Wittgenstein, modernity and the critique of modernism

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This article aims to demonstrate how new light can be cast upon Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by looking at the work in the contexts of modernity and modernism. Rather than placing the book, as exegetes traditionally have done, in the lineage of analytic philosophy, I examine it instead in relation to some of the cultural and aesthetic discourses of its times. Specifically, I contend that the *Tractatus*’ engagement with issues of modernity and culture can be grasped through a close analysis of the work’s literary form. I also argue that an understanding of the author’s dialectical method can bring us to think differently about the so-called ‘problems of language’ that we encounter in certain works of literary modernism. By examining the *Tractatus* in these contexts, my primary aim is to show how Wittgenstein’s philosophical insights can be extended and applied to domains where his own work does not explicitly focus.

**Keywords**

Ludwig Wittgenstein; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; modernism; Literature; Modernity
All the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.  
— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Stanley Cavell has long argued that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is a work which engages with the modern predicament. For Cavell, not only does the *Investigations* present ‘a philosophy of culture’ — one which responds to the pressures of modernity as directly as the writings of Spengler, Freud, Nietzsche or Emerson — it can also be seen as a modernist work in its own right — one in which the ‘portrait of the human is recognizable as one of the modern self, or, as we are given to say, of the modern subject’. The work’s cultural perspective is, as Cavell argues, *internal* to its philosophical teaching, and, as such, is inseparable from the ‘deliberateness’ and ‘seriousness’ of the author’s mode of writing. In this paper, my aim will be to explore the extent to which Wittgenstein’s early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, can also be understood in relation to the cultural and aesthetic discourses of modernity and modernism. This broad project will, however, be given a particular focus. In the first part of the paper (Sections I and II), I will look at some of Wittgenstein’s specific remarks on modernity and culture, and will argue that these remarks (which appear in his later manuscripts) can serve as the basis for a new reading of the ladder metaphor which he employs in the *Tractatus*. In the second part of the paper (Section III), I will carry out a reassessment of the *Tractatus’* relationship to literary modernism. Here, rather than drawing direct parallels between the *Tractatus* and modernist works, I will instead show how Wittgenstein’s writings can be used in order to shed new light on modernist *problems of language*.

There is no doubt that Wittgenstein considered himself to be isolated from the dominant currents of modern thought. In conversation with M.O’C. Drury, for instance, he remarks: ‘My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age, I have to swim so strongly against the tide. Perhaps in a hundred years people will really want what I am writing’. Wittgenstein’s attitude towards his times is explicitly summed up in a passage in his manuscripts entitled ‘Sketch for a Foreword’. Here he argues that the spirit in which he is writing is ‘different from that of the prevailing European and American civilization’. ‘The spirit of this civilization’ is, he says, ‘a spirit that is alien and un congenial’.

For Wittgenstein, a defining feature of Western civilization, at the beginning of the twentieth century, is ‘a disappearance of the arts’. He
thus argues that ‘what today represents itself as architecture is not architecture’; and that ‘what is called modern music’ can only be approached with ‘the greatest mistrust’. Wittgenstein insists that here he is not making a ‘value judgment’: ‘the disappearance of the arts’, he writes, ‘does not justify judging disparagingly the human beings who make up this civilization’. Nevertheless, he claims that his times are ‘without culture’; and he concludes the ‘Sketch’ with the following words:

Even if it is clear to me then that the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value but simply of certain means of expressing this value, still the fact remains that I contemplate the current of European civilization without sympathy, without understanding its aims if any. So I am really writing for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe.

In these passages, Wittgenstein expresses a strong antipathy towards his age. ‘Culture’, the ‘great organization which assigns to each of its members [a] place’, allowing them to ‘work in the spirit of the whole’, has declined, leading to a stage of civilization in which ‘forces are fragmented and the strength of the individual is wasted through the overcoming of opposing forces and frictional resistances’. Such remarks suggest clear affinities with the discourse of Kulturkritik. According to Francis Mulhern, Kulturkritik, as developed in the early twentieth century in the works of thinkers such as Thomas Mann, Julien Benda and Karl Mannheim, sought to advance an ethico-spiritual critique of mass culture and modern political formations. For this constellation of writers, modernity is seen ‘as degeneration, as the valorisation of the mass, as the paradoxical hyperactivity of essentially inert forces (the “revolt” of the passive “multitude”), as the decay or contamination of traditional, normally minoritarian values, as the disintegrative advance of high and vulgar enlightenment’.

Despite Wittgenstein’s close proximity to this intellectual tradition, it is also important to note some significant points of divergence. Unlike Thomas Mann – and his contemporary Oswald Spengler – Wittgenstein does not provide a systematic account of the relation between culture and civilization; nor, like Benda and Mannheim, does he attempt to formulate a vision of how society might be organized in the future. Indeed, as G.H. von Wright notes: ‘Wittgenstein’s world view is anything but “prophetic”’. And, as Wittgenstein himself puts it in a passage in his manuscripts of 1941: ‘You can’t construct clouds. And that is why the future you dream of never comes true’. (And later: ‘Who knows the laws according to which society unfolds? I am sure even the cleverest has no idea’.) In this respect, rather than putting
forward his concerns about Western civilization in the form of a theory, Wittgenstein expresses them instead through the form and style of his philosophizing – a mode of writing which is intimately connected to what he refers to, in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, as the ‘darkness’ of his times.  

According to Wittgenstein, the hallmark of a civilization without culture is belief in ‘progress’ – progress, that is, understood in terms of ceaseless scientific and technological endeavour. For Wittgenstein, unrestrained faith in science and technology is linked to what he calls the ‘apocalyptic’ conception of the world:

The truly apocalyptic view of the world is that things do not repeat themselves. It is not e.g. absurd to believe that the scientific and technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity, that the idea of Great Progress is a bedazzlement, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that humanity, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means clear that this is not how things are.

This scepticism towards progress is a familiar theme amongst Wittgenstein’s contemporaries. In an essay entitled ‘In dieser großen Zeit’ (‘In These Great Times’), the Viennese satirist and poet Karl Kraus argues that modern existence has become subordinate to the human desire for advancement and expansion. ‘Progress’, Kraus writes, ‘lives to eat, and at times supplies proof that it can die to eat. It endures hardship so that it may prosper […] Progress, under whose feet the grass mourns and the forest turns into paper from which newspaper plants grow, has subordinated the purpose of life to the means of subsistence and turned us into the nuts and bolts for our tools’. In the domain of philosophy, Wittgenstein’s work encapsulates this critique of progress as an end-in-itself. In a remark in his manuscripts, he thus draws an important distinction between his own belief in clarity and transparency and the ideology of mechanical construction which dominates the empirical sciences:

Our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress. Typically it constructs. Its activity is to construct a more and more complicated structure. And even clarity is only a means to this end and not an end in itself.

For me on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself.
I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible buildings transparently before me.

So I am aiming at something different than are the scientists and my thoughts move differently than do theirs.26

In his autobiography, the logical positivist Rudolph Carnap writes: ‘I sometimes had the impression that the deliberately rational and unemotional attitude of the scientist and likewise any ideas which had the flavor of “enlightenment” were repugnant to Wittgenstein’.27 Similarly, Hans Sluga observes that Wittgenstein stands in opposition ‘to those movements in the twentieth century that have sought to reconstruct philosophy in a scientific manner.’28 To illustrate the point, Sluga quotes Wittgenstein’s own remark in the Blue Book: ‘Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness’.29

For Wittgenstein, then, the scientific and technological problem-solving spirit of modernity is, in many ways, antithetical to the proper task of philosophy.30 At various points in his manuscripts, he thus opposes the scientific investigation to the aesthetic one: ‘Scientific questions […] never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions have that effect on me’.31 He also emphasizes the didactic role which the arts can play: ‘People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets […] to entertain them. That the latter have something to teach them; that never occurs to them’.32

II

Although, in the Tractatus, Wittgenstein does not explicitly discuss his attitude towards his times, there is no doubt that questions of modernity exert a powerful influence over the text. For instance, Wittgenstein claims that ‘the whole modern view of the world’ is characterized by an ‘illusion’.33 This illusion consists in the belief that science (and, in particular, scientific laws) can provide a complete explanation of how things are in the world. As he puts it:

At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. So people stop short at natural laws as at something unassailable, as did the ancients at God and Fate.
And they both are right and wrong. But the ancients were clearer, in so far as they recognized one clear terminus, whereas the modern system makes it appear as though everything were explained. (6.371–6.372)

In this passage, Wittgenstein commends the ancients for their ability to recognize that, at some point, explanations must come to an end. At the same time, he cautions the moderns against thinking that theoretical accounts of the world can provide a complete answer to every problem. As he goes on to state at section 6.52 of the Tractatus: ‘even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all’.

One of the things which the Tractatus thus aims to get its readers to see, is how the modern desire for ‘theories’ and ‘explanations’ is in itself a cause of deep disquietudes. After the prefatory remarks, the book famously begins with the following metaphysical pronouncement: ‘The world is everything that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things’ (1–1.1). It then proceeds to advance a series of philosophical theses explaining the nature of objects, the picture theory of meaning, the ineffability of logical form, and the tautologous nature of logical truths. That these philosophical theses are much less stable and coherent than they might at first appear, is a fact which is strikingly brought home to the reader in the book’s enigmatic, penultimate section. Here, at proposition 6.54, Wittgenstein writes:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it).

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

In this passage, the author of the Tractatus steps forth in the first-person, asking the reader to understand him, rather than his propositions. The propositions of the book are, he says, to be recognized as nonsensical; and, moreover, only by overcoming them do we see the world rightly. By linking the ability to see the world aright with the activity of throwing away the book’s nonsensical, metaphysical propositions, Wittgenstein makes an important point about the relation between philosophy and life; namely, that the type of theorizing which we engage in when we philosophize reflects our alienation from the world and results not in insight but blindness. Typically, such theorizing is motivated by the belief that it is possible to occupy what W.V.O. Quine refers to as a position of ‘cosmic exile’ – a position from which one can survey ‘the relation between
language (or thought) and the world independently of [one’s] own situation in the world.\textsuperscript{40} In the \textit{Tractatus}, Wittgenstein counters these modern, philosophical temptations, inviting the reader to give up the search for an ‘external’ perspective (a view on the world ‘sub specie aeterni’ (6.45)) and to find a form of living that will engender peace. Such peace will not be brought about by any increase in what we know about the world, but by arriving at a point where the problems which confront us disappear. As he writes at section 6.521 of the book: ‘The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)’

The \textit{Tractatus’} engagement with issues of modernity can also be considered at the level of form. Despite the author’s remark in the Preface that the book is ‘not a text-book’ [\textit{kein Lehrbuch}], it is in fact written and structured exactly like a textbook.\textsuperscript{41} The pronouncements themselves – put forward, according to Bertrand Russell, much in the manner of ‘a Czar’s ukase’\textsuperscript{42} – suggest that the book is advancing a set of incontrovertible and axiomatic logical truths. Moreover, the strict numbering of the sentences – which Wittgenstein describes as vital to securing the book’s overall clarity\textsuperscript{43} – leads the reader to believe that he or she is embarked upon a linear, progressive journey through the text. This principle of arrangement is, however, explicitly undermined at the end of the book, when the reader is called upon, by the author, to ‘throw away’ its sentences because they are nonsensical. Whilst the formal structure of the \textit{Tractatus} therefore invites the reader to think that philosophical progress can be made by climbing the book’s propositional ladder, in the end such progress turns out to be an illusion. Indeed, rather than advocating any type of philosophical advancement, the \textit{Tractatus} aspires instead to bring about a wholesale change in the outlook of the reader, one which results in an awakening from the dream world of traditional, philosophical theorizing.\textsuperscript{44}

This idea of awakening, of seeing the world from the point of view of \textit{clarity} rather than progress,\textsuperscript{45} connects with a different idea of the ladder to the one that is traditionally put forward. This is the idea of the ladder not as a straightforward linear structure – leading to a view of the world ‘sub specie aeterni’ (6.45) – but rather as a circle, which takes us back, via a long and sophisticated detour, to the point from which we started.\textsuperscript{46} On this reading, the \textit{Tractatus} begins by introducing us to language and the world, in order to return us back to them, transformed, at the end of the book, once we have succeeded in overcoming our temptation to grasp them from a metaphysical point of view.

Understanding the \textit{Tractatus} in terms of this structure of return, allows us to place the book in the broader literary and philosophical context of modernity. For instance, as M.H. Abrams observes in his
natural supernaturalism, for the German romantics the figure of the circular journey plays an important role in representing the development of the individual spirit ‘as it strives […] to win its way back to a higher mode of the original unity with itself from which […] it has inescapably divided itself off’. The metaphor of the circular journey, as Abrams illustrates, is encountered throughout romanticism – in the philosophical writings of Hegel, Fichte and Schiller, as well as in the literary works of Hölderlin (Hyperion) and Goethe (Faust). It also makes a striking return, in the early part of the twentieth century, in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. In Four Quartets, Eliot’s complex meditations deal with the poet’s own ‘spiritual quest […] for the lost but unforgotten garden’. His pilgrimage, as we discover in ‘East Coker’ (the second quartet) ‘is a circular one’: ‘In my beginning is my end […] In my end is my beginning’. In the last movement of the poem, reflecting upon the nature of his journey, Eliot famously writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

In the Tractatus, arriving back at the point from which we started means arriving back with language, with the world, and with ourselves. In this respect, when we throw away the ladder, we do not do so because it has succeeded in leading us to a new place, but rather because we have come to recognize that the place we want to get to is the place which we are already at. At the end of the book then, having fully understood the implications of the author’s method, we are already in a position to appreciate the following remark from Wittgenstein’s later manuscripts:

I might say: if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already. Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me.

III

Although the Tractatus is often read as an expression of ‘loneliness’ and ‘solitude’, the interpretation I have given above takes very much the opposite view: the work, as I argue, can be understood as an attempt to get its reader to overcome feelings of estrangement and isolation – feelings
which are generated by the modern world and exacerbated by the impulse to philosophize. Such a reading opens up the question of the book’s proximity to other works of its times, and, in particular, of its relationship to literary modernism. In the next part of this paper, I will argue that rather than seeing this relationship in terms of a set of direct or indirect parallels, we can instead use Wittgenstein’s ideas and methods to inform our thinking about modernism. Specifically, I will show how the *Tractatus*—understood as a work which exhibits a strong degree of continuity with Wittgenstein’s later writings—can be seen as providing a critique of the types of linguistic bewitchment and alienation that we encounter in certain works of modernist literature.

Modernism’s deepest loneliness is, we might say, rooted in its feeling of dissatisfaction with everyday or ordinary language. This dissatisfaction finds itself expressed in a number of different and often radically contradictory ways. On the one hand, we find a number of key modernist writers attempting to ‘emancipate’, to ‘clarify’, or to ‘purify’ language, because, as they see it, language is being blocked, denatured or contaminated by the modern world. On the other hand, we find many writers preoccupied with the acute failure of language in the face of modern experience, and we thus see in their work a turning towards the themes of ‘ineffability’ and ‘silence’. Both of these trends (which can occur simultaneously as well as independently) perceive everyday language to be fundamentally inadequate. Such language, as the surrealist writer André Breton argues, ‘reveals itself to be increasingly powerless to provoke the emotive shock in man which really makes his life meaningful’. Consequently, for many of the advanced literary practitioners of the early twentieth century, this language must be either painstakingly reformed or rejected entirely.

Numerous attempts have been made to locate Wittgenstein’s early work somewhere on this modernist-linguistic spectrum. In their study, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin interpret the *Tractatus* not only as an expression of the post-Kantian philosophy of the times, but also as a work which, like the archetypal fin-de-siècle literary text, engages with the problem of ‘the nature and the limits of language, expression and communication’. According to Janik and Toulmin, the literary background to the *Tractatus* is therefore supplied by such works as Hofmannsthal’s ‘The Letter of Lord Chandos’, Kafka’s ‘Description of a Struggle’, and Musil’s *Young Törless*. Each of these works, the authors argue, express a ‘concern with the incapability of language to explain men’s innermost being to others’; they show that ‘language cannot express what is most real […] this is something which remains forever private in the depths of the person’s subjectivity’. 
In addition to Janik and Toulmin’s ‘limits of language’ reading, exegetes have also interpreted the *Tractatus*, on the one hand, as striving towards the ideal of ‘linguistic purity’ and, on the other hand, as attempting to express ‘[t]he disenchantment of language, its systematic failure to put experience into words’. Such readings – which suggest affinities with Pound and Artaud, respectively – depict Wittgenstein as caught up in a typically modernist struggle with language.

To read the *Tractatus* as modernist in this way is, however, I would contend, ‘to mistake the bait for the hook’ – that is, to mistake the ideas which the book places under scrutiny for those which it advocates. Whilst we might hear Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, *lending voice* to certain modernist fantasies and fears about language (such as the fantasy of ‘perfect expressiveness’ and the fear of ‘inexpressiveness’), we need also to bear in mind that, in the context of the book as a whole, such ideas are deeply problematic. Indeed, on the reading of the work which I am advocating, the aim of the *Tractatus* is to help readers overcome such linguistic confusions by bringing them to see that discourse about ‘the problems of language’ is, in a certain sense, empty.

In thinking through the *Tractatus*’ relation to modernism, we will therefore need to be attentive to what we might call the *dialectical* character of the work. To understand the work dialectically, as I suggest in Section II, means registering the way in which the author invites the reader to take up various philosophical and linguistic positions in order to expose them, at the end of the book, as plain and simple nonsense. To grasp the *Tractatus* in this way (as a work which, like the *Philosophical Investigations*, aims to teach the reader ‘to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense’) involves resisting the temptation to place it squarely within the context of modernism, and instead turning our attention towards the type of rhetorical activity in which its author is engaged. From *this* view, we can, I would argue, see the *Tractatus* not as endorsing (or as opposing) any particular modernist perspective on language, but rather as *imaginatively* entering into such perspectives in order to deconstruct them from within.

Understood in this way, it is possible to see the *Tractatus* as an immanent critique. The work’s intention is not to ‘refute’ any particular position on language from outside; rather, its method is to occupy the internal logic of a position in order to bring it towards a self-consciousness of its own illusoriness. A clear example of this type of activity can be seen if we consider the aspiration to perfect expressiveness. This aspiration, which recurs in different forms throughout literary modernism, is one which, according to certain traditional exegetes, Wittgenstein articulates (from the philosophical point of view) in the *Tractatus*. As Bertrand Russell thus writes:
In order to understand Mr Wittgenstein’s book, it is necessary to realize what is the problem with which he is concerned. In the part of his theory which deals with Symbolism he is concerned with the conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language.76

This idea of Wittgenstein as striving after a logically perfect or ideal language is, I believe, one which is radically mistaken.77 If we grasp the *Tractatus* in terms of its authorial strategy (rather than its manifest content) then we come to see that the desire to make language more ‘precise’ or ‘exact’ is itself something which the work invites us to overcome. This desire typically arises out of the belief that our words cannot adequately express what it is we want to say.78 We feel, for instance, that there is an unbridgeable gap between what we *mean* and what we *utter*.79 For Wittgenstein, however, the problem is not with our words; rather, it is with our confused relation to them, and, more specifically, with our temptation to imagine that there are fixed and necessary *limits* of language, and, consequently, that there is a realm of ‘ineffable truths’ that exists beyond them. It is, however, this reified picture of our life with words which, in the Preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes as resulting from a failure to understand ‘the logic of our language’.80 The very idea of being restricted from saying certain substantial kinds of things is thus one that, in the end, we must learn to throw away.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein makes the following point about ‘ideal’ and ‘ordinary’ conceptions of language:

> ![Image](image.png) 

Interpreters who emphasize the notion of a decisive break between Wittgenstein’s early and later writings overlook the fact that such ideas are already clearly evident in the *Tractatus*. For instance, as Wittgenstein writes at section 5.5563 of the book: ‘In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order’.82 This remark – like the remark from the *Investigations* – can be taken as an affirmation of our everyday, ordinary language, a clear indication that such language does not stand in need of (logical) clarification or reform.

In the *Tractatus*, the ordinary is not, as it is in the *Investigations*, ‘the medium of philosophical thinking’.83 It is, however, the place to which we are returned once we are able to overcome the metaphysical pictures of language that hold us captive.84 Typically, the temptation is to think of
the ordinary in terms of the familiar, the pedestrian, or that which is bound up with so-called ‘common sense’. Nothing, though, could be further from Wittgenstein’s own understanding. Although Wittgenstein does not, in the *Tractatus*, provide a fully worked-out definition of the ordinary, he does point towards its infinite complexity. As he writes at 4.002: ‘Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it’.85 This remark, as I understand it, serves to bring out the intimate connection between word and life, language and the living body. Because language is so closely bound up with our material selves, the struggle to make sense with our everyday, ordinary words is, we might say, inseparable from what it means to lead a fully human life. From this perspective, the attachment to forms of perfect expressiveness can be seen as an evasion – as an attempt to relieve ourselves of the (ethical) task of clarifying our own utterances.86 For Wittgenstein, as I read him, coming to ‘see the world aright’ thus involves breaking the spell of the ideal; and this can only be achieved through an acknowledgement and an acceptance of the words which we already possess.

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**Notes**


8 CV, p. 8.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


13 CV, p. 9.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.


17 Ibid., p. 19.


21 CV, p. 48.

22 Ibid., p. 69.


24 CV, p. 64.

25 Karl Kraus, ‘In These Great Times’ in Harry Zohn (ed.), In These Great Times: A Karl Kraus Reader (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), pp. 73–74. For more on the historical context of Kraus’ essay and its explicitly anti-war

26 CV, p. 9. As the motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein chose the following line from Nestroy’s play *The Protégé*: ‘Anyway, the thing about progress is that it looks much greater than it really is’. This translation is proposed by David Stern in his paper ‘Nestroy, Augustine, and the Opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*’ in Rudolf Haller and Klaus Puhl (eds), *Wittgenstein and the Future of Philosophy: A Reassessment after 50 Years: Proceedings of the 24th International Wittgenstein-Symposium* (Vienna: öbv & hpt, 2002), p. 427.


30 Wittgenstein’s critique of science was less a critique of science per se and more of its place in culture and the spirit in which it was practiced. For instance, in conversation with Drury, Wittgenstein makes the following remark about James Jeans’s book *The Mysterious Universe*: ‘These books which attempt to popularize science are an abomination. They pander to people’s curiosity to be titillated by the wonders of science without having to do any of the really hard work involved in understanding what science is about’. See M.O’C. Drury, ‘Conversations with Wittgenstein’ in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, p. 132.

31 CV, p. 91.

32 Ibid., p. 42.

33 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, German text with an English translation *en regard* by C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 2000), §6.371. All subsequent references to propositions in this book will appear in the body of the text using the propositional numbering system as it appears in the *Tractatus*. When referring to the author’s Preface, I will use *TLP* followed by a page number in the notes. (References to the Pears and McGuinness translation will be indicated in the notes).


35 For Wittgenstein, scientific laws do not *explain* how the world is; rather, they simply provide a way of describing the world. See sections 6.341–6.372.


38 Here it might be added, following James Conant’s analysis, that it is not necessary for readers to see Wittgenstein, at section 6.54, as attempting to consign every section of the *Tractatus* to the category of nonsense. He does not say, for instance, that ‘all of the book’s sentences are nonsensical’. Rather, he states (at section 4.112) that a ‘philosophical work consists essentially’ – but not entirely – ‘of elucidations’, and (at section 6.54) that the sentences of the *Tractatus* serve as elucidations only when the reader finally comes to recognize them as nonsensical. Therefore, ‘[n]ot every sentence of the work is (to be recognized as) nonsensical. For not every sentence serves as an elucidation’. See James Conant, ‘The Method of the *Tractatus*’ in Erich H. Reck (ed.), *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 457 fn 135; also James Conant, ‘Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism’ in Alice Cray (ed.), *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life; Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 47. On this view, the burden placed upon the reader, when he or she climbs the ladder, is one of determining for themselves which of the book’s sentences serve as elucidations (i.e. which belong to the body of the work) and which can be understood, alternatively, as belonging to what Cora Diamond has referred to as the book’s ‘frame’ – that is, those sections of the work in which Wittgenstein informs us about its ‘aim [...] and the kind of reading it requires’. See Diamond, ‘Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, pp. 149, 151.


44 Relevant here is the following remark from Wittgenstein’s manuscripts: ‘In order to marvel human beings [...] have to wake up. Science is a way of sending them off to sleep’. *CV*, p. 7.

45 At section 4.112 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes: ‘Philosophy is not a theory but an activity [...] The result of philosophy is not a number of “philosophical propositions”, but to make propositions clear’.
46 On this point, see Eli Friedlander, *Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 22, 155. Whilst Friedlander presents a persuasive argument for understanding the ladder in terms of a ‘structure of return’, I disagree with his contention that we are returned to the world, at the end of the *Tractatus*, ‘through an understanding of the limits of language’ (p. 22). The notion of ‘limits of language’ is, I would argue, part of what we are asked, by the author, to throw away at section 6.54.


49 Ibid., p. 319.

50 Ibid., p. 320.


52 Ibid., p. 43. These lines are from the final verse paragraph of part V of ‘Little Gidding’, the fourth quartet.


54 CV, p. 10.


The ‘Imagist Manifesto’ states as its goal: ‘To present an image (hence the name: “Imagist”). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous [...] To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite’. See ‘Preface’, Richard Aldington et al., Some Imagist Poets (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), p. vii.

The image of purification is used by Mallarmé in the sonnet ‘Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe’: ‘With a hydra-spasm, once hearing the angel endow/with a sense more pure the words of the tribe’. Stéphane Mallarmé, Selected Poems, trans. C.F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 89.


André Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’ (1930), in André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, p. 152.


The phrase is from Conant, ‘The Method of the Tractatus’, p. 381.


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73 This is not to argue that Wittgenstein self-consciously engages with the linguistic problems of aesthetic modernism; rather, it is to argue that the types of metaphysical thinking about language that the Tractatus is concerned with are articulated in the types of modernist writing I touch upon here.

At this point it is also tempting to draw connections between the Tractatus and the artistic avant-garde which, according to Peter Bürger, attempts to deconstruct traditional notions of the ‘autonomous’ work of art (the product of individuated and isolated artistic labour) by integrating ‘art into the praxis of life’. See Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 22 and passim. The relation between the Tractatus and the avant-garde is touched on by David Rudrum in his essay ‘Slouching towards Bethlehem: Yeats, Eliot, and the Modernist Apocalypse’ in Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period, ed. Adrian Grafe (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 58–70.

74 We can think of this aspiration in terms of the desire for an ideal language – whether artistic or philosophical.

75 The aspiration to perfect expressiveness is, in modernist writing, often bound up with the idea of language as a ‘fallen’ medium. Thus as Mallarmé writes, making an explicit connection between linguistic ‘imperfection’ and the multiplicity of languages: ‘Languages are imperfect because multiple; the supreme language is missing. Inasmuch as thought consists of writing without pen and paper […] without the sound of the immortal Word, the diversity of languages on earth means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of the Truth Herself Incarnate’. See Stéphane Mallarmé, Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 38.

76 See Bertrand Russell’s ‘Introduction’ to the Tractatus, TLP, p. 7.

77 Here the following point should be added: in the Tractatus, Wittgenstein, as I read him, invokes the need for a logically perspicuous notation (a Begriffsschrift) to counter the symbolic imperspicuity of ordinary language. See, especially, sections 3.323–3.327. This is, however, importantly different from reading him (as Russell does) as someone who is seeking an ideal language.

78 Wittgenstein, we might argue, gives voice to this fantasy at section 3.221 of the Tractatus: ‘Objects can only be named […] I can only speak about them: I cannot put them into words’. (Here I cite the Pears and McGuinness translation).

79 These issues are explored, with great philosophical finesse, by James Conant in his paper ‘Must We Show What We Cannot Say?’ in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds), The Senses of Stanley Cavell (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), pp. 242–283.
80 TLP, p. 27.
82 Here I cite the Pears and McGuinness translation.
85 Here I cite the Pears and McGuinness translation.