

BOOK REVIEWS

Fact and Fiction:

*Ludwig Wittgenstein. Ein biographisches
Album* by Michael Nedo

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Nedo, Michael, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Ein biographisches Album*. München: C.H. Beck, 2012. 463 p.

In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations* in January 1945, Wittgenstein explicitly wrote that he had not composed a genuine book but had “written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs” proceeding “from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence.” Then Wittgenstein specified that his work was “just an album” comprising “a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and meandering journeys” (PI 2009: 3). This sturdy tome by Michael Nedo seems a metaphor for the fragmentariness of Wittgenstein’s own album, describing in absorbing detail the stories of Wittgenstein’s life and works. Published as a serious coffee-table book, it is based on a mixture of fictional and non-fictional

chronicling of Wittgenstein’s life. The album gives a hieroglyphical lesson on Wittgenstein souvenirs, works, quotations, letters, lectures, diaries, addresses, and many photographs, assisted by firsthand information from family members, colleagues, friends, and so forth, as well as a number of documentary biographical appurtenances of material from postcards, the archives, and press clippings.

The flow of short sketches gives a kind of metaphor of Wittgenstein’s life cycle, focusing on Wittgenstein as a person and scholar. Starting from his childhood in a wealthy family in Vienna (1889-1906) and his education at home and abroad (1906-1914), Wittgenstein’s biography then continues to his professorate in Cambridge (1938-1947)

and the journeys from Cambridge to Ireland, the United States, and Norway (1947-1951). The album provides a detailed shadow biography of pleasant (and unpleasant) memories without breaks in time, throwing some light on the complex of motives and emotions of Wittgenstein's whole lifetime and lifestyle. The biography is presented as a very loosely woven book, without separate subtitles. More than half the album is based on a variety of photographs, captioned with textual references. Nedo's choice of melodramatic photographs and appropriate texts in English and German highlights a well-researched and well-indexed guidebook, but the decisive facts of Wittgenstein's album have a hidden meaning.

What happened behind closed doors are the many "family resemblances" of the flippant ambiguities and mordant contradictions in Wittgenstein's way of dealing with the conflicts around him. The general meaning of the photographs shows a dramatic age difference in the expression of concentrated quiet or liveliest attention, revealing variations in faces, features, and expressions, the way of sitting or standing, and so forth. According to Fanja Pascal, his teacher of Russian, the personal appearance of Wittgenstein was:

... small in stature but of concentrated inner energy, neat with a keen look as of a bird in flight. I never saw him wearing a closed collar or tie. He found it

hard to sit still; it seemed as though at any minute he might take off. There was something stern and forbidding, yet naïve, in his expression, directed to others but also to himself. ... He was altogether a naïve man, remarkably unselfconscious. He could be irritable in the extreme, but much (maybe most of it) he could not help — his life was made hard by excessive sensibility, a sensitivity affecting all the senses. (312).

The cover image presents Wittgenstein in a sporty costume, after having abandoned his professorial duties. He wanted to create some distance from what he called the "*Steife, Künstliche, Selbstgefällige*" kind of atmosphere (387) of the university town of Cambridge by travelling to Ireland. Compare the cover photograph of September 1947 to the older pictures of Ludwig junior in a sailor suit (33, 41 ff., 58 ff., 63, 70) and the austere youngster with an elegant jacket and neat tie (79 f., 87, 131, 149).

The later pictures are often informal snapshots. For example, see Wittgenstein's well-shaped head and the high, broad forehead set off his staring eyes in 1920. His face reflects intensified sadness, but he wears a black motorcycle jacket for a fast drive (177). The press photographs of 1921 show a relaxed Wittgenstein rowing on the Norwegian fjords, dressed in a sporty shirt and sweater (193). An observant and cool picture of Wittgenstein in 1922, when he was working as a primary schoolteacher

in rural Austria, shows him informally dressed with an open neck shirt and without a tie (206). Next, we see Wittgenstein as a working man with dirty shoes, ready for architectural work on his sister Margarete's new house in Vienna (242). The official photograph of the stipend in the University of Cambridge shows a controlled, firm, and slightly grim face (266), but in the company of his family (1932), Wittgenstein shows a happy face (293). On a street photograph, Wittgenstein's face is friendly, walking through London with his friend Ben Richards. Wearing a raincoat and motoring cap, he stands upright but secretly uses a walking stick (389). The finale is Wittgenstein's sad face in his death mask (420).

The dialectical sides of his never-formal self-presentation are exemplified by Wittgenstein as an unconventional model, beset by worry and intense concentration. Transmitting hidden messages about his social status, he reflected in his personal appearance the change and transformation of social causes and economic order during his lifetime. The slogans of the French Revolution took up equality and fraternity to exhibit the revolution of the middle class people. These new criteria provided more relevant standards of judgment than those of the old upper class to which Wittgenstein's family belonged. Yet at the same time, the revolutionary ideas of Marx's theory have redirected socialism into the political

power of Communism. As Wittgenstein said after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935 (322ff., 433): the horrors of Stalin have betrayed Soviet communism, misleading into non-Marxist principles (360). Wittgenstein's academic and artistic attitude stirred up the strength of mind of his rational thought against his self-defense of alienation and transgression, linking his emotional life to his sometimes irrational attitude of spiritual exile.

The early images of young Wittgenstein, his mother and father, his sisters and brothers (26ff. and throughout the book) reflect the luxury of his family's background in respectable Habsburg bourgeois society. Ludwig seemed to go along with his parents' intellectual and cultural world view. He had a brilliant but self-absorbed career in academia (402), yet because of his strangeness to academic education, he felt marginal, an outsider. Wittgenstein had an essential horror of universities. His professorate in Cambridge was not a personal calling; he needed a private income to support himself. Despite his pessimism, Wittgenstein carried out his mission, fixing his attention on the future of the new philosophy of language. Wittgenstein's transgressive personality brought academically both success and failure according to his own standard of the highest norms. Morally affected and imprisoned by the political turmoils of both world wars, Wittgenstein belonged to the

fin-de-siècle generation, constrained by the radicalization of his real and fictional truths in order to stay alive in the furnace of Europe.

Spiralling back in time to Wittgenstein's education in Vienna, Nedo's album witnesses that his father Karl Wittgenstein, an iron and steel magnate, considered practical and theoretical knowledge for himself; for his children he had in mind the professions of technician and businessman (37) for a career in finance and industry. The Wittgenstein siblings had private lecturers to teach Latin and mathematics (426). His sister Hermine seemed to miss the conformist routine and discipline at an ordinary school (42, see 63). Perhaps the Wittgenstein brothers and sisters overcame their isolated education by the artistic rationalization of the Secession spirit. They created a style of their own as part of a revolt against the law-and-order values of the Habsburg monarchy. As an adolescent, Ludwig followed his mother's passion for music, but pursued his education in engineering and aeronautics in his father's footsteps (82-87). But in "learning" his real talent, philosophy (starting from 88ff., discussed throughout), Wittgenstein was a self-taught genius. His friend David Pinsent wrote in his diary on 30 May 1912 that:

Wittgenstein was very amusing: he is reading philosophy up here [University of Cambridge], but has only just started systematic reading; and he expresses the most naïve surprise that all the philosophers he

once worshipped in ignorance, are after all stupid and dishonest and make disgusting mistakes. (101)

Wittgenstein easily moved away from the old canon of philosophy towards his new branch associated with the emerging modern linguistics. Was Wittgenstein anxious for public acknowledgement? In his academic reaction as an insider and outsider of mainstream society at Cambridge, Vienna, and elsewhere: yes and no.

After the robust sense of fun during Wittgenstein's youth, his later years contained the serious pursuit of his philosophy, but against the mood of alarm and bewilderment raised by the danger of war. Wittgenstein's aim was to be tougher on himself, in Hermine's words, "*etwas Schweres auf sich zu nehmen und irgend etwas Anderes zu leisten als rein geistige Arbeit*" (130). His patriotic ambition involved him as a voluntary soldier in the horrors of World War I. The habits of the military class involve the absence of freedom, but Wittgenstein's discipline was maintained strictly under the enemy's fire. After the military encounters in Poland (136ff.), Nedo highlights the image of Wittgenstein's military identity card as an imperial and royal lieutenant of the "*Kanonenerbatterie Nr. 1 des Gebirgsartillerieregiment Nr. 11*" (144, with a photograph showing Wittgenstein's serious face), crowned with the "*Goldene Tapferkeitsmedaille für Offiziere*" (147). After surviving the climate of fear and despair, Wittgenstein needed to spend some

troublesome years to find a new way of emotional and intellectual life. He dedicated the publication of his controversial book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (183) to his friend David Pinsent, who had heroically died in World War I (152ff.).

Next, with Hitler's *Anschluss* (1939) incorporating Austria into Nazi Germany, bourgeois Habsburg society was over and done with. The *Zeitgeist* of the nationalist and racist reality of Fascism threatened Wittgenstein's real existence, because of his Jewish extraction. Although Wittgenstein never followed the mass of any popular ideals, his *Volksgeist* on the political scene was driven to a cynical and relativist feeling of destruction and self-destruction. These were translated into his moral decency and respectability – in Wittgenstein's own words "*Kultur ist eine Ordensregel. Oder setzt doch eine Ordensregel voraus*" (177) – but transposed from reasoning to sentiments. Facing the feeling of imminent danger, he had intimate thoughts on burn-out and suicide. As a politically "impossible" person in European countries occupied by Nazi Germany, Wittgenstein's destiny forced him to become a British citizen, becoming an outsider in an allied country.

Nedo narrates that Wittgenstein was not a man of fixed abode. He spent longer and shorter periods in Norway, Ireland, and Russia in order to study. The periphery of Europe stayed Wittgenstein's scene, since he was looking for a good place to

think and write his new philosophy. The absolute solitude of the working stays at the Norwegian fjords and the simplicity of the Irish countryside deepened the lack of daily drama of life, electrifying Wittgenstein into writing the *Philosophical Investigations* and later texts.

This book belongs to the "must read" list for anyone interested in understanding Wittgenstein as a person-and-philosopher. The biography has produced a nuanced, nonjudgmental personal portrait, resting firmly on prodigious archival work but including no new firsthand information. Nedo's album shows several layers of Wittgenstein's lifetime: complexity and simplicity, richness and poverty, arrogance and humility, and faith and science. With fresh information the readers can see the many visual details of the pictures, while the written references give a fresh start to the original photographs to study Wittgenstein's reasoning. The photographs penetrate beneath the surface manifestations of academic writings and publications to show the multifaceted *Umwelt* of Wittgenstein's philosophical writings. The fragmentary elements of Nedo's biography narrate the artistic, dramatic, and intellectual "novel" of Wittgenstein's unique mind in the choice of materials which offers the more generous and brilliant imaginery to the investigation of his work. Nedo's album forms an emotional, practical, or logical guideline for today's readers, helping to fulfil the wish of

many readers to learn more about Wittgenstein's rigorous and adventurous mind.