

**BOOK REVIEWS**

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*Wittgenstein and Modernism*  
edited by Michael LeMahieu and  
Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé

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This collection of essays relates Ludwig Wittgenstein to modernism. It features chapters by the following authors: Charles Altieri, Kristin Boyce, Anthony J. Cascardi, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Eli Friedlander, John Gibson, Allan Janik, Michael LeMahieu, Yi-Ping Ong, Marjorie Perloff and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé. There is a kind of affinity between Wittgenstein and his modernist contemporaries like Adolf Loos, Robert Musil, Walter Benjamin, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Henry James and Franz Kafka – to mention some famous modernists discussed in this anthology.

The high point of modernism, as a trend in literature and art, occurred in Wittgenstein's life-time. However, there never was an established *philosophical* movement known as modernism. As the editors point out, "modern philosophy" stands for Western philosophy from Descartes onwards, much of which Wittgenstein no longer thought was viable. Still

In post-war reception, Wittgenstein was often cast as a conservative rather than modernist. His partiality to the culture of German late Enlightenment and early Romanticism is well known. He voices misgivings about "the entire modern view of life" (Wittgenstein, TLP 6.371), its belief in progress and its "spirit" of "building an ever more complicated structure" to which he opposes his own

approach: one for which “clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves” (Wittgenstein, CV, p. 7e). The contradiction is solved if we distinguish between *modernism* and *modernity* (see, e.g., the chapter by Cascardi, p. 23). The ideal of perspicuity is central for Goethe, but it is also a defining feature of modernism, as evidenced, e.g., in the architecture of Adolf Loos (see the contributions by Janik, Donatelli and Friedlander).

The book makes repeated references to Stanley Cavell. Cavell, not unlike many others before and after him, defined a modernist work of art as one which breaks with the past and questions its own medium. Modernism does not ignore history, but on the contrary it perceives itself as occupying a particularly problematic point in it. Once-powerful ways of doing art can today only produce Kitsch. The artistic tradition must be continued, but one can do so only through completely new forms of expression. Wittgenstein similarly considered that established ways of doing philosophy were no longer open to him. *Tractatus* can be seen as a monument to the modernist ethos, a full stop to an entire philosophical style.

Modernism, in this perspective, is a kind of romanticism. It glorifies the search for new means of expression and it glorifies artists and poets, spiritual guides taking over from priests and scientists.

Relations between Wittgenstein and modernism are open to many kinds of treatment. (1) One can trace

modernist impulses that contributed to Wittgenstein’s philosophical development. (2) One can look for affinities between Wittgenstein’s work and contemporary works of fiction without claiming direct influence either way; and (3) one can juxtapose Wittgenstein and some modernist work, letting the one elucidate the other, even in cases (as with Saul Bellow) where any influence seems excluded. This book is divided into three parts roughly corresponding to this division.

In his contribution, Janik argues that, on the Viennese cultural scene, there were two distinct “modernisms”. With his “critical modernism” Loos emphasised craft, not art. Everyday functional objects should not be small works of art, but their judicious crafting should set art free to perform its proper task, that of shaking us up of our spiritual slumber. Loos’ attitude chimes with Wittgenstein’s idea that philosophy should be “businesslike”. The house Wittgenstein and Engelmann designed for Wittgenstein’s sister was, however, not really functionalist but rather a kind of stripped-off classical representative building.

For most writers in this collection, the emphasis is on Wittgenstein’s early work, especially the *Tractatus*, the publication of which coincided with that of some of the most acclaimed modernist works of fiction (e.g., Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*). One feature stands out: Wittgenstein’s struggle with limitations of the linguistic medium.

Zumhagen-Yepklé compares the ethical agenda of the *Tractatus*, including Wittgenstein's letter to his publisher, with a reading of *Ulysses*. The ultimate ethical insight of the *Tractatus* comes out in what is left out, and *must* be left out of any treatment that merely describes "what is the case". The solution to the problems of life consists in the disappearance of the questions themselves, which is why those who have found the solution cannot describe it to others (TLP 6.521). This is also, Zumhagen-Yepklé suggests, the very insight that Joyce conveys in "Ithaca", the final, fact-laden chapter of *Ulysses*.

The experience of value, then, lies beyond discursive language. Donatelli suggests, in a similar vein, that our insight of having lost a fully human command of language opens up the possibility of "expressing a dimension of life through its absence in language" (p. 106). In her contribution, Ong compares Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" with Kafka's "Report for an Academy". Just like the ape Red Peter literally sits in a cage, Wittgenstein runs up against the walls of the cage of our form of life.

Many contributors adhere to a standard "resolute" reading of the *Tractatus*. The idea is that *Tractatus* presents "a *mock doctrine*", "a metaphysical lure" (Zumhagen-Yepklé, p. 177, 191). Its sentences are "mere nonsense, indistinguishable from gibberish, and unable to convey any illuminating ethical (but ineffable) insights" (p. 178). Recognising the nonsensicality of the "body" of the work (but not of its "frame"),

however, leads the reader to philosophical insight. The profound insight consists in – well, first and foremost, in the recognition that one should not write books like the "body" of the *Tractatus*.

It seems to me that there is a problem here, however. After all, the ethical remarks to which Zumhagen-Yepklé refers, *also* belong to the "body" of the *Tractatus*. Moreover, Wittgenstein presents them (TLP 6.41–6.522) as something that *follows from* his earlier treatments of logic, science and the metaphysical subject.

Gibson, himself mildly in favour of "New Wittgenstein", takes issue with Rupert Read's extended "resolute" analysis of the poetic work of Wallace Stevens. Read describes Stevens' poetry as therapeutic nonsense which "*discloses the sensical through 'violating' the limits of language*" (quote on p. 140, emphasis in the original). Gibson acknowledges for his own part that a kind of "willed opacity" is distinctive of modernist poetry. However, he points out that Wittgenstein always demanded sensitivity to linguistic context. What counts as nonsense in a philosophical treatise would not necessarily do so in a poem. If we go along with Read we must, however, "approach each line in an incredibly literal manner and then find it surprising that each line falls apart if so approached" (p. 140) – which is "a very peculiar way to approach a poem of this sort" (p. 141).

Questioning the traditional psychological and metaphysical subject is another hallmark of

modernism. This theme is addressed, in particular, by two authors: Friedlander and LeMahieu. Friedlander starts from Wittgenstein's remarks on subjectivity in *Tractatus*, 5.6–5.641. In a factual description of one's experiences, for instance an imagined book called *The World as I found it* (TLP 5.631), the subject just disappears. Subjectivity is, however, present in it in an indirect way. It is not revealed in facts the writer tells us about herself, but in the fact that the reader is offered a view, a perspective from somewhere. Thus the idea of a perspicuous presentation is also a solution to the question how the subject can be represented: we do so by presenting a uniquely, meaningfully organised world. Friedlander highlights here the work of Walter Benjamin, who considered photography as a way to reveal meaning through perspicuous representation.

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* also call Cartesian subjecthood into question, but in another kind of way. LeMahieu addresses Wittgenstein's private language considerations in his chapter, "Bellow's Private Language". For Bellow and for Wittgenstein, private language was elusive and, with it, also the psychological subject as traditionally conceived. The question for both was how to ward off personal disintegration when classical subjectivity is out of the picture.

Distrust of organised religion was an important strand of the modernist self-image. Wittgenstein was a modernist also in this respect, as Perloff shows in a helpful summary.

Wittgenstein's attitude, inspired by Tolstoy, was, on the whole, one of embracing spirituality but respectfully dismissing all theological formulations of it.

The underlying modernist sentiment is, once more, the feeling that our means of dealing with what is "higher" are not adequate for the task. Along these lines, Donatelli describes Loos' views on how to include spirituality in architecture. Spirituality is shown in our responses, not in verbal formulations; thus, "the full command of the language of architecture is shown [...] in the capacity of response to a burial site, with solemnity and a sense of the significance of life and death" (p. 113). No doubt Loos wanted us to think of a *silent* response.

But it seems to me that this example should really point to a limitation of the modernist approach. There is hardly just *one* reaction to death and burial. The reverent attitude that Loos takes for granted is conditioned on ideas of transcendence, typically as formulated in organised religion. A sense of transcendence may survive as a kind of atavism with the first generation of those who dispose of religious dogma. But can the *same* attitude at length be kept alive by philosophy and art if they eschew positive ideas of transcendence?

In sum, this is a fascinating and heterogeneous collection of essays. I have not been able to address all of its chapters. Especially Wittgenstein's early work seems to lend itself to fruitful comparisons with modernist writers. I would personally like a

follow-up with a more critical assessment of some key ideas of modernism, in ways that go beyond merely juxtaposing Wittgenstein with some writer or other.

For many contributors to this anthology, the emphasis is on the limitations of the linguistic medium, perhaps hinting a way out through poetry. ‘The limit of language’ – ‘the other side of which will be simply nonsense’ – is a thoroughly modernist idea. However, it is also a metaphysical and, worse still, a dogmatic idea, as Wittgenstein later came to recognise. It is probably the most obvious piece of nonsense in all of Wittgenstein’s writings. Surely it would have been worth some sustained scrutiny in this anthology. In his chapter Cascardi helpfully reminds us that the idea of meaning as lying outside language is completely abandoned in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein’s interest is not on nonsense but on the sense that we do find immanent in grammar.

With the notable exception of Adolf Loos, this collection is overwhelmingly focussed on writers of fiction, not on visual artists like Malevich, musicians like Schönberg, journalists like Kraus or philosophers like Mach, Weininger, Bergson or Bataille; perhaps because many of the contributors come from departments of English. Moreover, the list of

writers discussed looks somewhat arbitrary. It seems to reflect the specialisations of the contributors rather than any unifying vision of Wittgenstein’s modernist context. It includes writers whom Wittgenstein never read or whom he dismissed (e.g., Kafka; cf. Monk 1990, 498). It leaves out others who were important to Wittgenstein (e.g. Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rabindranath Tagore) or who influenced his milieu (e.g. Peter Altenberg and Arthur Schnitzler). On Wittgenstein’s modernist context, Janik and Toulmin’s book (1973) still remains unrivalled.

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