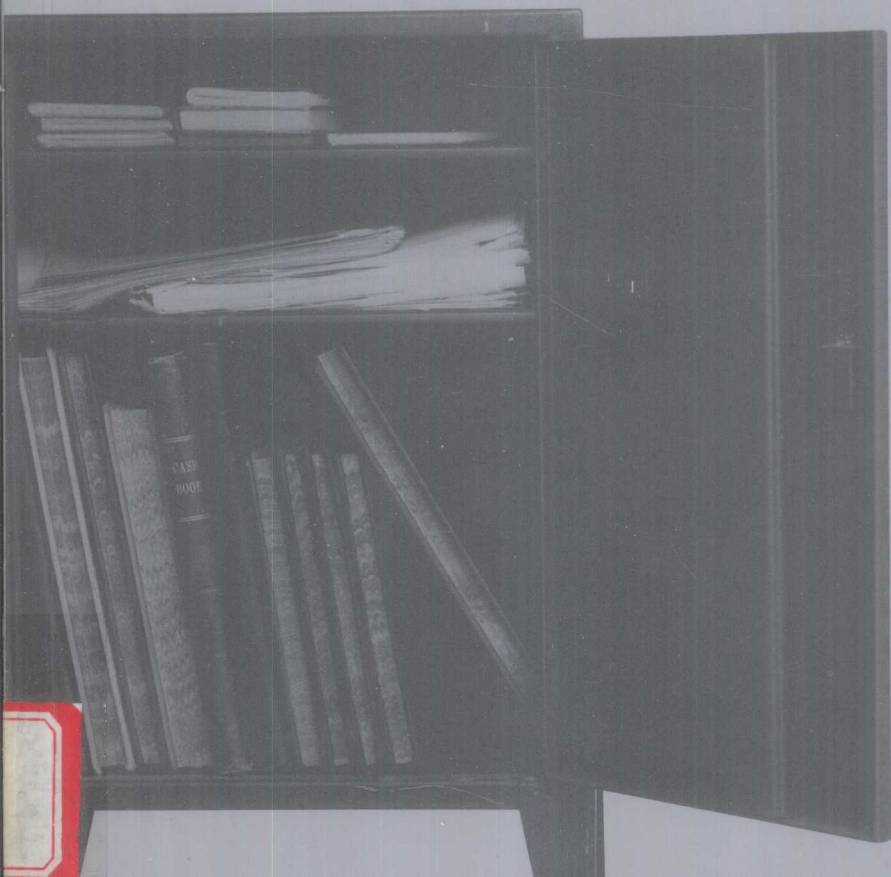# The Literary Wittgenstein

Edited by John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer

THE LITERARY
WITTGENSTEIN

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John Gibson and
Wolfgang Huemer

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: WITTGENSTEIN, LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE

Wolfgang Huemer

The philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein is characterized by an extraordinary interest in language, with remarkable results. Wittgenstein developed a picture of language that radically broke with the tradition and revolutionized the way philosophers approached the topic in the twentieth century. While in his first book, the *Tractatus*,[1] Wittgenstein focused on the question of how words can depict the world, he later came to understand language not as an abstract system, but as a social practice. He counteracted a longstanding tendency among philosophers to reduce language to assertive statements and to focus exclusively on analyzing their logical form with the goal of creating an "ideal language." Wittgenstein's crucial move was to point out that understanding language requires us to focus on how it is used by members of the linguistic community, appreciating all the nuances and varieties of expression that characterize everyday communication. His analyses of "clear and simple language games" at the beginning of the *Investigations* "are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language," but rather "*objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities."[2] Wittgenstein, thus, privileges the richness and diversity of linguistic phenomena, which he explored with extraordinary sensitivity and insight, over the tendency to develop an ideal, rigorously regulated language, a tendency which sacrifices the variety of language games for unattainable exactness and universality.

For Wittgenstein language was not only one of the central problems of philosophy; it was also the key to their solution. Over and over he warned against our urge to misunderstand the workings of our language, pointing out the traps that are built into language and its powers to lead our philosophical paths into dark alleys, to "bewitch our minds."[3] Wittgenstein argued that to solve most philosophical problems we do not need better philosophical theories; we should not aim for *explanation*, but rather for a detailed *description* of the use of our words, providing a "perspicuous representation" (*PI* §122) by means of which we can gain a more profound understanding of language. Philosophical problems, Wittgenstein states, "are solved…by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an

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urge to misunderstand them" (*PI* §109). It is his contention that by making the risks that are inherent in our language manifest, by showing that "grammatical illusions" (*PI* §110) are the true source of most philosophical problems, we can solve these problems, like a therapist who cures his patients by showing them the source of their illness.[4]

Moreover, the importance of language for Wittgenstein is reflected not only by what he said, but also by how he said it: it has often been pointed out that the fascination of Wittgenstein's works lies to a considerable degree in their literary quality; like few other philosophers he succeeded in creating a harmony between the literary form and philosophical content of his texts. In the *Tractatus*, the importance of the structure of language is underlined by the strict form of the text – all statements are enumerated in a hierarchical system – and the aphoristic, yet concise style *shows* what Wittgenstein tries to express: "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (*TLP*, p. 3). The literary style is of central importance not only in Wittgenstein's first book, but also in his later writings, especially in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Once more, Wittgenstein did not adopt the stylistic conventions for philosophical texts at the time, but rather developed a new form of exposition – short *remarks* that are loosely connected to one another – which he thought more appropriate to express his ideas and in general to convey philosophical information. The harmony of style and content in both books that Wittgenstein published or prepared for publication in his lifetime comes not by accident; Wittgenstein struggled to develop a new form of presenting philosophical views,[5] which clearly expresses at a stylistic level his efforts to take new paths in philosophy, leaving the burden of tradition behind.

These three aspects explain why Wittgenstein had an enormous impact on writers and, more generally, on the artistic community. It is not by accident that Wittgenstein's centenary was celebrated in Vienna with a big exhibition, presenting works of art which, in one way or another, have been influenced by Wittgenstein's philosophy. Moreover, we find direct quotations from Wittgenstein's work in literary texts, his life was thematized in literary books as well as films, and there are poets who have even written theoretical texts on Wittgenstein's philosophy.[6] Terry Eagleton hit the nail on the head when he said:

> Frege is a philosopher's philosopher, Sartre the media's idea of an intellectual, and Bertrand Russell every shopkeeper's image of the sage....But Wittgenstein is the philosopher of poets and composers, playwrights and novelists, and snatches of his mighty *Tractatus* have even been set to music.[7]

Given this background it might surprise one that Wittgenstein said relatively little about literature. At some places he mentioned the names of authors he appreciated though without discussing the literary value of their work.[8] Moreover, there are only few theoretical remarks, and no developed theory on

the role which language plays in literary contexts. Although Wittgenstein emphasizes that to understand language we need to take the diversity of linguistic phenomena into account, he hardly discusses questions that are central to the philosophical debates on literature, which might explain why his influence on philosophy of literature and literary theory is less dominant than that on, say, the philosophy of language or philosophy of mind.

The significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for our theoretical understanding of literature is not so much based on his occasional remarks on aesthetics, however, but rather on his general philosophical position. With this volume we present a collection of essays from philosophers and literary theorists who develop Wittgensteinian accounts of literature, who use Wittgenstein's philosophical results to solve problems pertinent to the theory of literature, or show how topics that arise in our reflecting on literature can illuminate our understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Before presenting the contributions to this volume in more detail, however, I want to offer a few considerations of how Wittgenstein's philosophy can be relevant for our theoretical understanding of literature. I will do so by sketching some of Wittgenstein's central moves and pointing out how a new understanding of language can solve problems that are discussed in philosophy of literature and literary theory. My goal is not to outline an uncontested common ground; I will not present basic assumptions that are shared by all contributors of the book – this would be impossible and unnecessary, for they approach the topic from very different perspectives and with different goals. I will rather sketch a rough picture in order to recall Wittgenstein's background and illustrate a few notable respects in which his philosophy can enrich our understanding of literature.

Wittgenstein's background: the referential picture of language

Wittgenstein developed his philosophy at a time when most philosophers, impressed by Russell's analysis of definite descriptions, tried to understand language on the basis of the notions of truth and reference. Both aspects of this referential picture of language, however, are not particularly apt to approach literature; unlike scientific ones, literary texts do not seem to deliver veridical descriptions of the world, but rather to describe fictional scenarios. Moreover, they typically do not refer to objects or events that exist in the actual world. Russell solved this tension in a radical way: he argued, as is well known, that statements containing definite descriptions or proper names are true only if there exists exactly one thing to which the name or description refers. Writing about *Hamlet* he states that "the propositions in the play are false because there was no such man."[9] The problems of this position seem obvious: if statements in literary texts are false, literature cannot be of cognitive value. This position seems to marginalize the value of literature in our society; it becomes mysterious why people are interested in spending their time with writing or reading literary texts in the first place.

Russell's treatment of literature was very influential on, but is not necessarily representative of, the role literature is assigned in the referential picture of language. Various philosophers have presented more subtle accounts which, like Russell's, are based on the concepts of truth and reference. Literature, it was argued, does not communicate truths, but is rather a game of make-believe; it consists of speech-acts similar to the ones we use in ordinary discourse, with some of the conventions that govern ordinary speech acts bracketed; some philosophers have argued that literary texts are taken to be true not of this, but of another possible world; and others that they refer not to ordinary, physical objects, but rather to a special kind of object, typically Meinongian objects, which do not exist, but subsist and, thus, can have properties and be referred to.[10]

All of these approaches struggle with the difficulties inherent to the referential picture: literary language cannot be adequately accounted for on the basis of the notions of truth and reference. As a consequence, it is often viewed as a border case, an aberrant use of language, in which the general rules of linguistic usage are bracketed. According to this view, writers only pretend to use words in the way they are used in ordinary language, but actually do not: they only act as if they made true statements, described the world, raised questions, gave orders, etc., as we do in ordinary language. Literature, however, misses the worldly engagement characteristic of our everyday use of language: descriptions in literary texts cannot be corrected, questions do not wait to be answered, and no one expects orders to be complied with – at least not by the reader. In consequence literature is not seen as part of our ordinary language, but rather as a niche, a language game isolated both from the world and from the rest of language, governed by its own rules. Thus, according to this position, literature can be disregarded in a general account of (ordinary) language.

This view of literature is highly problematic. The strict separation between literary and ordinary language presupposes that we can give criteria to distinguish the two. The argument that literary language works in radically different ways also raises the need to explain how we can understand literary texts in the first place, for that would presuppose that we need to learn this new language. Moreover, if one understands literature as an aberrant use of language one faces difficulties when explaining how we can refine our ordinary linguistic capacities by reading literary texts, and why the latter are often taken to be the paradigmatic cases of informed uses of language – proponents of this view cannot explain, for example, why the *Oxford English Dictionary* often quotes from literary texts to illustrate the use of a word.

A Wittgensteinian picture of literary language

Wittgensteinian accounts of literature can avoid these problems. There are various ways of adopting Wittgenstein's insights to address these and other problems related to literature – as the variety of positions elaborated in the

contributions to this book show. Let me develop here one line of reasoning: Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language is characterized by a move from reference to use; "the meaning of a word," he famously states, "is its use in the language" (*PI* §43). By approaching language as a social practice, Wittgenstein does not put an emphasis on the relation between words and world; but rather focuses on detailed investigations of how words are used in diverse contexts of human practice. Moreover, he refuses the tendency prevalent in the referential picture to reduce all legitimate uses of language to assertive statements, or, more generally, to bearers of truth-value, but recognizes that language can be used in many different ways to pursue a variety of different goals. The aspects of truth and reference do not disappear from this picture, though. They do, however, play a less central role, for they are relevant only insofar as members of the linguistic community use language to refer to objects and events, and sometimes, but by far not always, assert declarative statements that have a truth-value.

Wittgenstein's move has immediate consequences for our understanding of literature. In this picture, literary language is no longer viewed as an aberrant border case, in which language does not work quite the way it does in ordinary discourse. It rather allows us to take literature seriously as one form of linguistic expression among others. Literature is not an isolated language game, the meaning of a word is not radically altered when it is used in a literary text, the general rules of language are not bracketed, and the expressions used do not refer to other kinds of object or other possible worlds; rather they are well grounded in our actual world.

This understanding of literature is not a mere side effect of the Wittgensteinian picture of language, rather it reveals that literary language plays a central role within that complex system of language. If we try to define what is particular about literary texts, we find that they put an emphasis not on *what* is said, but on *how* it is said; literary language makes itself manifest, it focuses more on the texture of expressions than on their content. "In its semantics," we might say with Lubomír Doležel, "literature (poetry) aims in the direction opposite to science: it is a communicative system for activating and putting to maximal use the resources of intensionality in language."[11] Accordingly we can state that at least to some extent in literary texts language itself becomes the topic. More than other texts, thus, literature displays the rules that govern the use of language. By showing what can be said and how it can be said it draws our attention to grammar – it shows in which contexts words can be used and how they can be combined with other words.[12]

The shift from content to form is a general characteristic of literary texts allowing, as it does, for degrees. All genres of literary texts can – in their respective ways – become relevant to our understanding of language. A Wittgensteinian approach to literature does not need to restrict itself to narrative texts like novels, short stories, or plays, but can also take other genres into account, especially poetry, which performs the shift from content to form in a most genuine way. This can open interesting perspectives, since most philosophers who discuss literature

focus on questions concerning fictional texts and consequently restrict themselves mainly to texts that are primarily narrative. Poetry is hardly discussed, but rather treated like a negligible ornament. Richard Rorty, for example, explicitly states that his plea for literature does not extend to poetry. Rorty famously argues that literature – and not moral philosophy – is of central importance for the development of our moral sensitivity and understanding. If one looks at the actual effects that novels and the theories of moral philosophers had on people, Rorty argues, "you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories."[13] Rorty sees poetry in line not with the novelist's power to raise moral consciousness by describing unnecessary details, but rather with moral philosophy's damaging efforts to construct theories: "I have been suggesting," he states, "that we Westerners owe this consciousness and this sensitivity more to our novelists than to our philosophers or to our poets."[14]

Poetry cannot, of course, develop long-winded stories rich in unnecessary details. What Rorty does not appreciate, however, is that poetry can be valuable for our understanding of language precisely because it offers concise and well-wrought formulations. By concentrating on the necessary and finding new ways of saying what is difficult to express, poets take language to its extremes – and sometimes beyond. Even when violating the rules that govern ordinary language they draw our attention to these rules and open them up to critique. In short, they provide concise showcases of the workings of our language, and thus explore – and extend – its limits.[15]

What texts of all literary genres have in common, however, is that they do not only use language to express certain contents, but also direct the readers' attention to language itself. In doing so, literature can illuminate our understanding of the workings of our language; it can become a tool for grammatical investigation. Different genres fulfill this aspect in different ways: novels allow us to describe uncommon situations and to develop a new perspective on everyday situations. By telling stories they provide the context necessary for exploring not only the grammar of our language, but also the limits of our form of life.[16] In this way, literature can, as Rorty insisted, even contribute to raising our moral understanding, not by increasing our knowledge through the communication of information, but by describing situations that trigger our acknowledgment of the human condition.[17] Poets, on the other hand, provide short, carefully crafted texts that are particularly apt for minute and acute analyses and critique of single expressions and their roles in language. By developing new metaphors they shed light on the limitations of ordinary language to express certain situations or feelings; moreover, they denounce our unreflected, habitual perception of everyday situation by depicting them in an original way, thus developing new perspectives. In short, literature can provide important insights into the workings of our ordinary language – and, consequently, into our form of life and the reality we live in – something which it can do only because literary texts do not use language in some aberrant way; rather they use ordinary language towards which literature also draws our attention. Literature, thus, is not a niche-

phenomenon; it must not be viewed as an unnecessary but entertaining orna-ment, but rather as a practice central to our language without which we might not even be able to master a language as complex as ours in the first place.

Wittgenstein's later picture of language has further important consequences for literary theory: his casting of language and meaning as primarily public, embedded in our social practices, entails a view of the relationship between a speaker's utterance and his intentions that can be illuminating for the way in which we approach literary texts. To understand what a person means with an utterance, according to this view, we do not need to read her mind to grasp the meaning she attaches to this utterance, but rather listen to what she says. Meanings are not in the head, they are in the words anchored in social practice and physical environment. This approach can shed an interesting light upon the question of whether knowing the author's intention is relevant for an under-standing of a literary text, as Colin Lyas has shown.[18] Following Wilmsatt and Beardsley's attack on the intentional fallacy – or, on the continental side, Barthes's and Foucault's point concerning the death of the author – many philosophers and literary theorists have argued that the author's intentions should not be relevant for the interpretation of a text. This argument presupposes that we can distin-guish between the text and the author's intentions, the latter being something over and above the text, something that can be located in the author's head. As soon as one allows for this distinction, the role of intentions for interpreting a text becomes dubious, for we can never know what the author really intended.

If we adopt a Wittgensteinian stance we can see that Wilmsatt and Beardsley have gone too far. We cannot completely dismiss the author's inten-tions for we would not be able to recognize something as a literary text if we did not assume that it was authored by a person to whom we ascribe certain intentions. If we want to know what the intentions of the author are, however, we have to read the text. Wilmsatt and Beardsley are right to point out that to understand a text we do not need to conjecture what the author could have meant. The author's intentions are relevant only insofar as they are manifest in the text – there is no other place to look for them but the text and the social practices that are connected to it.

The considerations developed in the last few paragraphs stem from a certain understanding of one aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy: his move from the referential to a communitarian picture of language. They show, as I hope, that Wittgenstein's philosophy can prove extremely relevant for questions pertinent to literature. Moreover, they show that literature is not a niche-phenomenon, but a relevant part of our social practice. The urge to do philosophy comes from our urge to understand what is going on with and around us, or, as Wittgenstein once put it, to find our "way about" (*PI* §123). This involves an understanding of who we are and what is essential to our form of life. I have tried to show that a Wittgensteinian approach to literature can appreciate that in order to under-stand ourselves we need, among other things, to pay attention to the central role literature plays in our form of life.