerian).”<sup>48</sup> In Wittgenstein’s metaphor, compared to a symphony by one of the great masters of the past (the image here is of an organic, living form: a real apple tree), a Mahler symphony is a perfectly executed picture of a complete apple tree while a Bruckner symphony is a smallest daisy, yet real, a living thing. Clearly, for Wittgenstein, the resemblance of Mahler’s music to the music of high-culture is deceptive. It may belong to an entirely new spiritual enterprise that embodies modern civilization. It is the musical equivalent of a *trompe l’oeil* picture, for its true appreciation requires understanding its quest for disorientation — that under certain circumstances it is supposed to replace or be mistaken for that which it resembles. Thus, it calls out for participating in games, which are far removed from those befitting the forms of expression of yore.

Here Cavell’s philosophical extension of Spengler’s view of cultural decline comes into play.<sup>49</sup> It allows us to appreciate the intimate connection, which is the heart of Cavell’s essay “A Scale of Eternity,” between Wittgenstein and Mahler as creative forces in an age without culture. According to Cavell, “what Wittgenstein means by speaking outside language games [...] 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.”<sup>50</sup> From Cavell’s perspective, the disorientations of human language and its philosophical misuses, which Wittgenstein traced and engaged so vividly in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “these moments as tracked by the struggle of philosophy with itself, with the losing and turning of one’s way,”<sup>51</sup> give voice to the loss of home, the repudiation of inheritance, the replacement of shared modes of community expression by artificial ones, which are all symptomatic of the condition of modernity. Cavell wrote: “[T]he philosophical subject of the *Investigations*, the modern ego entangled in its expressions of desire (Wittgenstein speaks both of our urge to understand as well as of our equally pressing urge to misunderstand), is specifically characterized by Wittgenstein in its moments of torment, sickness,

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48. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 17. I argue elsewhere (Guter, “The Good, the Bad, and the Vacuous”) that Wittgenstein’s way of comparing Mahler with Bruckner vis-à-vis the works of the great masters of the past is another evidence for Wittgenstein’s exposure at the time to the music theory of Schenker.

49. See the comparative study of Spengler and Cavell in William James DeAngelis, *Ludwig Wittgenstein – A Cultural Point of View: Philosophy in the Darkness of this Time* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), ch. 4.

50. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 345.

51. *Ibid.*, 344.

strangeness, self-destructiveness, perversity, suffocation, and lostness.”<sup>52</sup> For Cavell, these are concepts that seem to be called for in his experience of Mahler.<sup>53</sup> But I would like to suggest further that they may also serve to unlock Wittgenstein’s intriguing self-directed, agonized remarks on Mahler.

According to Cavell, the diagnosis of becoming disoriented and lost in the world in speaking outside language games gives way to resistance in Wittgenstein’s writings. It is a call to arms, taking over philosophy’s ancient task to awaken us, to bring us to our senses, by means of reorienting us “to the everyday, the ordinary, every day, diurnally.”<sup>54</sup> “It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein’s practice,” Cavell contends, “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.”<sup>55</sup> Clearly, according to Cavell, the crucial task that Wittgenstein conjured for his new way of philosophizing was to find ways to tune-in on the words that got away and so to rein them in once again. This would be the genuine revolt against cultural decline, as opposed to simply negating it, thereby becoming unable to see through it — as in the case of vacuous modern composers — or to embracing the fake form of progress, thereby becoming unable to see the decline at all — as in the case of nonsensical modern composers. For Wittgenstein, the question then becomes all the more focused with respect to Mahler: Did he rise to the occasion? Could he have risen to the occasion?

Seen in this context, Wittgenstein’s double-edged remarks on Mahler bring out not so much his aversion to Mahler’s new form of musical art as his debilitating fear that he was plagued with the same type of myopia, which prevented Mahler, who may have gone further than any other composer of his generation to where the sounds have wandered, from returning and commanding them. In Wittgenstein’s mind there was an intimate link between the puzzle of Mahler as a modern composer and his grappling with his own predicament as a philosopher in an age without culture. These remarks, written over a time span of some seventeen years, feature a remarkable

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52. Cavell, *Here and There*, 267.

53. *Ibid.*, 282.

54. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 345.

55. *Ibid.*, 324.

consistency of tone and substance, thereby showing that this very personal, acute struggle with his musical alter ego was in fact never resolved.

Wittgenstein contended that Mahler failed to be authentic, which, for Wittgenstein, is immediately a failure of character. As Lurie points out, for Wittgenstein the notions of character and culture were bound together: “real, concrete human life emerges only within a culture, and as an expression of character.”<sup>56</sup> This is something Wittgenstein carried over from his reading of Schopenhauer and Weininger concerning the relation between such notions as genius, character, and talent, and it was reinforced by reading Spengler.<sup>57</sup> Following a central theme of the Romantic movement, Wittgenstein maintained that human beings are set apart from one another by their different natures (character), just as human societies are set apart from one another by their different natures (culture). The term *character* designates a feature of human life through which singular and authentic human lives manifest themselves. This unique aspect of human nature “is manifested in the emotions, imagination, personal attitudes, and aesthetics sensibilities from which a person’s actions ensue in a natural and uninhibited fashion.”<sup>58</sup>

The terms “character” and “culture” are both contrasted with the notion of “intellect,” which designates something which is a product of logic, commonly possessed by all human beings — to wit, the ability to think abstractly and to acquire scientific knowledge. Intellect is a feature of human life, which cuts across individuals and cultures, and does not distinguish any of these in particular. Since the notion of human life emerges through intellect as a mere abstract generalization, for Spengler, intellect may serve at most as a basis for the emergence of human life in what he dubs “civilization,” not culture. The contrivance, abstraction, imitativeness, and artificiality of civilization marks the loss of “nimbus,” which Wittgenstein speaks about, as character (“expression of personality”) tends to be reduced to intellect (“method”) in the age without culture.<sup>59</sup> Hence, we witness also the disappearance of “strong and genuine characters” from the arts,<sup>60</sup> whereas the arts, at their greatest moment, were

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56. Yuval Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 47.

57. In 1931, Wittgenstein included Schopenhauer, Weininger and Spengler in a list he made of ten thinkers who influenced him the most. See Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 16.

58. Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit*, 47.

59. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein*, 5:2.

60. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8.

supposed to enable the clearest, most pronounced manifestation of character. Indeed, for Wittgenstein (clearly under the influence of Schopenhauer, Weininger and Spengler), “the measure of genius is character, — even if character on its own does *not* amount to genius. Genius is not ‘talent *and* character’, but character manifesting itself in the form of a special talent.”<sup>61</sup> Being authentic in this sense requires courage. Hence, “one might say: ‘Genius is courage in one’s talent’,”<sup>62</sup> and “to the extent there is courage, there is connection with life & death.”<sup>63</sup>

In a passage written in 1937, Wittgenstein described the form of myopia of modernity pertaining to Mahler (and alarmingly, also to himself) as a failure of character: self-deception due to a lack of courage. The fact that he wrote this passage in code speaks volumes about its personal sensitivity. Wittgenstein wrote:

Lying to oneself about oneself, lying to oneself about one’s own inauthenticity, must have a bad effect on one’s style, for the consequence will be that one is unable to distinguish what is genuine and what is false. This is how the inauthenticity of Mahler’s style may be explained and I am in the same danger. If one is putting up a show to oneself, this must express itself in the style. The style cannot be one’s own. Whoever is unwilling to know himself is writing a kind of deceit. Whoever is unwilling to plunge into himself, because it is too painful, naturally remains with his writing on the surface. (Whoever wants only the next best thing, can achieve only the surrogate of a good thing).<sup>64</sup>

Wittgenstein connects the accusation concerning inauthenticity explicitly with the concept of style as a mode of expression. Importantly, this accords with Cavell’s internalist way of reading Wittgenstein, which takes it for granted that Wittgenstein’s style of writing is an essential part of his philosophical method, and that his method and style are internally related.<sup>65</sup>

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61. *Ibid.*, 40.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 44.

64. Wittgenstein, “MS 120,” *Wittgenstein Source*, ed. Alois Pichler and Joseph Wang, accessed December 27, 2023, [http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/BTE/Ms-120,72v\[1\]et73r\[1\]\\_n](http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/BTE/Ms-120,72v[1]et73r[1]_n) (my translation).

65. For further considerations of style and method in Wittgenstein in connection to music, see Guter and Inbal Guter, “Thinking Through Music: Wittgenstein’s Use of Musical Notation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 81, no. 3 (2023): 248-62.

For Wittgenstein, a style connoted a deep sense of urgency and commitment in one's life, but also a pattern of human life. "Style is the expression of a general human necessity," Wittgenstein wrote, "This holds for a writing style or a building style (and any other). Style is general necessity viewed sub specie aeterni."<sup>66</sup> Wittgenstein understood the concept of style in terms of fittingness and attunement: "Writing the right style means, setting the carriage straight on the rails."<sup>67</sup> Owning a style, giving voice to one's movement of thought, became an acute, disquieting philosophical challenge for Wittgenstein in the aftermath of the *Tractatus* and well into his later years.<sup>68</sup> "[Being] in love with my sort of movement of thought in philosophy," he confessed, "does not mean [...] that I am in love with my style. That I am not."<sup>69</sup> As late as 1947 Wittgenstein still found it necessary to note his reservations about restoring or performing an old style afresh in a new language, as if it would speak in a manner that may suit current times. He associated such reproductive flattery with his own onetime attempt in modern architecture.<sup>70</sup> He averred:

What I mean is *not* however giving an old style a new trim. You don't take the old forms & fix them up to suit today's taste. No, you are really speaking, maybe unconsciously, the old language, but speaking it in a manner that belongs to the newer world, though not on that account necessarily one that is to its taste.<sup>71</sup>

Yet for Wittgenstein this challenge was marred and hindered by the kind of myopia that he feared he shared with Mahler: they both might be positioned in such a way as to be incapable of distinguishing between what is genuine and what is false. This self-deception is portrayed in the 1937 coded passage as a lack of courage to know oneself, an acknowledgment of a weakness of character that leads to an inability to manifest

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66. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 37. There is an allusion here to Spengler's inflated contention that style is the revelation of something metaphysical, a mysterious necessity, a fate.

67. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44.

68. See Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 39. Wittgenstein regarded the *Tractatus* as containing "kitsch," that is, "passages with which I filled in the gaps and so-to-speak in my own style." He admitted that it is now difficult to evaluate how much of that book is filled with such "kitsch."

69. *Ibid.*, 109.

70. Between the years 1926-1928 Wittgenstein designed and built (together with Paul Engelmann) a house for his sister, Margaret Stonborough, at 19 Kundmannngasse, Vienna.

71. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 69.

true genius, that is, authentic creativity in, and for an age without culture. Cavell offered an image for this personal crisis: “a Cassandra-like fate,” that is, being blessed with a perfect capacity for telling or expressing the truth and cursed with the fate of forever being misunderstood.<sup>72</sup> In the singular diary passage on the vagaries of authentic, that is, truthful modern music, which I discussed above, Wittgenstein could not be clearer about this predicament: “This sentence is not easy to understand but it is so: Today no one is clever enough to formulate what is right. [...] The truth would sound completely paradoxical to everyone.”<sup>73</sup> Yet the point, which I wish to draw from Cavell’s suggestion, is that just like Cassandra’s fate, Wittgenstein’s and Mahler’s joint fate as creative forces in an age without culture is tragically self-induced. There is nothing Godly or otherwise transcendent about it. The *crime* and its *punishment* are both to be found within the scale of humanity.

Wittgenstein’s remarks further suggest that Cassandra is perhaps not the only relevant image conjured by his acute realization of his failure. In the context of Wittgenstein’s quest for, and difficulty with owning a genuine style of philosophizing, the curse of being misunderstood make look also, as McGuinness suggested, like the fate written books in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “[Wittgenstein’s] aim was always to stimulate a new way of thinking, and so, by the kind of bind that occurs in various forms in his life, his task could never be complete, never reside in a written book.”<sup>74</sup> Admitting that he was in love with his own movement of thought but not with his own style, Wittgenstein added: “Perhaps, just as some like to hear themselves talk, I like to hear myself write?”<sup>75</sup> “My style is like a bad musical composition,” Wittgenstein wrote a few years later.<sup>76</sup> This sense of solitude and uncertainty deepens in Wittgenstein’s final remark on Mahler, which was penned in 1948, shortly before Wittgenstein’s death, and with it arises another sense of the conjunction of self-deception and being misunderstood.<sup>77</sup>

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72. Cavell, *Here and There*, 279-80. Apollo, the sun-god, god of prophecy, music and poetry was attracted to Cassandra, daughter of Priam, King of Troy. In return for her favors, she asked from Apollo the gift of prophecy, which the god was glad to grant. But when Cassandra refused to give herself to him, Apollo, unable to withdraw his gift, made it useless to her by providing that those who heard her predictions would not believe them.

73. Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 69.

74. Brian McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein: Collected Papers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 197.

75. Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought,” 109.

76. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 45.

77. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

This is a fairly extensive passage, which palpably shows that Wittgenstein never got to the point of resolving the inner tensions that Mahler's persona and music had come to embody for him, and which pertained to his own style of philosophizing in an age without culture. Wittgenstein maintains that one cannot see oneself from within an overview, and therefore one can always (mistakenly) render one's otherness as some sort of excellence. Wittgenstein contends that "even someone who struggles against vanity, but not entirely successfully, will always deceive himself about the value of what he produces."<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, the problem afflicting Mahler as a composer, and Wittgenstein as a philosopher and writer, is a problem of incommensurability: "If today's circumstances are really so different, from what they once were, that you cannot compare your work with earlier works in respect of its genre, then you equally cannot compare its value with that of the other work."<sup>79</sup> And then he adds: "I myself am constantly making the mistake under discussion."<sup>80</sup>

Cavell offers the observation that this sort of incommensurability is inherent to the way Wittgenstein's philosophizing relates to the past, that is, it is inherent in Wittgenstein's writing to philosophy's self-encounter. He suggests:

[I]f I think here of Wittgenstein's revolution, or kink, in philosophy, as letting the commonplace, or say the banal, break into the mood of philosophizing (as well, as is expected of philosophy from its beginning, demanding that philosophizing break into the spell of the commonplace), and recognize that in Wittgenstein these are two faces of philosophy attempting to recognize each other, then I feel I might turn to Mahler's works as contributions to thinking about philosophy's selfencounter.<sup>81</sup>

Then, Mahler's activation of the vernacular, which, as I noted above, Wittgenstein strikingly kept silent about, earmarks the joint fate of the two men, as Lurie suggests,<sup>82</sup> as something like the fate of Philoctetes, who, agonized after being bitten by a snake, was abandoned on an island by the Greek troops on their journey to Troy.

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78. *Ibid.*, 77.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. Cavell, *Here and There*, 283-84.

82. See Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit*, 150.

Stranded on the island of philosophy's (and music's) self-encounter, the question always remains "whether the spiritual progression of our culture is still continuing (and it is us who are being left behind), or whether the culture has disappeared (and we are the only ones left to notice it)."<sup>83</sup>

Thus, for Wittgenstein, the most debilitating form of myopia pertaining to the modern condition is the loss of measure, as refracted by the threefold imagery of the fate of Cassandra, the fate of books in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and the fate of Philoctetes. As Cavell points out, Wittgenstein's relation to Mahler, indeed the very modernism of these two figures, is deeply rooted

in the radicality of the doubt [concerning the value their work], the invention of or participation in a new term of criticism, that of worthlessness, a sense of personal failure in not reaching the greatness of one's enterprise, where greatness has lost its measure.<sup>84</sup>

This was undoubtedly an uneasy realization for Wittgenstein who, as Cavell noted, has set himself on a mission to combat decline by rectifying the maladies of philosophy with his own new interlocutory style of clarification. Yet it was this realization that gave rise in Wittgenstein to a yearning, which Cavell expounded in his reading of the *Investigations*, to hear the music in the scale of humanity — in human life and in language — realizing that expressive reciprocity is "a demand that music, perhaps first among the arts, shares with philosophy."<sup>85</sup>

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83. Ibid.

84. Cavell, *Here and There*, 281.

85. Ibid., 254.