

## THE WAYS OF THE WITTGENSTEINS ACCORDING TO A WAUGH

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Alexander Waugh. *The House of Wittgenstein: a Family at War*. London: Bloomsbury, 2008. Pp. 366. ISBN: 0-7475-9185-7. £20.00 (hb). New York: Doubleday, 2009. Pp. 333. ISBN: 0-385-52060-3. US\$28.95 (hb).

Each family is happy and unhappy in its own ways. This is hardly surprising given that the family lies at the crossroad of so much human experience. It is the scene for playing out genetics and for working through the rearing and civilizing of children, both nature and nurture. In economic life it constitutes the primary unit, the household. Despite Tolstoy's ideal, none can ever be completely happy for every member all the time. And, there is no reason to think that basically happy families are any more the same than unhappy ones. But then none can ever be completely unhappy; or rather, when a family is completely unhappy it is unlikely that it will remain one. One other factor, however, intrudes on this picture: we tend to be more interested in bad or scandalous news than good. Vicarious experience brings catharsis, possibly helpful in a way. Yet, as the German language recognizes with the word "*Schadenfreude*", we can experience joy at someone else's sorrow, despite the questions it raises about our empathy.

Alexander Waugh is himself the member of a famous family. He has written

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its “autobiography” in *Fathers and Sons*,<sup>1</sup> where he is principally concerned with his father Auberon (“Bron”), his grandfather Evelyn, his great-uncle Alec, and his great-grandfather Arthur. Given the family documentation at his disposal and the span of generations, that book covers enough territory, in enough detail, to give us some sense of Waugh family character. You learn what it was like to grow up in the family, down to the odour of Uncle Auberon Herbert’s cologne, “smelling like Cleopatra in her barge on her way to meet Antony for the first time” according to Bron (p. 370, paperback ed.), and the family suspicion that this uncle may have been the illegitimate son of Hilaire Belloc (p. 276). The fathers and sons, from Arthur down to Alexander, all wrote for a living, witty, stylish prose, and sometimes poetry. They especially liked writing about each other in letters, essays, and novels, often to each other in public letters and dedications; and as a consequence Alexander’s book is rich, amusing, intimate, and a bit indiscrete. Arthur’s turn-of-the-century avoidance of emotion in sentimentality grew outmoded, but it was replaced in the family business with newer models, with more flash and cynicism. When it came to Alexander’s father Bron, he was known for his talent at vituperation, and got into verbal and legal scrapes with C. P. Snow and Bertrand Russell among others (p. 407), which led to his getting sacked but only made his journalism more widely read and more valuable to publishers. In Alexander’s disclosure of his family history, there is a sureness of touch that comes from working within his ken.

Waugh studied music, and worked as a music critic. In his easy, self-deprecating way, he told an interviewer for *The Wall Street Journal* that he got the idea to write this book because of “the most appalling boil on my right index finger”. This curtailed his routine enjoyment at the piano, “But then as I sat down and pressed a chord with my left hand I thought of Paul Wittgenstein. I knew about the concerto that Ravel composed for him and I knew that he was Ludwig’s brother. He was bound to have an interesting story.”<sup>2</sup> With access to some Wittgenstein family papers through one of Paul Wittgenstein’s daughters, he began. But a biography of the one-armed pianist soon turned into this “family history”, in part because of the author’s previous success with his own family, but also one suspects out of commercial considerations. Unfortunately witty depreciation of one’s own family does not have the same lightness when applied to someone else’s.

This book about the Wittgensteins is not a full, sweeping family history. It is rather strictly limited to the generation in which Paul and Ludwig were the youngest siblings, along with some discussion of the last years of their parents, Karl and Leopoldine. For most of the book, the story concerns only four of the

<sup>1</sup> *Fathers and Sons: the Autobiography of a Family* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> “A Family’s Decrescendo”, interview by Moira G. Weigel, *The Wall Street Journal*, Books, 1 March 2009; <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123575592455895881.html>.

eight siblings who survived into adulthood, the oldest Hermine and the three youngest: Margarethe, Paul, and Ludwig.

Hermine was the daughter who stayed at home to care for her aged mother. The next four drop out of the picture after only brief appearances: Hans, a musical savant, went missing in America in his mid-twenties, having left the parental household. Though Waugh does not make the connection, his departure actually follows the pattern of most male Wittgensteins, who leave their father's domination in their early twenties and emigrate; this happened with grandfather and father, and later brothers Kurt and Ludwig did the same. Hans was the only one we know of to get lost in the process. Helene married at twenty and, remaining in Vienna, successfully established her own household and family. Kurt, considered an overgrown child, had brief stints in the Austrian Reserves and the steel industry; he later left for America where he seems to have been an Austrian agent of some kind. He returned to reenlist as an officer during the First World War only to be shot, by the Italians or his own men or himself, just as the war was ending. Rudi had openly committed suicide in Berlin ten years before the war, apparently in mourning for a friend and worried about exposure of his homosexuality.

Of the youngest three, Margarethe ("Gretl"), later Margaret Stonborough, had her father's will to power, which she actively exercised in a number of ways over the next decades, often charitable, always (it seems to me) controlling. Paul, who had a promising career as a concert pianist before the war, lost his right arm and suffered further as a prisoner-of-war held in Siberia. His subsequent efforts to make a career and his success at doing so despite this injury provide the central thread of Waugh's narrative. And, as we all know, fair-haired<sup>3</sup> Ludwig, the youngest, left Austria to study first engineering, then philosophy with Bertrand Russell, returned, fought in the War, had his own trying times in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, gave up his share of the family fortune, and then wandered off again.

For various reasons (to which I will return), in Waugh's version of the house of Wittgenstein, Ludwig is the most famous person mostly not at home. Yet his shadow lingers. The epigraph of the book, rather dark and negative in the context of Paul's amputation, is a passage from Ludwig's *On Certainty*: among general empirical propositions that count as certain, "One such is that if someone's arm is cut off it will not grow again ..." (§274). At least two bleak section headings come from Ludwig's letters. But Waugh does not quote the passage mentioning the Grimm brothers' fairy-tale used by Ludwig at *Tractatus* 4.014, "The Gold-Children," in which two youths, two lilies, and two horses are "all in a certain sense the same."<sup>4</sup> This was appropriate to the two youngest boys, Paul and

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<sup>3</sup> In his youth; see the dustjacket of the British edition and other early photographs.

<sup>4</sup> See Inge Ackermann, *et al.*, "Wittgenstein's Fairy Tale", *Analysis* 38 (1978): 159–60.

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Ludwig, as a cautionary tale about their golden inheritance and as an example of the proper Wittgenstein attitude, “*Ich soll und muss fort*” (“I should and must be off”). But that suggests a deeper and more positive identification between Paul and Ludwig than fits Waugh’s telling.

In dealing with the period of this generation, *The House of Wittgenstein* is organized in four parts around the two world wars. It starts with Paul’s first public recital in 1913, then backtracks to cover the rise of Karl Wittgenstein’s fortunes and other family matters before World War I. The second section covers the Great War itself; the third, the period between the wars; and the fourth, from the Austrian *Anschluss* to Paul’s death in 1961. There is a brief post-script concerning Paul’s wife and children, the Stonboroughs (Gretl’s children), and the Salzers (Helene’s). This organization of the book around the world wars may explain the ominous subtitle, “A Family at War”, for there is really nothing to support the idea that the family was at war with itself, with the possible exception of the struggle of Gretl and the Nazis against Paul over the cash with which to purchase protection for Hermine and Helene by having them declared *Mischlinge* (half-breeds under Nazi laws). Those were extraordinary circumstances that would have produced conflict in any family.

The book takes a breezy, journalistic approach to these events. Waugh is particularly good on Paul’s harrowing difficulties in the first war. He gets only a passing grade on Paul’s work on piano technique and teaching. His empathy for Paul begins to fail when it comes to manipulative Gretl, especially in the struggle over Paul’s remaining assets in 1939. If you want to understand the family dynamics, you have to put the pieces together yourself. If anything, Waugh plays up the sorrows and misunderstandings for all they are worth, though you become aware in passing that the family could be deeply happy and connected through music. At the most difficult moments, playing music together, or simply enjoying it, was the consolation to which they turned, as Waugh acknowledges (pp. 6–7, 30–1, 38–9, 111–12, Doubleday pagination). But more often it is *Schadenfreude* that carries the narrative along. One verifiable suicide (Rudi’s) becomes two (Hans’ disappearance, cause unknown) with the inference of a third (Kurt’s fate at the end of the war). At every turn we learn of other deaths and suicides: the conductor at Paul’s recital jumped from a window seventeen years later (p. 5), the general who pinned a decoration on Paul shot himself in the head fifteen months later (p. 109), Paul’s principal piano teacher was not at his one-handed debut “as he had died four months earlier” (p. 104), not a suicide but still an excuse for not being present. This is all just glib in a morbid way, blows of fate delivered in march tempo. Waugh calls Hermine’s thoughtful family memoirs “fairy-tales”, meaning that these recollections intended for nieces and nephews are too happy for his taste. Of course, actual fairy-tales are even darker than anything he produces.

Then there is the question of Ludwig, the youngest, the one who let nothing

be swept under the rug, no tragedy, quarrel, or embarrassment go unnoticed. My own conclusion is that he was not so much the frequent cause of contention as overly sensitive to family tensions and shortcomings. You can hardly ignore him, can you? Waugh confesses, “What I did not want was to get embroiled in an analysis of his philosophy . . . there’s no consensus. So I thought, here’s a really good chance to write a book about Ludwig, and not try to be a smart ass.”<sup>5</sup> You have to ask, then, whether Waugh is writing a book about the family as his title suggests, or a book that is principally a biography of Paul the pianist. Or is it, oddly, really a book about Ludwig that avoids any discussion of his philosophy?

Of course Waugh has a special problem as the biographer of Paul: how to prevent the other brother from getting all the attention. This seems to produce an odd form of sibling rivalry carried out after the fact by a biographer. Waugh could have been more straightforward about this. Instead you will find him diminishing or skipping over Wittgenstein family matters in which Ludwig is a central character. Ludwig’s sudden interest in philosophy is seen as an allegedly bitter disappointment to Karl’s supposed hopes that his youngest would become a great engineer. Ludwig’s wartime experience, including his extended post-war term as a prisoner at Cassino, is mentioned only briefly. Hermine’s assistance during that time in sending the *Tractatus* manuscript to Gottlob Frege is ignored entirely. Similarly Gretl’s efforts on Ludwig’s behalf are mentioned only in passing; but she invited and befriended Frank Ramsey when he was in Vienna in 1923 and 1924, and she took an active role in rehabilitating Ludwig, who seems to have been still suffering from his war experience, by engaging him in the design and construction of her modernist house. When it comes to the *Tractatus*, you get what is really a pastiche of negative views and people claiming that it is impenetrable—no discussion of the fact that Bertrand Russell took it quite seriously. This part of the story is sandwiched between unsympathetic opinions about Ludwig’s difficulties readjusting after his war and prison-camp experiences and a letter from Paul to Rudolf Koder concerning the proper diet to treat Ludwig’s painful colitis (pp. 143–8).

In the end I am left tracking down and rethinking what Waugh seized upon to make his case. Two examples—first: Is it really true that the extended family was unimpressed by Ludwig, thought him the family fool and a useless person? Were they amused that the academic world had been taken in by this clown (p. 147)? The thought expressed here is actually from a character in a novel *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*,<sup>6</sup> by Thomas Bernhard, and an unreliable character at that—

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Nephew, a Friendship*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 62–5. Waugh uses a translation by Ewald Osers (London: 1986), p. 75.

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the book celebrates Paul's shameless madness as a kind of sanity and clarity. The character does represent a real person, a Paul Wittgenstein (1907–1979),<sup>7</sup> a son of Karl Paul and grandson of the Paul (1842–1928) who was Ludwig's uncle; Bernhard's Paul was actually Ludwig's great-nephew. We can accept, though, that this is a reliable report from the 1970s, accurate in the sense that this Paul is likely to have said something like this about the reaction of his extended family, since Bernhard's methods were autobiographical. But both characters in the novel respect Ludwig. In the context Paul's rant is not at all a criticism of Ludwig, his philosophizing, and those outside of Austria who thought it valuable. Instead it is a criticism of the narrow-mindedness of the extended family and the perfidiousness of Austrian society.

Second: What did Ludwig mean when he said, concerning the events of 1939, "Had I realized then how insane Paul was, I would never have treated him so harshly" (p. 250)? The quote is from an interested party, one of Gretl's descendants, reported to Brian McGuinness many years after the fact (1993). Still, even in this form, it is not what you say about someone you have turned your back upon. Rather it is an admission of ineffectiveness, being unable to come to the aid of someone close to you who was under great stress—not someone you take to be permanently insane. Was Ludwig hoping that he could rescue the sisters in Vienna, or perhaps Paul? The situation must have tied Ludwig in knots since these aims were at odds. He had already given up his share of the estate, so he could not help with money. He was pressed to join the negotiation in New York by the Stonboroughs, and came on the *Queen Mary*, perhaps thinking "I should and must be there." In the end he apparently came to the conclusion that "the Stonboroughs' behaviour was certainly rash and stupid" (p. 250). But he did not meet with Paul, only with Paul's lawyers. (Fortunately leaving it to the lawyers worked pretty well.) In this case, Ludwig just felt in retrospect that he could have been more sympathetic. This is not, I think, the impression that Waugh intends to convey, which is more like a pure antipathy between the two brothers. But that is much less likely, and much less interesting.

In all of this Alexander Waugh exercises a kind of easy wit that too often tends toward the nastiest possible interpretation. You get disparaging put-downs rather than insight. Some random examples: Karl made the family fortune as an entrepreneur, reorganizing mining and steel production. Why does Waugh characterize him as a "chancer" ("opportunist" in the u.s. ed.) who lied in order to secure contracts, when in fact the contracts were fulfilled and the enterprises successful (pp. 17–18)? Why is Russell's interest in his new student called "Ludwig's seduction of Russell" (p. 47)? Is there any possibility that Waugh missed something significant about the work? How does it illuminate anything about

<sup>7</sup> Allan S. Janik and Hans Veigl, *Wittgenstein in Vienna: a Biographical Excursion through the City and Its History* (Vienna: Springer, 1998), pp. 211–13.

the *Tractatus* to say that it gave “the philosophical world a great deal of gristle to chew upon” (p. 147)? Finally, we can understand what would have justified complex emotions when Paul returned to Vienna in 1949, but do we really know that Paul’s heart was “full of bitterness” (p. 273)? Not conflicting emotions? Why not emptied of bitterness, or even just numb, as long as we are guessing?

All of this snickering at the foibles and misfortunes of the Wittgensteins makes it hard to see their good qualities, their skills, and their accomplishments. Waugh clearly wants to tell no stories with happy endings. But the reality was pretty extraordinary; otherwise why bother? The family was talented and intelligent. Fortunes were made in two previous generations by rationalizing agriculture and steel. A great deal was expected of the children. The males in each generation were as much as driven off by their fathers’ demanding personalities. Apparently they were expected to toughen up by being outcasts and vagabonds, like young gorillas. At least that was the way it worked, when it worked. They in turn accomplished great things. The generation of Paul and Ludwig had great wealth, but also great adversity. These two brothers flourished precisely because they were willing to extricate themselves. Paul the pianist lost an arm, but overcame the loss with left-hand and pedal technique. He went on to create a career for himself and to use his wealth and skill to enrich the musical world with performances, arrangements, commissions, and students. Ludwig apparently had to disavow all wealth and family entanglements to make it. But, despite Waugh’s difficulties reading and crediting Ludwig’s philosophy, he did create important work. Ludwig saw it as elucidating, seeking an overview, taking a wider look around, perhaps in the manner that his father and grandfather saw ways to make improvements, rationalizations, and consolidations in business. It would be interesting to know whether Paul pursued music in this same spirit. At least you get some hint that he must have, once you strip away the quarrels with composers, the bad reviews, the distressing vicissitudes, the perfectly human failings.

Expectations created by Waugh’s *Fathers and Sons* are disappointed in his *The House of Wittgenstein*. The wit and dash that work on the Waughs misfire when aimed at the Wittgensteins.

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