

**Fictions of Fact and Value: The Erasure of Logical
Positivism in American Literature 1945-1975**

by Michael LeMahieu

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Michael LeMahieu's first book both makes the case and develops a method for reading postwar US fiction's philosophical logic in terms of its immediate academic milieu, rather than through lenses imposed by later critics and theorists. Tracing literary responses to logical positivism's precedence in mid-century US philosophical culture, LeMahieu demonstrates this positivism's determining but curiously disavowed role in the rhetoric of the era's university-centric fiction, from Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" (1955) to a swan song in Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972). Dense with both archival research and philosophical exegesis, LeMahieu's project is narrowly conceived in all the best and some of the less appealing senses of the term. An unnecessary reticence about its intended range of implication leaves the book open to substantial quibbles, but at its core stand, unquibblably, a revisionary history of philosophical circulation and authorial inspiration, a fresh genealogy of the postmodern, and an exemplification of a method.

Postmodern theory's autobiography—a "narrative of progress" about its triumph over a still unrevised caricature of "positivism as an ahistorical, universal idea that can show up anywhere at any time but will always be rejected easily and uniformly" (16)—has, LeMahieu suggests, given us a distorted and badly taxonomized sense of the postwar literary landscape. Treating logical positivism's absolute separation of facts from values as "the central moral question of the period," he reads his fictions "not [as] a simple rejection of logical positivism but instead a sustained aesthetic response to its doctrines" (96). He thus revises "logical positivism's ahistorical afterlife in literary studies" (17) through historical accounts both of postwar fiction's uneasy, non-uniform engagement with the fact/value distinction, and of the way in which that fiction came to be so consistently read in relation to a "concept of postmodernism . . . premised on not knowing, and thus not owning, its debt to logical posi-

tivism.” Foregrounding postmodernism’s and logical positivism’s mutually repressed but clearly “shared emphasis on the contingencies of value and the constructions of fact,” LeMahieu highlights not just the opposition’s tendentious origins, but also its far-reaching effects on literary history.

From these revisions, new taxonomical possibilities arise, among them that we might treat works that pursue the separation of fact and value as philosophically “modern” and thus apply “postmodern” to works that foreground the project of morally and aesthetically reconciling the two terms. LeMahieu frames his four central authors—O’Connor, John Barth, Saul Bellow, and Thomas Pynchon, usually read as partisans in opposed camps of tradition and experiment—as each differently but definitely postmodern, “major writers responding to one of the most pressing philosophical and aesthetic problems of the period” (153).

Fictions of Fact and Value thus unites two channels in current literary scholarship. On one hand it’s a peer of books like Lisi Schoenbach’s *Pragmatic Modernism* and Robert Chodat’s *Worldly Acts and Sentient Things*—or in related registers recent work by Amy Hungerford on religion or Steven Meyer on science—which have attempted to make twentieth-century space for the sort of investigation of US literature’s interactions with US philosophy that has long been standard in work on the nineteenth century. On the other hand, LeMahieu challenges postmodernism’s putative ahistoricity in the manner of less specifically philosophical books by Daniel Grausam (on the looming nuclear threat), Marianne DeKoven (on the popularization of political radicalism), and Steven Belletto (on international relations and the game-theoretical refiguration of chance). The eight-year span of *Fictions of Fact and Value*’s four central works pinpoints a precise moment of cultural intersection, which the book then addresses at the methodological intersection of philosophical elaboration and historicist revision.

LeMahieu argues not only that his authors engaged with logical positivism, but that they shared a curious disavowal of doing so: theirs is “a genealogy that is often erased in the very texts where it registers and disowned by the very authors it includes” (6). This is the “erasure” of his title, and examining it demands a method that, “unlike many philosophical approaches to literature, combines theoretical and archival methods.” Recovering the overt engagement recorded in drafts and notes makes the published fictions’ philosophical origins legible, “woven in the fabric and hidden in plain sight” (5). LeMahieu thus more often

finds his “emblem[s]” (121, 156) in the archives than in the published fiction—for instance in the Bellow draft in which a character tells his wife “no more logical positivism for me” (qtd. in LeMahieu 122). LeMahieu provides a nearly full-page reproduction of the relevant page, which Bellow cancelled under a single cross; this reproduction of an erasure of a renunciation neatly emblemizes *Fictions of Fact and Value*’s own tracing of philosophical influence, aesthetic response, and strangely covered tracks. Correspondingly, the era ends once such erasures can themselves be represented in the published fictions: as *End Zone* closes, a student sees wall-space where he imagines a poster of Wittgenstein used to hang, and in LeMahieu’s neat reading, this “perspicuously captures both the pervasiveness of logical positivism’s influence and the abruptness of its obsolescence: a once iconic philosophy now reduced to tape remnants” (15).

To so deliberately row from the archival to the aesthetic also requires LeMahieu to develop a task-specific form of literary reading, elaborated in his first chapter through an account of the “negative” structural rhetoric of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Against the scientific caricature of the *Tractatus* circulated by early objectors like Adorno and perpetuated by logical positivism’s Anglo-American popularizers, LeMahieu offers a technical and rhetorical account of how “the relationship between the positive and speculative propositions in the *Tractatus* constitutes a dialectic of fact and value, one that the text ultimately ‘suspends,’ in Adorno’s sense of that term” (36). In this reading, Wittgenstein ultimately indicates value’s immanence by leaving it unwritten. Through his four subsequent chapters, LeMahieu isomorphically applies this logic to the way that, as the era’s authors erased the obvious signs of their engagement with logical positivism from the surface of their texts, Wittgenstein himself became a form-organizingly absent presence in their fictions.

LeMahieu’s account of “Good Country People” uses O’Connor’s letters to show how she, like Wittgenstein, tried to convey the “feeling” of immanent values by creating worlds in which only the facts are writable: she “warns writers motivated by religious considerations against enshrining ‘the mystery without the fact’” and “insists, often belligerently, on depicting the world that is the case, but she does so with an eye to revealing what is absent or negated in that world” (53). For this Wittgensteinian O’Connor, “to supply the positive content that [she] withholds is to contradict her negative aesthetic” (85). That withheld content—especially grace, the fic-

tion's unwritable moral and conceptual center—is, like value in Wittgenstein, not a blank to be filled or an abjectly separate realm but a factual and effectual absence.

In his next chapter, LeMahieu translates the extensive philosophical debates contained in Barth's *The End of the Road* into the terms of an underlying preoccupation with the fact/value distinction. Taking the novel's action as a pessimistic exemplification of the dominant philosophy's limitations, LeMahieu charts how "Barth exhausts the logic of logical positivism, stretching it to its *reductio ad absurdum* in order to reveal what he, like O'Connor, considers its pernicious ethical consequences" (100). LeMahieu suggests that this silence-reaching critique fails—due to the novel's realist commitment to the very fact-presenting capacities of the normative language that it wants to show is exhausted—to achieve anything like Wittgenstein's value-enshrining redemption of silence. *The End of the Road* thus becomes the point from which Barth's subsequent manifesto "The Literature of Exhaustion" embarks, rejecting realist form along with the conception of fact-contingent value that the earlier novel took seriously enough to try to exhaust.

LeMahieu delves deeper into the archives to trace the composition history of Bellow's thinly disguised sketch, in "Zetland: By a Character Witness," of "his childhood friend, intellectual companion, and literary rival Isaac Rosenfeld" (118). Setting the story in the context of Bellow's own academic and artistic education, LeMahieu frames "Zetland" as the point at which Bellow's career locked into the "attempt to pick up what positivism leaves behind: literature's claim to what Rosenfeld described as 'that nonpropositional, vague, metaphysical anguish which is nonsense technically, yet morally often the watershed of sanity.'"

The book ends with an examination of the late revisions to the chapter of Thomas Pynchon's *V* in which a scientist tracks atmospheric patterns that, on decoding, spell out the first proposition of the *Tractatus*. The archive reveals that Pynchon originally gave logical-positivist talk to his characters rather than to the ether, cutting lengthy conversations on the topic from the chapter's published version. LeMahieu thus establishes that "Pynchon's postmodern coupling of science and fiction emerges out of a sustained engagement with what the narrator, in an earlier draft of *V*, describes as 'the dilemma of the scientist or positivist in today's decadent world'" (155), a revelation that grounds a fresh take on the ethical and political logic of Pynchon's career-long engagement with the rationalizing excesses of modernity.

As these brief summaries show, LeMahieu's structured synthesis of historicism, philosophy and close-reading—starting with the archive to demonstrate the presence of an erasure, whose logic then grounds a reading with wider implications—is flexible enough to distinguish as well as connect the texts under discussion. It is, in this sense, a viable methodology. Even so, the relation between the archive, the concept of erasure, and the mode of negative reading isn't the same in each chapter. As a rule, these terms generate stronger and more widely applicable readings the more clearly the erasure each chapter traces is ratified by the archive.

On this basis, the Barth chapter stands out as a weak link. Treating a novel so overtly composed of philosophical discussion without delving into the archive, LeMahieu leaves himself little room to do more than translate that discussion into logical positivist terms. Emphasizing “The Literature of Exhaustion”'s opening repudiation of realism, rather than the positive case it goes on to make for recuperating old styles, LeMahieu fails to address *The End of The Road's* reflexive modulations of style, or the way in which these suggest that the narrator Jacob Horner's event-saturating nihilism *follows from* his retrospective knowledge of his value-laden role in the facts he recounts. Taking Horner at his motive-denying word, treating his philosophical musings as the novel's own critique, LeMahieu misses the possibility that Barth characterized Horner's resort to value-scepticism precisely as an evasion of moral responsibility, thus pointing beyond Horner's tendentious “exhaustion” to an implied moral judgment of his evasion as evidence of potentially unexhausted values. In this chapter, then, LeMahieu's departure from archival methods hinders his usually astute separation of philosophical implications from paraphrases of philosophical content.

If the exhaustively exegetical Barth chapter results in the only unconvincing reading in the book, the Bellow chapter that follows showcases LeMahieu at his best. The tracing of the gradual erasure of logical-positivist inspiration through the various drafts of “Zetland” puts this little-studied “sketch” convincingly at the philosophical heart of Bellow's career: its efforts to treat values as factual in the face of a world that offers no obvious warrant account equally for the secular mysticism of *Henderson the Rain King* and the turn to irascible conservatism in *Mr Sammler's Planet*. LeMahieu goes further, finding parallels with Wittgenstein in Bellow's treatment of death as a silence/language/feeling nexus, revealing in passing that Bellow's famously reductive, philosophically illiterate

female characters were not just a matter of negligence but a concerted construction mappable through the drafts, and reaching beyond Bellow to briefly limn logical positivism's role in the development of theories of fictional reference in the period. Here, his method proves just how much generalizing weight it can bear.

It's the Pynchon chapter, though, that stands as the clearest emblem, to use LeMahieu's term, of the book's achievements and shortcomings. Its archival revelations ramify impressively: establishing just how overt logical positivism's role was in the original draft, LeMahieu elaborates patterns barely acknowledged in the large body of existing Pynchon criticism. He gives the novel's recursive interrogation of the concept of "love" a foundation in logical positivism's attempts to write off swathes of human experience as meaningless because they are "merely" emotive, and along these lines recontextualizes the role of the ineffable in Pynchonian ethics. More fundamentally, he offers one of the more substantive expansions of the logic of "world" in Pynchon since Brian McHale's now-axiomatic account of postmodern ontological indeterminacy. Treating Pynchon's many "beyonds" as realms in which the values displaced by a positivist world might still inhere, he revises McHale's notion that postmodern fiction's proliferating worlds are necessarily unhierarchized in relation to fact. As in the Bellow chapter, then, LeMahieu here develops an archival kernel into a convincing account of a novelist's career-long preoccupations. The problem is that with these insights the book abruptly ends.

With only the briefest of speculations on *why* Pynchon might have cut the logical positivism material, and an even briefer survey of the fact/value question's contemporary literary survival, the book closes. This reminds us that, while LeMahieu's historical and author-specific claims are rigorously documented, his treatment of their implications is sporadic, even reticent. Sometimes this is symptomatic of, and sometimes it exacerbates, the limitations of his narrow focus. Throughout, two claims remain unclear: first, whether his texts represent logical positivism's impact on the whole field, or just a subset, of American literature; second, whether logical positivism was a major factor in these texts' development, or *the* major factor. This leaves the whole project open to criticism in ways that more explicit acknowledgement of its limits might have foreclosed.

Of these, the most significant—bearing more directly on LeMahieu's claims than other equally conspicuous limits of demographic diversity—is the fact that all these fictions either orbit university settings or star PhD-holders and scientists. The secondary cast of fiction-makers who

flesh out the chapters—William Gass, Ronald Sukenick, Iris Murdoch, Mary McCarthy, Walker Percy—only compound this issue. Even were LeMahieu to acknowledge that this is only a subset of his titular era’s American literature, the question would still remain as to how its institutional strictures channelled its forms and ideas. That logical positivism “did not sponsor didactic fictions so much as provoke aesthetic responses” (20) doesn’t mean that its political and institutional sponsorship had no bearing on the shape of those responses. Brief references to scholarship on the era’s university context—for example, to John McCumber’s work on politically driven funding constraints on philosophical research, or to Mark McGurl on O’Connor and the MFA system—don’t go far enough toward addressing this question. From McGurl to Hungerford to Steven Schryer, recent sociologically-inflected work on postwar US fiction’s institutional contexts offers resources that could complement and refine the philosophical and historicizing approaches from which LeMahieu exclusively draws his coordinates. Scholars in that sociological line of work, though, will find great raw material here.

Similar issues arise from the Wittgenstein-centrism of LeMahieu’s version of logical positivism. Since so much of LeMahieu’s contextualizing of Wittgenstein’s philosophical reception comes through European figures like Adorno and Murdoch, it’s never quite clear how this reception migrated to US philosophy *or* literature. LeMahieu’s dealings with US logical positivists are perfunctory. The revelation that “Zetland” was originally titled “Zetland and Quine,” for example, gets no further gloss than that the relevant Quine is the one whose initials were WVO. It’s surely pertinent that Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (which LeMahieu does briefly cite in his chapter on Barth) was the highest-profile early counter-positivist challenge to emerge from within Anglo-American philosophy. But beyond Wittgenstein LeMahieu is reluctant to venture, leaving it unclear whether the US logical positivists with whom his authors actually shared university turf were ever inscribed enough in their colleagues’ fiction to get erased—let alone how, why, and how differently to Wittgenstein.

The other flaw of range is LeMahieu’s tendency to focus on logical positivism in analytical isolation even after acknowledging the many philosophical registers in a given text. His introduction approvingly quotes a review of *End Zone* to the effect that “each of the characters speaks a jargon that mocks its origins, a reduction to the absurd of what once passed for thought” (qtd. in LeMaheiu 7), but no jargon beyond

that of logical positivism subsequently gets addressed. The Barth chapter convincingly frames the fact/value distinction as the conceptual bedrock underlying *The End of the Road*'s more overt references to Kierkegaard, Sartre, pragmatism, and the Greeks. Elsewhere, though, LeMahieu's focus on logical positivism as a master key, rather than as part of an interacting philosophical array, leads to moments that can remind one of Pynchon's monomaniacal Stencil: the suggestion that we should add "value" to the many things that the elusive "V." might stand for, for example, or the claim that the centrality of "show don't tell" to pedagogy in the MFA programs for which O'Connor blazed a trail is best understood in terms of Wittgenstein's distinction between showing and saying.

On all these fronts, LeMahieu's reluctance to extend his argument's implications beyond the home-turf of PhD fiction seems a missed opportunity. Could we find evidence of logical positivism's influence, however differently transmuted and erased, in further-flung but still philosophically coherent genres of the period, like black expatriate existentialism, socialist realism, the Beat movement, or the whole generation of poets Charles Altieri saw cohering around the fact/value question in the early 1970s? (LeMahieu never quite clarifies whether or why *fiction*'s engagement with logical positivism was generically distinct.) It seems plausible, but LeMahieu's method is so finely tuned to the particular group of university-centric authors he addresses, his account of the philosophy so beholden to one philosopher, his consequence-tracing so narrowly trained on the concept of postmodernism, that we must await the work of future scholars in order to find out.

Yet the fact that so many questions about the scope and implication of LeMahieu's argument remain is itself a testimony to the rigor and significance of its core. Whereas Chodat—whose account of "agency"'s parallel conceptual developments in mid-century Anglophone philosophy and literature is probably *Fictions of Fact and Value*'s nearest predecessor—deliberately downplays the question of documented influence in order to trace an almost century-long literary-philosophical zeitgeist, LeMahieu's archives of direct influence bestow precision on his readings and force on his revisions by their very concentration. That his approach so complements Chodat's helps clinch their shared claim: that insofar as literary study has accepted the continental/analytic philosophical distinction and enthusiastically picked a side, it has wilfully blinded itself to much of what's going on in twentieth-century US fiction. As archival material on this generation of authors becomes increasingly accessible, LeMahieu's

method should take on an exemplary role. This is philosophical literary study done well, and done well about a philosophy long caricatured as inimical to literary experience.

LeMahieu notes that “logical positivism never spawned a cultural style; to the contrary, it seemed to lack all style” (2). His diligently unfashionable work calls to mind Schoenbach’s recuperation of the philosophical centrality of “habit” to modernist fiction’s methods and imperatives, against the attractive but long institutionally defanged preoccupation with aesthetic “shock.” Putting a glamorless philosophy convincingly at the heart of twentieth-century literature, *Fictions of Fact and Value* significantly advances our understanding of what the more insistently hip claims of conventionally postmodern theory and criticism have obscured. Though the book doesn’t always provide them with clear signposts, anyone working on intellectual history and conceptual implication across the whole range of postwar fiction should be building on its revisions for the foreseeable future.

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