

*Dialectic of the Ladder: Wittgenstein, the Tractatus and Modernism*

Ben Ware

pp188 + xiv; London: Bloomsbury; 2015; hb £65.00

Review by Dr. Stephen Mulhall, Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy, New College, University of Oxford.

This book seeks to enhance our understanding of the full significance of Wittgenstein's early masterpiece by building on and conjoining two familiar interpretative traditions or disciplinary contexts which are usually treated independently of each other. The first is the ongoing philosophical dispute about whether one should read the *Tractatus* in metaphysical or resolute terms; the second is the recurrent suggestion (first given systematic expression in the work of Janik and Toulmin) that the *Tractatus* must be understood in relation to broader cultural currents in turn-of-the-century European intellectual life, and in particular as an expression of a distinctively modernist critique of language, ethics and society. With respect to the first of these debates, Dr. Ware comes down firmly in favour of the resolute reading – or at least, of one version of that programmatic stance which he labels 'dialectical'. This emphasizes the therapeutic dimension of the text, and so the extent to which it aspires to articulate a range of philosophical fantasies so that its readers might be encouraged to work their way through and beyond them, and thereby acknowledge their emptiness. Dr. Ware dubs this a process of seduction and shock, and aligns it not only with Kraus and von Ficker amongst Wittgenstein's contemporaries, but with the strategies of high modernist authors such as Benjamin, Kafka and Beckett, whose texts he characterizes as 'difficult, formally innovative, austere, heroic [and] agonistic... concerned with the perfection or purification of the expressive medium itself' (48).

Dr. Ware distinguishes such high modernist works from those of the avant-garde, and from those of late modernism. Where the avant-garde aims to use art to transform existing modes of social life, high modernism aspires to transform only the artistic traditions it inherits, restricting its critique of the broader culture to its enactment of an aversion to it, a refusal to accommodate itself to existing forms of mass appropriation. Late modernist works discard this monolithic and potentially dogmatic perfectionist aversion, and its corresponding esoteric focus on the spiritual edification of individual readers, in favour of a more accommodating and diplomatic – hence essentially exoteric – deployment of a variety of diverse rhetorical strategies that aspire to return the reader to the realm of the ordinary (even if the journey which takes them there gives them a new perspective upon its limitations and opportunities). Indeed, one of Dr. Ware's central suggestions is that one might best understand the relationship between Wittgenstein's early and later modes of philosophizing as amounting to a transition from high modernist to late modernist approaches to the critique of modern culture.

Given the relative brevity of his book (the main body of the text amounts to some 140 pages), it is perhaps unsurprising that Dr. Ware cannot treat every one of the topics or themes that he touches upon in great detail. For example, his nuanced treatment of the charge that Wittgenstein is politically conservative culminates in a frustratingly brief and barely argued

charge of his own – that Wittgenstein’s political perspective is hollowed out and passively nihilistic; and he occasionally floats suggestions that would probably have been withdrawn given a little more time for self-scrutiny (such as the idea that the image of a ladder might embody the Romantic conception of a circular journey - p 83). The difficulty is perhaps most evident in his engagement with the philosophical debate between traditional and resolute readers of the *Tractatus*. He does a good job of summarizing the main claims of the contending parties, and makes it clear which considerations lead him to endorse a (non-Jacobin) version of the resolute programme; but he simply doesn’t have the space to engage critically with the objections and counter-claims likely to be generated from the traditional camp in response to the position he takes.

He is, however, in a position to enrich the current state of play in the second interpretative tradition that he brings to bear: for (particularly in the opening two chapters) he broadens the context of existing discussions of the early Wittgenstein’s relation to modernist critiques of culture in a very helpful way – invoking the work of Habermas, Adorno, Benjamin and T.J. Clark, as well as the more familiar figures of Kraus and von Ficker. But perhaps the most useful aspect of his project lies in its construction of a convincing case for viewing these two interpretative matrices as themselves internally related.

As Dr. Ware acknowledges, Cavell has long argued for an understanding of the *Philosophical Investigations* as a modernist text; and although one or two commentators have tried to make a parallel case with respect to the *Tractatus*, Dr. Ware here develops an original and plausible case for regarding a resolute reading of the *Tractatus*’ critique of the very idea of the limits of language as making possible an understanding of that text not only as modernist, but as a modernist critique of modernism. For on Dr. Ware’s account, most of the modernist writers of this era build into their critique of language a perception of words as inherently inadequate to the task of capturing the fine grain of human experience in modernity, perhaps because of their contamination by its inherent tendency to commodify and instrumentalize human life and its modes of engagement with reality. But Wittgenstein’s early work shows that the task of purifying the expressive medium of language not only does not presuppose such a perception of the inherent inadequacy of words, but will be completed only by purifying our thinking of any such perception.

Overall, then, this book sketches the basic lineaments of a thought-provoking reading of the *Tractatus* in which its philosophical, literary and ethical dimensions are seen as internally related elements of a modernist critique of modernity. Anyone interested in the text will benefit from engaging with this stimulating work.

Stephen Mulhall  
New College, Oxford