

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was born in Vienna to a wealthy business family, reputedly the second wealthiest family in the Hapsburg Empire (second only to the banking family of the Rothschilds.) Though Ludwig's career was subsequently to lead to a Professorship at Cambridge, and to close acquaintance with many of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century in England and Germany, he published little in his lifetime, and took considerable time for solitary living and thinking. (In World War II he could not endure being absent from the war struggle itself, and [did volunteer work]

for a long time as a hospital orderly; while in WWI he was active on the front lines, and was decorated for bravery.) In 1921 he published a version of his Cambridge thesis under the title *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he attempted to show the correlation between logical propositions and the structure of the world. In later life he reread this work and found it seriously lacking, especially as he had, since the 1921 publication, been intensively at work on the notes and papers for a new work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, which would first be published in 1953, after his death. It is that work which we will read this week, and which will doubtless occasion the query what this work is doing in a syllabus on German autobiography.

The syllabus writer before you has taken the liberty of including, in a course on German autobiography, a text (*The Philosophical Investigations*) which is not an autobiography—for Wittgenstein wrote no such thing—but (among many other issues)—a text about the possibility of autobiography. This set of reflections bears on the nature and possibility of the whole life-writing or autobiography project the present class takes for granted. Wittgenstein plants, in the midst of the materials of this class, critical doubts without considering which we are hardly in a position to justify our whole undertaking. From the time of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was concerned with the problems raised by our efforts to describe in language, and though he came out, in that text, very subtly on the side of the describability of the world, he has, in *The Philosophical Investigations*, taken the same concern in a different direction. He has subjected language and its descriptions to a radical critique, introduced the notion of language games, and thereby raised fundamental doubts about the kinds of descriptive vehicle available to us, for describing or talking about our selves. In plain English, he has very subtly raised the question of what kind of account we could possibly give of ourselves.

Readings:

Philosophical Investigations; (trans. Anscombe.) (New York, 1958).

Questions:

In the opening of the *Investigations* (sections 1-7) Wittgenstein outlines his conception of language as a game, a way of moving counters without actually making contact with the real world entities those counters represent. What specific implications do you see, in this theory, for the practice of autobiography? Do you accept Wittgenstein's perspective, or do you see a way to restore, to language, an objective/substantive role in human being?

What is Wittgenstein's view of the 'self' or the 'soul'? From section 413, off and on until the end of the text, Wittgenstein grapples with this self-issue. How does his view challenge the assumption, about selfhood, on which the present syllabus is based?

Is it important to you, as a student of autobiography, to understand whether the autobiographical text sheds light on its object, or is that a matter of indifference? Are you comfortable to think of the autobiographical text simply as a construction in language, without reference?

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* raised the issue of the possibility of describing the self—the kind of activity implied in the notions of autobiography and life-writing. What is your view, now, about the possibility of describing the self, as it plays out in German autobiography?