

Book Reviews

SUSTAINED ELEGANCE OF ELABORATION

Germ: a memoir of childhood. Richard Wollheim, 2004. London: Waywiser Press; ISBN 1904130143, 263 pp., £7.99, paper.

‘Why am I, who really am so similar, so different?’ (p. 245). The question is about why the author can’t just flick the water out of his eyes after a shower or a swim as other people seem to do but has to grope for a towel. But the question could easily be a more general one, since a notion of being different from other people pervades Richard Wollheim’s memoir of childhood. The commemorative plaques in the church the family attended impressed him with their ‘pure Englishness, evocative of rolling countryside ... a world that I knew only from the back of the car’ (p. 39). The nearby houses in the Walton-upon-Thames of his early childhood were lived in by ‘noisy, easy-going families’ (p. 75) who had jolly summer birthday parties in the garden. In contrast, RW (as Wollheim will be referred to from now on) was a solitary child: ‘My parents knew no other parents, my nanny knew only a few other nannies’ (p. 76) so he was rarely invited to the jolly parties. Not that he longed for them; the excitement of preparation for the few he was invited to led to tears, wetting himself or trembling. At around 10 years old, he resolved on principle not to have friends, since boys ‘with their interest in games and dirty jokes and lavatories represented for me a dilution of the world of the imagination’ (p. 76).

Imagination was fed by writers, such as Scott, Dickens and Charles Reade. Engaged in solitary games, RW peopled the countryside with characters from Froissart and Malory. Scott he experienced for the first time while convalescing from one of many childhood illnesses, when still young enough to be read to by his governess. His doctor considered that Scott was permissible so long as endnotes, appendices and long descriptions were omitted. This didn’t suit the young scholar convalescent who threatened to scream if he suspected anything was being left out. Though solitary in terms of coevals RW was a very much looked after child. There was a nanny then, when illness cut short his early school career after four and a half days, a French governess as well. Mademoiselle was soon replaced by the much loved Miss King, she who was the reader of Scott.

The first governess, Mademoiselle, took looking after to a ludicrous extreme. Before going out in winter her charge was dressed in scarf and

overcoat and given a silk scarf to cover his mouth with if there was a wind. The coat was tightly buttoned and the fastening of each button reinforced with a safety pin (p. 144). Then gloves. It was probably another obsession of Mademoiselle's that led to her leaving as it conflicted with one of his mother's. Mrs Wollheim's daily regime of house cleaning (which she had no need to do herself, a self-imposed task that often delayed a later activity of the day such as meeting her husband for lunch at the Savoy Grill) was liable to an interruption that meant she had to start a great chunk of the process over again. If someone inadvertently opened a door while one large section of the house was being cleaned, germs penetrated the cleaned section and polluted it (p. 142). The conflict with Mademoiselle was that while Mrs Wollheim thought that germs lurked in the house and needed to be swept out, Mademoiselle thought that germs surrounded the house and must be prevented from getting in.

In company, however, Mrs Wollheim 'presented herself as a dizzy hedonist' (p. 143). She was born Constance Mary Baker, in London in 1899, into comfortable circumstances. But when her father died a year later there were severe money problems. In spite of this she attended a finishing school in Paris and became a showgirl (respectable; chorus girls weren't). In a bid to become a proper actress she joined, in 1914, a theatrical company that would play for the troops. This was how she met RW's father, Eric Wollheim, who was manager of the company. Eric Wollheim was born in Breslau in 1879. The family was Jewish, but RW says that he did not know what religion his father was brought up in – a fact which might indicate a paternal lack of committed interest in any religion, or on the other hand, and equally likely, a lack of the kind of confiding relationship between father and son that would discuss such matters. (At another point in the memoir RW says that his father's family had converted to Christianity.) At all events, RW's parents were married in St James's, Piccadilly, and Eric Wollheim sometimes accompanied his son to church. RW was brought up as a churchgoer, and in childhood took religion and prayer very seriously, though belief did not last through adolescence. Eric Wollheim started his career as an impresario in Germany, but came to London in 1911 to run a theatrical agency. From 1918 he was London manager of Diaghilev's Russian ballet company.

RW had a brother, three years older, and very little is said about this relationship. Possibly they were little together because of boarding school. RW describes one holiday that he spent with his nanny at a seaside resort in the kind of boarding house where guests had to spend the day outdoors between the hours of nine thirty and four. Meanwhile his parents and brother were holidaying on the lido with members of the Russian ballet. No resentment is expressed over this – indeed the warmest feelings of love in *Germs* are, apart from Miss King, expressed towards the nanny who

accompanied him on this holiday. There are no expressions of negative feeling towards people, such as anger or jealousy, in *Germes*. There are, however, many glimpses of an intense super-sensibility towards things and events in life: 'I was sure that God would understand the terrors of the night, or the pleasures of food, or the love of books, or the lasciviousness of pictures, or the shame of bedwetting' (p. 66). Trips to the cinema were reserved for winter, and rainy afternoons. The latter evoked a special dread, that the sun might have come out while RW and his mother were watching the film. The wet surfaces glinting in the sun 'a natural cause of joy to many ... stirred in me the deepest darkest melancholy' (p. 45).

One of the strangest of these extreme reactions to ordinary things, and something mentioned several times, is utter disgust at the smell of newspaper. This was not merely a childish revulsion, as 'the smell of newspaper nauseated me then [i.e. as a child] as much as it does now' (p. 89). RW has a memory of his two and a half year old self connected with this nausea. The memory links his nanny reading, with fixed attention, of the death of Queen Alexandra with his brother making spitballs out of bits of newspaper and aiming them at the paper the nanny was reading so that the face of the Queen in the photograph became 'desecrated by spit, and the smell' (p. 250). This is a rare example of a hint at explanation in the memoir. For the most part the experiences of the child Wollheim are simply recounted. Yet *Germes* is far from a naive memoir, unsurprisingly given the author's deep interest, as a philosopher, in psychoanalysis. A 'Dr S.', presumably RW's analyst, is sometimes referred to. But there is nothing here of the boredom or embarrassment a reader might fear of confessions from an analyst's couch. It is a psychoanalysed life in that the reader feels that RW has understood much of the process through which his super-sensibility, fears and shame have come about, and any anguish from the past has been muted (and one detects too a certain masochistic pleasure in these sensibilities). But the reader is not called on to go through this process. In any account of *Germes* (such as this review) it is hard to convey the sustained elegance of its elaboration of the texture of a life.

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ASSERTIONS OF PRACTICAL EMBODIED CONSCIOUSNESS

The body in culture, technology and society. Chris Shilling, 2005. London: Sage; ISBN 0761971246, 247 pp., £19.99, paper.

Chris Shilling's book is much more than a map or summary of the field of body studies over the last 20 years; it demonstrates that the embodied