

A REPRESENTATIVE MODERN

Edward Kanterian: *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007. Pp. 224. \$16.95.)

doi: 10.1017/S0034670508000405

Edward Kanterian's *Ludwig Wittgenstein* is a solid, accurate, well-written intellectual biography whose purpose in life is unclear. In keeping with the guiding principle of the Critical Lives series of which it is part, the book seeks to place Wittgenstein and his work in the cultural context of the modern period (i.e., the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries). The book also offers a critical perspective on Wittgenstein's work and the existing secondary literature. These three ambitions—biography, modernity, and criticism—coexist uneasily, making it unclear who the book's audience is intended to be.

Although it is accurate and inclusive as a biography, it is not a rival to Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (Penguin, 1991), to which Kanterian pays his respects. The discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophy is

again accurate and thoughtful, but not enough information is presented for a reader otherwise unfamiliar with the original work to form more than a general idea about it. The critical discussion of the secondary literature is selective and surprisingly tendentious. In criticizing W.W. Bartley and Colin Wilson regarding Wittgenstein's sexuality (194–95), Terry Eagleton regarding Wittgenstein's influences (74; 160), and the idea that Wittgenstein's work may have been influenced by an alleged dyslexia (102), among other claims, Kanterian is engaging in interpretive and critical battles that are of interest to specialists, who do not need the brief biography and summary of the philosophy, but probably not to the nonexpert reader who wants an introduction to the man and his work. Finally, Kanterian's complaint that the "Wittgenstein industry" risks obscuring the thought rather than elucidating it by publishing so many "competing interpretations, philological debates, new 'readings', introductions, textbooks for students, collections of papers, conference proceedings, dissertations, [and so forth]" (200) strikes an oddly self-doubting note, virtually daring the reader to question the value of the book itself (and perhaps thus slyly recalling section 6.54 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which Wittgenstein claimed that a reader who had understood the book would thereby realize that it was all nonsense).

As far as biography goes, the book contains even-handed treatments of the major periods in Wittgenstein's life, from the childhood in Vienna to the rootless yet remarkably productive final few years before Wittgenstein's death. Kanterian deals frankly and clearly with Wittgenstein's several romantic and sexual relationships with men, though he rejects the interpretation that Wittgenstein is best understood as homosexual (107). Similarly, the question of Wittgenstein's religious views, and their significance to his philosophy, gets careful and extensive treatment, and Kanterian forcefully argues against the interpretation that religion and ethics were central to the inspiration for the *Tractatus* (50; 65–67; 84–86). His claim that "The philosophy of the *Tractatus* can be seen as defending science against metaphysics" (84) puts him firmly on one side of a debate, the other side of which argues that the point of the *Tractatus* is to defend ethics and religion from the self-confident nonsense of scientism (see, for example, Robert Fogelin's *Wittgenstein* [Second edition, Routledge, 1987] at 99).

The other two aims of the book—to put Wittgenstein into the context of modernity and to offer a critical view of the existing literature—blend together. Kanterian makes clear early on that his intention is revisionist: "There is . . . an imbalance between Wittgenstein's present-day public persona and the character of his actual work, which this book attempts to correct" (8). I have already mentioned several of the critical debates that Kanterian engages. He also responds critically to the claim that Wittgenstein's miserable experience as a primary-school teacher was central to his later philosophy (101), and to the "romantic cult" that he perceives regarding Wittgenstein's several sojourns in Norway, which were typically productive philosophically, but also apparently lonely and emotionally

painful personally (141). More generally, Kanterian is dryly derisive of what he appears to see as faddish interpretations of Wittgenstein's work. For example, he writes: "More recently, Wittgenstein has been also portrayed as a postmodernist, a relativist, a poet (or even as a Pyrrhonist, Zen-Buddhist or rabbinical thinker). These are strange interpretations of a man who towards the end of his life said that his chief contribution had been in the philosophy of mathematics" (203).

How, then, should we understand Wittgenstein? Kanterian gives us a hint when he says, "Wittgenstein lived in the modern age, the age of intellectuals, of charismatic writers, thinkers and artists whose lives capture the collective imagination, since they incorporate some of the deepest tensions of modernity, and maybe even suggest some solutions to them" (8). Many of Kanterian's interpretive positions seem to represent a desire to understand Wittgenstein as a representative modern and to reject interpretations that are inspired by more recent intellectual trends. Thus, for example, Kanterian rejects the claim that Wittgenstein's work was in some way influenced by his putative homosexuality (see the story of Barry Pink on pp. 194–95), but endorses Monk's quasi-Freudian assessment that Wittgenstein was tormented by the conflict between romantic love and sexuality of any kind (134). Similarly, in rejecting the claim that religion and ethics were primary in the genesis of the *Tractatus*, Kanterian argues that Wittgenstein's experience in the First World War was transformative, echoing a major theme of twentieth-century literature: "Questions about life and death were of *personal* not philosophical concern to Wittgenstein at this time. . . . To claim some kind of unity between his logical investigations and his religious problems is to romanticize the former and trivialize the latter" (66). As another example, the emphasis that Kanterian puts on Wittgenstein's embodiment of and preference for high culture, and Wittgenstein's belief that Western culture had become decadent (11–12, 137), puts the focus on conflicts that were alive to intellectuals of Wittgenstein's day, but that have since lost salience.

From the perspective of this reading, one disappointment is that Kanterian does not develop the idea that Wittgenstein's life might "suggest some solutions" to the "deepest tensions of modernity" (8). The problems that Wittgenstein struggled with, both personally and intellectually, are mostly still our problems. Both his life and his work do indeed suggest some methods of coping with them—"solutions" is too strong—but Wittgenstein's was an austere regimen. On a personal level, he appears to have sought self-understanding and clarity about his own character, without much hope of improving it. Philosophically, Wittgenstein hoped to help us get out of perplexities that we could not help but fall into, a misfortune that we call philosophy. He did not aspire to solve those problems, or to help us avoid falling into them in the first place, but rather to help us alleviate the anxiety and confusion that they cause. From this perspective, we probably cannot learn to be different, but we can learn to suffer less.

That is a message firmly rooted in modernity—think, for example, of Freud’s explanation of the purpose of psychotherapy—and one that Wittgenstein struggled to make clear to himself and to us.

—Matthew J. Moore