WITTGENSTEIN AND CRITICISM
Towards a Praxiological View of the Text

A.W. McHoul

INTRODUCTION

FROM SIXTEENTH CENTURY metaphysical views of language to the modern concerns of structuralism, semiology and generative semantics, philosophers and linguists have sought in vain for a simple relation of words to objects, of sentences and propositions to situations and states of affairs. The linguistic philosopher's stone has been a metaphysical correspondence, the isomorphism of word and world. The tendency—which we shall call 'linguistic essentialism' or 'correspondence theories of meaning'—still exists in implicit form at the roots of much linguistic thinking. But in philosophy the spectre was put to rest by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the studies which led to Philosophical Investigations and which rejected the most sophisticated form of linguistic essentialism—logical atomism—which, in turn, had received its fullest realisation in the earlier Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Yet in those disciplines which deal with linguistic formations but which also take for granted the work which language performs, the essentialist doctrine remains latent. Literary criticism is a case in point. The purpose of this paper is to show this and to suggest how criticism might benefit from (a) making literary language itself an object of study (as opposed to language's manifestation as a text), thereby being able to (b) reject its implicit acceptance of the essentialism paradigm, (c) replacing that acceptance, as the later Wittgenstein did, with what will be called a 'praxiological' view, and (d) looking at texts in this light. The story of Wittgenstein's shift from logic to praxiology is the story of a potential shift in the paradigm of literary criticism.

In what follows we shall ask: 'What is the essentialist view of language and meaning as it is found in the early Wittgenstein?'; 'How is it uncovered in the work of one literary critic, F.R. Leavis?'; 'What is the critique of essentialism that Wittgenstein performed in the Investigations?'; and 'How does this critique lend itself to the methodology of literary criticism?'.

WHAT IS ESSENTIALISM?

Within Wittgenstein's early conception of language, ordinary propositions such as 'The Earth goes round the Sun', 'Moses led the Israelites', and 'The President of the USA wears glasses' were taken to be vague. Despite this vagueness, it was thought that their ultimate clarity and hence their having meaning could be uncovered by analysis. It was a tacitly assumed and rarely questioned fact that such ordinary propositions must in some way be imperfect because they lacked the clarity of synthetic logical languages. The very existence of analysis was due to this supposed imperfection. In turn, the supposed existence of this imperfection was due to concerns with analysis as the correct method of philosophy. This is not the first circularity we shall meet on this terrain.

What was this analysis? The process is something analogous to the following story. I say to you, 'My chair is standing in the corner'. I have uttered
a proposition, a simple declarative sentence. You begin analysis when you ask, 'What do you mean by "your chair", by "standing", by "the corner" ...?' I continue the analysis by giving a brief re-phrasing in place of each of the terms that (for the sake of analysis) puzzle you. Again, I will use propositions: 'My chair is the green object composed of four legs, a back and a seat that you can see over in the corner ...', and so on. You will then ask what I mean by each of the items in my second set of propositions and I will furnish a further set in reply. This could go on ad infinitum but eventually, it is hoped, we will reach ultimate clarity and the vagueness of the original propositions will become the clarity of ultimate analysis. The process of analysis is something like this story.

The point of final analysability that we hopefully reach is a logical limit, some such point must exist for the analysis to be 'over and done with'. At this point, the elementary propositions we have arrived at will consist purely of simple names which will have one-to-one correspondence, or isomorphism, with the simple objects intended by the initial, ordinary proposition. In fact, no example of an elementary proposition has ever been recorded. All we can say is that it would look like a string of names, much simpler than ordinary names ('car', 'tree', 'chair', 'house') because these are themselves composites or complexes. The names would be atomic, that is, not further reducible.

Further, the relation of the names is identical with the relation or form of the simple objects in the state of affairs initially given by the unanalysed proposition. Here again, an approximation will have to suffice. Suppose I say, 'My fork is to the left of my knife'. The finally analysed proposition might look like the following: 'Fork Knife', where the spatial arrangement of the word is isomorphic with the spatial arrangement of the objects in the original state of affairs; 'Fork' to the left, 'Knife' to the right. Again, 'The aeroplane is above the ground' becomes 'aeroplane ground'.

Substitute simple names for the complexes 'aeroplane' and 'ground' and you have something like an elementary proposition.

What analysis aims for is a picture of the state of affairs represented by the proposition. This is 'the picture theory of the proposition'. The elementary proposition, as it is hypothesised in the Pezatada, reaches out for the situation it pictures. It is a projection of the situation and shares its form just as the picture on a screen in the cinema is a projection of the cellulose frame illuminated by the projection equipment. After analysis we can, as it were, see the lines of projection between the words and the world just as we can see the projection lines in a darkened cinema. Or, to use Wittgenstein’s example, just as we can imagine the lines of projection between the original situation in which a traffic accident took place and the arrangement of models in the traffic court after the fact. For the early Wittgenstein, the ordinary sentences of our daily speech, by containing the possibility of analysis, project on to the reality they are said to represent. The job of the analyst is simply to clear up the way in which this is possible, the way in which the meaning of a word is the object which it denotes—this is its reference—and the way in which the meaning of a proposition is the state of affairs which it pictures—this is its sense.

**HOW IS ESSENTIALISM FOUND IN LITERARY CRITICISM?**

There are a number of steps involved in answering this question. For the sake of clarity they are presented below in the form of a list.

1. As we saw above, according to the essentialist thesis, a picture is a correct picture of reality if its form or structure is identical with the structure of the fact it pictures. We called this process 'projection', 
2. For a piece of language to be a correct picture of reality, there must be a point at which its structure is identical with the structure of the fact it represents. The process of establishing that identity is called 'verification'.

3. Logical analysis, according to the *Tractatus*, brings ordinary language to this point: the 'analysed form'.

4. Literary criticism, as it is practised by P.R. Leavis, sets up some analogous demands for the language of literature, even though it may not always be specifically 'linguistic' in orientation. An item of literary language may be judged by its capacity to picture a fact correctly or incorrectly. This Leavis calls 'concrete realisation'. Pleas for the non-translatability of literature such as those of Lodge reinforce the supposed sacredness of the bond between word and world. A rough motto for this idealisation would be: if we spoke even a (fractionally) different language, we would perceive a different world. The precision of the author's word is taken as an index of the precise world we supposedly imagine when we read.

5. A situation which is correctly pictured by its literary-linguistic expression is said to be 'concretely realised' or 'sharply imagined'. 'Imagination' is no longer used to refer to questions of creative mental play but to the ability to 'see it as it is'.

6. The only permissible use of imagination, for Leavis, is its 'sharp' form. That is, imagination of a state of affairs is said to be sharply done if we can picture what would be the case were this state of affairs an actual one. In the early Wittgenstein the same thing is expressed as:

   To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true.

7. It is, for both the early Wittgenstein and for Leavis, impossible to express in understandable language an impossible state of affairs. Those who try are either doomed to failure, according to Wittgenstein, or 'romantic', according to Leavis. For Wittgenstein and for Leavis the (empirical/imaginable) world is all that is the case.

8. The analogy of Leavis' criticism and Wittgenstein's logical analysis is as follows: for any given state of affairs there is a hypothetical best expression of it. For Wittgenstein, 'best' is a matter of correspondence or agreement with the empirical universe. For Leavis, it is a matter of correspondence or agreement with an imaginable universe. For Wittgenstein, a proposition either matches or doesn't match a real state of affairs. It is either true or false. For Leavis, a piece of literary language either matches or doesn't match an imaginably real state of affairs. It either does or does not 'concretely realise' that state of affairs.

9. For Wittgenstein, no expression of an impossible state of affairs can actually 'say' anything. Attempts at producing them give rise to nonsense. An example would be something like 'God is blue', which has no corresponding empirical fact. This can have no truth-value; it is neither true nor false but simply unsayable. On the other hand we have incorrect expressions of possible states of affairs, for example, 'Jones is wise', given the empirically verifiable fact that Jones is wise. This is a false proposition. Lastly, there are correct expressions of possible states of affairs which are true propositions, such as 'Jones is wise', given the empirically verifiable fact that Jones is wise.

10. For Leavis, no expression of impossible (that is, unimaginable by Leavis) states of affairs can exist. Attempts, such as the escapist poems of the Victorian 'poetasters' give rise to romanticism and various other sorts of negative labels. Secondly, incorrect expressions of possible states of affairs are labelled 'not concretely realised' and may also be
called 'romantic'. An example would be Shelley's description of a flame, which is discussed below. The point is that Shakespeare's, unlike Shelley's, flame has positive correlation with Leavis' imaginable flame, just as 'Jones is unwise' has positive correlation with the fact that Jones is unwise.

11. The analogous relation between Leavis' criticism and the early Wittgenstein's analysis is therefore clear. While this analogy holds structurally, at least one aspect of it gives us cause for concern. Talking of the propositions of natural science, though not of the propositions of logic, Wittgenstein says:

In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality. It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false.\[13\]

In Leavis' case we are dealing with an imaginable reality; in Wittgenstein's an empirical reality. The case for concern is the appearance of Leavis' name in all this; i.e., the phrase 'Leavis' imaginable reality'. This makes it possible to say that, from the Wittgensteinian position, Leavis appears to decide from the representing expression alone whether it is acceptable or unacceptable. But think what complete freedom of judgement this allows! It is probable that the term 'imagination' is misused here. What Leavis is actually doing, in order to accomplish his analyses, is closer to the decision between 'I like it/I don't like it'. At this point, the appearance of rigour and consistency begins to break down.

12. In the Tractatus, unsayable and false propositions are not confused. On the other hand, Leavis often confuses his two analogous categories, i.e., those which attempt to portray an impossible situation and those which badly present a possible situation. We can see this in the following example. In the way that the picture theory of the proposition involves the analyst in matching linguistic items with 'reality', so too does Leavis' analysis of these one and a half lines from Shelley describing a flame:

\[\ldots\] on whose edge Devouring darkness hovers!

Leavis comments:

-A flame may be said to have an edge, but darkness hardly hovers there; it hovers on the shifting, indeterminate confines, for which 'edge' is not the word, of the aura of radiance.\[14\]

Notice here that Leavis is matching Shelley's description of a flame against a proposition which, according to Leavis, more aptly matches the appropriate reality. His proposition is the one underlined above and derives from a description which, supposedly, does represent an imaginable flame, i.e., that of Shakespeare (if Othello, V, ii: 7-13 can be called a 'description'). Leavis' search for a more elementary linguistic expression of the phenomenon in question is comparable, here, with the logical analyst's search for elementary propositions. There are, Leavis would have us believe, simples which parallel the simple names of the Tractatus; viz., 'shifting, indeterminate confines \[\ldots\] of the aura of radiance'. These, in turn, combine to form a more elementary description, not unlike an elementary proposition. Leavis presents, that is, a 'better' propositional statement—a better conclusion to the sentence 'A flame is \ldots\)'—than that provided by Shelley. It is 'better' in the sense that it can be seen to have positive correlation with reality—'a sharply imagined situation', 'a concretely imagined particular situation'\[15\]—and, hence, is 'true'. Strangely enough, Leavis has also said:

The critic—the reader of poetry—is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which
he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process.\textsuperscript{17}

The confusion of categories is fairly evident here in that there can, no doubt, exist some imaginable thing called 'a flame'. This much is acknowledged by Leavis\textsuperscript{17} and Shakespeare's 'correct' imagination of one. What Leavis is trying to show is that Shelley has not expressed this imaginable entity correctly. Yet there is no explicit acknowledgement that this may be an entirely different matter from attempting to express the impossible, as the Victorian poetasters did, at least according to Leavis. For the purposes of excluding writers from the 'tradition' or 'the line of wit', attempting the impossible is as negatively ranked as achieving the possible badly. 'Not concretely realised' is as good, for Leavis' practical purposes, as 'cannot be concretely realised'.

WHAT IS THE CRITIQUE OF ESSENTIALISM?

Garfinkel\textsuperscript{18} asked his students to report on a short piece of naturally occurring conversation in which they had taken part. When the transcripts were presented, Garfinkel had the students write out for each utterance a description of what it was the parties were talking about. Here is an example:

Dana succeeded in putting a penny in a parking meter today without being picked up. This afternoon as I was bringing Dana, our four-year-old son, home from the nursery school, he succeeded in reaching high enough to put a penny in a parking meter when we parked in a meter zone, whereas before he has always had to be picked up to reach that high.

Now, this kind of exercise reveals that what is said (left side) conceals much of what is talked about (right side). While the parties could get all of the information on the right side from the simple utterances on the left, this was a matter of tacit understanding—i.e., it was not said 'in so many words'. Furthermore, Garfinkel persisted in telling his students that the righthand columns were not detailed enough. They did not, he insisted, say everything about what was 'spoken of but left unsaid'. As students re-wrote and re-wrote the righthand sides of their transcripts, it began to occur that the 'reference' of what was said could not be stated in so many words. The possibilities were enormous, the list infinitely extendable. Garfinkel drew from this the conclusion that, in using language in the settings of daily life—having a conversation, reading a newspaper, novel, etc.—understanding is not performed by having a knowledge-in-common of the referents of words but by knowing how someone or something is speaking to us. Understanding is a matter of attending to utterances over a course of time, as contextually located, as produced for this audience, by this speaker or author. Further, the situation itself is the situation of speaking and hearing. The talk and the situation which produces it reflexively define one another and act as indexes for one another over a temporal course. So, instead of assuming a correspondence theory, an inspection of how understanding is actually accomplished in naturally occurring situations brings to our attention the indexicality of our language-use. Or, in Garfinkel's words, we should:

\[
\text{[...]} \text{drop the assumption's accompanying theory of signs, according to which a 'sign' and 'referent' are respectively properties of something said and something talked about, and which in this fashion proposes sign and referent to be related as corresponding contents.}\textsuperscript{19}
\]

Bar-Hillel\textsuperscript{20} introduced the distinction between 'objective' and 'indexical' expressions. The former, he says, depend solely on the referents of their con-
tents. An example would be: 'Ice floats on water'. The latter, indexical, expressions depend rather on the pragmatic content of their production. The point of quoting this research is that no examples of the former can in fact be given. 21 Think how 'Ice floats on water' could be used, for instance, ironically, e.g., in a context where a person known to be sexually frigid is floating in a pool. Think also of the context-dependence of the utterances in a scientific report: a dependence on linguistic situation (e.g., 'It turns blue litmus red'); on the shared competence of a particular audience (e.g., 'Acidity in a solution is given by pH = log10 (1/\[H^+\])); and on the state of knowledge at the time of the utterance (e.g. 'All swans are white' prior to the discovery of Australia by the self-styled 'scientific' community).22), to name but a few.

All utterances, then, carry with them an open-ended 'et cetera', a blank which is potentially infinitely extendable and which is, as it were, 'filled in' by the competent hearer or reader. The literalness of description demanded by the essentialist correspondence theory is immediately cast into doubt, as Harvey Sacks realised:

\[\ldots\] how is the scientific requirement of literal description to be achieved in the face of the fact, widely recognised by researchers, that a description even of a particular 'concrete object' can never be complete? That is, how is a description to be warranted when, however long or intensive it be, it may nonetheless be indefinitely extended? We call this the 'et cetera problem' to note: To any description of a concrete object (or event, or course of action, or etc.), however long, the researcher must add an et cetera clause to permit the description to be brought to a close.23

It is the 'et cetera problem' which Garfinkel's students were facing during the impossible task of providing completely clear accounts of what they were talking about. The impossibility of fully realising all the potential statements (etc.24) of the et cetera clause for any utterance, scientific or mundane, is one and the same impossibility as that of fully analysing a proposition. Wittgenstein had realised, even in the Tractatus, that 'all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order'.25 However, he then mistook this order for a latent ideal-logical clarity somewhere at the root of our ordinary utterances. In fact that order or rationality is an order 'for all practical purposes',26 where this term only partially reveals the contextual specifics of any actual occasion in which language is used, including texts. Hence, in his critique of the Tractatus, the Investigations, Wittgenstein was able to say:

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.27

The recommendation, then, is: To understand a piece of language, look to how it is understood by its users, i.e., look to how the talk indexes the situation of its generation and how, reflexively, the situation indexes the talk. As opposed to the Tractatus/Leavis-view, I take this to be a 'rotation of the axis' of investigation 'about the fixed point of our real need'.28 Instead of explaining the meaning of a linguistic item, we should simply do description29 of its use by its actual users, who may or may not be ourselves. The research question is: How do users (speakers, hearers, texts, readers) display to one another their shared understanding of how they are speaking or reading? In short: What are the rules of the particular language-game in hand, and how do we know how to follow them? I take this epistemological question to be the untapped methodological 'silence' which pervades all criticism.29

What is the critique of essentialism in the final analysis (or lack of it)! that its view of language and meaning describes none of the actual practices which
are employed in deciding the sense of linguistic items by their users. In Wittgenstein's words, to act under the assumptions of a correspondence theory is to

\[ \text{... act...} \] as though we had tried to find the real artichoke

by stripping it of its leaves.\[\text{...}\]

Strip the leaves and you will find you have no artichoke left.

**HOW DOES THIS CRITIQUE HAVE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE METHODS OF LITERARY CRITICISM?**

The text is in perfect order as it stands and that order cannot be established or disestablished by recourse to forms of re-writing 'what it is actually saying or trying to say'. Criticism-as-explanation is a wrong-headed approach for this reason, i.e., there is nothing to explain, explanation requires re-writing, etc.

What the later Wittgenstein, and other contemporary critics of essentialism point to as an object of study is use, actual occasions of use, or the artful, and organised, practices of users of texts. For the sociologist, this would be a valuable end in itself. For the literary critic, however, it would have quite a different function.

We must begin by saying that critics are 'users of texts'. They read and analyse texts with a view to producing interpretations of them. Like any other reader, they use certain interpretative procedures in order to perform that reading and to arrive at an interpretation. That interpretation is the basis for their criticism. At this point, however, the text becomes an object and the procedures which were employed in the critic's constituting it as an object are forgotten. Once the piece of criticism is written, it too becomes an object and the reading procedures which led to it are equally forgotten. I say 'forgotten' although, in the first place, those procedures were simply employed. They were taken-for-granted as 'unremarkable', as what 'anyone' might do.

The praxiological view, on the other hand, suggests that these very procedures become a topic of study. In becoming this for the critic, they constitute the scaffolding, the unapparent methodology on which his criticism is built. By leaving this scaffolding unexplained, the eventual interpretation or criticism appears to 'float freely', unanchored and unanswerable to any methodology.

For these 'hidden methods' to be explicated, criticism would need a supplementary reading-analysis which would state how the text (in the course of reading) and the interpretation which arises from it came to be objects, or facts. This supplementary analysis would take it that there are no objects or facts without their having been accomplished (or, as the phenomenologists have it, 'intended') as objects or facts. Thereby criticism would be supported by a methodological substratum which is an explication of the methods underlying it; methods which are 'there anyway' but simply neglected.

A very short inventory of examples of such methods would be: the temporal sequence of the reading, the necessary prospective-retrospective attention to texts, the imputations of an 'author' which are frequently made, processes of typification, the procedures whereby the reader comes to be able to see the text as a-world-in-itself (reading as the constituting of a world, or indeed the world), the techniques which readers employ in 'tying' one piece of a text with another, and so on. Here I can only indicate a fraction of such 'readerly work', but recent work in-progress on these matters indicates already that there is an enormous complexity and wealth to them.

Particularly interesting here is that, for readers of texts from other cultures, whether those texts are written in English or not, a reflective analysis of
their own readings would bring to the fore the kinds of culture-bound assumptions they 'inadvertently' employ in such readings. Such an awareness, I suggest, would facilitate the possibility of genuinely 'empathetic' readings.

In summary: in that traditional criticism must be founded, at some point, on the practice of reading, it is founded upon practices which go uninvestigated in the normal course of critical activity. Taken for granted is the 'fact' that 'everyone knows how to read' and it is therefore not realised that much of the ensuing (post-reading) analysis is an unexamined upshot of these mundane resources. Dwellers in the edifices of criticism and critical theory neglect the musings in the cellar upon which these edifices are built. Either this, or they deliberately stifle them as unworthy of research. The lesson from the later Wittgenstein is quite literally a rotation of the axis of investigation, a turning around and looking back to the substructure on which all dealings with texts stand.

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NOTES

1. Classical essentialism held that entities such as 'courage, 'blueness', etc. existed independently of courageous men and blue skies. Linguistic essentialism holds that the meaning of words exists in some equally vacuous property of them, independently of human uses of language.


8. Tractatus, §4.024.

9. See the Tractatus, §1.

10. More strictly expressed: at least one simple sign or name in the complete analysed form of such a pseudo-proposition will have no reference.

Tractatus, §5.4713.


12. For these, see the Tractatus, §§6.113 and 6.1222.


16. Elsewhere, Leavis talks of 'the true' or 'real' experience. Revaluation, p.257.

17. F.R. Leavis, 'Literary criticism and philosophy: a reply', Scrutiny 6 (1) 1937. pp.59–70. This quotation, p.61.


24. For not every linguistic utterance is 'doing stating'.

25. Tractatus, #5.5563.


29. This, bearing in mind the problems of description mentioned in the above quotation from Sacks.

30. To his credit, T.A. Richards was one of the few critics to hear this silence. Stripped of its prescriptive elements, How to Read a Page (Beacon Press, Boston, 1959) is still a highly useful data source for the study of the reading process.


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