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Language, all said and done

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Abstract: I begin, with Wittgenstein's help, by opposing the view that language is rooted in principles biologically programmed in our brains in advance of use; arguing, instead, that it is rooted in human action and reaction, and embedded in our practices. I then discuss the fact that language is a human construct, but that this does not prevent its being autonomous. Because language is a perennial collaborative achievement – hinged on a grammar conditioned by our human form(s) of life – it has a force and a life of its own. This is not to say that it is impervious to change. I suggest that language best evolves in the hands of creative writers who, through interrogating, wrestling with, and sensitively wielding language, are able to make it say, show and do things that question and enrich our concepts, and thereby our understanding of ourselves.

Keywords: Language; Grammar; Literature; Certainty; Wittgenstein

Invited Article.

> … language does connect up with my own life. And what is called 'language' is something made up of heterogeneous elements and the way it meshes with life is infinitely various.
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> Wittgenstein (PG: 66)
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> … language is never the mere clothing of a thought which otherwise possesses itself in full clarity.[1]
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> Merleau-Ponty (1964: 8)

1. Grammar and life

Chomsky was wrong. Yes, grammar is a *sine qua non* condition of human language, but grammar is not developed from a set of linguistic principles biologically programmed in

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[1] '… le langage n'est jamais le simple vêtement d'une pensée qui se posséderait elle-même en toute clarté.'

our brains in advance of use. As Wittgenstein has groundbreakingly made clear, grammar is internally related to human life and action. This is what his concept of the language-*game*, as well as his often-reiterated conviction that 'at the beginning is the deed', convey. It is rules or norms that are necessary to the existence of a language, and these do not pre-exist language but are embedded in its practice: «*Practice* gives the words their sense» (CV: 85). As John Canfield puts it: «The practice underlies the rule rather than vice-versa» (1975: 114), which is to say that grammatical rules merely express or bring out our normative use of words and expressions. The child assimilates these rules as it assimilates the language – through guidance in, and exposure to, correct usage. Peter Hacker: «Rules for the use of words are exhibited in human discourse, in explanations of meaning, in corrections of errors, in what counts as accepted usage» (2010, 29). *Pace* Chomsky, nothing more complicated than that.

But for all that, Wittgenstein does not think his conception of grammar clashes with ourstandard conception of grammar: it extends it. For, as he insists, «any explanation of the use of language» is «grammar» (MWL: 69). On his view, «A rod has no length» is as ungrammatical as «A has rod length»; but as he concedes (to Moore), the former violation of grammar is of interest only to the philosopher (*ibid.*), whereas syntax – albeit also part of grammar – is not the part philosophers are interested in. Wittgenstein leaves it to grammarians to bring out the syntactic aspect of use. Also, grammarians may find it of interest to map grammatical rules, but this does not make the apprehension of rules as such relevant to language acquisition. In picking up the correct syntactico-semantic use of language – its grammar – the child is not picking up rules as such, but simply: correct use[2].

But how, then, is grammar internally related to human life and action? For one thing, in that it is internally related to use. In fact, grammar is rooted in behaviour or action.

2.   From deed to word

One of the important things Wittgenstein said about language is that it has its root in gesture – or, as he also put it, in «action», and more precisely: «reaction» or «instinct»: «What we call meaning must be connected with the primitive language of gestures» (BT: 24). By this, he means instinctive gestures and reactions which – through evolution and enculturation – get replaced by words. This – Wittgenstein's «primitivism» (Canfield 1997: 258) – prompted Michael Tomasello to realize that «[i]f we want to understand human communication, … we cannot begin with language». Contrary to primatologist dogma, apes' *gestures*, not their vocalizations, are the precursors of human language[3] (2008: 59; 53-5).

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[2] This is not to say that correct use cannot be facilitated or improved by looking up rules in grammar textbooks. Indeed second languages can be acquired through textbooks because they basically rely on our native language. On Philippe Narboux' view, training is a necessary but insufficient condition for the learning of a *native* language whereas *second-language* acquisition doesn't require it, and can rely on nothing other than ostensive definition because it relies on previous training (2004: 136).

[3] On this, see "From Deed to Word: Gapless and Kink-Free Enactivism" in (Moyal-Sharrock 2021).

Though I have not found it to be as clear, consistent or elaborate as Wittgenstein's, there are intimations of this stance in Merleau-Ponty: «The first speech found its meaning in the context of already common forms of conduct» (1973: 42-43):

> The first speech was not established in a world without communication, since it emerged from forms of conduct that were already common and took root in a sensible world which had already ceased to be a private world. To be sure, speech brought to this primordial and mute communication as much and more than it received from it. Like all institutions, speech transformed what was congeneric in man. Speech inaugurated a new world. (1973: 42).

When Wittgenstein writes that «[t]he study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or languages» (BB: 17), he does not, by this, mean words or symbols, but reactions:

> The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop.
> Language – I want to say – is a refinement. 'In the beginning was the deed.' (CE: 395)

> Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive kinds of behaviour towards other human beings, and our language is merely an auxiliary to, and further extension of, this relation. Our language-game is an extension of primitive behaviour. (Z: 545)

> What, however, is the word "primitive" meant to say here? Presumably, that the mode of behaviour is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*: that it is the prototype of a mode of thought and not the result of thought. (RPP: I, 916).

Language, then, is a refinement, or «an extension», of our primitive behaviour; it emerges from the development of some of our animal or natural reactions. Not just any natural reaction – not singular or idiosyncratic ones, like tics – but our *common* natural reactions; what Wittgenstein calls «the common behaviour of mankind» (PI: 206): reactions such as crying when in pain or sad; smiling when glad; jumping when startled; gasping or screaming when afraid; but also reacting to someone's suffering. He writes: «In its most primitive form [the language-game] is a reaction to somebody's cries and gestures, a reaction of sympathy or something of the sort» (CE: 414). As he says, these instinctive common reactions or action patterns are the *prototypes* of our modes of thought (RPP: I, 916), of our concepts. And so, the basis for the development of language is constituted by a number of such distinct instinctive, behavioural patterns which John Canfield calls «proto-language games» (1996: 128). Without these behavioural patterns, there would be no language:

> […] it is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists in steady ways of living, regular ways of acting (CE: 397).

> Our acquiring concepts, such as pain, requires that we have appropriate (i.e. normal) human reactions: "If a child looked radiant when it was hurt, and shrieked for no apparent reason, one couldn't teach him to use the word 'pain'". (LPP: 37)

That language is based on reaction is the case phylogenetically as well as ontogenetically; for these natural configurations of behaviour – such as: «[t]he natural, untutored behaviour of one pre-linguistic hominid helping another it sees is hurt – are part of the species' inheritance» (*ibid.*). So that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny[4].

Inasmuch as – both ontogenetically and phylogenetically – language is rooted in behaviour, it cannot take its impetus from explanation: «the teaching of language is not explanation, but training» (PI: 5); «Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination» (OC: 475). Language, then, is an extension of our patterned non-linguistic behaviour through training or enculturation:

> […] how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word "pain" for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. "So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?"—On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it. (PI: 244)

What the adult does when teaching a child to replace the gesture with a wordis, as Stephen Cowley nicely puts it, enable the child «to align its behaviour with the grammar of [the word]», to «attune to a bundle of local customs» (2007: 293).

3. The creation, fertility and autonomy of language

Language owes its existence to human beings: it is our construct and is rooted, as we have seen, in our shared instinctive reactions, in «very general facts of nature» – such as the «common behaviour of mankind» (PI: 56; PI: 206) – but also in our diverse human forms of life. Thus created by us, language is used in a multitude of ways to e.g., express, describe, question, explain and categorise reality, but also to create further reality – as also non-reality, such as fiction. Where language is used to describe the empirical world, it does not create reality; but in other of its uses language is the means by which we create new realities, new ways of being in the world, of relating to the world and to each other: ways of being and living that depend on language both for their emergence and their maintenance. Whereas being alive, hungry or afraid does not depend on language, being rich, religious or married does. It is in the contribution of language to the creation of human practices such as commerce, religion, marriage, science, law and literature that we see the fertility of language emerge. The innumerable forms of human life that owe their existence to language constitute human reality as much as people, mountains and death do. And if some of our language is inextricably bound up with making us what we are, then language is – to borrow a term from Bernard Harrison – «reality-soaked» (1991: 58). J. L. Austin, too, underlined the reality-soaked nature of our concepts and their ingrained embeddedness in human practices:

> … our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of

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[4] Here again, see "From Deed to Word" in Moyal-Sharrock (2021).

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> many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since
> they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at
> least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely
> to think up in our [philosophical] arm-chairs. (1961: 130)

Austin – alongside Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle – is one of the main practitioners of ordinary language philosophy; that is: the view that philosophers should resort to ordinary language to sort out philosophical problems because these problems are not generated by metaphysical complexity but by linguistic confusion. Conceptual elucidation based on an examination of our ordinary use of words should give us the necessary clarity to dissolve philosophical problems. Inasmuch as the use of language is embedded in our practices or, as Austin puts it, in «the phenomena», in sharpening our perception of language, we are sharpening our perception of the phenomena:

> When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what
> situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or 'meanings', whatever they
> may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a
> sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final
> arbiter of, the phenomena. (*ibid.*)

Because language is a collaborative achievement, in using it, we tap into a collective source of meaning embedded in human living. In examining ordinary language, the philosopher examines and reflects on the practices that constitute it and the form(s) of life in which it is embedded. So that bringing words back «from their metaphysical to their everyday use» is bringing them back, in Sandra Laugier's words, to «the shared ordinary»: «it is to come closer to the real» (2013: 96).

Because language is public property, it has a life and a force that no individual controls: the life and force of generations of reality-embedded, reality-soaked, use. Language carries shared concepts which are not easily mishandled:

> We are playing with elastic, indeed even flexible concepts. But this does not mean
> that they can be deformed *at will* and without offering resistance. (LW: II 24).

It is at this conceptual or grammatical level that we perceive the autonomy and the certainty of grammar, and thereby the connection between language and certainty.

4. The certainty of grammar

Learning the meaning of a word is nothing but learning how it is used; that is, assimilating the norms that govern its use – what Wittgenstein calls its *grammar*. As noted at the start of this paper, grammar is not a principle-based system programmed in the human brain; rather: «Grammar consists of conventions» (PG: 138) – keeping in mind that conventions here are not due to a concerted consensus, but to an unconcerted agreement in practice. Grammar is the conventionally established basis on which we can make sense. Wittgenstein speaks of grammar not only in terms of 'conventions' but also in terms of

‘norms’, ‘method’, ‘method of description’, ‘rules’ (both ‘grammatical and logical’[5] rules), and finally: ‘certainty’.

At «the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language)» (OC: 401) are certainties without which no thought – indeed, not even a doubt about these certainties – can be formulated. Wittgenstein compares these certainties to hinges on which the questions that we raise, and our doubts, can turn (OC: 341):

> If I wanted to doubt whether or not this was my hand, how could I avoid doubting whether the word ‘hand’ has any meaning? So that is something I seem to *know* after all. (OC: 369)

> But more correctly: The fact that I use the word ‘hand’ and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed that I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings – shews that absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game, that the question ‘How do I know . . .’ drags out the language-game, or else does away with it. (OC: 370)

Rules of grammar are nothing like linguistic principles stored in the brain; they are formulations of the linguistic norms or ‘hinges’ that regulate our use of words. We can distinguish in Wittgenstein what I call a ‘thin grammar’ – a grammar that governs our use of words independently of facts about the world – from a ‘thick grammar’ – a grammar that is reality-soaked or fact-*conditioned* (*conditioned*, not *justified*)[6]. Examples of ‘thin grammar’ would be: ‘2 is a number’; ‘2 + 2 = 4’; ‘This ∅ is what we call a table’; ‘Red is darker than pink’; ‘A rod has a length’; ‘A bachelor is an unmarried man’. Examples of reality-soaked or ‘thick grammar’ are: ‘There exist people other than myself’; ‘Human beings require nourishment to survive’; ‘I speak French’; ‘I live in London’; ‘I have a sister and a brother’. These grammatical rules or certainties are «exempt from doubt» and constitute «our method of doubt and enquiry» (OC: 151). I could not make claims such as ‘The world’s population in 2024 is 8.2 billion’ or ‘My sister lives in Canada’ were they not hinged on such certainties as ‘there exist people other than myself’; ‘I have a sister’; ‘There exists a place called Canada’. Grammatical rules determine what it makes sense for us to say.

Human grammars are embedded in our uses of language and conditioned by our forms of life; it is therefore the «stream of life» – and not the human brain – that is the source of these grammars[7]. However, whereas some of our certainties are universal – that is, they logically pertain to our human form of life (e.g., ‘There exist people other than myself’) –

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[5] The post-Tractarian Wittgenstein uses ‘grammar’ and ‘logic’ interchangeably: e.g., «To talk about logical possibility is to talk about a rule for our expressions» (AWL: 162); «a logical, and hence properly a grammatical question» (Z: 590); «everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic» (OC: 56).

[6] See ‘Wittgenstein's grammar: through thick and thin’ in (Moyal-Sharrock, 2021; Chapter 1), which also elaborates on what I call ‘the grammaticalization of experience’.

[7] For in-depth discussion, see ‘Universal Grammar: Wittgenstein versus Chomsky’ in (Moyal-Sharrock, 2021).

others are only personal or local or linguistic certainties[8] and can shift out of bedrock[9]. So that the certainty of grammar does not prevent its transformation or development. Language evolves. As regards, linguistic certainties, words can take on new possibilities of meaning, extending from what Merleau-Ponty calls «sedimented meanings» – the «shared common stock of well-worn and readily available significations» (1973: 12) to «constituted meanings» – the speech that «add[s] to the common heritage» (1973: 13).

The evolution of language can be due to all kinds of socio-political factors (e.g. 'woke'), but it is also often due to literature. Harrison mentions two examples: the first drawn from Merleau-Ponty; the second is his own:

> Before I read Stendhal, I know what a rogue is. Thus I can understand what he means when he says that Rossi the revenue man is a rogue. But when Rossi the rogue begins to live, it is no longer he who is a rogue: it is a rogue who is the revenue man Rossi. I have access to Stendhal's outlook through the commonplace words he uses. But in his hands, these words are given a new twist. ... the contexts in which Stendhal uses common words reveal even more majestically the new meaning with which he endows them. (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 12)

In the same way, Harrison finds that *King Lear* expanded the concept of 'daughterliness':

> Shakespeare's treatment of the relationship between Lear and Cordelia enlarges our conception of what is involved in filial piety, shifting the notion away from the standard Renaissance conception emphasising mere passive obedience to parental decree, to associate it with something both more independent and more actively compassionate. (Harrison 2012: 5)

Language evolves. But should we be confused by a word used in a way we had not previously come across, Wittgenstein suggests we review the examples and language-games that enabled us to understand the word:

> In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we learn the meaning of this word ('good' for instance)? From what sort of examples? In what sort of language-games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a fan of meanings. (PI: 77)

Wittgenstein's advice here helps those of us who, for instance, cannot understand the current application of the word 'art' to objects such as Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). By remembering the kind of examples and in what language-games we first learned the word 'art', we come to see that some of the usual criteria for the use of the word[10]– e.g., originality; materiality; the use of imagination; being exhibited in a museum – do apply in

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[8] For a discussion of my categorisation of certainties into 'linguistic', 'personal', 'local' and 'universal', see Moyal-Sharrock (2007) or, more recently, Moyal-Sharrock & Pritchard (2024).

[9] «And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited» (OC: 99). See (Moyal-Sharrock 2021; Chapter 1).

[10] Some of which are formulated in the many potential definitions of art available; e.g.: «the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power», *Oxford Languages*; «the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects», *Merriam-Webster*.

the *Fountain* case as well. This may bring some of us to agree that Duchamp's *Fountain* does meet some of the usual criteria for something to be called 'art'[11]. But for others, meeting these criteria does not suffice to merit the qualification of 'art': we may believe that anything that has not been physically produced by an artist cannot be art, and so refuse to call *Fountain* 'art'. Another example is the application of the word 'husband' to a man married to another man. Here again, emphasis of *some* of the criteria for past uses of the word (e.g., that the person be a married *man* or a *male* partner in a marriage), and not exclusively others (e.g., that the person be a man *married to a woman*), will facilitate its currency as a relationship that does not demand that its partners be of different sexes.

What is certain is that *individual* opposition to altered or extended uses of language will not arrest its evolution. Language has an autonomy that no individual can control. Indeed, as discussed in the next section, even the most gifted creative writers must reckon with the autonomy of language. As Wittgenstein stresses:

> We are playing with elastic, indeed even flexible concepts. But this does not mean that they can be deformed *at will* and without offering resistance […]. (LW: II 24).

Language has fight and mettle: it carries concepts, feelings, meanings, emotions and values, as well as density, precision and a huge array of descriptive potential that the gifted user of language needs to wrestle with so as to thread them together in a unique way.

5. Language as the measure of our lives

Language has a force and a life of its own: the life of generations of reality-embedded use. Because language is a collaborative achievement, in using it, the creative writer taps into a collective source of meaning independent of her. Of course, the writer may also impact the language (as we saw earlier in the Stendhal and Shakespeare examples) but not without resistance (as well as support) from its deep-lying embeddedness in the reality of immemorial human living. It is this embeddedness that gives language the force and autonomy perceived by the creative writer as beyond her control. It is because words have a life independent of the writer that they can be 'interrogated' rather than merely manipulated. Whereas the dictionary serves as a quick reference tool for the general uses of a word, the creative writer's use of words requires interrogating them, trying them, testing them against one another, and in so doing testing the concepts they express, revealing the limits and possibilities of their meanings. Merleau-Ponty writes acutely about this[12]:

> One can have no idea of the power of language until one has taken stock of that working or constitutive language which emerges when the constituted language, suddenly off center and out of equilibrium, reorganizes itself to teach the reader – and even the author – what he never knew how to think or say. (1973: 14)

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[11] See, e.g., George Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art.
[12] Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1973).

The work speaks for itself. 'Not I, but the wind that blows through me', writes D. H. Lawrence[13]. Such accounts of inspiration have often been given a metaphysical or spiritual reading, but they needn't have. What is in play here is the force and autonomy of language. This is not meant, as post-modernists have tried, to 'kill' the author: writers are the writers they are because of the people they are, but not only. They are also heirs of a language whose impact in their writing is active, and at times irrepressible. As their testimonies make clear, writers speak of revelation as brought about in the process of composition; as resulting from their immersion in, and struggle with, language. However one wants to describe this creative flow of which writers speak, I don't believe it can be prized apart from language. In an interview, Ernest Hemingway stated: 'I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms,* the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.' When asked by the interviewer: 'Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?' Hemingway replied: 'Getting the words right' (*Writers at Work,* Second Series 222).

While upholding the individual quality of the author, literary critic, F. R. Leavis also affirms the *essentially collaborative* nature of literary creation (1975, 36). So that the poem or novel does not solely belong to its maker but is 'the creative product of something other than ego and will'; its author having drawn freely, for creativity, 'on the deep-lying source' of language (1976, 72-3). In the words of Merleau-Ponty (above), we might say that, having been interrogated and wrestled with by the author, the constituted language 'reorganizes itself to teach the reader – and even the author – what he never knew how to think or say' (1973, 14).

As Harrison puts it: 'The writer's occasional power to enlighten us comes, not from a special cognitive faculty, but rather from his power to ride the reality-gorged tiger of language' (2012, 19). This is why 'great art is necessarily impersonal' – or rather, 'at once personal and impersonal' (1982, 147; 32), says Leavis. D. H. Lawrence goes some way with the intentional fallacy[14]: it isn't just that great literature does not necessarily reflect its author's intention, but that it hardly should. If the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection; if the writer's intention takes control of the artistic impulse, the novel, says Lawrence, becomes a treatise:

> If you try to nail anything down in the novel, either it kills the novel,
> or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.
> Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When
> the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his
> own predilection, that is immorality. (1961, 528)

Immorality, that is: moralism. When the creative imagination fails, the artist is

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[13] This is the first verse of Lawrence's poem: 'Song of a man who has come through'.

[14] Broadly speaking, the view that the author's intended meaning is not the only or most important meaning of a work. 'A phrase coined by the American New Critics W. K. Wimsatt Jr and Monroe C. Beardsley in an essay of 1946 to describe the common assumption that an author's declared or assumed intention in writing a work is a proper basis for deciding upon the work's meaning or value. These critics argued that once a work is published, it has an objective status and its meanings belong to the reading public. Any surmise about the author's intention thus has to be tested against the evidence of the text itself.' *Oxford Reference*: https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100006219

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stuck with moralism, as Lawrence himself was in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and (more egregiously) Tolstoy in *Resurrection*. So that the active and autonomous contribution of the work itself in the determination of meaning is for Lawrence an imperative:

> ... the greatness of the novel itself. It won't *let* you tell didactic lies, and put them over. […] The novel makes [the truth] obvious, and knocks all old Leo's teeth out. […] You can't fool the novel. (1968: 417).

Indeed, Wittgenstein remarked in a letter to Norman Malcolm: «I once tried to read *Resurrection* but couldn't. You see, when Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader. When he turns his back to the reader then he seems to me *most* impressive. ... It seems to me his philosophy is most true when it's *latent* in the story» (quoted by Malcolm 1958: 43; original emphasis).

Morality must be *latent* in the story; that is, it should not be prescribed but must show itself. As Leavis puts it, works of art do not state but *enact* their moral valuations (1982: 110-11); which means that the author does not come to the work with a moral agenda that she intends the work to dramatize. This would be moralism, not morality. For Leavis, the moral in art should be a «deep spontaneous lived question» (1967: 12): spontaneous, in that it should *emerge* from the work and not be put into it; 'lived' in that its so-called 'conclusions' should be embodied (1986: 20); and a question in that it should not be a premeditated answer, but an «exploratory effort towards the definition of a norm» (1986: 67).

The creative imagination is really creative; it doesn't teach or sermonize but, at its best, sensitively choreographs speech and action to allow the ethical to emerge from the artistic fabric. The morality is in the novel, not in the novelist: «Never trust the artist. Trust the tale», writes Lawrence (1964: 8). This perhaps clarifying what Wittgenstein means by: «What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language» (TLP 4.121). I interpret this as follows: the important things don't get expressed by our expressly *saying* them; it is when language is used in a creative way that the important things get expressed. This seems to dovetail with what Leavis calls «creative impersonality» (1986: 67), but it also reminds us that literature is at its best when it does not say but *shows*. As here, when – having just spoken to, and been deeply moved by, Vronsky on the train – Anna Karenina sees her husband on the platform:

> At Petersburg, as soon as the train stopped and she got out, the first person that attracted her attention was her husband. "Oh, mercy! why do his ears look like that?" she thought, looking at his frigid and imposing figure, and especially the ears that struck her at the moment as propping up the brim of his round hat. Catching sight of her, he came to meet her, his lips falling into their habitual sarcastic smile, and his big, tired eyes looking straight at her. An unpleasant sensation gripped at her heart when she met his obstinate and weary glance, as though she had expected to see him different. She was especially struck by the feeling of dissatisfaction with herself that she experienced on meeting him. That feeling was an intimate, familiar feeling, like a consciousness of hypocrisy, which she experienced in her relations with her husband. But hitherto she had not taken note of the feeling, now she was clearly and painfully aware of it.

Of course, literature *says* things, such as that Anna met Vronsky on the train, was moved by their conversation, and saw her husband on the platform; but its real talent lies in *enactment* through language[15]. Anna's developing feelings for Vronsky give her a new consciousness about her married life. Her reaction tosuch a trivial matter as her husband's ears – previouslyleft unregistered –suddenly and irrevocably reveals to her, and to us, the barrenness of their relationship.

Literature is working at its supreme level when it shows, not when it tells. This is the unparalleled power of literary depiction. Cora Diamond beautifully recognizes it:

> It is part of the concept of a human being that an immense amount of what being human is for us can be present in a look that passes between two people; it is part of the concept that *all that* can equally be denied in a look. Novelists and other writers can put before us and develop our concept of a human being by giving us scenes of such recognition or denial of recognition, by showing us, reminding us, that *this* is what it is like to recognize another human being, and that *this* is what it is like to fail to accord such recognition, to refuse it. [They] show us … the shape of certain possibilities in human life. (1988: 264-5)

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1993), Toni Morrison said: «We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.» With these words, Morrison may have captured the distinctive importance of language in the constitution and expression of human morality, sociality, psychology, science and art. In this, she echoes what Harrison recognizes as

> […] the commitment of both Leavis and Wittgenstein to the idea of 'the life of language': that is, to the idea of language as a living human enterprise, holding the key to many other kinds of human enterprise, and so deeply involved in the constitution of 'human worlds,' rather than a mere system of notation for the recording of natural regularities. (2012: 1)

Wittgenstein was, perhaps along with Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher who best understood the autonomy and the creativity of language. He, alongside his friend, F. R. Leavis, enabled us to understand that – far from thought requiring a formal mental language – a 'language of thought' (or 'mentalese') à la Chomsky – it is language that enables thought[16]. Language which, rooted in reality-soaked grammar, allows us to both 'show and tell'. Toni Morrison got it right: the measure of human life is that we do language. Language, all said and done.

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[15] For a discussion focused on enactment in literature, see Moyal-Sharrock (2016).

[16] Where, by 'thought' is meant more than e.g., 'pre-reflective awareness' or the post-aphasic ability to do algebra and play chess.

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