A social theory of language: Ludwig Wittgenstein and the current theoretical debate

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Summary

This article attempts to introduce the work of the later Wittgenstein into the current debate on critical theory in order to suggest the essentially social nature of both criticism and theory. It briefly sketches Wittgenstein's theory of language and meaning after the *Tractatus*, emphasizing his concept of language games and the fact that particular language games (including those involving the study of literature) spring from and are sustained by specific 'forms of life'. The most important aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language for the article are (a) his definition of meaning as use, (b) the denial that meaning is a mental event or a product of pre-linguistic consciousness, and (c) the suggestion that language stems from a variety of social practices which control and make possible various forms of discourse, or language games. The article then argues that debates about theory within literature are sustained by social factors – the struggle between 'abnormal' and 'normal' discourse, or the shifting of theoretical paradigms are fundamentally tied up with ways of living within a particular social matrix. It finally argues that we should cease to define literature by searching for an essential property that is common to all 'literary objects', but, following Wittgenstein's maxim that 'meaning is use', we should define literature by its *use* within a particular community.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel poog om Wittgenstein se later werk te betrek by die huidige gesprek oor kritiese teorie om sodoende te wys op die wesenlik sosiale aard van sowel kritiek as teorie. Wittgenstein se taal- en betekenisteorie na die *Tractatus* word kortliks uiteengesit. Klem word op sy konsep van taalspel gelê en op die feit dat sekere vorme van taalspel (ook dié wat die literatuurstudie betrek) uit spesifieke lewensvorme ontstaan en daardeur ondersteun word. Die belangrikste aspekte van Wittgenstein se taalfilosofie vir die artikel is (a) sy definisie van betekenis as gebruik, (b) die ontkenning van betekenis as 'n verstandelike aktiwiteit of as 'n produk van die pre-linguistiese bewussyn en (c) die bewering dat taal ontstaan uit 'n verskeidenheid sosiale gebruike wat verskeie vorme van redevoering of taalspel beheer en moontlik maak. Daar word aangevoer dat gesprekke oor teorie binne die letterkunde ondersteun word deur sosiale faktore – die stryd tussen 'abnormale' en 'normale' diskoers, of die verandering van teoretiese paradigmas, is in beginsel verbind met die lewenswyses binne 'n bepaalde sosiale matrys. Laastens word geredeneer dat ons moet ophou om literatuur te definieer d.m.v. 'n soeke na 'n wesenlike kenmerk eie aan alle 'literêre objekte', maar dat ons Wittgenstein se grondbeginsel van 'betekenis is gebruik' moet volg en letterkunde moet definieer volgens sy gebruik binne 'n bepaalde gemeenskap.

The aim of this article is to introduce Ludwig Wittgenstein's work on language and society into the current struggle over language and literature. This is not an entirely novel project, since, despite his general exclusion from Structuralist accounts of language, his name is increasingly being coupled with that of Jacques Derrida, paradoxically both in support of deconstruction, and in answer to its corrosive effects.[1]

Wittgenstein's relationship to Saussurean linguistics and its post-Structural-

ist emanations is extremely ambivalent. On the one hand he stems from a seemingly different philosophical tradition, an Anglo-American empiricism which counts Locke, Hume, and Bertrand Russel among its major thinkers, and which has traditionally been opposed to the neo-Cartesian rationalism from which Structuralism springs. On the other hand, like Derrida's relation to continental epistemology, Wittgenstein sought not only to undermine the logico-empirical tradition in his later work, but also to deconstruct the whole enterprise usually regarded as 'philosophy' in the West.[2]

His later work on language is similar to Saussure's enterprise within linguistics in his insistence on the autonomy of language, its arbitrary nature with regard to the world, the fact that it is only within a language that one can mean anything, and his total rejection of the idea that meaning and understanding consist of inner mental states. However, Wittgenstein has no theory of the sign to correspond with that of Saussurean linguistics; consequently he avoids falling into the idealist, transcendental trap that the Saussurean distinction between 'signifier' and 'signified' entails.[3] Furthermore, he is totally opposed to the 'scientific' project of explaining language in terms of a complete, overarching, synchronic system. His view of language (in fact of *all* knowledge) is social, historical, and opposed to idealism and psychologism.

With this background established, the thinking of the later Wittgenstein promises to raise issues which are pertinent to the current debate about literature and its place in our society.

1. 'A picture held us captive . . .': Wittgenstein's early work

Wittgenstein is almost unique among philosophers in having held two opposing views of philosophy, language, and the world, the one a repudiation of the other.

The style of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (which articulates his early thinking, and is the only book published in Wittgenstein's lifetime) differs markedly from the pain-ridden remarks of his later work. The *Tractatus* also consists of remarks, but they are the taut, rigidly systematic thoughts of somebody trying to build a comprehensive, pure, crystaline foundation for all philosophical knowledge. Very briefly, Wittgenstein proposes a picture theory of language in the *Tractatus*. A sentence hooks onto the world because it is a picture of reality. It is a picture of a state of affairs (a fact) in that the elements contained in it have a logical form which corresponds to the form of the reality which it depicts. This depends on the notion of names as 'simple signs' which are *not* composed of other signs but which *stand for* objects in the real world. The object for which the name stands is thus the meaning of the name. Language, consequently, can depict reality because it shares a common structure with the world.

By 1929 Wittgenstein had started to repudiate not merely details of the *Tractatus*, but the whole edifice as well as the metaphysical quest which constituted it. This involved a rejection of its crucial belief that there is a 'hooking of language onto reality', of the idea that this hooking up is achieved by an inner mental process, of the search for a foundational logical necessity,

and of the vision of language as a complete, overarching system of calculus. Furthermore, the whole epistemological enterprise from Descartes, Locke, and Kant through Husserl to its 'secularised' form in British philosophy of language is seen to spring from a series of powerful, misleading metaphors. 'A *picture* held us captive,' Wittgenstein writes in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1978:48), 'and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.' His later thinking constitutes a tortuous struggle against this 'picture'. Unlike Derrida, Wittgenstein does at times seem to suggest that we can get rid of it – seen that it is merely a cog idling in a machine which otherwise works pretty satisfactorily.

2. The later Wittgenstein: 'From Mental Images To Social Interactions'[4]

At the beginning of the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein asks, 'What is the meaning of a word?' The traditional Lockean answer to this is that it is the idea for which the word stands. A word is given life/meaning by the mental processes of the user: 'Words in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that has them ... nor can anyone apply them as marks, immediately, to anything else but the ideas that he himself hath,' Locke remarks, and he continues to make the stronger claim that words used without accompanying mental processes are meaningless: 'He that hath words of any language, without distinct ideas in his mind to which he applies them, does, so far as he uses them in discourse, only make a noise without any sense or signification' (Locke in Hacker, 1972:224 and 227).

Wittgenstein turns this psychologistic conception of meaning around by a hundred and eighty degrees. Instead of being the *causes* of our outward performances, mental acts or states (ideas, images, intentions) are merely the effects of our ability to use words. In doing this he retains the notion of mental acts. He does not deny that there are such things; he merely claims that they have no constitutive role in the meaning of signs. The transcendental mind which is one with meaning because it baptises the world from within is denied, together with the necessarily *private* nature of language that goes with it:

> The idea that you might have a language with logically private rules – ie., rules that only you could understand because only you could know to what the words refer – is a self-contradictory idea. Following a rule implies *doing the same*, and what 'the same' *is* can only be defined by a practice in which more than one person participates. (Malcolm, 1967, vol. 8:338)

Here we have Wittgenstein's crucial move – from the notion of meaning as a mental image to a theory which situates its very possibility within a set of social practices. The social nature of language is illustrated by Wittgenstein's analogy between it and a game. Playing games is a social activity which involves common abilities and practices. In *Zettel* Wittgenstein claims that 'only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning' and elsewhere he introduces the concept of a 'language-game', saying: 'Here the term

"language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity or form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1978: 11e).

The idea of a variety of language-games that stem from different social practices (forms of life) challenges the earlier metaphysical attempt to forge a single, crystalline pure link between language and the world. 'But how many kinds of sentence are there?' Wittgenstein asks. 'There are *countless* kinds ... And this kind of multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten' (1978: 11e). The theory of language-games is therefore both social and historical.

Closely implicated in this theory is the crucial notion that 'for a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (1978: 20e). This is extremely important, for it prevents us from thinking of the meaning of words independent of their actual, specific employment within concrete social practices. We can now resist the temptation of thinking that there must be an ideal, independent entity of meaning to which our specific use of words refers. Signifier and signified are not metaphysically separate in Wittgenstein's theory of language: the signified does not exist in some independent realm, whether Platonic or Structuralist. It is *produced* in the concrete employment of the signifier. This definition of meaning as use also runs counter to the notion of language as calculus: that it is the form or structure of language that determines the present and future meaning of a part of that structure. 'Use determines meaning; meaning does not determine use' (Bloor, 1983: 25). Use, however, does not reside within the sovereign consciousness of the individual. A person can only acquire language by being initiated into a linguistic community, and this, for Wittgenstein, involves the mastery of a technique through a process of social training: 'It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule ... To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions) ... To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique' (Wittgenstein, 1978: 81e).

The analogy between linguistic operations and playing chess in this comment raises further aspects of Wittgenstein's theory. The chess analogy is a favourite one of his, and is used to draw out the original likeness between games and language. One of the most important of these involves the autonomy of both practices. In contrast to the attempt in the *Tractatus* to provide the foundations of language by showing its links with the world, Wittgenstein insists in his later work that it is impossible to forge links between reality and language *from within language* (which is the only way open to us) because there is no metaphysical foothold by which we can get outside language and so see and describe the connections.

Like Saussurean linguistics therefore, but by a totally different route, Wittgenstein proposes the autonomy of language and grammar (his word for the rules which govern language and the system of such rules), also using the idea of the arbitrariness of language and its rules: 'The only correlate in

language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this intrinsic necessary into a proposition ... Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is' (1978: 116e). This arbitrariness does not entail an endless slippage of meaning, however; it is the arbitrariness that we find in the rules of a game. The game is constituted by the rules and its end can only be understood in terms of those rules, but it is also an activity that is grounded in social practice, and this keeps the rules and the game stable. This is not to claim that the forms of life which give rise to language-games may not change. They can, and do. Then the language-game is discarded. But the *game* does not change; instead, a new game is created. In Hacker's words, 'If one changes the grammatical rules one creates an alternative form of representation; one moves from the language-game to another' (1972: 164).

This means that language-games are autonomous and complete in themselves, and that there are alternative grammars which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Here lies the whole point of the notion of language-games. It evades the traditional temptation to regard the purpose and activity of language in narrow, essentialist terms. ' *"The essence is hidden from us"* ' Wittgenstein states ironically, summarizing the opposing quest, 'We ask: *"What is* language?", *"What is* a proposition?" And the answer to these questions is to be given once for all; and independently of any future experience' (Wittgenstein, 1978: 43e).

Instead of a quest for ideal essences, Wittgenstein proposes the concept of 'family resemblances'. Games and language have no essential characterictics or historic features: instead 'we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' (1978, 32e). The meaning of words is related to the way in which they are used, and this boils down to a multitude of differently related grammars which stem from social practices, interests, and needs. The latter correspond to Wittgenstein's 'forms of life': 'a common way of conceptualizing experience together with the accompanying kind of behaviour' (Hacker, 1972: 220).

To sum up, then, the suggestion that our employment of language is analogous to the playing of a variety of games which share no single, essentially common feature enables Wittgenstein to evade the metaphysical picture that held him and philosophy captive. Language and grammar are arbitrary and autonomous: they have no constitutive link with reality; the use of a word in an utterance is like the use of (say) a chess piece in a move: just as the piece has significance only within the context of a move, and the move means something only as part of a game, so a word only has meaning within a sentence, and the sentence only as part of a language. Furthermore, understanding or intending are not mental states, but the mastery of techniques – an ability to go on in certain ways. Although the rules of a language-game or chess constitute and limit the kind of moves one can make, the rules do not determine their own application. This is a crucial point regarding the ultimate foundations of meaning and certainty. There are no necessarily common, essential, and unchanging features which define games or the nature of language. Finally, and this is crucial, games and the uses of language are

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social practices. They get their point from shared needs and interests which are biologically, socially, and historically determined. They are conventional, not natural, although some of them may have a grounding in nature.

It is the last point that has the greatest significance for the current debate about literature, and it is to it that I now wish to turn in greater detail.

3. A social theory of knowledge: truth as an expression of will

One of Wittgenstein's most radical projects (one which he shares with Derrida) is to collapse the traditionally rigidly separate areas of *rhetoric* and *logic*. The Platonic view of logic and mathematics is that they exist independently of human activities, and that discoveries in these fields are a progressive revelation of these ideal metaphysical realms. In Wittgenstein's view there are no such extra-terrestial realms of pure knowledge waiting to be discovered as human beings move closer to the ultimate truth of the world. Logic and mathematics, like all other forms of human knowledge, are anthropological phenomena. In his view mathematics is *normative:* 'Mathematics forms a network of norms.' We feel compelled to proceed according to the rules of logic for the same reason that we follow the rules of any other language-game – not because they have some kind of transcendant ontology but because they are shared.

In terms of this conception logic and mathematics become forms of representation that are not justified by anything other than human needs and practices. They are 'free creations of the human will imposing an order on reality ... They are not forced upon us but are created by us in our endeavour to master the world, and their only justification lies in their expediency' (Hacker, 1972: 102-3). However, the social discipline by which we are initiated into these techniques inculcates in us a sense of necessary, transcendental essence within these practices, and this belief in an unanswerable essence is frequently used to entrench and govern practices: 'if you talk about *essence,* you are merely noting a convention ... to the *depth* that we see in the essence there corresponds the deep need for a convention' (Wittgenstein, 1964: I.75). Far from being totally remorseless and inexorable, our techniques (which we usually carry out 'as a matter of course' because we have been trained to do so) could always change radically and in fact this is happening in the sciences all the time. 'That which first seemed out of the question,' Wittgenstein remarks about the conceivability of the square root of a negative number, 'if you surround it with the right kind of intermediate cases, becomes the most natural thing possible' (Wittgenstein, 1976: 116). Conversely, but by the same argument, what counts as valid inference or deduction are the moves in a language-game which we, out of habit, do not question:

> so long as one thinks it can't be otherwise, one draws logical conclusions. This presumably means: as long as *such and such is not brought into question at all.* The steps which are not brought into question are logical inferences. (Wittgenstein, 1964: I. 115)

The usual practices characteristic of logical behaviour are marked by conventional stopping points at which questions are no longer asked. The point is also that there is no extra-social compulsion to accept those practices, as Charles Dodgson (1895) (in his capacity as a logician rather than a writer of children's stories in which the compulsions of logic are marvellously deconstructed) wittily points out in his article 'What The Tortoise Said To Achilles'.[5] We can always make trouble, as those arch-trouble-makers Derrida, De Man *et al.* show. In fact, the practice of deconstruction is a living proof of Wittgenstein's anthropological conception of logical necessity.

Wittgenstein, therefore, grounds our linguistic operations on the contingencies of history and society, rather than in an eternal chimera of ideal entities. The problem with any forms that are written in the stars is that the spectacles still have to be found with which to read them. A further important point is that no set of verbalized rules can provide a justification for our language games. Wittgenstein is acutely aware that justifications have to stop sometime. One can give reasons why we do this rather than that, but at some point one's 'spade is turned'. And the spade turns on the bedrock of the non-verbal, of action. We cannot justify our use of logic from within logic, nor is it conceivable to do so outside of it. 'The danger here, I believe, is one of giving justification of our procedure where there is no such thing as a justification and we ought simply to have said: *that's how we do it*' (Wittgenstein, 1964: II. 75).

Whether logic is deemed to operate or not is dependent upon the language-game that is being played. As Bloor astutely points out in his discussion of conflicting formal proofs in logic, 'Rather than having reached any logical rock-bottom we are merely led by the logician along paths that are worn smooth by custom and use'; and more significantly, 'proofs are deemed valid . . . because they represent a stable language-game. If they are deemed invalid it is because we are wanting to replace one language-game by another' (1983: 131). This last statement suggests that truth is not only a product of human interests and will, but also of conflict in which groups are at pains to establish *their* mode of representation as the natural one in terms of which linguistic training will take place. One might call this a struggle for the hegemony of grammar, in Wittgenstein's sense of the word 'grammar'. And it is not only in the obvious fields like politics, economics, and sociology that this happens, but also at the very heart of 'objectivity': science, mathematics, logic. Describing debates within these disciplines, Bloor says:

> The problem confronting the participants in debates of this kind is how to attach credibility to the positions they take. Somehow they must mobilise support, and to do this they must appeal to something that commands our allegiances. Appeals to intuition; appeals to the 'costs' of making alterations in the logical system – all these are publically available sources of credibility. Whatever their private motives, whatever the idiosynchratic, autobiographical origins of their preferences, the resources for justifying them and giving them credibility are not things that are within the heads of individual thinkers.

And, furthermore:

> It would be a mistake to suppose that issues of credibility can be separated from the 'real content' of the dispute. They are its very substance because what is at issue is the credibility of the claim that certain formal steps in reasoning are valid steps. (1983: 134)

In this Wittgenstein-based view, logic springs from rhetoric – it is a form of discourse which assumes its justification in social action, and needs continually to dredge that social basis for the support with which to attack other modes of representation or to defend itself from displacement by opposing interests. It calls upon common allegiances which it also had a hand in forging. As Dodgson's tortoise who refuses to grant the self-evidence of inference shows, it depends, in the last analysis, on credibility, on agreed and accepted forms of judgement: 'there must be agreement not only in definitions but also . . . in judgements' (Wittgenstein, 1978: 88e).

Explanatory or descriptive moves made in philosophy, science, psychoanalysis, literary theory, and even deconstruction often take the form 'what you think is this, is really that'. Some of the most innovative and challenging theories of the twentieth century have rested on this process, stripping away our normal perception of things and replacing it with another. Marxism and Freudian psycho-analysis are two that are difficult to ignore, so is that constituted by Deconstruction. The most common reaction to these descriptions is that they are 'reductive', that they overlook complexities, differences, and qualities that are inherent in the object or phenomena described. As often as not this objection hides a repulsion, a loathing for the way of seeing and thinking brought out by the new theory, which is based on an allegiance to a 'form of life'.

In his 'Lectures on Aesthetics' and 'Conversations on Freud' Wittgenstein makes some interesting remarks about this practice which are related to the discussion of logic and rhetoric above. The word 'really' in the explanation 'this is really that' seems to point to a final discovery of the ultimate nature of the phenomenon – we have discovered what it is in reality. Hence Freud's remarks that his theory of dreams is 'scientific' and talk about the 'science' of Marxism. Wittgenstein was highly interested in Freud and read him avidly. However, he objected violently to Freud's claim of practising a science of interpretation, of having found the *essence* of dreams.[6]

Compare, Wittgenstein suggests, Freud's interpretations of dreams with the fact that scents are 'made of things that have intolerable smells. Could we therefore say: the best scent is really all sulphuric acid . . . If we boil Redpath at 200°C. all that is left when the water vapour is gone is some ashes, etc. This is all Redpath really is. Saying this would have a certain charm, but it would be misleading to say the least' (Wittgenstein, 1976: 26). Here we have a clash between two language-games, and an attempt to obliterate the one in terms of another which is somehow more fundamental and encompassing. One could play the game in which people were seen as being a combination of ash and water vapour, but it could not be used in the same circumstances and prac-

tices within which we use words like 'human' etc. Such a language-game, habitually adopted, would involve changes in our behaviour, one of the outcomes (perhaps) being that it would be easier to turn people into ash and water vapour.

These descriptions or explanations should be seen, not in terms of their reflection of reality, but rather in accordance with what we would do with them, i.e. as language-games, alternative grammars or methods of projection, ways of organizing our world. Their 'charm' means that they exert a pull on us. We find them attractive or repulsive, interesting and useful or boring and worthless, 'true' or 'false', not by the metaphysical compulsions of logic, but by the forces of rhetoric. 'If you are led by psycho-analysis to say that you really thought so and so or that your motive was so and so, this is not a matter of discovery, but of persuasion. In a different way you could have been persuaded of something different ... Those sentences have the form of persuasion in particular which say "This is *really* this". This means ... there are certain differences which you have been persuaded to neglect" (1976: 26).

Within the alternative scheme everything fits and so it seems perfectly natural: 'Freud remarks on how, after the analysis of it, the dream appears so very logical. And of course it does ... There is an inducement to say, "Yes, of course, it must be like that"' (1976: 51, 52). But within the Wittgensteinian scheme nothing is natural in the sense of residing over and above a set of linguistic social practices, not pointing, not logic, not mathematics. They acquire their sense of naturalness because we are trained to do them as a matter of course. New ways of doing things can be constituted and old ways can *always* be deconstructed: 'That which at first is out of the question, if you surround it by the right kind of intermediate cases, becomes the most natural thing possible' (Wittgenstein, 1972: 226), and 'Being Mathematics or Physics it looks uncontrovertible and this gives it still greater charm. If we explain the surroundings of an expression we see that the thing could have been expressed in an entirely different way' (Wittgenstein, 1976: 26).

Although language-games or forms of representation/description/explanation can displace one another, they need not do so. The Law of the Excluded Middle does not hold here, although we could try to make it hold if we had reason to do so. Newtonian physics has not been replaced by the theory of relativity, the two systems are used (to different purposes) side by side. Which will be accepted into the practices of a community will depend on the interests, needs, desires, and cultural relations within the community, on the power relations between the purveyors of 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourse.[7] This is so because of the subject's relation to community, language and the processes of training that make certain language-games a matter of course: understanding is not a mental state, but knowing how to go on in socially trained ways.

The concepts of 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourse are extremely useful here. They are discussed at length in Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and derive from Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions: his concept of 'normal' as opposed to 'revolutionary' science. One of the advantages of this analogy is that it enables us to get rid of the traditional dichotomy

between 'science' and 'criticism' which is based on a narrow, Newtonian paradigm of the work of scientists, and a romantic, 'mystical' view of the mysteries of literature.

The point is that, in Rorty's words, 'Normal' science is the practice of solving problems against the background of a consensus about what counts as a good explanation of the phenomena and about what it would take for a problem to be solved. 'Revolutionary' science is the introduction of a new 'paradigm' of explanation, and thus of a new set of problems. 'Normal science is as close as real life comes to the epistemologist's notion of what it is to be rational' (1976: 320).

This view has important implications regarding the rhetoric of terms like 'relevance' and 'irrelevance', 'subjective' and 'objective', showing that nothing belongs *inherently* to the one side or the other of these dichotomies, so often used in the literary critical debate. To quote Rorty again:

> To say that someone is bringing in 'subjective' considerations to a discussion where objectivity is wanted is, roughly, to say that he is bringing in considerations which the others think beside the point. If he presses these *outré* considerations he is turning normal enquiry into abnormal discourse – he is being either 'kooky' (if he loses his point) or 'revolutionary' (if he gains it). For a consideration to be subjective, in this sense, is simply for it to be unfamiliar. (1976: 338-9)

So too, with regard to the concept of 'relevance', its significance is, following Wittgenstein's view of language, dependent upon certain, dominant patterns of social training and use:

> We cannot differentiate scientific communities by 'subject matter', but rather by 'examining patterns of education and communication.' To know what counts as relevant to choice between theories about a certain subject is, in periods of normal inquiry, to belong to what Kuhn calls a 'disciplinary matrix'. In periods when the relevant community of inquiries is in question, in which the lines between 'learned men', 'mere empirics', and kooks (or, to alter the example, between 'serious political thinkers' and 'revolutionary pamphleteers') are getting fuzzy, the question of relevance is up for grabs. We cannot determine relevance by focussing on subject matter . . . (1976: 331-2)

Both sides of the critical debate in South Africa have tended to make the latter appeal to subject matter in the past.

In the last decade or so the lines which Rorty points to between 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourse have become increasingly fuzzy, and the 'relevant community of inquirers' has come to be more and more fragmented and contradictory. The question of 'relevance' has been up for grabs for some time now. The monolith of English criticism/education of the fifties and sixties is not quite as secure as it once was. In fact, to most members of this community of inquiry it is F.R. Leavis who is liable to be thought the 'kook', even if there may not be much concensus in the view that Marx has progressed from the category of 'revolutionary pamphleteer' to 'serious political thinker'.

Although the formal coherence and operations of each 'approach' to litera-ture can be carried out 'as a matter of course' because certain techniques have been mastered – have been made to seem 'the most natural thing possible' through a process of institutionalized training – it is now the credibility of the games themselves that is being questioned. Springing, as they do, from particular 'forms of life' a questioning of the language-games inevitably involves an attack on the ways of living that sustain them. This is one of the most interesting implications of Wittgenstein's view of language as social, as imbedded in social practices, and as constituting and limiting particular forms of action and behaviour. For this is not an idle 'academic' debate about the meaning of words. Nor can it be resolved by an appeal to an all-encompassing science. It is, as Bloor says, about the *ownership* of concepts (see 1983: 80), about convincing us that certain descriptions and explanations capture the *true* character of a particular phenomenon, and are therefore natural.

Wittgenstein's view of language enables us to distance ourselves from any set of claims to knowledge; 'it robs them of their self-evidence and finality, and this can often help to make their social components more visible' (Bloor, 1983: 38). An uncovering of the social components of our naturalized reading and teaching of literature can only, it seems to me, be a good thing. It might break the log-jam of petrified theoretical disagreements by showing the sustaining forms of life that maintain those disagreements. Like other descrip-tions of the 'this is really that' kind this is based ultimately on rhetoric. Wittgenstein makes this quite clear when he remarks to his students at the end of the third lecture on aesthetics:

> I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another ... how much I'm doing is persuading people to change their style of thinking. (Wittgenstein, 1964: 28)

4. The current debate

The three aspects of Wittgenstein's thinking that are most important for a discussion of literature and literary theory are (a) the definition of meaning as use, (b) the denial that meaning is a mental event, and (c) the claim that language is acquired through a process of social training. The corollary of each of these insights is (a) that words have no essential meanings, either inherently through reference to reality or via an abstract system of rules which dictates their use in advance, (b) the subject which uses language is consti-tuted by and through language while still being able to use it in new ways, and (c) that language stems from a variety of social practices which control and make possible various forms of discourse, or, in Wittgenstein's jargon, lan-guage-games.

In a complex, challenging and often problematic work, John M. Ellis (1976) accepts Wittgenstein's rejection of the reference theory of meaning and adopts his theory of 'use' to tackle the old chestnut, the search for the definition of literature. His argument constitutes one of the most sustained applications of Wittgenstein to attack the traditional (mostly formalist) beliefs

that literary works are literature because of a set of inherent properties which constitute their literariness. In the case of Anglo-American formalism these properties are a set of universal human values and, in the case of Russian Formalism, the defamiliarization of perception. Later formalists sought the essence of 'poetic' language in its fundamental difference from ordinary language, in its deviance from normal 'grammaticalness', or in its calling attention to its own forms of signification. Such a definition of literature seems to commit itself to the notion that 'Literature' creates itself by virtue of particular, essential properties, values or functions. Its status as 'Literature' is inscribed within it; we merely recognize this inscription and classify it accordingly.

Ellis suggests that the search for essential, ahistoric properties rests on a reference theory of language which is committed to the idea that the meaning of the word 'literature' resides in the object to which it refers, i.e. for it to have any meaning at all there must be a stable body of works with common properties to which it can point. Indicating the inadequacy of defining 'poetic' language in terms of its deviation from the rules of ordinary grammar and observing the failure to isolate 'literary' properties which are not part of non-literary language, Ellis argues that we should define literature by use rather than reference. Literature is *any* work which a particular community uses as literature, i.e. reads, values and talks about in a particular way. Literature, therefore, has no intrinsic value or set of common properties which make it valued; rather it is literature *because* it is valued in a particular way. It is constituted within a social language-game, and serves a particular form of life.

The analogy which Ellis uses to make this point is the concept of weeds. There are no properties which we can isolate as being definitive of weeds. Weeds are simply plants that we do not want in our gardens, fields, or parks. What is more, different plants will be considered weeds under different circumstances. There is no essential weed. Like the concept weed, the concept literature depends entirely on its use within specific social practices. Thus these concepts are socially and historically specific; they are bound up with the values of a specific community; they derive their meaning from their relation in use to other, related concepts; and, most important, they may change as the cultural relations of the society change.

This approach leads Ellis to claim that 'to ask for the most general statements about literature is to ask about its function in human life' (1976: 232).

It seems that any account of literature which is influenced by a careful reading of Wittgenstein will account for it in thoroughly social terms. 'What belongs to a language-game,' Wittgenstein says in the 'First Lecture on Aesthetics', 'is the whole of a culture' (1976: 8), and in the remarks collected and published as *Zettel*, 'only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning' (1976: 31e). This means that the reading and dissemination of literature (its function in human life) are *interested* activities, bound up with particular socially constituted ways of evaluation, seeing, and behaving. Just as the community makes the subject in its linguistic image, we make literature in accordance with social needs and interests.

Wittgenstein suggests that although reasons can be given from within the

language-game as to why certain moves are made and others excluded, the ultimate justification for its privileging lies outside the game, in social practice – one finally has to say, simply, 'this is how we do it'. But, as Terry Eagleton points out in his latest work, the opponent can always reply, 'Well do something else' (1983: 126). This is as true of the practice of adhering to the Law of the Excluded Middle as it is of 'prac. critting' the irony in Jane Austen. What this reply indicates is that disagreements over the definition of literature, or the practice of criticism, or the quest and methods of philosophers are not merely about changing academic games but about abandoning practices, ways of living, forms of life. And this is also why metaphysical statements, claims about the absolute nature of things, are so seductive: they form a last (and often very strong) line of defence surrounding the forms of life which sustain our language-games. Metaphysical claims are also valuable ways of initiating programmes for action. They stave off incapacitating doubts and questions, and allow us to do things as a matter of course, just as commitment to the principles of logic enables us to continue unhindered and unshaken in what we normally call thinking.

It is therefore extremely difficult to be a consistent anti-essentialist. It is much easier to ground the privileging of a particular language-game in the claim that *it,* at last, reflects the world as it really is, than to admit consistently that one's adoption of that language-game, and one's absolute conviction that it is the right one, lies not in the ineffable nature of reality itself, but in the fact that it enables one to achieve specific social and cultural purposes, to live and act in a particular way, and to train others in accordance with this programme. We are convinced by redescriptions of the 'this is really that' type, Richard Rorty suggests, not because of their epistemological rightness, but by asking questions of the form: 'What would it be like to believe that? What would happen if I did? What would I commit myself to?' And when we praise or blame such redescriptions 'we show how the decision to assert them fits into a whole complex of decisions about what terminology to use, what books to read, what projects to engage in, what life to live' (1976: 163).

Derrida's now infamous statement that 'there is nothing outside the text' is an apt reminder that our language-games have no transcendental guarantees. But while endorsing its denial of epistemoloy a Wittgensteinian view of language would add the qualification: there is nothing outside the text except human activity. Against the notion (metaphysical in its own way) that meaning is *necessarily* an endless free play of writing, Wittgenstein's theory sees meaning as something that is produced within and through collective social practices. The linguistic system – writing, signifier, signified, *langue* – has no autonomous, inevitable process of deferment or dissemination inscribed within its nature independently of human activity.

That anything can be made to have sense or to lack sense or to seem incomplete or unstable is one of the later Wittengenstein's major insights. But this does not lead him to conclude that nothing is ever complete or stable. His theory of language-games and their basis in forms of life leads him to deny the usefulness of the search for an ultimate standard of exactness of meaning. There is no such thing – all we need to do to live with the inexactness of our

concepts is to abandon the philosophical quest for ultimate grounds. We have to learn to stop doing philosophy. Derrida, on the other hand, is plagued by philosophy, for all his attempts to deconstruct it. Living its death he cannot announce its extinction.

Instead of painstakingly rehearsing the impossibility of ultimate meaning we need to say: We are not concerned with 'ultimate' meaning, 'final' reality, 'pure' presence. We're quite happy to muddle through without conceptual schemes, knowing that they serve no metaphysical purpose. We accept this so-called lack and are happy to do with a less than transcendental match between concepts and the *ding-an-sich*. The *ding-an-sich* is, like mental images, a wheel idling in the machine of meaning – we can manage to do quite well without it, unhindered by the great quest of philosophy. To put the point more concretely: the claim that everything is an endless play of *écriture* is less likely to impress us when we are living in a society where the inability to read and write makes life intolerable for a large group of the population; or, to use another example, where to train people in a particular way of reading Shake-speare or Fugard means in some way to uphold or to challenge ways of living that deny others the right to read (or eat, or live where they wish, or vote, or work, or whatever). This is what it means to say that what belongs to a language-game is the whole of a culture.

The test for a theory of language and literature is not merely the question, 'Is it right about the nature of signification?' but rather 'What would it be like to believe that? What would happen if I did? What would I be committing myself to?' These are pertinent, difficult questions in any society, but they seem to me to be particularly important to someone engaged with the teach-ing of literature in South Africa at the moment. These questions need to be asked, not only of the language-games that challenge those that we were trained into playing by habit, but also of the stream of life that supports those habits. Wittgenstein alerts us to the fact that a single language-game may be used for different purposes. So values and hierarchies entrenched in our uses of literature are often used to sustain similar values and hierarchies in the culture as a whole, in the same way that descriptions of nature have been used to entrench particular arrangements within society.[8] We may finally support the implications of our practice as purveyors and definers of the function of literature within the culture as a whole, but we may also be shocked by what our theories and practice commit us to.

Those who ignore the implications of the current struggle between 'normal' and 'abnormal' discourse, new and old language-games, have every right to do so – but they may find that the forms of life of which their literary theories and practice area manifestation will one day no longer be viable. In the face of 'the problem of the sign' we can do many things except escape the social matrix of which we and our discipline are a part. We can acknowledge openly what thinking and believing commit us to, we can hide behind autonomous meta-languages and synchronic, self-regulating systems, we can remain silent, or we can engage in Nietzschian laughter. But even laughter, as Wittgenstein has shown, is inextricably part of a language-game.

Notes

1. See Christopher Norris (1982) and (1983); Charles Altieri, 'Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Theory' (1976); Newton Garver (1973); and Marjorie Grene (1976).
2. See Richard Rorty (1976).
3. See the discussions of this in Frederic Jameson (1972), and Rosalind Coward and John Ellis (1977).
4. This is the title of a chapter in David Bloor (1983), a work to which this paper is much indebted.
5. In this article Dodgson shows that a rule permitting a conclusion to be drawn from a premise cannot itself be treated as a further premise without generating an infinite regress. This demonstration supports Wittgenstein's crucial claim that rules cannot ultimately be explained by reference to other rules.
6. Wittgenstein's objection to Freud rests finally with a statement about the historical context of Freud's thinking:

   Freud was influenced by the 19th century idea of dynamics – an idea which has influenced the whole treatment of psychology. He wanted to find some one explanation which would show what dreaming is. He wanted to find the *essence* of dreaming. And he would have rejected any suggestion that he might be partly right but not altogether so. If he was partly wrong, that would have meant for him that he was wrong altogether – that he had not really found the essence of dreaming. (Wittgenstein, 1970: 48)

7. Compare Bloor's account of the way in which language-games may be used for different power-related purposes:

   Cultural mechanisms of this kind have been called 'social uses of nature'. They represent the most important instances of the general principle that a language-game can serve more than one need at once. The world is understood in such a way that it becomes a reason for upholding the social order. It is this social use that explains why some beliefs have a privileged and fixed status within a system of empirical knowledge. Social life itself revolves around them and holds them in place. (1983: 148)

8. See Bloor, 1983: 148-149.

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