

# REVIEWS

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## Germs: A Memoir of Childhood

RICHARD WOLLHEIM

SHOEMAKER & HOARD. 2004. PP. 320. £12.20. (HBK)

### I.

What are the genre characteristics of an autobiography? Is it journalism about anecdotes from the writer's life? Or is it a personal fiction based on truthful memories that conveys the nature and logic of the writer's youth? Biographies certainly differ from philosophical texts with their argumentative strategies. How was I to read *Germs*? If I just read on, like one reads a novel, I might overlook details relevant to the life recounted. Reading intently, in contrast—like you would a philosophy book—might make one miss the peculiar scope of events. Anecdotes may lack insight into the social context, the psychological background, and the future of those involved. A remark from Aristotle about the difference between art (poetry) and history motivates me in this review. Poetry, Aristotle thinks, is more philosophical than history because it delivers universal knowledge:

By universal truths are to be understood the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation; and this is the aim of poetry, although it gives individual names to its characters. The particular facts of the historian are what, say, Alcibiades did, or what happened to him. (Aristotle, 1986, 1451b7, p. 43–44)

Now each moral situation might be understood in this manner if only we had the relevant details, as a good biography might deliver, providing the universal knowledge about 'kinds of thing a certain type

of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation'.

Not so in *Germs*. Wollheim, who was heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, applies psychoanalytic theory to the memories of his youth. The events, places, and thoughts discussed in the book follow the path of association. After disclosing some of those associations, Wollheim remarks that he 'always realized that they would be mere associations after the fact, telling me nothing of the past, or why it has the power to repeat itself in the present' (p. 18). But what else forms the thread of a life (according to Wollheim) than a history of experiences retained over the years?

I read *Germs* as if it were written by a friend, unsure whether Wollheim would take me as one. What do I want to give him in return? How can I do justice to the richness of his writing? Who am I to say what went on in his life? It is as though he is looking over my shoulder to see whether I paraphrase his intimate reports correctly. I must make you see for yourself, by prompting you to his descriptions.

As a small child I lived under a rule of my father's making, which he insisted upon and with such strictness that he must have once suffered under it himself, and it forbad me, no matter the circumstances, ever to use the word 'boredom', and boredom would be the currency in which I would pay for the pleasures of calm and quiet. (p. 14)

Wollheim goes beyond the anecdotal and describes the psychological, phenomenological and rhetorical aspects of events, interactions, and actions. Thus we become acquainted with the way he led his life on his way to adulthood and with what happens rhetorically in the power balance with his father (be well-dressed,

do not feel bored, ever), his mother (germs); the way famous visitors (clients and friends of his father) visit their home, and what this may have meant for this very sensitive and intelligent boy. Diaghilev, for instance, was a frequent visitor to the household, but ‘this would [not] have added up to so much if Diaghilev had not in the last resort conformed to my father’s fundamental demands on life, which brought him so much in conflict with me’ (p. 201).

Once, young Richard came down the stairs to join a conversation between his aunt and his parents, and stopped before opening the curtain that hid him from the room, just in time to hear his aunt tell his parents that she knew a doctor who could cut his ears so that they would no longer stand out as ugly as they did now. And he stole upstairs in silence, to his room, to cry. How a child can be fond of a loving aunt without ever noticing the way she glanced at his ears.

At times, one wonders how the older Wollheim is still capable of recalling the details of experiences he had as a boy. But he must have rehearsed his anxieties and his thoughts about his former self and his relations to father, mother, the homes and towns they lived in, visitors and family members, and so on, in lengthy and repeated conversations with Dr S—most probably a psychoanalytic therapist.

It is Wollheim’s style that hands us the younger Richard, his inner turmoil, his ways of thinking, his issues. We come to know what kind of child Richard was—and it does not contradict the intensity and attentive dedication of the grown-up philosopher who did so much for aesthetics and the philosophy of psychology, and served as the president of the British Society of Aesthetics from 1992 until his death in 2003.

## II.

Young Richard was burdened with thoughts about failure and loneliness, and with insecure feelings about his body:

when, from time to time, I put it down in order to rest my eyes, I would suddenly feel commanded to climb up to the top diving board and dive off,

even though I have never learnt to dive, and, if the water got up my nose by mistake, I started to drink it in, believing that I should get death over quickly. Accompanied or unaccompanied, I was always alone (p. 98).

Richard loved lists of all sorts, of places where he had been, royal mistresses, and so on. Of all these lists:

the most necessitated – though, even if I could have, I never would have entrusted it to paper – was a catalogue of the various ways in which the unreliability, the incontinence, of the body forced itself on my attention. (p. 17)

to continue the associations, I could cite the shame that was to persist through the years of childhood and adolescence and also later at the unreliability of my body, of that constant companion which was to let me down so often and so regularly. (p. 16)

At the age of six or seven, on a holiday with his parents, Richard goes to the sea with his mother and her friend Peggy. After swimming in the freezing sea, Peggy is asked to dry Richard, and he, as he was taught, facing her, raises his arms to allow her to do so. Peggy and his mother exchange smiles. ‘[Smiles] – quick amused smiles – did much work in telling me when, when and how, I had done wrong.’ He is to turn around. He overhears a few ‘broken phrases ... “A young gentleman”, “At your age”, “And a lady”. “You’ll need to know such things”’. And Richard concludes: ‘just as pleasure is to be paid for in boredom, so the price of love is fear’ (p. 227). Enjoying life was a challenge for Richard:

Desperate for the mere recognition of my existence, I felt that anyone I danced with completely owned me, both in her eyes and, for the duration of the dance, in my eyes too. My feet were not free to dance as I would have liked them to, my mouth was not free to form the words I wanted to utter, my eyes were not my own to turn in whatever direction they were drawn. My only desire was to please the girl I was with, but, inside

the body which my arm lightly, gently, encircled, I could feel waves of scorn rising and crashing against the ribcage. (p. 233)

### III.

When his mother cleaned the house, she set up a strict system of regulations for all to answer to: all doors, ten in total, must remain closed, lest the germs she had just removed in one room would re-enter from another. Nobody should move, or open a door, not even a small crack. The cleaning operation would take more than two hours, and occurred every two or three weeks (p. 169). She never had to explain these procedures until the first governess arrived—Mademoiselle de Saint-Germain, who admired Richard, mostly for his convalescent state. Oh well.

Mademoiselle thought the germs did not come from the inside, as mother thought, but from outside, so when she cleaned certain rooms, the first thing she did was close the windows and open the doors (p. 174). Richard's confusion concerned his mother's response:

Did [mother] believe in the germs that she spent so much of her life trying to eradicate, or did she not? Did it, or did it not, matter in her eyes that someone disagreed with her, with what the woman hath said? When someone disagreed with her, was it, or was it not, important for her to persuade this other person of the error of his ways? (p. 175)

I wanted to know, because I needed to know, why it was that what my mother spent so much of her life doing was so important to her. (175–176)

For Richard, norms of correctness are a recurrent theme—also in his philosophical thought—so what did his mother think? “I do what I do”, “That’s what I’m like”, she would say. But, Richard adds, it would be wrong to think that mother thought of eradicating germs as something more important than other things going on in the house (p. 176). She simply held no ‘scale of things’.

I too, in some part of my mind, had a view that was beyond discussion. This was my fear that, if things went on as they were going, my parents would go to eternal damnation. (p. 176)

The family lived outside London, but father worked in London and returned home mostly around midnight. Apart from the weekends, he hardly ever dined at home. When he returned home from travelling abroad, he would lay the ties he bought there side by side on the bed, showing them to Richard. And that was more or less,

the total of the moral education that I received of him. However, ... I learnt how to choose a shirt in the morning, I learnt how to hold up my socks with garters, I learnt how to use the forefinger of the right hand to make a dimple in the knot of my tie, I learnt how to fold a handkerchief, and to dab it with eau de cologne before putting it into my breast pocket, and, above all, I learnt that it was only through the meticulous attention to such rituals that a man could hope to make his body tolerable to the world. (p. 24)

One day, father tells him he can clean himself, i.e. wipe himself, with only two sheets, folded.

I could, if I liked, turn round, and watch the paper go down the lavatory, and in Australia it would rotate the other way. This small incident was probably the single greatest increase in personal responsibility that my childhood had in store for me. It is what I think of when I hear moral philosophers discuss responsibility. (p. 110)

His father wanted Richard to learn French and, to further that aim, lent him a French book by Léon Blum.

The loan of this book was what I referred to as the second thing my father did for my moral education, the first being those sparkling mornings when he permitted me to watch him dress. (p. 199)

At the age of thirteen, before entering boarding school, Richard had to visit Dr Barclay, who had

once introduced him to the novels of Scott, and had instructed Richard ‘in the facts of life’ (p. 253). Dr Barclay told him about boys and rabbits, to teach him things sexual, and Richard responded as though he knew nothing—that seemed the wiser thing to do. The doctor asked whether Richard had ever wondered how rabbits came about. No. The questions were so specific that it was unclear that the talk was about something else altogether, and the doctor was rather disappointed about the outcome. Later, back home, when Richard descends the staircase, he stops in time, again, behind the curtain—like when his aunt had talked about his ears to his parents—to overhear a paraphrase of a telephone conversation with Dr Barclay, who had said ‘His ignorance is complete’, and ‘He had to give it up’. His father was somehow confirmed in something he had always known. Richard, on the other hand:

Once again, in retreat up the stairs, I suddenly felt sorry for Dr Barclay, who had, I reflected, not particularly that day, but on other days, or in general, done more for my education than anyone except myself. (p. 257)

At 16, Richard sees a girl walking to the sea and is enthralled. Against his anxious expectations, he later has deep conversations with her about Marx, Auden, French poetry, but especially about the Russians, and among them, Dostoevsky. Yet he dares only to observe her when she is at a great distance. And when she comes near, he looks away, acting surprised to see her. He appears to be doing this more often with people he loves, as if to prevent disappointment (p. 271). Their conversations turn into a dream for Richard, after Jill moves away. Richard sends her letters.

Sixty years later he writes an obituary for the philosopher who got him his first job, soon after which he receives a letter from Jill, who read the obituary. She explains how his letters had been stopped by the nuns from reaching her, and so did her letter to him. She writes with great charm about the walks they had had back then, of which Richard had feared that she would have all but forgotten them. Richard puts the letter, which had no return address, in a safe place, so safe he lost sight of it. If the letters had reached their

destination, Richard would have started, at that early date, a different life from the one he led (p. 268–273).

#### IV.

The boy’s authenticity yields from the psychological reality of the older Richard’s individual style of writing. In *Germs*, the facts are tracked subjectively, by inner confidence. The way we near its author is in the subject matter as much as in the performativity of the writing. This autobiography is, indeed, a work of art in Aristotle’s sense, as it is in Wollheim’s.

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayac001>

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#### Art, Borders and Belonging

MARIA PHOTIOU AND MARHSA MESKIMMON  
(EDS)

BLOOMSBURY, 2021. PP. 226. £81.00 (Hbk).

Inspired by Hamid Naficy’s view that exile ‘thrives on detail, specificity and locality’, Maria Photiou and Marhsa Meskimmon set out to ‘investigate three associated concepts: house, home and homeland’ in relation to artistic practices that explore ‘departures and homecomings, indeed, *homemakings*’ (p. 1). Given that 68.5 million people were ‘forcibly displaced worldwide’ in 2017, artistic practices and related exhibitions focused on ‘migration, exile, diaspora and empire’ feel especially timely (p. 2). The continuous thread through this book concerns the way artists hailing from elsewhere tend to have convoluted family histories that complicate narratives surrounding