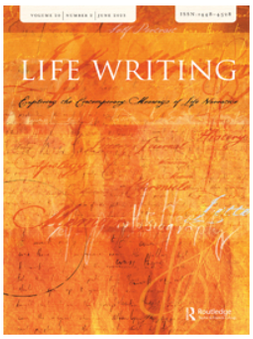

Life Writing

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlwr20

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To cite this article: Päivi Kaipainen (2023): Ludwig Wittgenstein and Georg Henrik von Wright: An Unexpected Friendship, Life Writing, DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2023.2225134

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2023.2225134

Published online: 21 Jun 2023.

LIFE WRITING
https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2023.2225134

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ludwig Wittgenstein and Georg Henrik von Wright: An Unexpected Friendship

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ABSTRACT

Over a decade ago, when I studied in my dissertation the lives of three world-renowned philosophers, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Georg Henrik von Wright, my main sources were their published biographies and memoirs. Later on, when I came across the correspondence between Wittgenstein and von Wright, and realised how frankly and spontaneously they wrote to each other, I was fascinated and convinced of their friendship. Not only were they colleagues with a similar cultural background, who understood each other and each other's work, but they also seemed to be trusted friends who freely shared their lives, fears, and joys in their letters. This paper sheds light on the surprising friendship of Wittgenstein and von Wright. It aims to show why they became friends by analysing their personalities, life choices and Wittgenstein's legacy to von Wright drawing mainly, but not exclusively, on their correspondence, thus giving space to their own voices.

KEYWORDS

Correspondence; friendship; trust; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Georg Henrik von Wright

Introduction

Friends were important in the lives of both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Georg Henrik von Wright, the two philosophers studied in this paper. However, their mutual friendship has so far received little attention. Although their becoming friends may have been rather surprising, von Wright's role in Wittgenstein's life, and especially after, grew larger than expected.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was, and still is, amazingly famous worldwide even though he published only one book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in his lifetime. Most of his manuscripts were published posthumously by his literary executors, one of them being Georg Henrik von Wright, who was also his successor as professor at the University of Cambridge and an eminent figure in his home country, Finland, even outside academic circles. The two philosophers were very different in character, expression and attitudes towards academia, yet they got along very well, and quite surprisingly, became friends, which shows well in their correspondence. Both came from elite backgrounds and

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adopted continental European cultural upbringing with its tastes and values, which partly explains their mutual understanding and friendship. This is the explanation given by von Wright (2002, 134) himself, and repeated by many scholars later (e.g. Erbacher 2017; McGuinness 2005). Nevertheless, their friendship does not seem obvious at first sight. Young von Wright admired Wittgenstein, the great philosopher, which was no surprise, but it is reasonable to ask why Wittgenstein accepted an unknown Finnish philosophy student as his friend. The analysis of their 12-year long correspondence sheds light on their friendship, focusing on their own words. It aims to find out and show why they became friends and what followed from it.

First, it is necessary to know their background, especially the events that may have indirectly affected their friendship. Under the next three headings, I present their personal history until 1939, the year they met, and introduce their friends and published correspondence. After that, divided into three periods, I go through the development of their friendship as evidenced by their correspondence. Finally, I reflect on their friendship and Wittgenstein's trust and legacy to von Wright.

First fifty years of Ludwig Wittgenstein: 1889–1939

Born in 1889, Wittgenstein grew up in Vienna in one of Austria's wealthiest families.[1] The family was partly of Jewish origin, which played a role in Ludwig's later life. The family had made their fortune in industrial business, and they formed a useful network of teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals to lean on. In addition, the family's many artistic talents filled the home with music and culture. Ludwig studied at home with private teachers until he was 14 years old. With the guidance of his older sisters, Ludwig read religious-philosophical texts and the cultural debates of his time, and studied the basics of science. When he showed interest in practical skills, his father sent him to a technically oriented school in Linz. After finishing school, he studied engineering first in Berlin-Charlottenburg and then at the University of Manchester where he became interested in mathematics and logic and read Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* and works of Gottlob Frege. Therefore, he went to Cambridge to attend Russell's lectures and to ask for his opinion as to whether he had talent.

By then, Russell's scientific career was declining and he was looking for a successor to his philosophical work. Wittgenstein was enthusiastic about solving the problems that he saw in Russell's book and was writing his own book. When Russell had supervised Wittgenstein unofficially for one term, he knew that he had found his protégé. Wittgenstein registered at the University of Cambridge in 1912 and was admitted to Trinity College.

There he became acquainted with important figures such as G.E. Moore, W.E. Johnson, A.N. Whitehead and J.M. Keynes. However, at Cambridge Wittgenstein stood out, he was an Austrian with no similar intellectual background. Fortunately, he found an intimate friend, David Pinsent, a mature student with whom he spent long times in Norway.[2] In Norway, Wittgenstein found peace for writing, but whenever he wanted to show his writings to Russell or discuss with him, he travelled back to Cambridge although he increasingly disagreed with Russell. The year 1913 was productive, although depression and fear of insanity or death sometimes interrupted the intense work. In 1914, Wittgenstein quarrelled badly with both Russell and Moore. In August, he participated as a volunteer in World War I and spent five years on different fronts.

He believed that facing death heroically would develop him spiritually. Due to the influence of the war, religious-mystical elements appeared in his texts. In the frontline years, he also managed to finish the manuscript of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

By 1919, Wittgenstein had diverged from the logic of his mentors to such an extent that, neither Frege nor Russell could understand the finished manuscript. Since he no longer saw his future in philosophy, he enrolled in a teacher training institution in Austria. He also made another life-changing move by giving up his large paternal inheritance. Despite Wittgenstein's sudden decisions, Russell wanted to see *Tractatus* published and offered to write an introduction as his last kind gesture. The book was published in 1921 in Germany and in 1922 as a bilingual edition, translated in to English by Frank Ramsay.

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein had no interest in returning to Cambridge. For six years, he taught in village schools in the Austrian countryside and worked as an architect for two years, designing a house for his sister. Meanwhile, *Tractatus* began to gain attention among the logical positivists of the Vienna circle. In 1929, he returned to Cambridge to study philosophy and got his doctorate when *Tractatus* was accepted as his dissertation; he was treated as a 'God' among the Cambridge élite thanks to his book. The feeling was not mutual, he still felt like an outsider. In 1930, he met Francis Skinner, a young mathematician who uncritically admired Wittgenstein. Their friendship lasted until 1936 when Wittgenstein made Skinner to abandon academic career.

Between 1929 and 1935, Wittgenstein wrote a lot in his famous notebooks, of which he sifted the best philosophical ideas into typed manuscripts. In the *Blue Book,* he introduced the notion of a 'language-game', and the *Brown Book* was a basis for the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. All his manuscripts of the time were published posthumously. In 1935, his Fellowship at Trinity College ended but he stayed in Cambridge until the summer of 1936 when he moved to his cottage in Norway. In 1938, he returned to Cambridge and was elected professor in 1939 to succeed Moore.

Young Georg Henrik von Wright: 1916–1939

Von Wright was born into a Swedish-speaking noble-family in Helsinki in 1916.[3] The family was doing well financially, and relatives of both parents were influential in various fields, which was useful to von Wright later. Georg Henrik had a privileged childhood but poor health, and the family feared that he would get tuberculosis. Therefore, at the age of twelve, he spent a year in the famous sanatorium town of Meran in South-Tirol, Italy with his mother, grandmother and two sisters. That year he studied German in a comfortable climate and had an intellectual awakening when he discovered mathematics.

Georg Henrik got a classical school education and studied both Latin and Greek. Both parents spoke many languages, so it was only natural that he would follow their example. After returning from Meran, Georg Henrik asked his father about a problem of philosophy and got some books for reading from the family library. Those books made him understood that philosophy was to be his calling; he was thirteen at the time. In 1934, when he enrolled at the University of Helsinki to study theoretical philosophy, Professor Eino Kaila asked him whether he was more interested in the psychological or the logical dimensions of philosophy. As he preferred exactness of science and precision of mathematics, he chose logic. Attending Kaila's lectures, he started his path in the spirit of the Vienna Circle and logical positivism. Among the books he read for his final exam,

was also Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. However, not all he read was logic. Von Wright explains he owes some of his humanist attitude to life, developed in his youth, to the works of Jacob Burckhardt, such as *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* and *Der Cicerone*, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*.

In the spring of 1937, after travelling for three months in Europe with a fellow student, the future art historian Göran Schildt, Georg Henrik's poor health caused him trouble again. Italy's beauty, art, history and other impressions of their European tour exhausted him so much, that after their return he suffered from a nervous crisis, partly due to his hereditary hypochondriac disposition. He had also overworked himself with his math studies and did not pass the final exam. The doctor recommended him rest in the countryside.

When von Wright returned to his studies in the spring of 1938, he started working on a doctoral dissertation and never finished his studies in mathematics. He would have continued his studies in Vienna, the city of his dreams, but because of the Anschluss, Vienna was no longer a buzzing centre of philosophy.

After abandoning the first dissertation topic proposed by Kaila, von Wright returned to a topic he had been engaged earlier, justification of induction. Now he started reading philosophers such as Bacon, Hume, Mill, Keynes, Ramsey, and Broad. Then Cambridge seemed a place where he could learn more on the topic. Yet, he had no idea that Wittgenstein was there and they would soon meet.

The published correspondence

As was the custom of the time, learned men had a lively correspondence. Wittgenstein often wrote to his mentor Bertrand Russell and his dissertation supervisor J.M. Keynes, other scholars he wrote to included philosopher G.E. Moore, philosopher Frank Ramsay, and Italian economist Piero Sraffa; their letters were published in two collections in 1974 and 1995. The latest and most comprehensive collection, *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911–1951* by Brian McGuinness, contains correspondence with 36 people, including his students and friends Norman Malcolm, Rush Rhees, and Georg Henrik von Wright.

Von Wright's extensive correspondence with 1871 people contains nearly 16,000 letters and postcards from the late 1920s to 2003. His most important scholar friends included philosopher Eino Kaila who was the first person to guide von Wright towards reading philosophy, philosopher Norman Malcolm, as well as Finnish mathematician Rolf Nevanlinna. An important friend in his career was his dissertation supervisor at Cambridge, Dean of the Faculty of Moral Sciences, C.D. Broad. By allowing von Wright to attend Wittgenstein's lectures, Broad paved the way for the friendship between the two. Most likely, the closest friend of von Wright outside philosophical circles was Göran Schildt, a Finnish writer and art historian; their almost lifelong correspondence has been published (see Kruskopf 2008).

The correspondence between Wittgenstein and von Wright includes forty published letters and postcards from 1939 to 1950, most of them from Wittgenstein to von Wright. All Wittgenstein's 35 letters and cards were published in *The Cambridge Review* [hereafter CR followed by the number of the letter] in 1983 with von Wright's comments (von Wright 1983). Nineteen of them, as well as four letters from von Wright to Wittgenstein, are included in *Wittgenstein in Cambridge, Letters and*

Documents 1911–1951 [hereafter WC followed by the number of the letter] edited by Brian McGuinness (2008). In addition, one letter from von Wright is included only in *Wittgenstein: Gesamtbriefwechsel*. Their correspondence is not complete; in particular, most letters sent by von Wright have not survived. According to McGuinness (2008, 11), Wittgenstein did not keep all the letters from his Cambridge friends and colleagues, as they mostly served for practical matters such as arranging meetings. Apparently, von Wright did not copy the letters he sent for his own archives, either. However, the themes, questions, and concerns of the missing letters can be deduced from the reply letters.

Under the next three headings, I will examine their correspondence chronologically with some excerpts showing how their friendship developed over the years. The first period of letters covers the years 1939–1940, when von Wright studied at Cambridge. It was followed by a long silence in their correspondence during the war years, when von Wright lived in Finland. The correspondence continued after World War II in 1947, when von Wright began planning his return to England, and it lasted until Wittgenstein's death in 1951.

Beginning of the correspondence 1939–1940: from a rude first encounter towards friendship

In a polite reply letter to von Wright dated 9 March 1939, in Cambridge, Wittgenstein explains his rude behaviour at a lecture the young von Wright attended for the first time.[4]

> Dear Sir, I'm sorry I caused you the trouble of writing to me. … If I could, as many other people can, prepare my lectures in writing and then read them off in front of the class the presence of new people would not disturb me. But as I am unable to do this and have to think things out afresh while I'm talking I am very easily disturbed. (CR 1)

Wittgenstein did not believe that anyone attending his lecture for the first time in the middle of the term could understand the difficult thing he was explaining; the fact that someone would misunderstand would disturb him a lot and interfere with his own thinking and concentration. Wittgenstein's way of lecturing was spontaneous thinking that required a lot of concentration. The development of the idea started in one lecture and continued in the next (CR 1; Monk 1991, 403–404.).

The reason why von Wright had appeared in Wittgenstein's lectures in the middle of the term was that he had permission from the chairman of the faculty, C.D. Broad to attend classes in philosophy (CR 1, comment). Realising that Wittgenstein did not welcome him, von Wright wrote him a letter, directly asking whether he could attend or not (von Wright 1989, 10–11). In the reply letter, the postscript of which is crucial, Wittgenstein suggests:

> … if you wish to come to my classes you should begin at the beginning of next term … P.S. If you like, come round to my rooms … at 4.30 pm tomorrow. It may be easier for me to explain the matter to you when I see you than by writing. If you can't come don't bother to reply. I shan't wait for you longer than until 4.45 pm (CR 1)

Von Wright accepted Wittgenstein's invitation, and writes that the visit, during which they talked mostly about architecture and Norway, laid the foundation for their friendship (CR 1, comment; 1989, 11). They discovered that they shared many interests outside philosophy.

Soon, Wittgenstein informed on a postcard that his next lectures would begin on 24 April (CR 2). By the end of the term, their friendship had taken a leap, as evidenced by their correspondence during the summer. On 28 August, von Wright sent a thank-you letter from Finland, in which he describes his thoughts on the inspiring term at Cambridge and outlines some ideas on philosophy that it had raised. He also describes his longing for the philosophical life in Cambridge, comparing it to the depressing student life in Helsinki. The letter has a sincere and slightly naïve, but confident tone:

> Dear Wittgenstein, … I miss it very much that I cannot now discuss with you this[5] and other philosophical topics, and I do it the more, because there seems to me under present conditions to be no possibility of seeing you again in an appreciable future. I know of what immense importance it would be for my intellectual development to talk with you, and I think also that I could now be of more use for you in your classes than I was last term, when I was quite unfamiliar with your 'method' so to say. (WC 259)

Von Wright's confident belief that he would be of more use for Wittgenstein shows that he already felt belonging to the circle of Wittgenstein's favourite students. The fact that he was a promising student had become clear to him earlier in the summer when Wittgenstein had tried to persuade him to stay in Cambridge. As a professor, Wittgenstein would have been willing to support von Wright's stay financially in the fall of 1939, but von Wright was not willing to stay in England due to the threat of war (von Wright 2002, 81–82).

Von Wright writes that he has found 'a certain 'tune' to follow in the realm of thoughts' and sincerely confesses his gratitude: 'the fact that I hear the tune is enough to fill me with life-long happiness and thankfulness for that I have met you and been thought by you, even if for a very short time'. Typical of von Wright, he closes the letter with an explanation in parentheses to tone down his overflowing admiration and gratitude: '(This was ment[6] very seriously, but I am much dissatisfied with my way of expressing myself. It must by no means seem exaggerated or pretentious.)' (WC 259).

Having paid attention to von Wright's confident wish, Wittgenstein responded quickly: 'I wish you were here and could help me with my discussion classes' (CR 3). He felt that he was wasting his time lecturing and discussing with people who were not 'deeply interested' in philosophical problems. He then expresses his confidence in his new friend:

> I should very much like to send you the M.S. of what would be the first volume of my book.[7] … I should like to know that you had read it and had a copy of it. (CR 3)

Wittgenstein did not believe he would publish the manuscript during his lifetime, and feared that it might be lost. In the end, von Wright never received the manuscript, as Wittgenstein probably never sent it (von Wright 1982, 3). Wittgenstein opens up at the end of the letter:

> I think it goes without saying that I shall always be exceedingly glad to hear from you. I myself am a *bad* correspondent especially now that everything that I do seems to me futile and I don't know what sort of life I ought to lead. (CR 3)

The friendship developed in unstable circumstances where letters provided a way to ease a restless state of mind, such as on 22 February 1940, when von Wright wrote to

Wittgenstein in the severe atmosphere of the Winter War. The letter inevitably evokes associations with the COVID-19 lockdown declared in 2020, or the despair in the spring of 2022 after Russia's attack on Ukraine. In the spring of 1940, as in 2020 and 2022, one had to live literally one day at a time.

> As you probably will know from newspapers there is a war going on in Finland since the end of November. It has changed in the most brutal way the ordinary aspect of life in this country and will, not unlikely, never allow the people now living here to return to their previous activities. With the outbreak of the war one has been compelled to leave every thought on the future and to cut off the connexion with the past. One is living in a quite new world, which knows only the present tense. (WC 269)

Von Wright wanted to contact Wittgenstein when it was still possible. The fear of death is visible in his words and his restless mind may have produced more misspellings than usual. Neither von Wright nor Wittgenstein were native speakers of English, which they used for correspondence, but unlike Wittgenstein, von Wright found it necessary to explain and apologise his poor English:

> This letter is a terrible mixture of vague and incorrect expressions. I hope you will foregive it. I have written it, because[e] I have for a long time felt a *very strong* need of getting into contact with you. I should like to show it in some way and not to tell it (as I am doing here) that there is no person to whom I am more indebted in my intellectual development than to you and that hardly anybody has left me with so many nice and fair and refreshing recollections. (WC 269)

Neither of them usually wrote about philosophy in letters, but discussed their own everyday life and moods. An exception is von Wright's letter of 29 March 1940, which is a long philosophical outpouring that ends with a request: 'Please let me know, if you do not want to get letters like this from me anymore (when I speak about philosophy). I should be very sorry if I knew I worried you with them'. (*McGuinness et al. 2011 Letter of 29.3.1940*). It is not clear how Wittgenstein took his letter but six months later, on 9 December 1940, von Wright writes apologetically: 'I sincerely regret that I wrote you a long letter about my ideas on probability' but relieved, he continues: 'Dear Wittgenstein! If I only knew that we could meet again, then this misery would be easy to bear. But there is unfortunately not much hope'. In the postscript of the letter, von Wright mentions having heard a Beethoven's musical piece that Wittgenstein had told him about, which he did not know about then. Now he finds it 'one of the most wonderful things ever created. I wish you could hear it now' (WC 287). The letter ends with an honest analysis of their relationship, as he probably feared they would never meet again.

> … of all things I have experienced in my life before that date [war] I should least of all miss that I have met you. We met only five times … and we mostly did not discuss very important things, neither could I always when we discussed philosophy follow you the way out. But still I got something (I seriously do not know exactly what). (WC 287)

Possibly, von Wright's frankness pleased Wittgenstein and cemented their friendship that survived the long silence during the war years. The correspondence was interrupted for almost seven years, until von Wright began planning his return to Cambridge in 1947.

Return to Cambridge: professional friendship 1947–1948

In the Easter term of 1947, C.D. Broad arranged for von Wright – who was a professor in Helsinki – to give a lecture series on inductive logic at Cambridge (von Wright 1989, 14). Von Wright wrote Wittgenstein about his intention to return to Cambridge as on 21 February 1947, Wittgenstein writes to him beginning with an appropriate title, 'Dear Professor von Wright. Thank you for your letter of Feb 14th'. Then he immediately shares his concerns 'My lectures vary a great deal. … My mind, for reasons I don't know, often feels very exhausted' (CR 4). He is not satisfied with his teaching and fears that he will have to give up teaching. Then he makes a special request:

> … if I should feel sterile and exhausted next Easter Term, I'll ask you not to come to my classes; four your presence, in that case, might make things more difficult for me. Otherwise I shall be glad if you will attend. (CR 4)

The request shows that Wittgenstein's self-criticism, fear that he might not be sharp enough, fear of being misunderstood, and poor concentration, which he described to von Wright in the first letter in 1939, had not disappeared. Nor was he going to attend von Wright's lectures although he could 'learn a very great deal'. He could not allow the 'import of foreign goods (i.e. philosophical ones)' into his mind. 'For the same reason I haven't read your book, though I am convinced of its excellence' (CR 4).

Wittgenstein was kind and loyal to his friends; in a funny little letter, written on 24 May 1947, Wittgenstein shows his kindness in a sincerely naïve way. Von Wright apparently had the flu and Wittgenstein is sorry that von Wright was not able to come to his class:

> Not that you lost anything. – The two items I bring along with this letter are not meant to be looked at, but to be eaten. Of the vitamin B, you take a tablet a day. It *can't* do you any harm but *may* do you a lot of good … The black currant puree was given to me as a present. I pass it on because I REALLY don't need it; *you do*! Don't make any fuss but eat it. (CR 6)

On June 6, 1947, Wittgenstein takes a step towards von Wright's future role as one of his literary executors, entrusting a copy of his manuscript to von Wright who was going to lecture at Oxford.[8]

> I feel extremely run down and tired myself and, therefore shan't write any more today. Take good care of my typescript – whatever you think of it. … in your copy there are some corrections and additions which don't appear in the other copies'. (CR 7)

On July 31, 1947, von Wright writes from his parents' summer villa in the Finnish archipelago, regretting that his visit to Cambridge was so short. The all-embracing enthusiasm of the young graduate student has changed into a mature person's assessment of his own learning and future:

> … it was, on the other hand, absolutely necessary for me to go aside and 'cool my head' after all the strong impressions I had had. … I learned an enormous mass philosophy. Why and how it came to be so, you know as well as I do. What will be the consequences of it, is not as yet to be foreseen, – I can only hope they will be of more good than harm, in the long run. I know that a hard struggle is needed before the imported goods will become my own. (WC 370)

Von Wright was having an internal struggle between his own thinking, and things he had learned from Wittgenstein. He was anxious to find his own voice, but concerned about whether he would be able to free his mind from the Wittgensteinian way of thinking (Erbacher 2016).[9] Even his words in the letter show Wittgenstein's influence such as the phrase 'imported goods', by which Wittgenstein meant undesirable foreign philosophical influences (cf. CR 4). Adapting word choices to the style of the recipient is inherent in interaction between friends; this also applies to writing letters (Niederhoffer and Pennebaker 2002). The linguistic influence is two-way: similar linguistic styles promote the formation and maintenance of friendship, while friends will go through linguistic convergence over time (Kovacs and Kleinbaum 2020). Despite his inner struggle, von Wright recalls the past with nostalgia:

> I feel that I could forget all that I have read of you and even all you said to me in conversation and still, deep in my heart, remember the hours we were together, even the most trifling details, and rejoice at those memories. (WC 370)

A month later, on 27 August 1947, Wittgenstein responds: 'It meant a great deal to me to have you in Cambridge for a term. I, too, wish it had been for longer'. He plans to resign from the professorship in October in order to write, but has not yet told the Cambridge authorities about his plan, 'as it's not yet *absolutely* certain'. First, he intends to go to Vienna, but is afraid to see it after all that has happened, and 'I also dread chucking my job at Cambridge' (CR 9). Earlier in the summer, Wittgenstein had told von Wright that he wished to see him as his successor, but now he does not write anything about it (von Wright 1989, 14; 2002, 136; CR 12 comment; Monk 1991, 507).

On 6 November 1947, Wittgenstein writes that he has resigned, but will stay in Cambridge until the end of the year to dictate some writings. After that, he will spend some time in Ireland. He is relieved: 'I am in *no* way optimistic about my future but as soon as I had resigned I felt it was the only natural thing to have done'. Politely, he adds, 'In dictating the stuff I am using up the paper you were so *very* nice to bequeathe to me'. Then he continues to discuss the books of Wilhelm Busch, one of which he had donated to von Wright. At the end, he presents a modest wish: 'I hope to hear from you often if you're not too busy' (CR 10).

In a Christmas card, Wittgenstein gives two addresses to Ireland and puts it frankly: 'There isn't much to write just now, but I shall when there is' (CR 11). A proper letter, which is a reply to von Wright's Christmas letter, is dated on 22 December 1947 in Wicklow, where he stayed on a farm. Although the owner family is very quiet, he intends to move later: 'I could do with greater loneliness … Heaven knows if I'll ever publish this work, but I should like you to look at it after my death if you survive me' (CR 12). Monk (1991, 522) finds here an indication that Wittgenstein was already inclined to leave the task of publication to his literary executors. If the interpretation is correct, Wittgenstein may have considered von Wright for the task as early as December 1947.

As for the more urgent task, Wittgenstein writes that he perfectly understands why von Wright is not going to apply for the professorship at Cambridge:

> … I had assumed before you wrote to me that you'd not apply. … the prospect of becoming English, or a refugee in England, seemed to me anything but attractive in our time, and I

> thought that you would *certainly* not wish to bring up your children in England. I hope for your own sake you won't be compelled to do so … (CR 12)

He continues with brief remarks on various topics, such as books and reveals that he reads hardly anything but some detective stories and books that he has read many times. 'Real reading is always bad for me'. By this, he referred to books on philosophy and their foreign influences that interfered with his writing (cf. CR 4). Instead, hard-boiled detective stories and detective magazines, or 'mags' as he called them, gave him great pleasure. The closing is solemn: 'I wish you good thoughts and good feelings and that nothing shall make you shallow, I hope somehow to see you again some day before so very long' (CR 12).

In a letter dated 23 February 1948, Wittgenstein promises to write a recommendation on behalf of von Wright, but he is concerned and probably fears that his friend would have to undergo the same as himself.

> I have *no* doubt that you will be a better professor than any of the other candidates for the chair. But Cambridge is a dangerous place. Will you become superficial? smooth? If you don't you will have to suffer terribly. – The passage in your letter which makes me feel particularly uneasy is the one about your feeling enthusiasm at the thought of teaching in Cambridge. It seems to me: if you go to Cambridge you must go as a SOBER man. – May my fears have no foundation, and may you not be tempted beyond your powers! If I wanted to play providence I'd write a luke-warm recommendation; but I won't. I'll write you as good a one as you can possibly wish for. (CR 13)

Von Wright hesitated for a long time before applying; undoubtedly, Wittgenstein's warnings played a part, but the main reason was the tense political situation in Europe and Finland's position in it, especially in relation to the Soviet Union. He even withdrew his application later, as he had been presented with interesting job offers from Oxford and Sweden (CR 13 comment; von Wright 2002, 139–140).

On 15 March 1948, Wittgenstein writes to Malcolm about the application process:

> … v. Wright wrote to me about his putting in for the professorship and asked me to write him a recommendation. I did, and it won't be the recommendation's fault if he doesn't get the job. I don't know *at all* what his chances are. I'm *slightly* doubtful because of his being another foreigner. (WC 382)

On 17 March, he puts it more gently to von Wright: 'I think I can say that, if you don't get the job, it's not because my recommendation wasn't warm enough – though I didn't say anything in it that I don't strictly believe to be the truth' (CR 14). The letter continues with Wittgenstein's own problems.

> My work is progressing very slowly and very painfully. I often believe that I am on the straight road to insanity: It is difficult for me to imagine that my brain should stand the strain very long. … May our fate not be too terrible! and may we be given courage. (CR 14)

On 30 April, Wittgenstein writes to Malcolm, 'I had a letter from von Wright a few days ago. He had lots of anxiety recently for political reasons, but things seem to be less dangerous now' (WC 385). Meanwhile, von Wright had withdrawn his application. The political situation in Finland had calmed down, but the post of a lecturer at Oxford attracted him more than the professor's chair, as it made it possible to continue in the professorship at the University of Helsinki (von Wright 2002, 140).

Nonetheless, when the Electors at Cambridge offered von Wright the chair, he accepted it.

Duties of von Wright and Wittgenstein's last years: 1948–1951

On 25 May 1948, having received two letters from his friend, Wittgenstein writes that he is glad about von Wright's decision to accept the chair: 'May things go well!!' He is still in Ireland, in a new lodge in Galway and finds his life 'very strenuous' living all alone. (CR 15).

For the rest of the year and in the spring of 1949, Wittgenstein was mostly in Vienna. Occasionally, he sent short letters informing von Wright about the days he was in Cambridge and they could meet. In a brief letter to G.E. Moore on 31 December 1948, Wittgenstein, for the first time, appointed his executors, those being his friend Rush Rhees and John Burnaby from Trinity College (WC 395).[10] Around that time, his health began to decline.

The following spring, on 29 April 1949, Wittgenstein writes that his sister is ill and that he cannot write a proper letter, but he 'very much' looks forward to seeing von Wright when he flies to Cambridge in 2–3 weeks (CR 19). A month later, on 24 May 1949, Wittgenstein replies to von Wright's invitation.

> I'd love to stay with you and I hope I'll be able to. My plans are very wobbly right now. After I had felt illish for about four months I had my blood examined a few days ago and it appears that I am very anaemic and there is likely to be some inner cause for that … (CR 20)

A week later, on 1 June, Wittgenstein writes that if the treatment for his anaemia works he should feel better soon. Now he worries that he may not be able to discuss philosophy. 'My head is *completely* dull. – I hope that you will soon get some rest, once the Term is over and I'm looking forward to seeing you even if I feel that I may be a bad companion' (CR 21).

On 8 June, Wittgenstein writes that he will arrive on either 20 or 21 June, but is worried about the trouble he may cause:

> … I *may* have to stay in a place where they give me all my meals. Now I don't know if that wouldn't be more than your household could do and if it wouldn't be, at least, a frightful nuisance to your family. Please write me a line about it and be VERY frank. (CR 22)

Prior to his arrival, in response to a letter sent by von Wright, Wittgenstein writes that he is already better off. An indication of his improved health is that he already worries about work stuff, regretting that Miss Deutsch does not have as much time to type his texts as he had hoped. 'If you heard of anyone who can type German well it would of course be grand, but that's *most* unlikely. Don't bother about it'[11] (CR 23).

Six months later, in November, while staying with the von Wrights, Wittgenstein received a diagnosis of prostate cancer from Dr Bevan, the von Wright family doctor (CR 25 comment). When he travelled to Vienna for Christmas he did not tell his family about the disease because he did not want to upset them; Wittgenstein's father had died of cancer and his sister was now dying of cancer. However, from now on, all his letters to von Wright included a description of his health.

On 1 January 1950, Wittgenstein writes that his health is good except for colds. The real reason for the letter, however, was to ask back for a book lent to von Wright

since it was meant as a Christmas present for Rush Rhees: ' … please send it to Rhees with a note. If you still have some Christmas paper around I'd be grateful if you wrapped it in that. I'm sorry to trouble you with it' (CR 27).[12] On 19 January 1950, Wittgenstein writes from Vienna regretting that von Wright did not have time to read the 'very remarkable' book he had asked to send to Rhees. As for his health, 'I'm much stronger and my nerves are all right. I have very good nights without using much of my sedatives'. He has not been to concerts, but listens to music, Schumann and Mozart, that a friend and one of his sisters play on the piano. During the last two weeks, he has been reading Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, which is 'partly boring and repelling, but in some ways also *very* instructive and philosophically interesting. You might take it out of your book case and look at what he wrote about Lord Bacon in the *historical* part' (CR 28). They had previously discussed Bacon's place in the history of thought (CR 28 comment).

In a brief message on 12 February, Wittgenstein writes that his eldest sister had died the night before. He also writes that he sees Miss Anscombe regularly. 'We even had a discussion the other day which wasn't too bad' (CR 29). Elizabeth Anscombe was in Vienna to improve her German, and it is possible that the idea of naming her as an executor matured during their regular discussions.

On 15 March, Wittgenstein writes that he is coming to Cambridge for a week or two and gently asks, 'I wonder whether you can put me up. Perhaps you could write a line to me … I'm very much looking forward to seeing you and Mrs v. Wright' (CR 30). After two weeks with the von Wright family, Wittgenstein writes to Malcolm, 'I *like* to stay with the von Wrights but the two children are noisy and I need quiet. I wish I weren't so sensitive!' (WC 422). A week later, he moved to Miss Anscombe's house in Oxford.

On 28 April, Wittgenstein writes from Oxford, thanking von Wright for a birthday present that was a very pleasant surprise: a first edition of Jacob Grimm's *Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache*. After moving out from von Wright's house, he does not praise his new living conditions too much:

> I don't yet feel acclimatized at all. The house isn't very noisy but not very quiet, either. I don't know yet how I shall get on. The lodgers seem all to be rather nice, and one of them even very nice. (CR 31)

In June, Wittgenstein writes briefly from Oxford to thank von Wright for returning the shoes that he had forgotten during his recent visit. He enjoyed the conversations the two of them had with [Georg] Kreisel, a young Austrian student whom Wittgenstein considered very talented. Since von Wright is about to travel to Finland for a sabbatical leave Wittgenstein advises him and ends the letter with a critical self-analysis:

> I hope your journey to Finland won't be too unpleasant and that you'll spend your time there *profitably*. Let me hear from you if you've nothing better to do. Give all my good wishes to your wife and to Bevan if you see him. I'm pretty well and pretty stupid. (CR 32)

On 6 September1950, Wittgenstein is still in Oxford. He thanks von Wright for the two letters and explains his long silence ' … there isn't anything to write about me'. His plans to go to Norway with Ben Richards, a young medical student with whom Wittgenstein had an emotional relationship 1945–1951, had been postponed (see [Schmidt 2021] about their relationship) and, he has done hardly anything for the last three weeks: 'my ability for philosophical work seems to have practically vanished'. He is very sorry

to hear about von Wright's accident. Oddly enough, he ends up sending regards to von Wright's wife and her mother (CR 33).

On 7 December 1950, Wittgenstein thanks von Wright for several letters, regretting that he has not written before now. He had been in Norway with Ben Richards and they had enjoyed their stay enormously.

> … I decided then and there that I'd return to Norway to work there. I get no *real* quiet here. … Of course I don't know whether I'm able any more to do decent work, but at least I'm giving myself a real chance. (CR 34)

The last letter from Wittgenstein is dated 29 January 1951 in Oxford. He writes that he has been rather ill for the last month or so, but will come to Cambridge next week. 'I'll stay with Dr Bevan and will let you know when I'm there. The last few days I've been feeling pretty good, but I still stay in bed for part of the day. I'm looking forward to seeing you' (CR 35). Wittgenstein came to Cambridge in early February, and lived with Dr Bevan and his wife until his death. Von Wright visited him every now and then, but once, on 21 April, Wittgenstein visited von Wright at the College because von Wright was unable to move because of his knee injury. Von Wright describes the last meeting:

> Wittgenstein entered unannounced. Seeing him greatly surprised me. He said, jokingly, that it was not him I saw but his 'astral body' walking round. He brought me some flowers. He then sat down for a short while and we talked about Aksakov's 'Family Chronicle' which I was reading. Then he left. He died eight days later. It then struck me that he had actually come to say goodbye. (CR 35 comment)

Wittgenstein regained his creative power in the last few weeks and wrote his last notes on 27 April, only two days before his death (von Wright 2002, 160). Von Wright and Elizabeth Anscombe published his last notebooks posthumously in *Über Gewissheit,* translated *On Certainty*.

On friendship

In a 'Biographical Sketch on Wittgenstein', von Wright (1982, 31) writes, 'One can say that Wittgenstein avoided acquaintances, but needed and sought friendships. He was an incomparable, but demanding, friend. And I believe that most of those who loved him and had his friendship also feared him'. Whether von Wright also refers to himself is unclear, but it is certain that Wittgenstein found a loyal friend in him. In his memoirs, von Wright (2002, 133) admits that in 1947, when meeting Wittgenstein again after eight years, he wrote in his diary 'Wittgenstein shakes my soul'. The impression that Wittgenstein made on von Wright was so strong that it turned both his philosophy and perspective on life upside down.[13]

From the beginning, the friendship manifested itself in open and spontaneous interactions between a promising student and a master who saw his potential. The correspondence shows that they became friends almost immediately. In his first letter, von Wright asked Wittgenstein for an explanation for their dramatic first encounter. Wittgenstein responded with a friendly letter, in which he explained his rude behaviour and invited von Wright 'to his rooms' to explain the matter. The foundation of the friendship was laid at that meeting.

According to von Wright (2002, 20, 134–136), his friendship with Wittgenstein was based on the correspondence of taste and values, as they shared a continental European cultural background, especially an interest in German literature and classical music. As examples, he mentions Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, whose aphorisms they both liked, philosopher and historian Oswald Spengler, and Schubert in the field of music. Von Wright (2002, 136) paints an idyllic scenery where they sometimes listened to music together at *The Student's Union;* sometimes Wittgenstein would read aloud German literature to him, after which they would continue to discuss what he had read. An apt example of their common interests is *Culture and Value*, a collection of Wittgenstein's remarks on general things, which von Wright edited posthumously by selecting excerpts from Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* to his own taste (cf. Erbacher 2017).

During the break in the correspondence between 1941 and 1946, von Wright advanced in his academic career in Finland; had his doctorate and held a professorship at the University of Helsinki. Meanwhile, Wittgenstein was a professor at Cambridge, but left philosophy during the war years of 1942–1943 to work in a hospital. In February 1944, he was called back to Cambridge (Monk 1991, 431–447). The correspondence was revived in 1947, and letters were exchanged almost monthly or even more frequently. Sometimes Wittgenstein replied to several letters at once, which means that von Wright was a more active writer; no surprise given the admiration expressed in his letters.

Due to long distances and few meetings, letters made it possible to share news, experiences and feelings. In them, they looked forward to future conversations, and missed the past ones. The topics covered crystallize the basis of their friendship. They naturally wrote about philosophy and the progress of their work, but mostly about everyday things, travel, friends, and health. They wrote about people they met, recommended books to each other, and shared their musical experiences.

Mutual trust and shared personal characteristics such as openness and sincerity, evident in their correspondence, may have strengthened the friendship between two otherwise very different personalities. Von Wright (2002, 134–136) writes that they rarely talked about issues in their personal life. However, personal emotional states are a central topic in their correspondence. Showing confidence, they wrote about personal anxiety related to difficult life situations, work, health, fear of the future, or war. In several letters, Wittgenstein openly talked about his physical and mental health, his difficulties in concentrating, and about disbelief in his own doing, while von Wright wrote about the intimacy of death during the war years and the conflicting feelings it had evoked. It is not known whether von Wright had told Wittgenstein about his own nervous breakdowns and other illnesses experienced in his childhood and youth, but he was probably sensitive to understanding Wittgenstein's problems, both mental and physical (cf. von Wright 2002, 13–20; 72–73).

They appreciated each other's integrity and depth, as particularly evidenced by Wittgenstein's letters, such as the one in which he fears that von Wright would be corrupted in Cambridge. This relates to the fact that Wittgenstein had felt an outsider among the Cambridge élite and thought von Wright, as a person of depth, would also suffer greatly in Cambridge unless he became equally superficial. Wittgenstein sincerely cared for his friends whether they were ill or uncertain of their choices, and therefore wanted to contribute to the career of his young friend von Wright.[14] Von Wright had tried to understand Wittgenstein and his philosophy and succeeded; Wittgenstein

wanted von Wright as his successor as professor. Von Wright was not a Wittgensteinian philosopher, but rather he had shown Wittgenstein what kind of person and friend he was, how dutifully he worked and how patiently he treated other people.

As they were both foreigners in England, it probably strengthened their friendship. They corresponded with each other in English, although von Wright also knew German, which they sometimes used for terms that had no good equivalent in English. Their writing styles and ways of saluting one another in the letters also tell about their friendship and changes in it. The first letters were quite formal; von Wright was then a 23-year-old foreign postgraduate student at Cambridge, doing a dissertation under the supervision of C.D. Broad, anxious to attend the classes of the person who had written *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein was also a foreigner, a world famous philosopher twice his age who had published his main work *Tractatus,* and was a newly elected professor at Cambridge. As soon as they became acquainted, their writing style becomes free and spontaneous. According to McGuinness (2005), Wittgenstein appreciated von Wright's 'unembarrassed directness'. Examples of such directness can be found in von Wright's letters, in which he unashamedly shows his overflowing gratitude and admiration for everything he has learned from Wittgenstein, describing how he misses their time together in words that he would probably not use face-to-face. During the war years, von Wright's letters show his fear of never meeting Wittgenstein again. However, his low-key courtesy goes hand in hand with stronger and more straightforward expressions, as he regrets his emotional outbursts and finds it necessary to explain them at the end of the letters to prevent potential misunderstandings.

After a long break in correspondence, when von Wright returned to Cambridge as a professor with his family, the language of the correspondence becomes more formal again. He had grown from a pupil to a trusted friend, who sometimes housed weakened Wittgenstein at his house in Cambridge. At the time, they wrote to each other using either the full name or a combination of title and surname in the opening salutation, and usually signed their letters using a combination of first and last name. Even though Wittgenstein's opening and closing greetings varied widely and did not follow any permanent style, towards the end of his life, he became more conventional; for example, he often closed the letter by sending greetings to von Wright's wife as well. Although formalities were common in German-speaking Central Europe, even with friends, they both used first names or nicknames, or closings such as 'Affectionately', when writing to their closest friends. However, their friendship was now an interaction between two equal professionals.

On Wittgenstein's trust and legacy to von Wright

Wittgenstein's friendship is particularly evidenced in the confidence shown to von Wright. Wittgenstein entrusted him with two major responsibilities: his professorship at Cambridge, and the posthumous publishing of his manuscripts with Rhees and Anscombe. He expressed the former wish in his recommendation and the latter in his will in 1951, which came as a surprise to von Wright (1982, 4). However, there are clear indications in the letters that Wittgenstein trusted von Wright at a very early stage, and hoped that he would either read or keep the manuscript copies given to him in case the originals were lost or he died (Kaipainen 2008). The manuscripts were

Wittgenstein's most important legacy, and over the years, he often worried about their preservation and passing onto future generations. Wittgenstein's letters give the impression that he was a perfectionist, and that he wanted to make sure things were completed. That characteristic may have contributed to his decision to appoint not just one, but three trusted persons in charge of publishing his literary legacy: Rhees, Anscombe and von Wright.

Wittgenstein had discussed his work extensively with the three, and he was convinced of their skill, integrity, and ability to think independently. The task would be facilitated by the fact that all three knew German, in which Wittgenstein wrote most of his manuscripts, and that they lived in England. Christian Erbacher (2016) considers von Wright's advantages to be efficiency, practicality, leadership, and outstanding diplomatic talent, the latter because as a young doctoral student, von Wright gained favour in just a few weeks with both C.D. Broad and Wittgenstein, who were the intellectual antipodes at Cambridge. He also had the advantage of being a professor at Trinity College. Moreover, let us not forget von Wright's familiarity with Central European culture, which helped him to understand and interpret Wittgenstein's thought, in particular Wittgenstein's history-conscious conception of philosophy. For Wittgenstein, philosophy expressed something that was valid in the context of his times (von Wright 1982, 216).

A trait of both Wittgenstein and von Wright that possibly influenced Wittgenstein's decision was a sense of duty, a useful quality both in publishing and as a professor (Kaipainen 2008, 189–191, 235). Von Wright (1982, 32) wrote that Wittgenstein was 'acutely and even painfully sensitive to considerations of duty', by which he meant that Wittgenstein's sense of duty had some seriousness and passion comparable to religiosity. Wittgenstein carried out his calling as a philosopher living ascetically, and often withdrew to quiet places to write. He considered spiritual growth to be his duty; it was a prerequisite for him to be able to work well. In the very first letters to von Wright, he describes his own method of working, which enabled him to work with the seriousness that he required from himself. He also felt it his duty to be critical, and to tell how things really are; he believed in von Wright's abilities, but felt obliged to talk about the dangers of the Cambridge professorship.

Von Wright's sense of duty shows in his hesitation to apply for the professorship at Cambridge because he wanted to succeed in it, but was unsure of his suitability. However, after withdrawing his application, he accepted the post when he received an invitation, and was assured by Gilbert Ryle that he would be welcomed as such. Soon after Wittgenstein's death, von Wright left the Cambridge professorship, one of the reasons being that he felt obliged to think about his children's future and to work in Finland, to which he owed loyalty. He also found the Cambridge tradition too heavy a burden to bear and did not feel mature enough to hold a professorship after his immediate predecessors, Wittgenstein and Moore (von Wright 1989, 14–15; 2002, 139–140, 161–163.).

Von Wright made an honest decision, when he left Cambridge. It can also be thought that during his three years in the professor's chair, von Wright had fulfilled his loyalty to Wittgenstein. Now he had another duty to fulfil, the organisation and publication of Wittgenstein's literary legacy, a task to which he dedicated his energy and passion for decades.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have only scratched the surface of the friendship of Wittgenstein and von Wright, which would be worth a whole book. The excerpts of the letters have shown us glimpses of their daily lives: what they saw and experienced, what inspired them, and what things bothered them so much that they felt a need to write about them to a friend. The value of the letters is that they contain genuine, spontaneous thoughts and feelings that have arisen in various life situations.

Although the correspondence began for purely practical reasons, when von Wright wrote about his wish to attend Wittgenstein's lectures, they soon began to share personal news. Information about one's whereabouts and travels remained a constant part of their communication. Sometimes, a polite reply to a received letter was a sufficient motive for writing. Wittgenstein's short letters often included practical matters, such as sending a book, matters related to the professorship, announcing the start of lectures, trips, giving a new address or a meeting date. Yet, he also wrote about his mental and physical problems, and the difficulties of working. Von Wright, on the other hand, wrote long, descriptive letters telling news about Finland or his current work, never forgetting to thank Wittgenstein for all he had learned. Despite their own writing style, both are sincere and open in their letters. Towards the end, Wittgenstein's illness made them even closer as he could rely on his friend in a number of practical matters. Their correspondence lasted until Wittgenstein's death.

In the first letters, young von Wright admired and praised the renowned philosopher who already showed signs of his trust in his new student. After the long silence during World War II, the letters show a friendship of equal, independent thinkers. In the end, their friendship was sealed in Wittgenstein's will, in which he named von Wright as one of his literary executors. It shows that he wanted to make sure that his philosophy was published by someone who understood him and whom he could trust.

In the beginning, I thought it reasonable to ask why Wittgenstein accepted von Wright, an unknown Finnish philosophy student, as his friend. I wanted to see if an explanation could be found in their correspondence. My conclusion is that the letters reinforce the idea of a shared cultural background, which according to von Wright, partly explains their friendship. However, the letters also display some qualities of von Wright that possibly appealed to Wittgenstein and fuelled their friendship: sincerity, reliability, sense of duty and self-confident stubbornness. Von Wright had the courage to express his own philosophical ideas to Wittgenstein, just as Wittgenstein had done with Russell in his youth; perhaps Wittgenstein saw his young self in von Wright. Von Wright's gratitude and admiration for Wittgenstein, and his open sentimentality, as if he were 'writing for the last time', shows in all the letters. The fact that von Wright tried to calm down his enthusiasm by adding explanations and apologies at the end of his letters reveals that he was not pretending, his feeling were spontaneous. That is moving. Moreover, the correspondence suggests that von Wright was ready to help Wittgenstein, no matter what the requests were, and vice versa. There were enough similarities between them to build friendship and trust.

As the letters were not written for publication, they allow the friends' own voices to be heard without censorship: von Wright's descriptions of frustration in weighing his choices as he tries to find his own philosophical path, or Wittgenstein's sincere joy to

receive letters from von Wright or the descriptions of his poor concentration. Writing a letter to a friend when life and work were difficult was a way to find relief. In those days and in their case, it was often the only way. The letters connect the inner world of these two philosophers to the circumstances in which their friendship and philosophical thinking developed. In the letters, Wittgenstein and von Wright voiced their friendship in their own words.

Notes

1. The biographical information on Wittgenstein is based on McGuinness (1988), Monk (1991) and von Wright (1982).
2. Their friendship ended in 1918 when Pinsent died at the age of 27. Von Wright edited his diaries into *A Portrait of Wittgenstein as a Young Man: From the Diary of David Hume Pinsent 1912–1914*. The diaries give a vivid picture of Wittgenstein's life and personality at that time.
3. The biographical information on von Wright is based on von Wright (1989; 1992 and 2002).
4. Von Wright's first letter, to which Wittgenstein responds, has disappeared. Since most of his letters have not survived, I will not hereafter mention it in connection with Wittgenstein's reply letters.
5. The topic concerning sentences about sense-experiences.
6. I have kept the original misspellings.
7. *Philosophical Investigations* (CR 3 comment).
8. Most likely Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations* (CR 7 comment).
9. In the summer of 1947, he wrote also to his friend Göran Schildt about Wittgenstein's strong influence, and told that only in the last couple of years, had he begun to find his own style (*Kruskopf* 2008, 177).
10. In his final will dated January 29, 1951, he appointed Rush Rhees as his executor and a literary executor, and Elizabeth Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright as literary executors (WC 395).
11. Wittgenstein dictated a text that was later published under the title *Philosophical Investigations, Part II*.
12. The book was *Letters of Wilhelm Busch to Frau Marie Anderson*.
13. In 1947, von Wright (1989, 14) writes: 'Each conversation with Wittgenstein was like living through the day of judgement. It was terrible. Everything had constantly to be dug up anew, questioned and subjected to the tests of truthfulness. This concerned not only philosophy but the whole of life.'
14. Friends were important to Wittgenstein. On the meaning of friendship for Wittgenstein, see e.g. Malcolm (1958, 34, 61) and Savickey (2014).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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