

Reproduction as Wittgenstein's Self-Understanding: An Essay on the Physiognomy of Language

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The idea that Wittgenstein's texts should be read in their Viennese cultural context is shared by many Wittgenstein scholars. Toulmin & Janik (1973) are among the studies that have argued most forcefully for this type of reading with regard to the *Tractatus* (1921). To be sure, a reading that strips Wittgenstein's text of its Viennese historicity may be a traditional method for those seeking to combine analytic philosophy with Wittgenstein's thought, but it can be violent given that this stripping is often done without informing the reader. This paper argues that the violence of the tacit stripping of historicity should be resisted and that Wittgenstein's text should be read against the cultural background of Vienna.

Strictly speaking, however, I do not like to use the word "background" because my long-term goal is to show boldly that Wittgenstein's Viennese historicity does not retreat "behind" his texts but rather "manifests" itself in them.

To achieve the long-term goal of reading Wittgenstein's texts as a manifestation of Viennese historicity, I will focus on the conception of "reproduction." This word appears in *Culture and Value* (1998), a collection of reflections on art and religion:

I think there is some truth in my idea that I am really only reproductive in my thinking. I think I have never *invented* a line of thinking but that it was always provided for me by someone else & I have done no more than passionately take it up for my work of classification. That is how Boltzmann Hertz Schopenhauer Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos Weininger Spengler, Sraffa have influenced me. Can one take Breuer & Freud as an example of Jewish reproductive thinking? – What I invent are new *comparisons*. (*CV* p. 16)

You can as it were restore an old style in a new language; perform it afresh so to speak in a manner that suits our times. In doing so you really only reproduce. I have done this in my building work. (*CV* p. 68)

Here Wittgenstein uses the words "reproductive" and "reproduce" to describe in what way he is a bearer of Viennese culture. These words are used in the context of Wittgenstein's self-understanding.

By focusing on the conception of “reproduction,” I will argue that Wittgenstein’s text shows the development of a “physiognomy”(*PI* 568) of language that generates a variety of uses from the same string of characters by copying other’s words and employing them afresh. This will be my short-term goal. The “physiognomy (of language)” is a way of thinking about language in which the understanding of human faces and the understanding of sentences are parallel. In other words, it is a way of thinking about the “features”(in German, *Gesichtszüge*)(*PI* 537) of a particular string of characters in terms of their various uses, just as one thinks about a person’s face in terms of her various expressions. The “features” of a particular string of characters are, in a nutshell, the individuality of a word, the way it can be perceived and can generate environments. Wittgenstein’s texts, in my view, practice a “physiognomy (of language)” that seeks to cultivate the “features (of a particular string of characters)” and give words a rich individuality.

If we can read Wittgenstein’s text as a physiognomy of language (if we are to achieve my short-term goal), we can reveal the nature of Wittgenstein’s self-understanding as both a reader of other’s words and a writer of the *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*(2009). We can show that through copying other’s words, such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, the creation of *PI* is Wittgenstein’s way of speaking about himself. Wittgenstein’s self-understanding in this sense can become a model for our own self-understanding as readers of *PI* attempting to say something about it.

The question of how I am going to achieve the long-term goal of reading Wittgenstein’s text as a manifestation of Viennese historicity through my short-term goal can be answered as follows. The conception of “reproduction” invoked in connection with Wittgenstein’s self-understanding is directly reflected in the textual formation of the *PI*. The conception of “reproduction” reflects not only Wittgenstein’s self-understanding but also how to form the *PI*.