

At the Crossroads of the Wittgenstein and Autobiography Highways

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Immler, Nicole L., *Das Familiengedächtnis der Wittgensteins. Zu verführerischen Lesarten von (auto-)biographischen Texten.* Edition Kulturwissenschaft Band 12. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011. 395 p.

Some philosophical books describe a landscape of thoughts, others explore a particular path. There are investigations that “leave no stone unturned”. Nicole L. Immler’s book positions itself at the center of an intricate and very busy intersection; at the crossroads of the “Wittgenstein” and “autobiography” highways. Both roads are in turn made up of multiple interconnected lanes, forming a complex hub of exchange between different – and sometimes conflicting – directions. An intersection does not mandate one particular orientation. Its job is to facilitate access to a number of possible destinations. N. Immler situates herself at a rich and stimulating traffic node.

The “Wittgenstein” part comprises several independent routes (1) the Wittgenstein family, including its ancestors and social impact in the late Hapsburg Empire; (2) the personal appeal of Ludwig, the family’s most famous member and (3) Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *philosophy* which, after all, ennobles facts about a wealthy, bourgeois Vienna

dynasty to a story of more general interest. “Autobiography” in turn is (1) a literary genre closely connected with (2) historical research of which it is one of the sources. In recent time (3) Cultural Studies have taken a comprehensive look at the construction of social identities affected by accounts of (auto-) biographical developments. Patterns of personhood have been found to determine an individual agent’s view of himself and its surroundings. And, as the previous sentence reminds us (“himself”), issues of (4) gender theory arise as soon as an author is regarded as a person interacting in a male/female environment.

N. Immler lays out the terrain with a clever move. She puts (auto-)biographical writings of Hermine Wittgenstein (Ludwig’s eldest sister) and her youngest brother vis-a-vis each other. The former ones are a largely conventional account (“Familienerinnerungen”) of how the Wittgensteins became an important part of Vienna’s economic and cultural life and how they suffered the fate of their Jewish compatriots during the Nazi regime and its aftermath. The remaining traces of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s reflections on his life are, on the other hand, of a very different kind, spread throughout his *Nachlass*, fragmentary and tentative, refusing to paint a harmonious picture of achievement and social recognition. From a strictly philosophical point of view, this link-up forms an extremely lopsided diptych, with Hermine’s narrative lacking theoretical distinction, simply providing background information on the conditions of work of her famous brother. But N. Immler successfully dissolves this prejudice. Her Wittgenstein family remembrance *includes* both registers, the pedestrian rhetoric of Ludwig’s family

contemporaries (as well as their offspring) and his own distinctive *dicta*.

Consider the following example of a memorable aphorism: “Es ist unmöglich wahrer über sich selbst zu schreiben, als man ist.” (MS 120, p. 51v)¹ This sentence can be used in a variety of contexts, two of which may serve to illustrate the methodological setting N. Immler has chosen. It can be taken as a *proposition*, to be discussed according to its philosophical merits. But it can also be regarded as a *discursive move*, prompted by certain events and triggering others. Families are prominent examples of the tension resulting from the superimposition of contexts of justification and contexts of discovery. The reader of “Das Familiengedächtnis der Wittgensteins” will recognize this systematic bipolarity in many places. A philosopher struggles with questions concerning the “good life” and this very philosopher – including his autobiographical reflections – is presented as the product of a set of cultural circumstances.

Philosophy and Cultural Studies do not make easy companions here. The habitual stubbornness of the quest for truth is opposed to the cavalier attitude towards such an enterprise often found in literary criticism and its neighbouring disciplines. Thinking about the relationship between philosophy and life is a well-known move *within* philosophy as well as a legitimate topic for someone looking from *outside*, asking how a particular person came to believe the propositions she utters. Reading Immler’s book one has to be prepared to switch between these options often. A prominent indicator of the challenge is the scare quotes frequently

¹ „It is impossible to write more truthfully about oneself as one in fact is.“

encountered in her discussions of (historical) authenticity and constructivism. “Wo liegen die Grenzen zwischen ... ‘echter’ Absicht und Täuschung bzw. Selbsttäuschung.” (p. 64, cf. 136Ff, 146, 168, 174, 184, 358)² One suspects that this type of tricky systematic problem is unresolvable within the framework indicated. One way to disentangle it would be to distinguish between assertive language games in *intentio recta* and a psychodramatic narrative.

The genre of this highly genre-sensitive publication is “PhD thesis” of which it is an ambitious and impressive example. N. Immler has full command of the twisted history of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* and adds a thorough investigation of Hermine Wittgenstein’s “Familienerinnerungen”, currently not published. She covers the ground of autobiographical concerns in several quite distinct disciplines, among them Philosophy, Literary Criticism, Cultural Studies and Sociology. Some typical weaknesses of the genre are in evidence, though. The overall organization of chapters is somewhat imbalanced (cf. subchapter III of the Ludwig part and VI of Hermine’s.) There is unnecessary redundancy, with some passages recurring verbatim (pp. 151/352, 275/304; 261ff, 303ff, 344ff). In several instances a cascade of quotes, taken from various loosely related sources, stifles the author’s narrative (cf. 145 ff for an example). Finally, N. Immler’s decision to quote the Bergen Electronic Edition by the date of Wittgenstein’s entry plus “BEE” strikes this reviewer as idiosyncratic and unhelpful. (The aphorism on truth in autobiographical writing

²“Where are the boundaries drawn between ... a ‘genuine’ intention and deception or self-deception respectively.”

quoted above as “MS 120, 51v” thus becomes “12.12.1937, BEE” on page 117.)

For someone whose main interest is not in autobiography or even in Cultural Studies generally, but in Wittgenstein’s philosophy “proper”, two achievements of N. Immler’s book deserve special mention. There is growing awareness that the material collected as *Nachlass* has a varied history which should not be ignored in discussions of its content. One intriguing example is the “Koder manuscript” (MS 142), an early version of the beginning of the “Philosophical Investigations”, declared by Ludwig as a Christmas present to Margarete in 1936. It seems that he took it back after the event, an apparently bizarre move. Immler’s account of the family’s Christmas rituals sheds light on this kind of incident. Her discussion of the Hochreit, the relationship of the siblings and the variety of textual genres employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein provides a broader than usual picture of his achievements. Secondly, N. Immler not only carefully distinguishes different genres of the philosopher’s work, but in addition to that extends her analysis to the numerous contributions *about* Wittgenstein’s life. Her observations on the changing fashions of biographical approaches (pp. 38ff) and on their general blindness to the various *topoi* and clichés pre-formatted into this kind of discourse make valuable reading. It will, in future discussions, become much harder to maintain the customary naiveté about suggestive, out-of-context Wittgensteiniana.