

Ernst A. Ebbinghaus (1926–1995)

Portrait of the Linguist as an Old Man

Ernst A. Ebbinghaus was sixty-nine years old when he died on June 5, 1995.

In 1980 I gave two talks at Penn State and was surprised to meet Ebbinghaus there. There was of course nothing to be surprised at: if I had taken the trouble to read the preface to *Gotische Grammatik*, I would have discovered the words “Pennsylvania State University” opposite his name. But I was still fairly new to this country and could not imagine that the editor of such a book, let alone of *Althochdeutsches Lesebuch* and *Abriß der althochdeutschen Grammatik mit Berücksichtigung des Altsächsischen*, could live anywhere except in Germany. I became very nervous. For years a frightful thought had pursued me: I am taking a qualifying exam, and my examiner is Hermann Paul or Eduard Sievers. How would I be able to learn all the *Anmerkungen* in their manuals? And here I was to lecture in the presence of someone whose name was separated from Braune’s by a thin slash.

On two consecutive days I spoke on the development of vowels in Early Germanic and on Germanic fatalism, two closely related subjects. Ebbinghaus turned out to be a most sympathetic listener and showed no interest in checking my knowledge of the fine print in his books. He took me out for dinner after my first talk, and we parted as friends. I wrote him soon after my return home, and this was the beginning of our correspondence, which lasted for fifteen years. When in the early summer of 1995 he did not respond to my letter for two weeks, I realized that something had happened. As I now know, I wrote that letter after his death.

All scholars of Medieval Germanic have Ebbinghaus’s books on their shelves, but his articles are read by few. In later years, most of them appeared in *General Linguistics*, the journal he edited with passion and dedication. In his view, the goal of general linguistics was not to propose ever new theoretical schemes but to observe the life of language, especially its history (*Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*).

Ebbinghaus looked on Gothic as his main area of study. He wrote an exhaustive survey of Gothic dictionaries (1983, 1985, 1986),

followed closely the progress of Lehmann's edition of Feist (and spent a whole summer reading the proofs), and published extensively on Gothic paleography, lexicology, phonetics, and grammar. He investigated in great detail Wulfila's life (1992) and, together with James Marchand, continued the bibliography of Gothic studies initiated by Mossé (1967, 1974). His notes may seem unpretentious to a reader brought up on book-length articles from *PBB*, and it is easy to overlook the fact that each of them contains an original solution, be it the role of length in Gothic vowels, the syllabicity of resonants in Early Germanic (1970), the origin of /ε/ in reduplicating verbs, or the absence of breaking in *hiri* 'here' (1979). Perhaps the best known of his short articles is the one on the etymology of *bōk* 'book' (1982). He was not the first to doubt the connection between *book* and *beech*, but he compromised decisively the etymology going back to Jacob Grimm. If *book* is to be dissociated from the tree name, its origin will remain "debatable," to use the polite jargon of etymological dictionaries.

Because of Ebbinghaus's aversion to pomp and self-glorification, few people realize the scope of his learning. His excellence in Gothic, Old High German, and Old Saxon can be taken for granted, but he was equally familiar with Old Norse and Old English. He also knew many things that he never discussed in his publications. Middle High German poetry was among them, but he kept repeating that he had no genuine feeling for it. The *Nibelungenlied* left him indifferent, and he found Gottfried affected. He had kinder words for Wolfram, and, judging by his chance remarks, must have been rather fond of Walther. Even less obvious to his readers was his deep involvement with Greek and Latin.

His teacher and lifelong object of admiration was Karl Helm, whose erudition and culture he always attempted to emulate. But regardless of Helm's lasting influence on him, one could not be an Ebbinghaus (the famous psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus was his grandfather) and grow up uneducated, even though his formative years coincided with the worst period in Germany's modern history. Unlike Helm, Ebbinghaus preferred to avoid polemic. An outspoken man who had mastered in full the gentle art of making enemies, he exercised utter restraint in his reviews. His praise was never extravagant, nor his criticism devastating. He may not have had a flair for linguistic theory (and he treated modern literary theory with utter

disdain), but he read dozens of books representing all trends, partly to review them, partly because he retained to the end an interest in other people's ideas.

Soon after Ebbinghaus's death, W. P. Lehmann published a profound evaluation of his friend's work in *General Linguistics* (1994—there is something macabre in the fact of an obituary predating one's death, but the journal was behind schedule), so I thought that, rather than giving another detailed account of his publications, I might present him as I knew him during the last years of his life. We met only twice: in 1980 at Penn State and in the autumn of 1985, when he was a guest of the Department of German at the University of Minnesota. (He gave our philologists a lecture entitled "Is There Anything to Be Done in Gothic?") But I have more than 200 letters from him, and our correspondence produced an illusion of extraordinary closeness. Below, I will let Ebbinghaus speak for himself, and may his words impart some warmth to the dry sections of his *Gotische Grammatik*.

In 1981 I asked Roman Jakobson whether he knew Ebbinghaus. "Very little," answered Jakobson. "But I heard that he lives alone surrounded by animals." He was right. The great python Kaa (Mowglie's rescuer from the monkeys) had been Ebbinghaus's favorite from his earliest childhood, and real animals treated him as one of their own.

While I have always had a special affinity for animals, of any kind, it sometimes goes beyond that. As a very small boy, I was lost for a day; until feeding time, until they found me in the breeding pen of English setters, which my relatives bred, peacefully resting amongst a litter. The bitch did not want to give me up. Later I got lost again, was found amongst wild boars, and I can still remember the wet noses of the striplings on my legs. The rescue operation, so-called, appears to have been difficult; the sow did not want to let me go, and I did not show any intention to get away. So it went over the years. In the zoo in Berlin, where my mother often painted, I took morning walks with a very young gorilla, supervised by Geheimrat Heck, then director. I also had access to the elephants, perhaps the gentlest creatures of all. (February 2, 1995)

Contrary to what one may think, Ebbinghaus was a sociable man and had many friends. But something somewhere went wrong, and a search for a home for five orphaned kittens or saving a cat's life (a

task in which he sometimes failed, “My dear cat, thank you for asking, is dead. When they opened him, an inoperable cancer showed. It was very hard,” from the above letter) became his main occupations, along with scholarship, teaching, editing the journal, listening to Haydn’s quartets, and writing letters.

Just before it got so very cold, I picked up a homeless cat; someone had abandoned the poor thing, as I found out. Now we are two dogs, two cats, one fish, and myself. A full house. The new cat is, however, very grateful and happy. I am praying to Zeus that there won’t be more homeless animals in my vicinity. (February 22, 1989)

There are, indeed, “pets” around. I share my life with two dogs and three cats. The dogs, both Tibetan Apsos are Teddy and Maurice, the cats are Cat, Fluff, and Bianca, the latter being totally white. They are practically the only people with whom I converse. The cats are highly intelligent; they love to sleep on my desk and, in contrast to the char, have the sense not to attempt to make order out of the normal chaos. (December 16, 1993)

He offered a few very good etymologies of animal names. Some older derivations amused him by their silliness: a distinguished scholar would etymologize a fish name as ‘spotted’ for example, though anyone could see that this fish did not have a single spot. I also contributed several etymologies of animal names to his journal and referred to them as my animal farm. My reward was the following:

A few days ago I read that the attempt is being made to re-introduce *mustela pennantis* in the wilderness of Pennsylvania. It is a weasel-like creature, not known, as far as I know, in Europe. Linguistically interesting are the popular names of the little creature. Here they call it *Fischer*, in other areas, *Pecan*, or *Black Cat*. It is indeed black. Pecan may be a distorted Indian word. What I recommend to your ever-growing animal farm is the name Fischer, for of all the things it eats, small rodents, &c., it never eats fish. As editor of *General Linguistics*, I expect you to solve the puzzle, and promise that your solution will appear in GL 35, if I get the manuscript early enough.

Submitted for your holiday entertainment by,
Ernst A. Ebbinghaus (December 20, 1994)

Editing a journal, even a thin one, was not easy. Sometimes the portfolio would be nearly empty, and he would appeal for help; but more often unpublishable articles would arrive.

A manuscript came today for GL; the author . . . sets out to show that Slavic and Basque are very closely related. He has found that certain Slavonic words are quite similar to certain Basque words, if one “scrambles” the letters somewhat. The manuscript has pictures drawn by the author. Prominent is the prehistoric lady with a fat arse. There should be a journal, *divertissement linguistique*, for such things. It reminded me of a little book that Helm showed me once. That book set out to show that the Homeric epics are actually Germanic; the only thing I remember is that *ennepe* in the opening line of the *Odyssey* means or is German *Hanf*, and the first sentence really means that there were several maidens spinning hemp. Homer would have enjoyed that. So much for entertainment. (October 14, 1993)

Since *General Linguistics* had a review section, he was the recipient of countless packages and saw to it that the best books would be discussed in the pages of the journal. He was disgusted by the very sight of the cheap production most publishers sent him. I complained to him that in my collection of essays *Word Heath* (1994), though it was printed on excellent paper and with a beautiful cover, misprints could not be eliminated. His answer was gracious and to the point, as always:

I have read your book almost to the end by now; a few typographical errors are to be expected. Helm said once, after you have read the proof time and again, the first thing you see in your new publication is a typographical error. I have found out that he was quite right. On the whole, type setting, which used to be an art, has become a rather sloppy business. There are very few now who set by hand and take pride in their work. The same goes for the design of books. Where are the wonderful margins of the 17th and 18th centuries? I love the Ræder Saxo; how easy that is to read. The Benzel-Lye Wulfila, Knittel's Ulfilas, and Uppström's editions are printed very well; compare them with Streitberg in its countless reprints, of which [Carl] Winter should be ashamed. (March 21, 1995)

I am aware of the tons of books that are published. A great waste of paper and other materials. Every few weeks I put them all in a box and ship them to the library in Binghamton. . . . Some time in the future, they can establish a chair at Binghamton on the Decline and Fall of Linguistics, they will have enough material. (April 20, 1995)

He chose Binghamton because one of his closest friends, Professor Saul Levin, taught there; it could be any other college. But the name *of the chair he was helping to endow had deep significance* for him. He viewed the future of humanity without much hope. He detested the mainstream *cum* cutting-edge type of things and shirked them in horror. But he did not look upon himself as the last survivor.

What we see is the decline and fall of the western world. For the time being, I can't detect any little seed that might, eventually, come to full bloom, saving some of the good traditions and, perhaps, add something good and new. Our discipline has reached its nadir. However, one should not cease to work and, perhaps, publish. We are, in doing so, talking to some future generations(s?). (December 9, 1993)

I am not worried about people reading, or not reading, my publications. I have always had it as my goal to write for the happy few. They are now very few, in the future they will again be more. (October 30, 1994)

And finally: "Of course one must be in the minority, one owes it to one's breeding and in the end one is always right" (May 7, 1990).

Neither the state nor the organization of schools and scholarship in the United States appealed to him:

Departments of Linguistics are, of course, an aberration. What is needed is good and solid introduction to one or two old languages in a language department; from that the student has to go on to other languages in the same way. That is how we all used to study, and we all did learn something. The departments of linguistics have been leading to the study of language without language. (March 30, 1995)

I once wrote what I thought a moderately amusing evaluation of a project for the study of the nude, three years in Italy had been asked for. I only pointed out that structurally Italian girls are nearly indistinguishable from American girls and that three nights would suffice. (July 28, 1989)

The evaluation was sent to the NEH, and Ebbinghaus always assured me that they knew him very well there. Perhaps they did. I told him about the hostility of some Germanic scholars to the idea of a new etymological dictionary of English in the spirit of Walde-Hofmann, Feist, or Vasmer; he had a quick explanation: "They probably don't know that English is a Germanic language."

Ebbinghaus was a conscientious and absolutely reliable scholar. Every statement in his works was based on months, even years, of checking, collating, and rejecting unconfirmed hypotheses. He enjoyed reporting interim results to his correspondents: “Nothing new about Wulfila. I have a fantasy. The Gothi minores were living in a kind of religious community, something like Amish, and Wulfila set up a scriborium which must have lasted a long time. The Hungarian fragments make it reasonable to assume that the S-Type script was developed in the east and not in Italy. One never hears of these Gothi being involved in the later struggles and Iordanes calls them peaceful and poor. Wulfila was probably quite a ladies’ man and did not divulge his age. Let’s write a novel. The Gothic maidens in the Igor epic are probably Wulfila’s descendants” (July 7, 1990). But even he could take only so much Gothic paleography at a time: “There are days when I wish that all Gothic manuscripts [were] consumed by fire, water, or any other destructive agent” (October 8, 1990).

Ebbinghaus felt perfectly at home in the world of medieval poetry. We regularly exchanged opinions on cruces in the *Hildebrandslied*, Eddic names, and other pressing issues. I always remembered how lucky I was to have such an interlocutor. Nineteenth-century Germany, a philologist’s paradise, acquired a living voice because of his presence. The slash between the names of Braune and Ebbinghaus connected, rather than separated, two epochs. His comments on the oldest Germanic authors were instructive and often amusing.

I did not know that there are now conferences on translation. . . . I also did not know that there are now courses on the matter. I had thought translating like writing poetry can’t be learnt; in the Middle Ages you could write poetry by being pious; Otfrid gives an example for the results. (May 10, 1995)

The answer to your question about Otfrid is very simple. He wrote the “poem” so that, as Helm said, we have sufficient text for *Staatsexamen*. I have never found a better explanation. I once undertook to read the entire cursed piece merely because it was there and I was learning OHG. I have regretted it ever since, and I see no reason why we do not read Heliand with our students. That is certainly a better piece of literature. (February 2, 1990)

Beowulf contemporary with the ms. does not appeal to me. I think it was fortunately copied in the Alfredian era. It could easily belong in the Offa time. The end of Offa's reign would have made an older and clear-sighted man quite pessimistic. Offa's successor was a double-breasted ass, and the entire wonderful empire went down the tube; that fits so nicely with the final scenes in Beowulf. (December 6, 1986)

Schallanalyse . . . I had long talks with Helm about it, who knew Sievers well. Sievers seems to have been quite obsessed by his idea, and he tried it on anybody he could get hold of. According to Helm, it never worked. Sievers was doubtless a great man, and great men have the privilege to have at least one absurd idea, I think. It distinguishes them from men of lesser qualities; they have only absurd ideas, if any. The *Sprachgefühl* we seem to develop is, of course, of no significance when it comes to such old poetry. The deuce is that one acquires it somehow and cannot get rid of it. I read my long-lines in a certain way, and I do not know why. I do not agree with Heusler in most points. From the little we, or at least I, know about the older Germanic languages I have developed a certain sense of rhythm which I know very well is mine and not that of the ancient poets. I always tell my students that, but they are somehow pressured into the same habits, I think. (March 30, 1986)

I used to ask him about the scholars he knew before he moved to the United States. Sometimes he would tell me an anecdote brought forth by a chance association, but more often he simply shared his memories about his older colleagues.

Holthausen remains an enigma to me. He certainly was dull, though learned. At the end of his life I had a brief correspondence with him. He was full of plans but had lost his collections. He was then living in Wiesbaden with his daughter. His attitude towards Feist was swinish, but he was not the only one of that ilk. Even the apolitical Ehrismann had a touch of Germanomania; Jan de Vries was a bad one, so was de Boor. (December 9, 1993)

I have never met de Vries, by choice. He came to Marburg once but on account of his political past I declined to be present at the reception. I have his *Religionsgeschichte* which is full of imaginative thoughts. He certainly knew a lot, but he should have concentrated on *-geschichte*. (April 20, 1995)

I agree with your opinion on OIcel. *fletta*; the transition to Mod. Icel. 'turn the pages in a book' [from 'strip one naked'] is interesting and

reminds the historian of Bezenberger. He is said to have walked regularly from home to university while reading a book. Instead of turning the pages as he went along, he ripped them out and discarded them thus littering the path. (July 28, 1989)

Once, while leafing through a German dictionary, I came across the word *Pogatsche* (österr.) 'kleiner, flacher, süßer Eierkuchen mit Grieben'. A sweet cake with crackling, that is, with crisp skin of roast pork, would be the last thing I could imagine myself eating, even if it was small, flat, and made with many eggs, but *Pogatsche* made me think of Alois Pogatscher, one of the luminaries of German *Anglistik*. So I asked Ebbinghaus whether he had ever eaten *Pogatschen*. I was sure he had not; he never lived in Austria, and I wanted only to tease him. I could also anticipate his reaction because some time earlier I inquired what he thought about the idiom *mit Bierruhe* 'imperturbably' and was told that he had no interest in its origin and that he hated beer. This is what I learned about the egg cake and the venerable student of English philology:

I do not know *Pogatsche*, and I do not wish to meet it, ever. I have always found German food disgusting or worse. Only in the southwest, Baden, do they serve you decent fare, but you have to go to a plain village pub. (December 12, 1994)

Ever since you mentioned *Pogatschen* to me my mind has been restless. Gradually, from the deepest layers of my memory there has emerged the thought that there must have been a scholarly man by the name of Pogatscher. As I remember it, Helm did mention the name, presumably quoting something. I can't remember the context. Perhaps the man was a cook and invented the food that you had in mind when writing. (January 8, 1995)

Actually, the thing and the word came to Austria from Hungary in the days of the empire.

Hitler's rule haunted Ebbinghaus all his life. He apparently left Germany without regrets (the Germany he loved did not survive even the twelfth century) and never wanted to see it again. Nor would it have been a simple matter to return, for he was afraid of airplanes. But his few fond recollections were not necessarily connected with animals. Once I asked him where he learned his English. Another time he wanted to know what kind of a place the town called Pushkin was.

(Pushkin, formerly Tsarskoe Selo ‘The Tsar’s Village’, was the seat of the famous Lyceum at which Pushkin received his education. Later the Lyceum moved to St. Petersburg and after the revolution became indistinguishable from other establishments of learning for the young. By sheer chance—I lived nearby—I went to that school. I told the whole story to Ebbinghaus.) This is what he wrote to me:

I have spent long periods in England, as a boy and later as a freshly hatched Ph.D. My relatives there are all gone; alas, many were swallowed by the war . . . ; others were old and just went to the happy hunting grounds. I do not think that I want to see England again; what I read and hear does sound very strange to me and is very sad to contemplate. (27 November, 1984)

Tsarskoe Selo brings back a memory. I had an uncle who was an intelligence officer in the Imperial Russian army. He emigrated, evidently in good time, and established himself in Switzerland, at which time I knew him. He was very friendly and very good to me; he told me of Tsarskoe Selo and all its splendor as well as of other things in Russia, of the Tsar, who must have been rather tall, and of the lovely princesses. But he did not mention, if I remember correctly, Pushkin; in those years I was not interested in literature beyond *Just So Stories*. I . . . regretted later that I had never exploited my uncle and made him teach me Russian; but I hated languages as, according to family rule, I had to speak three. Of them, I hated French and German; a sentiment which is still there, somehow. At any rate, I am glad to learn that you were actually a schoolmate of the great author. The difference in years does not count at all. I was not so lucky; the last school I went to was Kaiser Bill’s gymnasium. (March 17, 1994)

In the autumn of 1980, Ebbinghaus moved to a new house: “The new house, which is of my own design, is small and efficient, entirely heated by wood and coal and hence eventually much cheaper than anything I could possibly find. Everything is made by hand and of good materials and the outside will be absolutely maintenance-free. There will be sufficient room for my books, for dogs and me but no more” (September 12, 1980). Three years later, he contracted an infection of the brain and underwent a series of brain surgeries (all that in addition to several fractures and an especially virulent flu), but recovered and resumed his accustomed way of life. It was after this spell of ill health that he came to Minneapolis (by car, all the way from Bellefonte, Pa.): “The trip and lecture have meant a lot to me.

After having driven almost two thousand miles without any trouble and talked coherently to an attentive audience I feel that I am quite normal again. For the past almost two years I had always been a little apprehensive, wondering how I would stand up under stress; but this trip has made me feel very good indeed" (16 May, 1985).

He was an excellent speaker and almost never missed the annual conferences held at Binghamton: "There are long talks and small talks (the latter about twenty minutes) and in order to develop a strict plan, they ask for a) an outline, and b) a script of the lecture. This is a little alien to me, since I grew up with the notion that it is *infra dig* to *read* to an audience (based on the assumption that the people in front of you are able to read themselves), but then, one does not have to stick to the script, as long as one keeps to the time" (January 9, 1989). I naturally could not observe his teaching, but I have met his students with a bent for philology, and they all loved him. Of the many things he told me about his courses and classes, one is especially memorable. I spent my sabbatical year 1988–89 in Kiel, and at the time of my *Hauptseminar* "Schools in Phonology" there was a students' strike. I informed the participants in my seminar that I would go on as scheduled even if one person showed up. In the end, all eight came. I reported these events to Ebbinghaus, and he could not conceal his amazement: "Why do students strike? We had that here some years ago, and it seemed utterly juvenile to me, showing exactly what these children are not, viz. adult and mature. . . . I had a class here, once, with a bomb planted behind my back; a warning came through, and I told the children that they could leave, I would stay because I thought such a home-made job, manufactured by idiots, would not explode. I was right; after you have been hounded by the nazis you do not take such things very seriously" (January 9, 1989).

At Penn State, his relations with his nearest colleagues were sour, but he did not have enough energy to start from scratch, though it seems he could have: ". . . in my little town I have found a home at last, and the three weekly trips to State College and the campus are not too bad. I had a chance recently to go to Florida, but after considering everything, I gave up. Perhaps something really good will emerge one day and I should then move; but it would have to be an improvement, not only financially" (November 27, 1984). At sixty-five he was firmly asked to retire. He outlived most of his older friends. His last

letters are full of gruesome details about his visits to the dentist and about his other ailments: “A string of bad news has come in lately. My old friend Philipsson has died, Gertraud Müller of the big OHG dictionary has died, *** has had a slight stroke I am still holding out, until all my animals have joined the majority, or so I hope; I can’t abandon them” (September 12, 1992). But nothing prepared me for the news of his death.

In a two-page story by Hemingway, “Old Man at the Bridge,” the action is set in Spain during the Civil War. “An old man with steel-rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes” tells the narrator that he had to leave his little town “because of the artillery.” At home he “was taking care of animals,” various animals, as he explained: two goats, a cat, and four pairs of pigeons. He had no family, only the animals. “The cat, of course, will be all right. A cat can look out for itself, but I cannot think what will become of the others.” Before leaving, he unlocked the dove cage. “Yes, certainly they’ll fly. But the others. It’s better not to think about the others,” he said. On the other hand, Heine (in his *Ideen*) tells a story about a boy who saved a kitten from a deep stream, but, in doing so, slipped and fell into the water, “und als man ihn herauszog, war er naß und tot. Das Kätzchen hat noch lange Zeit gelebt.” I hope that Ebbinghaus is at peace with himself wherever he is now and that someone took good care of his animals. In many years there has been no one whom I miss half as much as I miss him. [ANATOLY LIBERMAN, *University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*]

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