

*A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature
after Wittgenstein*
by Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé

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This is an engaging and thoughtful reflection upon the borders between what is rationally intelligible and what lies on the other side of that border and appears to us as ‘perplexing’ (p. 116). This border incrementally gains complexity as the text unfolds, moving from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, through a discussion of Cora Diamond’s development of Wittgenstein’s philosophy and towards a therapeutic and existential ethics of self-transformation, enacted, the author claims, in modernist literature.

The term ‘modernism’ is first taken in the historical sense it has in English literature departments. Virginia Woolf, who moved in the same intellectual circles as Wittgenstein, allows the author to discuss how that which in philosophy takes the form of an intellectual puzzle, in literature may develop into a meditation

on experiences, which defy our moral comfort zone. From here, the author moves adventurously into less chartered terrain as she discusses themes of self-transformation and ethical “instruction”, in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and in novels by the contemporary South African novelist, and Nobel prize winner, J.M. Coetzee. With this expansive scope, the corpus of texts discussed by the author stretches the conventional wisdom around the term ‘modernism’ and thereby fruitfully compels the reader to think of modernism not so much as a period but as an ethically challenging mode of literary experience, with a long, still ongoing, duration.

This move within literary history *outwards* is liberating and establishes for the reader a methodological stance, which is not quite new, as it can claim the legacy of Stanley Cavell and of Cora Diamond, but which ap-

appears more open-ended than that of her predecessors. Zumhagen-Yekplé pursues an existential, partly spiritual, theme of self-transformation in literature. This theme does not on the other hand amount to a doctrine that has to be demonstrated. In its staging of characters undergoing a spiritual transformation and in its exploration of the ethically perplexing, literature may engage the reader both in virtue of being a text and in terms of the characters it puts into play. We as readers may follow a character's thoughts or we may be pushed to the limits of our own understanding by the text's intrinsic material of verbal expression. This duality is again refreshing in the context of debates in literary theory. I would say, therefore, that it is on the level of its contribution to literary interpretation that this book makes its most significant and thought-provoking contributions.

In the field of Wittgenstein scholarship, the author seeks to be an orthodox follower of Cora Diamond and to practice a therapeutic reading of the *Tractatus*. By working through a therapeutic reading of the border between sense and non-sense in the *Tractatus*, Zumhagen-Yekplé establishes a complex form of words in which she can then launch her own therapeutic poetics of self-transformation. This textual method owes much also to Stanley Cavell. The unfolding in prose of a network of mutually supporting terms, which also sometimes have the function of *code words*, operating as gate keepers selecting the initiated, is a specific US-

American academic tradition. It has echoes in other branches of writing, in the literary criticism of Harold Bloom for instance. In this emphatically textual writerly practice, language itself, and terms designating language, become charged with a special, sometimes ethical (Cavell) sometimes spiritual (Bloom) meaning. It is on the level of language, a language of conversation or a language of poetic invention, that 'we' as scholars or 'we' as ethical subjects will have to deal with life, and with texts.

Now, this strikes me as a stance that could be seen as, perhaps, irrelevant to a reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Whatever else Wittgenstein may be made to mean, by claiming that a ladder must be thrown away – that statement does not seem to point towards another, and better *form of discourse*. The word 'non-sense' is interestingly ambivalent in this regard. One could think of non-sense as a particular kind of verbal articulation, a particular use of words, as Zumhagen-Yekplé does. One could also think that non-sense designates a realm outside of sense. Hence a border between sense and non-sense could imply a border between two fundamental existential attitudes towards being. We see this in Plato's dialogues. The process of dialogue purports to bring Socrates' interlocutor to confront himself in a new way, with a different, more open attitude, allowing him to entertain notions that were not part of his previous common-sense pragmatism.

I believe that the *Tractatus* is Platonic in this sense and that one

should understand the limit of sense biographically, in view of Wittgenstein's involvement with music, which for him exemplifies a form of expression that addresses life without being propositional. This is of course just one among many perspectives one could adopt on the border between sense and non-sense in the early Wittgenstein. I mention it here in order to put into perspective the conception of non-sense as a particular *linguistic practice* that Zumhagen-Yekplé claims it is, in the wake of Cavell and Diamond. By thinking of non-sense as a specific kind of linguistic expression that does not make sense, the author can move seamlessly from philosophy to literature, from puzzle to perplexity. However, by making this move through an emphasis on verbal articulation, the spiritual theme of self-transformation comes across less forcefully than it might have. One sees, for instance, a slight tension in Zumhagen-Yekplé's text between the *telos* of spiritual redemption, enacted in literature, and the author's effort to remain an orthodox therapeutic reader in the Diamond tradition. The following passage seeks to invest a notion of renewal through the acquisition of a new perspective – as Wittgenstein himself performs in the *Tractatus* – with a wider ethical charge:

We can yearn to find genuine value that we imagine lies out of our reach [...] and so face the world with [a] sense of dissatisfaction or resignation. Or we can, as Diamond suggests, learn to 're-see' things, to occupy a figurative perspective from which the limits of language are but

figurative constraints, and thereby gain a transformed perspective of the world seen figuratively 'from outside'. (p. 172)

I believe it is difficult to arrive at an existential ethics if one begins thus in a paradigm centred on verbal articulation. An alternative could be to compare Wittgenstein to his Austrian contemporaries, who would give more space to that which is in us, or with us, but not necessarily accessible to verbal articulation. One may think in particular of Robert Musil's notion of a different mode of being, "der andere Zustand", which is kindred to the early Wittgenstein's active silence (*Schweigen*). The author mentions Wittgenstein's cultural context (cf. p. 173), but this background does not inform the interpretative frame established earlier in the text. Exploring further the tension running through Austrian modernity between romanticism and science, a tension which one sees forcefully at play in Musil and Wittgenstein, and also in Sigmund Freud, Arnold Schönberg and in architecture, could provide a less logocentric perspective on what is perplexing – in philosophy, in literature and in life. Perhaps.

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