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Familienerinnerung by Hermine Wittgenstein (review)

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“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

once, for example, that critics simply do not know what to say about Peter Handke: “An wenigen Beispielen ist das Missverhältnis zwischen Kultur und Kulturbetrieb deutlicher geworden als an dem Peter Handkes” (*Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur*, 162). Or in the case of H. C. Artmann, Waltraut Schwarz points out in the new *Bio-Bibliographisches Lexikon der Literatur Österreichs* that almost all commentators agree that his dizzying plenitude is held together by a glue that unifies the whole oeuvre but that no one can say what this glue is made of (1:227).

Ludwig Wittgenstein fits this latter category of a cultural phenomenon, a protean creator whom no one quite knows how to fathom. It would be overstating the matter to say that there needs to be a unified field theory reconciling all aspects of Wittgenstein’s activity—he might well rank, along with Goethe, as one of the very last universal geniuses—but discussions of him could end up reminding us of the proverbial group of blind men who visit the circus to find out what the elephant is like. One feels the tail, another the trunk, the third a leg, the fourth an ear, each coming away certain that he alone has the one true understanding of the animal. Logical positivists and structuralists decry any resort to biography, for instance, but in excluding it they miss the purport of the famous last proposition in the *Tractatus*, which not only allows but encourages a mysticism that discursive language cannot enter but poetry can. If the extreme formalists stopped to study Wittgenstein’s relations to Trakl, they would have to start operating from different presuppositions. Reversing the token, scholars of literature are eager to rush in and “explain” what Wittgenstein’s philosophy “really” means in light of literary categories often unsupported by training in linguistics. A justifiable interest by queer theorists has been pointedly ignored so far, and while any ideologically based method is bound to be limited, what is one to make of Wittgenstein’s declaration, when asked whom he would like to meet in the United States, that he wanted to be introduced to Betty Hutton and Carmen Miranda, two gay icons? (Best not to ask any members of his family about this.) Nor have we even touched on Wittgenstein’s competencies in engineering, architecture, mathematics, music, and other areas without an understanding in which we are likely to become as falsely self-certain as one of those blind men.

These thoughts emerge from the appearance of the book now under review. Equipped by the editor with a foreword, a bibliography, an afterword,

an admirably thorough commentary (323–477) that provides information on persons, places, and events mentioned in Hermine Wittgenstein's memoirs; and an editorial note on provenance (529–533), the volume is manifestly laying claim to scholarly status. Even so, it is published not as a work of research but as *Belletristik*, a category that in Europe accommodates autobiography and memoir. The decision on the publisher's part seems fair, since the supplements by Somavilla, conscientious and thoroughgoing as they are, function more as background information and orienting apparatus than as part of a critical/scholarly project. The editor is clearly caught betwixt and between, giving her very best to her task but performing that task, perhaps in cooperation with the family, under such limits as do not allow for, and perhaps never even intend, an inquiry into the content of the memoirs themselves.

The purpose of the present volume appears to be mainly to make an edition available to the public, a general public at that, a readership it would not be appropriate to tax with second-guessing but that requires the help of an apparatus. For a thorough examination of Hermine Wittgenstein's text itself, it is necessary to turn to Nicole L. Immler's *Schweigen im Familiengedächtnis: Zur nicht-motivischen Tradierung familiärer Codes in Hermine Wittgenstein's Familienerinnerungen* (2013). There the context comes alive: Much of what Hermine Wittgenstein's memoirs contain would have gone lost for a generation that had been through one of the most violent upheavals in history and needed to have memory preserved; it was not the role of the family *doyenne*, who saw herself as an agent of balance and harmony, to air family secrets and reveal information that the father had refused to allow ever even to be mentioned. The 1947–49 period, the years of Hermine's composition, were hardly an optimal time anyway for analyzing the suicides, breakdowns, and calamities in a family that was still emerging from trauma; above all, we cannot ask of any text to give us what we think it should but can only take it on its own terms. But when we do, we see, guided by Immler, the omissions, gaps, and blind spots. It is not Somavilla's task to do the same, and she can be thanked for providing a well annotated but distinctly not critical edition of Hermine Wittgenstein's memoirs.

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