

Siblings in Literature and Culture: An Interdisciplinary Symposium
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'The *Familiengedächtnis* - discussing a relational approach to biography'

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(draft)

Dear colleagues,

This invitation is a challenge. It brings me back to my dissertation and book on *Das Familiengedächtnis der Wittgensteins*; the family memory of the Wittgensteins, which was published in 2011; I was asked to present the book, contextualized into more recent developments in biography theory in general and a siblings-perspective more specifically. In this lecture I like to discuss two perspectives:

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1) *Das Familiengedächtnis der Wittgensteins* (2011) one could consider as a **meta-biography**; defined as being less concerned with authenticating a particular narrative about the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein than with 'the wider questions of textuality, memorialisation, life-course models, the uses of the past, and the narrative interpretation of its traces' (as the Irish literary scholar Cairríona Ní Dhúill -Keitrien Ni-dhil has called it in her recent book *Metabiography* from 2020). Without having the term at the time my dissertation looked at *the making of* biography and the *interface* between autobiographical and biographical texts, showing the changing fashions of (auto)biographical approaches in Wittgenstein Studies, revealing thereby a certain blindness to the various topoi and clichés pre-formatting autobiographical as biographical texts.

2) *Das Familiengedächtnis der Wittgensteins* is also a **relational biography** about Ludwig Wittgenstein and his oldest sister Hermine Wittgenstein; a sort double biography. The study examines Ludwig's autobiographical reflections (and their links with his philosophical thoughts) next to the family chronicle/*Familienerinnerungen* of his sister Hermine. Making use of the concept *family memory* this biography puts relationships instead of exceptionalism and disconnectedness (a key feature of well-known biographies by Ray Monk or Alexander Waugh) centre place. Therewith my study is part of a more recent shift in the field of Wittgenstein biography from the exceptional (topoi 'genius') towards the relational, foregrounding the contextual, the dialogue, the friendship.

Today I want to discuss what we gain from this meta-biographical as well as relational approach for rethinking Wittgenstein and (auto)biographical research. I will argue that both approaches allow to visualize the multivoicedness of biographical subjects; helping to better understand how some narratives became more dominant than others.

((Wittgenstein's image – Problem statement

(ppt2) One cannot talk about Wittgenstein's biography without addressing some of the key features that shape the image of Wittgenstein that circulates in public. A kind of myth established already during his lifetime, as his pupil Fania Pascal wrote: "I knew a lot about him without ever having met him. everywhere in Cambridge stories were told about him." The interest was motivated by his charisma, his exceptional family background (born into one of the richest industrial families of the Habsburg monarchy, a material inheritance he rejected), his bizarre life turns (from student engineering to one of philosophy, after WW1 becoming first elementary school teacher in Austria and architect, before in 1929 returning to Cambridge and to philosophy. There is written a lot about several stays in remote places (such as Norway, Ireland), labelled as 'seeking absolute solitude', and also about his aura of distance, he taught only selected students and published after his debut the *Logicus Tractatus Philosophicus* (1922) none of his 20.000 pages manuscripts.

Ingeborg Bachmann wrote shortly after his death: "the legend has replaced his life yet at the time when he lived, a legend of voluntary deprivation, the attempt to live the life of a saint, trying to obey the last sentence of the *Tractatus* 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'." Here Bachmann points to an almost obsessive interweaving of work and life, in asceticism as well as in mysteriousness; topoi that still shape the image of Wittgenstein in the wider public today. Described as a philosopher "without equal among master thinkers in terms of radicalism and at the same time enigma", he was surrounded by the aura of "a genius", an "intellectual saint", a "tense, puzzled human being" who strove for an **unattainable ethical ideal**. This typification of Wittgenstein as a sensitive outsider, alienated from society or seeking solitude, with a difficult character, these are stylisations that can be found in most biographies as in the film of Derek Jarman. It is difference and distinction that is emphasised.

Those stylisations are not just attributions made by biographers but are also consequences of their reading of the autobiographical sources. However, what I would like to stress in this lecture, how narratives ingrained in autobiographical sources can also misguide biographers when not being attentive to questions of context and genre (so-called 'mental maps') – thus, a kind of source criticism.))

First, a brief look at the biographical field

If you look at the biographical research on Wittgenstein, then it is striking: The biographers (most of them philosophers themselves) used the genre biography at the beginning foremost as an auxiliary science (Hilfswissenschaft), knowing more about Wittgenstein's biography helped them to order his 20,000 unpublished manuscripts that were gradually found. Establishing a chronology was seen as essential to understand the developments of his thoughts. Consequently, the biography was only a means to an end. This turns biographical details easily into decorative descriptions falling short of explanations instead of being part of the research question. From this perspective quotes of primary sources are so-called 'authentic' material, without any discussion about the nature of the source or the context in which it was generated, ignoring the performative or genre nature of such autobiographical sources.

Moreover, you can see, **the way Ludwig Wittgenstein was seen as philosopher influenced how he was portrayed as a person.** In the first decades after his death he was regarded foremost as an analytical philosopher (based upon the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*), from this view biographical questions were considered as mere anecdotes irrelevant to the understanding of his philosophical work, which legitimated in the eyes of editors also the decision to edit his philosophical writings without the many private remarks written in the manuscripts. Today the opposite is true. Since Wittgenstein was discovered as an ethical thinker – based upon a special attention for his later work, his remarks on ethics, religion and culture, and also based on his diaries and letters, as well as insights into his specific style of writing (mixing private and philosophical remarks) – it has become a dominant reading in the two main biographies of the late 1990s (by McGuinness and Monk) to illustrate the tight link between private and philosophical remarks in his manuscripts, which led to acknowledge an intense unity of life and work.

One could say: as long as Wittgenstein (in the first decades after his death) was seen as a logician, his private notes were considered insignificant; however, when he was received primarily as an ethicist because of his later writings, it also attributed a significance to his private notes. While the image of an analytical philosopher was rather disturbed by private notes, for the ethicist the connection between work and life (philosophy and biography) was almost a prerequisite.

((ppt3) Paradigmatic for this is the biography by Ray Monk, titled *The Duty of Genius* (1990), inscribing a key narrative in Wittgenstein scholarship. Following Richard Freadman the question of genius in Wittgenstein became, firstly, a claim on himself, a question of character, based on a striving for 'moral greatness' and a fascination with the ethical ideal; secondly, a claim on the work, namely to be original and to think radically new things; and thirdly, the striving for a Socratic correspondence between work and life, "philosophy as a way of life", philosophical activity as a "work on oneself". This is also crystallised in the motto of Otto Weininger that precedes the biography: "Logic and ethics, however, are basically one and the same - duty against oneself." But to what extent does not Monk's Weininger or Viennese Fin de Siecle reception overshadow the person of Wittgenstein here? Freadman argues that this 'Socratic ideal' - the philosophy of 'working on oneself' - has made aspects of ethical and moral rigorism and of authenticity key (Wittgenstein as the ascetic, eccentric, homosexual, misogynist) while more reconciling and playful aspects were pushed in the background. In my reading of the autobiographical sources I discovered a 'different Ludwig' or 'Hermine'.

While some philosophers have a tendency to regard autobiographical sources as authentic material to simply quote from, it was important for me as historian and Kulturwissenschaftler to show how the different autobiographical text types – whether diaries, letters, family chronicle, confessions or private remarks coded and uncoded in the manuscripts – have their own rules, rhetorics and stylisations that not only shape the authors' self-perception and self-presentation, but also guided the interpretation by the biographers.

(ppt4) Here, I looked at the correlation between form and content - which Wittgenstein did himself systematically for his philosophical writing, but also as I liked to show for his autobiographical remarks. Namely, to explicity to what extent the how/style is essential to the what/content of the

representation. Such a source-critical reading - so my claim – reveals a more gender-friendly; family and friendship-committed but also playful Ludwig Wittgenstein; the philosopher of the language game.))

Das Familiengedächtnis

(ppt5)

Briefly the structure of my book: It has two parts; it examines **first** (a kind of meta-biography) the biographies on Ludwig Wittgenstein – looking at how the image of Wittgenstein has changed over the last six decades and what writing strategies the biographers had followed, influenced by the Zeitgeist as well as from their idea about Wittgenstein as philosopher.

A chronological overview of Wittgenstein biography reveals how each decade has its own Wittgenstein, with its own problem-oriented subtext: In the 70s psychologisations and Freudian arguments (around Wittgenstein's alleged homosexuality) in by William Bartley, In the 80s localisation of Ludwig, whether as an elementary school teacher () or in the modernist context of the Fin de Siecle in Vienna by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin. In the 1990s the topoi of a bourgeois family with Jewish roots became central to Brian McGuinness biography, while Ray Monk wrote an intellectual biography: with the holistic claim to connect work and life.

Examining the narrative patterns used by the biographers; I showed the changing fashions of biographical approaches and the various *topoi* and clichés pre-formatted into this kind of discourse. Exploring what Virginia Woolf has called the main danger of an old style biography: namely biographers following slavish in the footsteps of their hero's.

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In **part II of the book**, I went back to the sources, Wittgensteins autobiographical reflections (notes, letters, diaries, confessions)ⁱ, showing how during his life-time autobiography became an issue, and the "family memories" of Ludwig Wittgenstein's sister Hermine, which have become key to the image of the 'private Ludwig' as well as to the development of a Wittgenstein family memory, what I show by integrating interviews with family members, demonstrating how the images about the family are recycled but also newly shaped by recent debates in Austria.

It is a relational biography, putting two different (auto-)biographical writings vis-a-vis **to** each other. On the one side, the largely conventional account of a chronicle, describing how the Wittgensteins became an important part of Vienna's economic and cultural life and how they suffered the fate of their Jewishness during the Nazi regime and its aftermath. While Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on his life are very fragmented and tentative, spread throughout his philosophical oeuvre (*Nachlass*) refusing to paint a harmonious picture of achievement and social recognition.

By systematically compiling the different sources, categorized and analyzed by genre (diary, letter, confessions, autobiography, confessions, family chronicle), shows not only how the genres shape crucially the self-presentation of the authors, **but also guided (and misguided) the biographers**

neglecting the performative element (dependent from genre and context) in autobiographical sources.

Relational Biography

What at a first view looks like comparing the incomparable – this juxtapositioning revealed not just that the family chronicle shaped crucially today's image of Ludwig and the family; but also that for all those private sources Wittgenstein's dictum "the how of representation is essential to the what". („das Wie der Darstellung ist dem Was wesentlich“)

The chronicle

The analysis of the chronicle shows how Hermine Wittgenstein co-initiated the **reading of her brother as an isolated thinker** or social freak - when demanding congeniality not just from readers, but also friends and family. Hermine shows Ludwig's lifechanges as motivated by inner needs and necessities, describing them as *conversions*, giving little attention to contextual reasons, such as experiences in WW1 or WW2. Hermine characterized the house he build for his sister Margarethe Stoneborough in stone materialized logic ("in Stein gebaute Logik"), focussing on obsessions with details, while others interpreted it as Wittgensteins first step towards a more practice-oriented philosophy in the late 1920ies. While she described the Wittgenstein family as a kind of pathological community, by relating the suicides of three of her brothers mainly to family tensions between father and sons (psychologisations endlessly repeated not just in Alexander Waugh's biography *A family at war*, 2008), this staged conflict between children and parents is also utilized by the author, to create bonding between the siblings at a moment the family falls apart.

Hitherto the family chronicle written by his oldest sister has been read foremost in regard to the information given about LW. Also her diary was published with the title: 'Ludwig says...'; both does not help to understand the logic and consequently the content of both sources. **Freeing the chronicle from Ludwig's shadow**, allows to see how the family chronicle, **written at a particular moment; in the midst of World War II.**

(ppt7, quote)

It was written at a very important moment of her life: When the decision is made, whether the family members, because of their Jewishness, should go in exile or rather try to make a deal with Hitler-Germany to be able to stay; a chance they were given due to the huge amount of money they had in Switzerland as Devisen. Hermine's decision to stay and to pay - while nearly all other family members left the country - split up the family for decades. From this perspective, the chronicle is less about representation (portraying a family) than legitimisation (legitimizing her decision by rooting the family deeply in Austria and Austrian culture). Thus the chronicle is less about witnessing than symbolizing family.

When Hermine Wittgenstein reduced her role in the chronicle to that of the caring oldest sister of Ludwig and the chronicler of the family, this does not reflect her status as one of the richest woman in Austria; and her responsibilities in the 1940ies.

(ppt 8) Wittgenstein's autobiographical remarks

In a similar way Wittgenstein's autobiographical remarks need to be read not just in regard to his philosophical writing, but have to be **considered in regard to the theatricality and performativity of autobiographical texts**, their intentions and functions. I suggested in my book to draw more attention to the way Wittgenstein presented his autobiographical thoughts, highlighting his skepticism towards such autobiographical self-representations, his way to play with the autobiographical genres and the authenticity they promise. This would remind us that Wittgenstein's language philosophy also asks to address his autobiographical writing in a different, less literally, way.

To refer to a well-known example: Several times in his life **Wittgenstein did confessions** in the 1930s towards friends and family members, those are crucial in the interpretation of Wittgenstein 'working hard on himself', striving for a better self and sincerity as an ethical thinker. While in the literature the confessions are associated foremost with a as problematic perceived Jewish roots, feelings of guilt and self-blame, and a certain masochism towards himself, in his manuscripts also from the 'language game confessions'. Somewhere else he wrote: "Half confessions against Mining in which after all I still succeed to appear as an excellent person.";

From a cultural studies point of view (**following Foucault and others**), the confession can also be read as a specific form of communication, constituting and strengthening existing relationships; confirming the order one is part of. This could suggest that Wittgenstein's confessions are less a search for honesty, catharsis and transformation, but for acceptance and confirmation. Instead of signalling exposure (as Helmuth Plessner has called it) rather signalling an intensive dialogue with those around him and submission into a social order, strengthening existing relationships. For the ethicist Wittgenstein, confession is an expression of a guilty existence (schuldbewusste Existenz); for the philosopher of language games, it marks a performative act. Confession not as an expression of guilt, but as a medium that creates closeness.

The study of Wittgenstein's autobiographical Nachlass has shown that he did not authorise any texts as 'autobiographical texts', but rather implicitly declared them to be such through ciphering or labelling. Here another Wittgenstein reveals himself; the reference to methodology and form, always signals that Wittgenstein's reflection on himself has some sort of distance.

Wittgenstein himself is highly sceptical about the genre of autobiography when he regularly thematises the limits of truth and sincerity, accusing autobiographical writing of dishonest motives (such as vain self-reflection, deceptive manoeuvres). In his private notes, the diary or in the so-called confessions, a certain scepticism towards this 'work on oneself' is very clearly evident, as it is in general towards questions of the autobiographical. It is precisely this scepticism that also gives a somewhat different (more dialogical) picture of Wittgenstein.

Central to the image of Wittgenstein as an ethicist are his confessions or the Secret Diaries.
Central to the image of Wittgenstein as a dialogical thinker are his letters and postcards.

In the last 10 years, based on those, new forms of what I call relational biographies have emerged.

A conference of the Hungarian Wittgenstein Society, entitled *Wittgenstein nach der Arbeit* (2011), contrasted the strict entanglement of Wittgenstein's work and life with a plain focus on the private Wittgenstein. Similarly, an exhibition in Berlin in 2011 (the 60th anniversary of his death) was titled: *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Locating a Genius* - not the aura of difference and singularity, but the dialogue with his friends, family, colleagues is the guiding principle of the exhibition. A similar principle is followed by Michael Nedo, who with Michael Rancetti re-edited the 'biographical album' (2012), a collage of photographs and quotations from primary sources, claiming to be a biography without author. Structured associatively, it follows Wittgenstein's idea of an album, a term from the *Philosophical Investigations* (1943), following the principle that understanding is not based on explanation but on seeing connections. The guiding principle here is also the belief in primary sources.

But while those biographies have a more relational approach they also once again do decontextualise and auratis the most popular quotations by and about Wittgenstein. Back to the sources as such is just the first step; it needs another step to read those sources anew. I would rather suggest that following here LW method of creating an *übersichtliche Darstellung*, can help that the sources shed light on each other. () It shows the conversation with internal and external voices, stressing the (conversation about the) form as being a main part of the story.

To sum up, what is the value of a relational meta-biography?

Calling it *Familiengedächtnis* hints towards the multiple voices that establish a biography and a family memory, including also the transformations of narratives across generations, describing how stories are echoed by contemporaries and by later generations and what impact they have on conceptions of subjects. In this sense *Familiengedächtnis* is a kind of **meta-biography; (PHOTO 7) addressing** 'the wider questions of textuality, memorialisation, life-course models, the uses of the past, and the narrative interpretation of its traces' (as literary scholar Keitrien Ni-dhil has called it). Namely addressing the fraught relationships between genre and gender, private writings and public discourses, image and text, *Selbstbild und Fremdbild*, life and narrative that play out in the biographical tradition. Metabiography suggests new possibilities for reading, writing and thinking about this enduringly popular genre.

There are multiple I voices in autobiographical material, the question is, which voices make the authors their dominant narrative voice, which ones the biographers? Metabiography helps to better see how this process is shaped and a lens to visualise this polyphony.