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Aufzeichnungen aus dem Irrenhaus by Christine Lavant
(review)

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Journal of Austrian Studies, Volume 50, Number 1-2, Spring-Summer 2017,
pp. 193-195 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/oas.2017.0035>



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des he remained the prime mover of the association. Heller's goal, which he realized, was to found a Trieste-based musical organization not unlike Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. Friedrich Schiller, the most idealistic of German-language eighteenth-century imaginative writers was chosen as the eponymous thinker reflecting the cultural ambitions of the organization. The longer oratorios performed at the Schiller Verein, including Mendelssohn's *St. Paulus* and Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*, reveal the ambitious programming of the music society and its preference for German-language musical offerings. The musical importance of the German-language society, though German was spoken by the smallest of Trieste's three language populations, reflected the Habsburg monarchy and its official political and cultural language.

When this invaluable study goes to press in its second edition, it would be advisable to add a feature: An index of names and places in the back of the book would make it easier to navigate the volume.

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Christine Lavant, *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Irrenhaus*. A new edition with an Afterword by Klaus Amann. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016. 140 pp.

Twice the winner of the Georg Trakl Prize for poetry during her lifetime (in 1954 and 1964) as well as the recipient of the Großen Österreichischen Staatspreis in 1970, Christine Lavant (1915–1973) left behind a literary output of more than a thousand poems, a dozen works of short prose, and two thousand letters. She was born into a large impoverished family in the Carinthian mountains of Austria, the ninth offspring of a coal miner. Later in life she replaced the family name Thonhauser with Lavant—the name of a river flowing through the valley where she was born—perhaps as a reminder of the more pleasant memories of her childhood. Because of her poor health she was forced to drop out of school at an early age.

From her letters, we know that she wrote her first autobiographical pieces of prose shortly after the end of World War II, in jubilation—Klaus Amann, editor of this volume, surmises—at the opportunity to escape the chaos of the war and Nazi oppression and to focus on her troubled youth in written form as a kind of “Heimkehr zu den Anfängen” (108). *Das Krüglein*, *Das Kind*, and *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Irrenhaus* all spring directly from this past. The

first of these, a work she herself called “ein erzähltes Stück Leben” (101), depicts the family life into which she was born in 1915. In *Das Kind* she recalls her first extended absence from home at the age of nine at the hospital in Klagenfurt where her imperiled eyesight was saved. Then in 1935, after an unsuccessful attempt to take her own life, she spent another six weeks in the state asylum at the same hospital, an episode of her life she depicts in *Aufzeichnungen*. Stylistically written as a diary, this story remained unpublished during her lifetime, although her friend, the Austrian-British writer and translator Nora Purtscher, managed to have an English translation—*Asylum Diary*—broadcast by the BBC on November 10, 1959. Purtscher succeeded in the venture in spite of Lavant’s last-minute hesitancy in releasing her heavily autobiographical story into the public domain. It only belatedly appeared in print in the original German for the first time by the Otto Müller Verlag in 2001.

“Ich bin auf Abteilung Zwei,” begin Lavant’s notes recording her arrival and medical placement in the asylum. Immediately she describes the first of numerous controversies that suddenly arose during her two weeks there, some between patients, others involving patients, medical personnel, or caretakers. Lavant’s very presence in this unit for less serious cases arouses resentment in one figure labeled “die Königin” (7), who views her as a possible spy; that is, she finds it highly suspicious that a new member of the asylum community would begin her stay in unit two and not have first “earned” her way out of unit three, which is reserved for the more seriously impaired. Another patient, Renate, voices her disgust with the content and tone of the “Queen’s” words, a reaction that encourages Lavant to develop closer ties of affection to Renate throughout the narrative. She repeatedly demonstrates a need for such reactions from her and other sympathetic asylum inhabitants, yet resists voicing harsh judgments about even the most problematic or revolting figures around her. Her letters, Amann notes, are filled with expressions of this fundamental craving for attention and love (107).

Characters on the floor of the asylum randomly catch the focus of the diarist’s attention, figures that she encounters in the rooms, halls, and toilets accessible to all inhabitants. Initially, the majority are very generally identifiable as fellow inmates or nursing staff by their names, actions, and language. The narrator sketches short scenes based on her perceptions—one following the other—in the order in which they occur. Often the allusion to another figure, a fall, the shouted threat of a straitjacket or an outburst of poetic lines or obscenities will be the only indicator that the scene is changing. This new

“event” is recorded, and the narrative flows forward, sustaining the suggestion of the “Gegenwärtigkeit von Wahrnehmung und Schreibvorgang” (116). The diarist makes little attempt to bridge the transition and build the constructed world of a fiction writer. Yet evidence of her own internal fears and desires communicate to the reader her human presence and empathy for the others populating the micro-world in which she lives. After six weeks of residence in this asylum, Lavant is dismissed back into the larger world that was—in Lavant’s real life in the thirties—increasingly the scene of National Socialism’s pathologically cruel actions. Amann gives a short history of the trial of Nazi personnel involved in the euthanasia of 1,500 mental patients in the last days of the war in Austria, including fifteen who resided in the same hospital unit where Lavant had spent several weeks eleven years earlier. Amann suspects that this trial may have been the trigger for her belated diary about her own experiences there.

The editor has done a superb job with Lavant’s text as well as his own multifaceted afterword that discusses, among numerous other topics, Lavant’s relationship with Thomas Bernhard during the postwar years. They exchanged letters, and he found her both “gescheit und durchtrieben” and even published a selection of her poems in the Bibliothek Suhrkamp in 1987, fourteen years after her death. At the present time, more than one hundred years after her birth, scholars interested in the larger picture of the postwar Austrian literary scene have much to look forward to with the ongoing publication of Lavant’s collected works by the Wallstein Verlag.

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Hermine Wittgenstein, *Familienerinnerung*. Edited by Ilse Somavilla.
 Innsbruck: Haymon, 2015. 552 pp.

Discussion and criticism of most cultural figures generally proceed along settled lines of debate, so that in assessing the recent upsurge of interest in Stefan Zweig, for example, it isn’t necessary to reinvent the wheel. Readers are able to negotiate fairly clear parameters of evaluation. Established categories of discourse do not preclude revisionist views, of course, but even revisionists set out along the usual approach routes. In some cases, however, commentators are uncertain or even bewildered. W. G. Sebald pointed out more than