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*Ludwig Klages and the Philosophy of Life: A Vitalist Toolkit*  
by Paul Bishop (review)

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Paul Bishop, *Ludwig Klages and the Philosophy of Life: A Vitalist Toolkit*. New York: Routledge, 2018, 218 pp., \$112.00 cloth.

Although he remains relatively unknown today, the German *Lebensphilosoph* (or “philosopher of life”) and psychologist Ludwig Klages was tremendously influential throughout the mid-twentieth century. His preoccupation with the redemptive or revolutionary powers of collective mythic experience, grounded in the biological life-world of the human, attracted the interest of numerous figures ranging from Walter Benjamin and Herman Hesse to prominent members of the Nazi Party. Klages’s thoroughgoing concern with political decay and its antidotes also meant that he was read widely by a popular audience—although, by the start of the 1940s, his popularity had waned dramatically. Ultimately, Klages was rejected vociferously by the very political allies he had spent time courting. In 1938, the prominent Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg delivered a lecture (“Gestalt und Leben”), explicitly attacking Klages for failing to contribute sufficiently to Nazi philosophy. After World War II, Klages descended into obscurity.

Indeed, Paul Bishop’s *Ludwig Klages and the Philosophy of Life: A Vitalist Toolkit* is only the second monograph on Klages in English to appear from an academic press, the first being Nitzan Lebovic’s *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics*.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, it is worth addressing—at least in part—the contestation over Klages, and who he was, that haunts this minor critical literature. Speaking bluntly, Lebovic positions Klages explicitly and almost exclusively in terms of his relationship to Nazism, whereas Bishop endeavors a little too earnestly to distance Klages from any possible ideological contamination that might attend his vitalism. My suspicion is that if we are to take Klages seriously in the manner Bishop prescribes, then we must avoid obscuring the biopolitical dimensions of his work. I return to this point below, but first, let us review how Bishop proceeds in this somewhat unusual book.

Principally, Bishop purports to provide us with what he calls a “vitalist toolkit.” This toolkit, he clarifies, is intended to serve these two purposes: to help us understand Klages better and to help us “construct a life based on vitalist principles,” if that is something we want to do (p. xx). On the face of it, this admixture of intellectual history and vitalist ethics appears rather out of the ordinary. Indeed, Bishop’s book is a rare hybrid in this regard, a balancing act that he manages admirably. That being said, it remains unclear why Bishop largely refuses to engage with the recent renaissance of vitalist (or quasi-vitalist) literatures in critical and political theory. If part of the purpose of the book is to make the case for Klages’s relevance to us today, then it would be nice to see how Klages speaks to contemporary new materialists like Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, or Samantha Frost. For example, in his *Conditio moderna*, Manfred Frank suggests that Klages is an important predecessor to Deleuze, but Bishop chooses not to pursue any such insight.<sup>38</sup>

Starting in chapter 1, Bishop offers us an intellectual biography of Klages, the man. Bishop’s skill as a historian shines here, for the level of detail he provides is truly exceptional, especially insofar as it concerns Klages’s intellectual development. In particular, Bishop’s discussion of Klages in relation to Nietzsche clarifies much of the discussion that follows, for Klages is sometimes portrayed as a misguided Nietzschean

37. Nitzan Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

38. Manfred Frank, *Conditio moderna: Essays Reden Programm* (Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1993), pp. 126–127.

epigone. To the contrary, Bishop illustrates the degree to which Klages both reconstructs and critically differentiates his own philosophy from Nietzsche's. As I mention above, Bishop also takes great pains to distance Klages from his political errors. For example, writing about Klages's use of highly racialized categories such as Aryan and Jewish culture, or racial essence, Bishop notes the cultural prevalence of such terms in discourse at that time. He then goes on to conclude that "Klages's mistake, in this regard, is unthinkingly to have accepted the categories of the discourse of his day" (p. 33). He also specifies a number of ideological differences between Klagesian *Lebensphilosophie* and Nazism, although the summary table he provides (p. 35) seems less than adequate as a rejoinder to, for example, Lebovic's monograph on the topic.

Chapter 2 gives us the substance of Bishop's monograph, for here he pares down Klagesian vitalism into the set of "conceptual tools" that form the "toolkit" his title promises us. Specifically, Bishop enumerates nine such tools, which he suggests we approach in context before we try to apply them to our own lives. For brevity's sake, let us examine a few core Klagesian concepts, then, characterized by Bishop in terms of the "science of 'expression,'" the "study of 'character,'" and "the opposition of 'spirit' and 'soul.'"

For Klages, the character of a human subject is intimately intertwined with her bodily expression. This explains Klages's fascination with taxonomies of movement. Character (or personality) is an externally accessible expression or function of the body in motion through time. Accordingly, the subject consists of the polar oscillation between bindings or condensations of life, of vital force, and dispensations or releases of that force. The structure of character and its expression in action and feeling is a structure of flow and inhibition that naturally inclines toward vital intensification, thereby embodying and expressing the vitality of nature itself. For Bishop, Klages's account seems to suggest something like a new phenomenology of embodiment, in which the relationship between our environment, our regimes of movement, and our psychic health receives a holistic treatment.

However, Klages amplifies these underlying dynamics into world-historical forces—spirit and soul, or *Geist* and *Seele*. *Die Seele* refers to the principle of animation that irreducibly inheres in the living body. In contrast, *der Geist* refers to a disordered principle of the will that seeks to formulate and impose undue abstraction, differentiation, and individuation upon a world that is fundamentally singular. This reification of the will called *Geist* disrupts and inhibits the natural ontology of life—that is, it sabotages life itself by cleaving *Seele* from the body, by driving a wedge between *psyche* and *soma*. Accordingly, an element of life ends up at war with life itself. Although Bishop does not explore how we might apply this "conceptual tool" to our own lives—despite highlighting it as the "fundamental thesis of Klages's thinking" (p. 89)—it would be interesting to compare Klages's understanding of this self-opposition to similar reflections in immunology and psychoanalysis.

Finally, chapter 3 functions as an appendix of sorts, offering selections from Klages in translation, in addition to Bishop's own extensive annotations upon these selections. In part, this chapter is useful insofar as it provides even more textual resources to which the reader may refer upon her first exposure to Klages. On the other hand, Bishop runs the very real risk of overdetermining his reading of Klages. In other words, it is not that Bishop cherry-picks the Klagesian oeuvre, but that the selections Bishop presents are so carefully stage-managed that it becomes somewhat difficult to formulate a response without extensive foreknowledge of the subject. Klages should be allowed to speak for himself. Counterintuitively, the care Bishop exercises in how he presents Klages works against the stated aim of intellectual rehabilitation.

So, what are we to make of this book, and who is it for? Ostensibly, it purports to introduce an unjustly forgotten figure. It is clearly intended to paint a charitable

portrait of an important philosopher who is neglected intellectually due to the dark political aura surrounding him. In this regard, Bishop's monograph is at least a partial success, particularly when we compare it to irresponsibly glib treatments of Klages in recent scholarship (e.g., in Jason A. Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity and the Birth of Human Sciences*, where Klages is excessively disparaged without any close reading).<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Bishop should be faulted for skirting the issue of to what extent Klagesian *Lebensphilosophie* cashes out into a radically negative biopolitics. For Klages was no metaphysician of the abstract, nor did he intend his work to be a merely celebratory ethics of life itself. Indeed, at times, the somewhat sanitized Klages Bishop portrays threatens to collapse into a heap of pious tautologies, more redolent of the Slovenian musical group Laibach's 1974 cover "Leben heißt Leben" than anything else.

My point is that the matter of Klages's politics is not just about institutional affiliation or rhetorical missteps. To the contrary, Klages is eminently clear throughout his work that the agency of *Geist* threatens the destruction of the world. *Geist* is a force of abstraction, yes, but it is not itself abstract. Indeed, Klages consistently identifies the machinations of *Geist* in world history with what he perceives to be the deadly effects of Jewish identity, influence, and thought upon life itself. As Klages writes in 1944:

But all of human being is connected with life: even when its life is degenerate, as for a degenerating race, even when it is parasitic, as for the Jew behind his mask. . . . Everything human is to the Jew a mere affectation—indeed, the Jewish face is only a mask. The Jew is not a liar, but the lie itself. Hence, we find that the Jew is not a human being at all. But he is not an animal, either. . . . It is by means of the Jew that an unearthly power of annihilation pretends to be human.<sup>40</sup>

Fundamentally at issue here is not just Klages's own anti-Semitism, but the way in which his anti-Semitism is the political expression of his *Lebensphilosophie* as such. For central to this philosophical vision is the Sturm und Drang of nature's vital drives endeavoring ceaselessly to overcome all that inhibits life's intensification. Klages states that the objective of *Geist* is ultimately to kill life itself. Accordingly, collective and individual manifestations of *Geist* embody a fifth column within the very heart of nature, seeking the etiolation of the vital. Accordingly, his biocentric communitarianism necessarily entails the political need to exterminate that fifth column. As Samuel Weber observes elsewhere, "To kill death would thus logically be to annihilate the Jews."<sup>41</sup>

I bring this up not because I intend to cast Klages back into the Tartarus of historical obscurity, but because, if we are to study philosophers seriously, we must refuse the temptation to whitewash them. There is something rabid about Klagesian *Lebensphilosophie*, and this tells us something about the excesses or propensities of certain forms of vitalism—that is, about their tendency toward biocult, or the cult of life itself. This is one more reason why Bishop's monograph would benefit tremendously from an engagement with contemporary literatures on the new and vital materialisms. For these literatures update forms of vitalism that make the leap from biocult to bioculture (to borrow Frost's term), which means that we need not repudiate life to avoid a Klagesian biopolitics.<sup>42</sup>

39. Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity and the Birth of Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

40. Ludwig Klages, *Rhythmen und Runen* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1944), pp. 289, 330.

41. Samuel Weber, "Bare Life and Life in General," *Gray Room* 46 (2012): 7–24, at p. 20.

42. Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham,

It remains unclear what the ideal political community could even look like for Klages. For if *Geist* were eliminated, then there would no longer be anything for life to overcome, and the specter of the *posthistoire* emerges. In many ways, it seems as if his political sensibilities are motivated primarily by a horror of stillness, always conceived in terms of stagnation. In a more fanciful mode, it is easy to imagine the Klagesian body politic as something like the fast-moving zombie hordes depicted in the film *World War Z*. It is principally the way the hordes move in the film that attracts my attention. For the zombies move as a human swarm, boiling up over barricades and bursting through walls like a Dionysian force of nature. Unlike George A. Romero's shambolic zombies, these zombies are rabidly, relentlessly fast and vital. They function as a mere medium for the transit of life. They are "carriers of life" ("der Träger des Lebens," to use Klagesian terms), whose disturbingly manic gesticulations and total expression of *Antrieben* (or vital "impulses") rapidly causes the deterioration of the very bodies through which the virus of life proliferates.

I leave aside the irony implicit in the fact that the film's centerpiece depicts a mass attack by the horde upon the city of Jerusalem.

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Joeri Bruyninckx, *Listening in the Field: Recording and the Science of Birdsong*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018, 237 pp. \$34.00 paper.

How does the practice of scientific observation change when scientists must close their eyes and trust their ears? *Listening in the Field: Recording and the Science of Birdsong* by Joeri Bruyninckx addresses the challenges of accuracy and authenticity in sound recording and traces the history of how standard practices for collecting, interpreting, and sharing those recordings were established. *Listening in the Field* offers a refreshing analysis of the science of birdsong by refusing to isolate science from aesthetics, and by examining the interdisciplinary networks of collaboration that contributed to the field. Focusing on major shifts in technology and method, Bruyninckx argues that sound recording practices offer science an opportunity to redefine itself and engage with a public audience.

*Listening in the Field* invites us to reflect on how the instruments scientists use are not as objective as we might think; rather, sound recording technologies and practices shape end results, impacting a listener's perception of sound. Listening to a recording of a thrush at the Cornell Library of Natural Sounds, for instance, one must critically examine the sonic context of the recording and the curative choices made by recordists. Bruyninckx, by tracing the history of sound recording from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, emphasizes that recordings are not simply *found* in the field, as one might assume, but are, in fact, *made*.

Bruyninckx centers his study around key pivot points in sound recording, such as radical departures from traditional musical notation, and attends, in particular, to the implications of new inventions, such as the parabolic reflector, magnetic tape, and the sound spectrograph. In addition, Bruyninckx treats sound recordings as circulating knowledges in translation between fields of study and between recordists working toward very different goals in science, in libraries, in entertainment, and, in

NC: Duke University Press, 2016).