

Review of Carla Carmona Escalera, *Egon Schiele: Análisis ético-formal de su obra pictórica*

(Universidad de Sevilla, 2010)

An invitation

Carla Carmona Escalera defended her doctoral dissertation at the University of Seville on June 11, 2010, and passed with flying colours (Outstanding – Sobresaliente cum laude por unanimidad). The bulk of it is in Spanish (350 pages), with an English translation of parts of the text (123 pages), and an accompanying DVD with 152 images.

This is an invitation to look and see in a special way. It is an invitation to see Egon Schiele's oeuvre as an artistic analogy to Ludwig Wittgenstein's way of handling ethics. It is an invitation to reflect upon Schiele's work in the light of Wittgenstein's work, and the other way round. By doing so, the author also invites us to reflect upon basic philosophical themes like the nature of understanding and ethics. But above all, it is a first-rate contribution to art criticism in general and to the literature on Schiele's art in particular.

The dissertation is divided into an introduction, two chapters on Schiele's oeuvre, and two short concluding sections. In the introduction, Carla Carmona Escalera does two things – she presents her own project, and she presents Wittgenstein's way of handling ethics. The core of the work (from p. 86 onwards) consists of detailed analyses of Schiele's pictures.

A lucid presentation

Wittgenstein's philosophical writings are characterized by a never-ending struggle to find adequate ways of expressing his points. The right expression is not just a matter of style. In art and philosophy, the ways we express things are crucial for our understanding. There is a passage in *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein managed to formulate that insight in a dense way:

122. A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A lucid presentation¹ produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*.

The concept of a lucid presentation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?)

Wittgenstein was concerned with understanding and lack of understanding, including that understanding which consists in seeing connections with



¹ The phrase that Wittgenstein used was *eine übersichtliche Darstellung*, which can easily be translated into Swedish and Norwegian but not so easily into English. In Elizabeth Anscombe's translation of the German original, one finds the expression 'a perspicuous representation'.

the help of intermediate cases. This is precisely what Carla Carmona Escalera does in her analysis of Schiele's oeuvre. She is concerned with understanding, and the method she uses throughout is making comparisons, making us see connections, similarities and differences. The Schiele study is a beautiful example of what a lucid presentation in Wittgenstein's sense might amount to.

In her careful study of Schiele's pictures, she compares single pictures with each other and contrasts groups of pictures with other groups of pictures. There are also comparisons with pictures by other artists and some excursions to other forms of art. Without making a fuss over it, she has *ipso facto* made a welcome contribution to a neglected area of philosophy, viz. *what it means to understand pictures*. Since pictorial understanding plays such a prominent role in our lives, she has also made a welcome contribution to the general *philosophy of understanding*. Her way of handling huge tangles of pictorial details has in fact given us excellent models of how words get new meaning by being used in new contexts or, if you like to put it in that way, models of conceptual development and change.

A good example of how this is done is the section on presentation (pp. 86-97). In the course of those twelve pages, Carla Carmona Escalera begins the work of building a concept of presentation by comparing 41 different pictures (20 of them on the DVD which is included in the dissertation). The building of the concept of presentation continues in the following sections, where presentation is contrasted with exhibition, allegory and grimaces. Those concepts – *presentación, exhibición, alegoría, muecas* – are gradually built up with the help of hundreds of references to hundreds of pictures, surrounded by comments intended to lead the reader's attention in certain directions. Meaning formation is ubiquitous, yet hard to grasp. Here we can follow the process step by step.

The section on presentation begins with a striking first line: "*In many of the cases in which the artist portrays his wife she is presented.*" What that means is explained with the help of a combination of saying and showing. The reader is invited to look at the first picture on the DVD, the oil painting from 1915 entitled *Portrait of the artist's wife, standing (Edith Schiele in a striped dress)*. After those two introductory sentences, the analysis begins straight away: "*Everything is treated equally. No element in the composition stands out above the rest.*" The first comparison comes immediately after that – a preparatory sketch for the 1915 painting (K D1720), in which "the whole figure is treated equally by pencil".

And so it goes on throughout the section on presentation, paying attention to a number of features of more than 40 pictures. Gradually, the notion of presentation takes form through remarks like the following: "*To present one must respect*"; "*The background is not indifferent with regard to the figure; it takes care of it*"; "*Schiele seems to be aware that the being of things is always the same, and if he respected his wife, it would have been senseless not to do the same with regard to the objects and plants which surrounded him.*"

Ethically loaded words play an important role in the text, words like *caring for, respect* and *dignity*. If one looks for it, one will find many other expressions in the dissertation which bring the moral dimension to the fore, words like *violence, finesse, vulnerability, naturalness, spontaneity, alienation*, to give a few examples only.

The house rules

Wittgenstein's style of philosophizing is far removed from traditional academic philosophy. To opt for something on those lines when writing a doctoral dissertation is a courageous thing to do. Looking back on what she has done, Carla Carmona Escalera writes about the difficulty of combining what is expected of a doctoral dissertation with the intuitive and dynamic character of her own study (p. 315). This is not just a stray afterthought. This is actually how the dissertation begins.

The dissertation begins with a long quote from Thomas Bernhard's novel *Correction*, in which Roithamer, the narrator, unfolds what it means to live in Hoeller's house, conforming to the rules of thought which one has to submit to when living in that house – "not easy for oneself".

The house rules for doctoral dissertations in the humanities are so well established that we tend to think of them as given once and for all, but the philosophical doctorate as we know it, based on original research carried out by the doctoral candidate himself, was in fact first introduced in some German universities in the 1860s. The current rules and expectations surrounding doctoral dissertations have a relatively short history, and they are not immune to change.

One of the most interesting developments in Academia in recent years is *the scientific essay*, often but not always based on the writer's own professional experience. Essay writing plays a key role in the *Centre for Practical Knowledge* at the University of Nordland in northern Norway, and it has also played an important role in *Skill and Technology* at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. One of the first doctoral dissertations presented in *Skill and Technology* in Stockholm was a remarkably unorthodox essay on the professional skills that meteorologists have. A more recent example from *Skill and Technology* in Stockholm is a doctoral dissertation a few years ago which consisted of an analysis of the professional knowledge of an established artist in Sweden, carried out by the artist himself, not an autobiography but including a good many narrative stretches.²

The point I want to make is simply that there is room for change. The dissertation we are considering here is a creative and innovative piece of work. The second part of the work, the Schiele analysis, is indeed an outstanding example of what a scientific essay might amount to. Let me mention two sections in particular: The analysis of the oil painting *Mother with Two Children III* from 1917 is a brilliant little essay in its own right on Schiele's treatment of chairs (pp. 191-203). The same is true of the meditations on the veiled and the unveiled in Schiele's art (pp. 78-84), starting with an analysis of the watercolour *Standing Girl in Blue Dress and Green Stockings, Back View* from 1913.

The problem, as I see it, is the first part of the dissertation. Let me explain. It is understandable that Carla Carmona Escalera has chosen to present her work in the way she does. After all, this is a dissertation intended to lead up to a doctorate. Hence the division of the work into a theoretical part (up to p. 85) and an analytical part which makes up the bulk of the dissertation. The first part is much more traditional than the second one. It shows that the writer is familiar with a relevant selection of Wittgenstein texts and in addition to that with a good number of texts written by various scholars. She goes through this background material with a particular purpose in mind – to prepare for the analysis which makes up the second and main part of the dissertation. The second part is much more direct. It is simply more efficient.

2 Maja-Lisa Perby, *Konsten att bemästra en process. Om att förvalta yrkeskunnande*, Stockholm 1995; Roland Ljungberg, *En resa från det ordlösa. En kartläggning av ett personligt yrkeskunnande*, Stockholm 2008

Consider the beginning of the analytical part of the dissertation (p. 86) which I have already quoted: “*In many of the cases in which the artist portrays his wife she is presented.*” That is an excellent opening line. It could in fact be the beginning of the whole work. But doctoral dissertations don’t usually begin like that. They don’t begin *in medias res*; they begin *ab ovo*.

I hope that after the dissertation there will be a book. After a short preface, the book could begin *in medias res* with the section on presenting. The Schiele study can stand on its own feet. It doesn’t need a heavy academic prop.

By doing so, one would also eliminate a source of worry, to which I now turn.

Facts and values

On p. 127 Carla writes about the clear difference which Wittgenstein established between the world of facts and the world of values in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and goes on to say that “*this is not in conflict with his later philosophy. The sphere of values needs a silent language.*”

I suggest that this is wrong. What Wittgenstein said about ethics in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is indeed in conflict with his later philosophy. Let me try to explain how.

Ludwig Wittgenstein spent the last 25 years of his life discussing and criticizing the views he had put forward in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In *Philosophical Investigations* and other texts, he concentrated on his earlier views on the relations between language and the world and developed a method to handle that cluster of problems. The core of the method could be described as *dismantling the problems*. Instead of seeking for new answers to the question of the relations between “language”, on the one hand, and “the world”, on the other hand, he came to the conclusion that the key words in the formulation of the problem are empty abstractions. What he did was to replace the abstract notion of language and the abstract notion of the world with a huge set of observations of the different ways in which various words and utterances are woven into the situations in which they are used.

Carla Carmona Escalera is not unaware of this, but she doesn’t draw the right conclusion. On p. 85 she talks about the dissolution of the problems, and on p. 70 one finds the statement, “*Wittgenstein used to insist upon the necessity of redirecting the words from the metaphysical use to their everyday usage*”, with a reference to *Philosophical Investigations*, § 116. The examples that Wittgenstein gives there of words which need such treatment are *Wissen*, *Sein*, *Gegenstand*, *Ich*, *Satz*, *Name* (knowledge, being, object, I, proposition, name). He could have added many more examples to the list, for instance *body*, *mind*, *fact* and *value*.

In the course of his investigations, Wittgenstein paid a good deal of attention to the so-called problem of body and mind. He did not seek for an alternative to say Descartes’ answer to the question of how the body is related to the mind. Instead, he used the dismantling procedure – body and mind as conceived by the philosophers are abstractions, concepts which are not anchored in ordinary speech and activities. The philosophers’ notions of body and mind are good examples of what happens when language goes on holiday. Look at everyday situations where we talk about the body and about the mind, and you will find something very different from the philosophers’ talk.

When the abstract notions of language and world are replaced in this way by huge skeins of language-involving activities, one cannot go on saying that ethics is beyond the world. One cannot go on talking innocently about the world of facts and the sphere of values as something that is given once and for all. The distinction between facts and values is like the distinction between body and mind and can be handled in the same way – by dismantling the philosophical abstractions fact and value. Much philosophical nonsense has been produced in the field of moral philosophy, not least because of the assumption that ethics has to be placed on a theoretical foundation. But if one reflects upon examples of different sorts of language-involving activities which have to do with ethics, one will readily discover that there is a good deal which can be said about ethics.³

In conclusion

The Schiele part of the dissertation can stand on its own feet without any need for traditional academic underpinnings. What matters is *drawing attention to* the various dimensions of Schiele's work, as Carla Carmona Escalera does again and again in the course of her admirable analyses of the individual pictures, without pressing the analogy with Wittgenstein too much, all the time trying to find the right balance between saying and showing. I hope to see a revised version of this dissertation in book form soon.

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3 Cf. the examples in the section *A lucid presentation* above. See further "Huckleberry Finn and the Architecture of Morality", in T. Nordenstam, *The Power of Example*, Stockholm 2009.