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Wittgenstein and Modernism ed. by Michael LeMahieu, Karen
Zumhagen-Yekplé (review)

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Wittgenstein and Modernism. Edited by Michael LeMahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp viii + 302. \$105.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Johanna Winant, West Virginia University

If Elizabeth Bishop was, according to John Ashbery, “a poet’s poet’s poet,” then Ludwig Wittgenstein is perhaps the literary critic’s philosopher’s philosopher. A great many of us in literary studies have read Wittgenstein’s work, yet he still has cultish status. I mean this both in the sense of feeling like his work is a secret shared with select others, and also in the sense that it inspires devotion. Is this due to the extracurricular route that many literary scholars take to him? Relatively few of us are taught the *Tractatus* or the *Philosophical Investigations* (much less *Culture and Value* or *On Certainty*) as part of our formal training. Or is it the case that even if one is already knowledgeable about philosophy of language and deliberately sets out to learn about ordinary language philosophy, reading Wittgenstein can *still* feel revelatory?

Wittgenstein himself expressed his goal as therapy or liberation or, as he famously wrote in the *Investigations*, “To show the fly the way out of the fly bottle.” He reframed inherited philosophical conversations by attending to their use of language; his work offers readers texts dense to the point of being cryptic, and it also offers a methodology or interpretive orientation. As groundbreaking Wittgenstein scholar Stanley Cavell writes, “Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* became for me not simply an object of interpretation but a means of interpretation” (cited on 16).

In *Wittgenstein and Modernism*, the new collection of essays edited by Michael LeMahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, Wittgenstein is both an object and a means of interpretation. This book gathers eleven essays by literary scholars who draw on philosophy, and philosophers who draw on literature. Each essay offers an argument that situates an aspect of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre relative to our conceptualization of modernism and/or of modernist artists including Adolf Loos, Robert Musil, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, James Joyce, and Saul Bellow. And each essay demonstrates the very different ways in which each of these scholars remains devoted to Wittgenstein. Of course, I’m conjecturing—nothing is written here about how the contributors feel or first felt upon reading Wittgenstein—but this conjecture accounts for the strongest aspect of this collection, namely how original so many of these essays are. It is thrilling to read so many very different demonstrations of what happens when you cross multiply the objects and means of interpretation provided by Wittgenstein with those provided by modernist studies. (My conjecture also accounts for the weaknesses of this collection; more on that later.)

In many ways, it is easy to describe Wittgenstein as a modernist: he crossed paths with modernists in both Austria and England; the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, his only book published during his lifetime, came out in the *annus mirabilis* of 1922; his magnum opus, the *Philosophical Investigations*, was published in 1953. LeMahieu and Zumhagen-Yekplé’s thorough and lucid Introduction situates Wittgenstein’s work, early and late, relative to modernism, both philosophical and aesthetic. They trace Wittgenstein’s reception history from the embrace of the *Tractatus* by the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, who claimed it as part of their movement to make philosophy work scientifically, through Cavell’s interpretation of the *Investigations*, where he claimed Wittgenstein’s second and very different book for modernism due to the way it “perpetually questions its medium and its sense of a break with the past,” and on to the work by the contributors to this volume (cited on 13). Some of the contributors here have been writing about Wittgenstein and modernism for nearly half a century. Allan Janik’s essay in this collection argues that Wittgenstein’s “views about style represent a highly peculiar form of Viennese modernism,” expanding on his 1973 intellectual history, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*

208 (co-authored with Stephen Toulmin) (72). Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff, the two literary critics who have done the most to bring Wittgenstein to literary studies over the past few decades, both present Wittgenstein as a reluctant and uncomfortable modernist. For Altieri, Wittgenstein is modernist in his conception of how expression opposes mimesis. For Perloff, Wittgenstein's description of religion as a form of life rather than a matter of faith makes him "a thorough if unwitting modernist" (42). Eli Friedlander describes Wittgenstein's modernism as connected to his philosophical naturalism. All of these scholars find it relatively unproblematic to describe Wittgenstein, himself, as a participant in modernism.

Other contributors, however, argue that whether or not Wittgenstein was himself a modernist by biography or disposition, his philosophy usefully clarifies what we mean by the term "modernism." Piergiorgio Donatelli's essay begins by asking how modernism helps us understand Wittgenstein, and, reciprocally, "how can a reading of Wittgenstein, situated within the development of Austrian modernism, help us understand modernism's concern for new forms of expression in the arts as a need for a radical reform of our lives?" (92). And Anthony Cascardi argues that Wittgenstein helps us understand how the disciplinary boundaries between literature and philosophy break down in modernism (25).

The second half of the collection features contributors who are mostly a generation or two younger, and for them Wittgenstein primarily offers a vocabulary or methodology to be applied to modernist literary texts. John Gibson uses Wittgenstein as a "vantage point" from which to see that the urge to describe a poem as "philosophical" appears "both important and misguided: important because we should wish to explain the encounter with depth and insight that the often apparently 'meaningless' modern poem gives us, and misguided because it offers entirely the wrong framework for making sense of the encounter" (131). Wallace Stevens is Gibson's example of so-called philosophical poetry—as he is modernism's, by and large—and Gibson argues that Stevens, like other poets and like Wittgenstein, offers us "perspicuous presentations . . . that offer us the sense of now seeing the world aright," though poetry can go beyond philosophy in providing "a sense of how words, perceptions, and feelings might succeed in reaching out to a common world" (144–5). Yi-Ping Ong uses two texts—Franz Kafka's fictional lecture by the ape Red Peter in "A Report for an Academy" and Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics"—to explore the lecture form's limited capacity to discuss ethics, as "making claims about the ultimate good or right ends in hopelessness and captivity" (211). Michael LeMahieu, one of the editors of this volume, argues that Saul Bellow's characters explore the same problem as Wittgenstein does in his private language argument: "how to refer to a private feeling one has experienced in the past; how to use it as a standard that could be applied to future iterations, emotions, and behaviors; and how to communicate it in a language that is shared and public" (233). Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, the other editor, draws on the "resolute" reading of the *Tractatus* by James Conant and Cora Diamond (philosophers and prominent interpreters of Wittgenstein) to describe a "counterepiphanic aesthetic practice" in which an author "speaks nonsense as part of a method of engaging readers in a philosophical activity that will bring about a change in the way we approach life and the search for meaning" (178). Kristin Boyce refers to Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell's conception of modernism based on Wittgenstein's work, and reads Henry James's *The Sacred Fount* as an example of modern literature that must "gaze at its own reflection to investigate what, under present conditions, will make its continued existence possible" when "its continued existence depends equally on finding a way to protect against the danger that it will become absorbed, Narcissus-like, in that reflection" (174–5).

While I've mapped out the essays as if they fall in three different camps, that is a simplification to the point of untruth. These essays share family resemblances between and across the categories I've sorted them into above, such as historical context or Cavell's influence, but none of these essays understand the "and" that links "Wittgenstein" and "modernism" identically, or even all that similarly. These essays do not originate from the same questions or concerns, do not

proceed by using the same methods or touchstones, and do not end up with the same conclusions or implications. They run mostly parallel to each other with few points of contact or shared context. A handful of the essays draw on prominent interpreters of Wittgenstein; a couple refer briefly to other philosophers including Kant, Hegel, Walter Benjamin, and Rudolf Carnap; and a very few cite literary scholars. There is a lot to be learned from reading these essays, but reading them does not provide a systematic overview of a particular interdisciplinary conversation. That overview is provided, very capably, by LeMahieu and Zumhagen-Yekplé's Introduction, which relates the essays to each other, but in doing so also shows how far-flung they are.

This book is a valuable addition for those of us interested in philosophy and literature as well as modernism more generally, but I'm not sure it will anchor an interdisciplinary conversation, simply because that conversation has already fractured into many. And so *Wittgenstein and Modernism* is prismatic rather than comprehensive. These essays are not introductory; while there are concise summaries of (for example) Wittgenstein's private language argument or Conant and Diamond's resolute reading of the *Tractatus* included here, they serve better as reminders than as primers. Rather, the best of these essays are exemplary: they show how this kind of interdisciplinary work can be done rigorously and also with devotion.

***Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia.* Andrew Pilsch. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Pp. 1 + 244. \$108.00 (cloth); \$27.00 (paper).**

Reviewed by Matthew Hannah, University of Iowa

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek outlines multiple imminent challenges to late capitalism, threats based in what he calls "questions of commons" unresolvable by capitalist market forces.¹ One of these crises of commons, he argues, will occur in the arena of biogenetics, the manipulation of human genetic codes by technology to prolong life and eliminate disease. For Žižek and other cultural critics, claims for a return to authentic Nature, isolated from technological manipulation, are ideology par excellence because it presupposes an "authentic" organic nature to which we can somehow return. Instead, we hurtle toward a world in which the boundaries of human existence confront the increasingly scarce and managed technologies of our commons. Technological intervention has become a reality of life in the West.

Like technology itself, debates about the limits of the human body and the role of technology in improving human life have accelerated exponentially over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Technological supplements to the human experience have become second nature for many of us in ways that the science fiction of yesteryear could only imagine. Concurrently, thinkers have advanced transhumanism, a philosophical, technological, and epistemological transcending of humanity's boundaries. As Oxford University philosopher Nick Bostrom explains: "Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways."² Essential to the transhumanist perspective is that current human existence is not at an "endpoint of evolution"; rather, through a responsible application of technology and science, humans will evolve into "beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have," (Bostrom, "Human Genetic Enhancement," 493–506). For transhumanists, technological and scientific innovations will catapult human life into a new existential phase in which disease and death can be regulated or eliminated altogether.

Andrew Pilsch's *Transhumanism* traces the intellectual formation of transhumanist ideas and movements. In this regard, his book is a history of sociocultural phenomena that are still in the