

»I think of you constantly with love ...«:  
*Briefwechsel Ludwig Wittgenstein – Ben  
Richards 1946–1951,*  
*edited by Alfred Schmidt*

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*»I think of you constantly with love ...«: Briefwechsel Ludwig Wittgenstein – Ben Richards 1946–1951*, Herausgegeben von Alfred Schmidt in Zusammenarbeit mit Gabriel Citron, ins Deutsche übersetzt von Alfred Schmidt, mit einem Vorwort von Ray Monk, Haymon: Innsbruck, 2023, 447 pp.

The title of the edition of 373 letters and postcards between Wittgenstein and Ben Richards in German translation (hereafter referred to as “letters”) aptly encapsulates Wittgenstein’s relationship with Richards: He loved him. This love appears to have been present from their initial meeting in November 1945 until Wittgenstein’s death in April 1951, which occurred in Richards’s presence. The love seemed profound and unconditional: I will *always* love you; I will *always* want to see your face; I will *always* want to be with you. At times, Wittgenstein encodes the expression of love with ellipses or uses abbreviations. The title of the edition is derived from the letters themselves, as it is the typical phrase Wittgenstein would use to conclude his letters.

Wittgenstein greatly cherished the company of Richards. It did him *good*. They enjoyed together music, art, exhibitions, reading books (including

philosophy), and nature. This edition provides us with unprecedented insights into Wittgenstein’s and Richards’s mutual love for plants, as well as Wittgenstein’s growing interest in birds. The records of the latter are particularly notable as there is no other such documentation of Wittgenstein’s fondness for birds, not even from his stays in Skjolden, where one would most expect them (the panicked report in MS 119 from October 1937 about a tit being caught in his mouse trap confirms the rule). It seems that this interest only developed out of his love for Richards. The letters often include numerous illustrations and actual specimens of flowers and plants picked from the location where Wittgenstein was writing. Wittgenstein felt that Richards was his ideal conversation partner and believed that their relationship made him a better person, a better teacher (he wanted Richards to

attend his lectures and discussion meetings), and even a better philosopher: “My work’s going slowly but it’s /always/ moving. The greatest help is thinking of you, & your letters” (II: 84); there is no other such “wonderful tonic like seeing you to straighten out my mind again”, “you keep me going” (II: 71); “I always miss you & wish I could refresh my soul by seeing you” (II: 72); “you have a way of bringing peace to my mind” (II: 74); “Life feels so much easier & sweeter when I am with you” (II: 104); “Thinking of you is the only thing that makes me feel really good” (III: 18); “When I think of you I feel good” (III: 20). Wittgenstein suggests that true love is characterized by the positive feelings one has for the other in their absence: “... love isn’t measured by what a person feels when the other is with him, but by what he /feels &/ will do for the other when they aren’t together” (V: 23). He believes: “However bad I am, your being with me will always be good for me” (V: 66).<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein sensed early on that the relationship between them might be more asymmetrical than he and Richards could tolerate, and that he might be expecting too much from Richards. His love for Richards placed an enormous burden on Wittgenstein – a burden that Richards’s love might not be able to counterbalance (II: 50). He asks Richards to always be honest with him and to inform him if he can no longer be his friend: “May you think of me with /real/ love as I do of you! or let me know that you don’t

(II: 4). A simile that Wittgenstein uses in this context is quite revealing:

Imagine you had bought a dog. For a time you give him his food regularly, & you enjoy his pleasure & gratitude. Then, may be, it gets monotonous, & you’re busy & feed him at odd times when it suits you. You make the animal wretched & ill. – Now there is no reason why you should keep such a delicate animal (on the other hand, it’s not the animal’s fault that it is like that). If you feel that you haven’t bargained for all that regularity in feeding him, you must get rid of him without delay. (II: 80)

Wittgenstein can in his letters sometimes be picky. He even chastises Richards for growing a beard: “If one loves someone that person’s face becomes a symbol which one can’t arbitrarily change without hurting the person who has come to love it” (III: 26). He also discusses the obligations they have towards each other, which include absolute honesty: “untruth is the worst of all, however sad the truth may be” (IV: 2). However, Wittgenstein always seeks Richards’ forgiveness when he feels he has been unfair. He desires his own love not to be possessive, and Richards’ love to be genuine: “... I can only say that I will never again want you to see me, or write to me, more often than you feel is good for you ...” (IV: 13).

The edition categorizes the letters into seven sections, based on the loca-

<sup>1</sup> Reference to the letters is by chapter and letter number. Quotations from the letters follow their original English, generously provided to me by the editor, A. Schmidt.

tions from where Wittgenstein wrote them:

- I: Cambridge and Swansea, June 1946–July 1947 (79 letters)
- II: Ireland and Vienna, August 1947–July 1949 (115)
- III: Malcolm’s house in Ithaca (NY), July–October 1949 (28)
- IV: von Wright’s house in Cambridge and Vienna, November 1949–April 1950 (34)
- V: Anscombe’s house in Oxford, April 1950–February 1951 (74)
- VI: Dr. Bevan’s house in Cambridge, February–April 1951 (24)
- VII: Undated items and three messages humorously signed “John Smith” (19)

Along with the endnotes, the editor’s introduction to the edition and individual chapters allows readers to understand the letters in their respective biographical, cultural, and institutional contexts. It also helps them comprehend the numerous references to other persons and works and see the connections with Wittgenstein’s concurrent philosophical work. Lastly, the edition provides a timeline of the main events in Wittgenstein’s and Richards’s lives from 1942 onwards.

While this review is primarily guided by the fact that Wittgenstein found in Richards (again) someone he could love and was allowed to love, it would be incorrect to assume that the

edition lacks content for readers primarily interested in Wittgenstein’s philosophical work. The letters provide commentaries on Wittgenstein’s philosophical activities, which include writing, lecturing, discussing, chairing and attending sessions in the Moral Science Club and other clubs, from the summer of 1946 until his death. One example are the reports about his philosophical “Gedankenbewegung” (CV 16): While in March 1948 he had still believed that his way of moving philosophical thoughts was productive (II: 32) and illustrated it with the same drawing as already used seventeen years earlier in Ms-110,82 (a coil spring)<sup>2</sup>, in February 1951 he found that his thoughts were stagnant and that he was incapable of moving them further on (VI: 7). Conversely, as brilliantly demonstrated by R. Monk’s preface and the editor’s introduction, the literary Nachlass contains also numerous comments that shed light on Wittgenstein’s relationship with Richards. In many ways, the letters and the Nachlass lend themselves to being read in parallel. Furthermore, many of the letters are closely related to Wittgenstein’s “Nonsense collection” (see Wang-Kathrein 2023). Not only do Wittgenstein and Richards frequently indulge in wit and humor (Richards excels with drawings and comics), but Wittgenstein also often attaches “nonsensical” newspaper clippings and similar items to his letters. It is no surprise that one of their favorite activities was reading Wilhelm Busch together (see V: 68).

<sup>2</sup> Other illustrations of his "Gedankenbewegung" can be found in Ms-118,77r and Ms-157b,37r.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Ben Richard's wife, Tara, and daughter, Miranda, for preserving and sharing this correspondence that today is kept at the Austrian National Library (see Schmidt 2014 and 2021), as well as to the editor for his excellent edition. This review could only scratch the surface of its richness and depth. English readers can eagerly look forward to the upcoming English edition from Bloomsbury.

## ***References***

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