

A House Divided

Botho Strauss's New Memoir *Herkunft* (2014)

The eve of irrevocable loss constitutes the emotional center of this little book: Botho Strauss is settling the family estate, just about to place his elderly mother in assisted living, and essentially bidding farewell to his childhood, youth, and young adulthood: “Morgen wird die Wohnung der Eltern aufgelöst. Morgen wird meine Kindheit entrümpelt” (43). It is a time of some sentimental reminiscence, as well as sober reckoning with the past. But it is also—for this is Botho Strauss, after all—an occasion for substantive philosophical reflection on memory and memoir itself. It is a compactly written, rather thin book (just under 100 pages). But do not be deceived: it covers a lot of ground.

One of the things that gives Strauss such intriguing texture is his remarkably economic allusiveness: he effortlessly enters into dialogue with numerous, often unnamed, speakers. In fleshing out those “conversations,” it is largely readers themselves who must provide the unexpected heft to this otherwise unassuming little book. For *Herkunft* does not merely deploy a particularly fateful evening as a memory fulcrum. Strauss’s ambition is greater: he wants to re-direct the whole tradition of “Väterliteratur”—that angry outpouring of accusatory prose penned by second-generation sons eager to distance themselves from their Nazi fathers. But this slender memoir rarely takes the form of direct confrontation or overt argument. It is rather throughout marked by a light touch—by the tenderly recalled episode or the gently proffered philosophical aperçu. To be honest, it is sometimes a bit hit and run.

Yet this strategy of indirection does not obscure a rather insistent effort to reconfigure what it means to be a German born into the so-called second generation. Twice Strauss references his birthdate of 1944 (though both times somewhat elliptically). As with those often denunciatory memoirs he both silently evokes and “refutes,” Strauss, too, is deeply concerned to grapple with his father’s legacy and their frequently difficult relationship. For the second, and at least equally important, point of departure for these recollections is the 100th birthday of his now deceased father: “Was werden wir tun, heute an deinem Ehrentag? Nun, Hundertjähriger, du wirst deine Geschenke betrachten . . .” (14). This direct address—which the narrator will later train upon the reader—is no less poignant than the transposition of the subjunctive, counter-factual voice (“Heute . . . hätte der Vater seinen hundertsten Geburtstag gefeiert” [14]) into the realm of present tense supposition. This supple switching of time layers (or better: this simultaneous occupation of multiple temporal/grammatical possibilities) dovetails nicely with Strauss’s reflections on the multi-directional functioning of memory itself.

So what does he make of this father, who, it turns out, made some sort of pro-Hitler remark in a brochure he produced during the Nazi period? Suffice it to say that he takes the longer view, lingering on the father's quite severe wound from World War I (he lost an eye as a young enthusiastic volunteer). He highlights the profound and lasting effect this had on the family—resulting ultimately in Strauss being deferred (then excused entirely) from military service because of his economic importance to the family. The account is straightforward, with no trace of manipulative intent. Going through his father's belongings, he finds the paperweight given by his mother that contains the piece of shrapnel extracted from his father's face in 1916. The son recalls simply: "Sein Verwundungstag wurde in der Familie jährlich mit Blumen und einem guten Essen begangen" (15). With no less sobriety Strauss seeks to interpret his father's later "impatience" as a traumatic symptom of his displacement from the East (the family was forcibly resettled to the West after World War II). It is a victim story, to be sure—but it does not seek to exonerate, compare, or "exemplify," and thus retains its integrity.

Likewise the episode in which his aunt, who had not seen him for years, mistakes him for her own son, who she imagines is now (in the mid-1950s) finally returning from war: "Sie rief mit einem freudigen Entsetzen: 'Wolfgang!' Das war der Name ihres Sohns, der im Krieg vermisst war. Sie hielt mich im ersten Augenblick für den späten Heimkehrer" (30). In just a few sentences, he communicates the mother's incalculable grief, and then the way in which this painful scene has accompanied him ever since: "Alle meine folgenden Ankünfte sind um diesen vorgeschalteten Verdacht, ich könne enttäuschen, unsicherer geworden. Ich höre in mir den Wechsel ihrer Stimme . . . nachdem ihr der Liebste, der Sohn ausgeblieben war" (30-31). The agony of the mothers (in contrast to the culpability of the fathers) is here visited upon the next generation. The much-theorized bond between generations appears here as an aching grace note rather than an indignant polemic. This very fraught generational bond is revisited later, though again only briefly, when the narrator confesses that his father's death comes also as a welcome, pleasurable relief: "Und doch überkam mich ein merkwürdiges Glücksgefühl: Er würde nicht mehr antworten. Wir beide waren erlöst von einem langen und oft mühevollen *Gegen-über*, von unserer beider *Gegen-wart*" (41). The death of the father is figured as a redemptive moment.

Not all of these reminiscences are so rounded. The memory of his uncle Wilhelm, a "Hobby-Mathematiker," begins with a humorous, warm-hearted smirk: "er war überzeugt, die Quadratur des Kreises gelöst zu haben, geometrisch exakt und unwiderlegbar, nur die algebraische Formel wollte nicht ganz aufgehen. Ein Weltproblem hatte er gelöst, als

erster und einziger Kopf des ganzen Erdenrunds” (62). But the vignette concludes almost midsentence, with the (to me) startling observation: “Ein liebenswürdiger, humorvoller Nichtsnutz. Ein begeisterter Nazi, ein geduldiger Steinklopf nach dem Fest” (63). The story sputters out, ending in a string of diverse attributes deprived of any explanatory syntax. At first glance, this may strike the reader as a direct provocation—and perhaps it is. But if so, it is also a challenge to look again. For Strauss seems determined to write from the perspective of what he calls “Damals-Unmittelbarkeit, Damals-Überwältigung” (62), not to process this in a manner that makes us feel that we have sufficiently dealt with the Nazi past. Rather than serve up a fully-digested retrospective, he places us with the child who loved the uncle —“ein Mann von grosser Güte und Schwäche” (63). Are we to think that Wilhelm was as deluded by the Nazis as he was about his own supposed genius? Does Strauss know more than he’s letting on? Rather than fulfill a self-imposed duty to denounce “the fathers”—an agenda, by the way, that may well have made good sense in the 1960s and 1970s—this son (or nephew, as it happens) seems to suffer from the plausible quandary of not quite knowing. And therefore neither do we.

I have said that Strauss’s sleight volume eschews polemic, and that is mostly true. But not entirely. In order to plead his case for delayed, layered, and dialogic memory, he makes a straw man out of what he simply calls “the historians.” To throw his own quite supple view of time and memory into contrastive relief, he resorts—uncharacteristically, I think—to caricature: “Anders die Historiker. Sie sehen mit ihren jeweils aktuellen methodischen Klugheiten, ihrem habituellen Besserwissen unvermeidlich herab auf die frühere Epoche, die sie untersuchen. Anachronistisches Wissen ist der Fluch ihrer Profession. Der Lebende hingegen wird von Gelebtem katechisiert. Er steht klein und verlegen vor ihm” (70-71). One can only wonder how familiar Strauss is with contemporary theoretical strains of historiography; for there is little there that would justify this broadside on the profession. It weakens the book also because it raises doubts about other assessments. This is at any rate an unnecessary assault, for Strauss lives within—depends upon and profits from—the very tensions and disagreements he eloquently evokes. What historian worth her salt would not agree with the reminiscing narrator’s concluding self-assessment: “Das warst du! Ein Herr der Möglichkeiten, ein Dunkelprinz. Und heute ein kleiner Schaufelsklave in den Gedächtnishalden” (71).

Despite its usual light touch, *Herkunft* is not without other moments of a more programmatic thrust. From the beginning, it stakes out ground against the customary left-liberal dismissal of tradition (13; see also 55); disparages the youthful rebellion of ’68 (“die hochmütig

verbrachte Jugend, den Eifer der Revolte . . . [94]); and dispenses with easy notions of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung.” Reprising his worthy (if not utterly innovative) contention about a living, unmasterable past, Strauss counters that much-maligned term with the neologism “Vergangenheitsüberwältigung” in order to suggest the way in which the past overwhelms *us*. It is a clever reversal. He expatiates: “Was war, liegt immer über dem gegenwärtigen Standpunkt. Ein unbezwingliches Reich, das keine Aufklärung je erobern könnte” (47).

The book is studded with poetic and often gnomic insights about the alleged impossibility of memory and memoir. True, one may sometimes feel that Strauss is writing in a vacuum—as if he is the first to articulate what in some cases are fundamental insights that go back at least to Montaigne. And sometimes the references (to Grillparzer, for example) do seem a bit forced or precious, a kind of mutual flattery of reader and writer resulting from the recognition of literary and literate erudition. But that surely does not exhaust their function; for on the whole, we encounter rigorous reflections that stand in opposition, interestingly, to the memoir-strand of *Herkunft* itself.

In the end, what we have here is not a single book but two narratives locked in productive struggle with one another. The first is, as we’ve seen, comprised of a string of powerfully recounted reminiscences that never lose sight of their subjective, personal, and tentative status. The second, as we’ve also noted, is a meta-narrative that reflects on the book’s own possibility. Paradoxically, this meta-narrator is quite certain of the memoir’s fundamental uncertainty. At the outset, we may mistakenly believe that the narrator’s more philosophical reflections are fully sponsored by—and consonant with—the halting and fragmented memoir of his childhood and youth. But this is only partly true. What is aggravating about *Herkunft* is the way in which Strauss progressively gives his philosopher-self the upper hand. The long, rather dry rumination on the father’s glass paperweight at the end of the book puts a damper on the story: In its ever more abstract contemplation, it serves to distance the reader and cool the narrative, which is no doubt exactly what Strauss intends. What makes this book so rewarding, however, is the way in which bits of the author’s life story, the hot magma of the memoir, survive this dogged attempt to wall it in. Decisive victory goes to neither.

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