

REALITY & THE LANGUAGE OF FICTION

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And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I.

In this paper I will suggest that one can use Wittgenstein to shed light on a puzzle literary language raises for the philosophy of language. Specifically, I will show that his notion of linguistic criteria allows us to understand how literature, speaking as it does about fictions and fictions alone, might nevertheless be able to say something of profound cognitive consequence about reality. Explaining how talk about fictions can be revelatory of reality is, of course, not interesting merely as a puzzle for the philosophy of language. It is upon the belief that it is possible to hang our faith in the humanistic value of the narrative arts, and so much is at stake when we find ourselves called on to address this puzzle. Now most of us do believe, in *some* sense at least, that the language of literary fiction can offer us genuine insights into how things stand in our world. But explaining this with any degree of philosophical respectability has proven to be a tremendously troubling task, and this is where Wittgenstein can help us. With the exception of two authors, Bernard Harrison and David Schalkwyk,¹ I am unaware of any philosopher who has even touched on the possibilities Wittgenstein's notion of criteria opens up for those of us interested in the puzzle of literary language, and in this paper I will map out a precise strategy for importing it into the current debate.

Writing the Austrian Traditions: Relations between Philosophy and Literature.
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Wirth-Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies, 2003. pp. 49-65.

II.

The precise form of the problem that Wittgenstein allows us to solve is well-known and requires very little setting up. It concerns a tension that exists between two basic intuitions we have about the nature of works of literary fiction. One intuition concerns the social and cognitive value of literature, and it tells us that literature offers us a window on our world. We might call this the “humanist intuition” and characterize it as the thought that literature presents the reader with an intimate and intellectually significant engagement with social and cultural reality. It is the idea, one familiar to all of us in some respect, that literature is the textual form to which we turn when we want to read the story of our shared form of life, our moral and emotional, social and sexual – and so on for whatever corners of our culture we think literature brings to view – *ways of being human*. The other intuition concerns how we understand the fiction that goes into a work of literary fiction. For it strikes us as equally intuitive to say that the imaginative basis of literary creation presents to the reader not his world but *other* worlds, what we commonly call fictional worlds. If we think that literature tells us about our world, we have to make this square with the obvious fact that we understand, and certainly read, literature as if it is exempt from the task of worldly exegesis. Literary fiction trades in aesthetic creation rather than factual representation. It speaks about people created on paper, who inhabit worlds made only of words. And from this it seems quite natural to conclude that literature is therefore essentially and intentionally silent about the way our world is, choosing instead to speak about worlds none of which are quite our own. The tension, then, is a matter of how we might reconcile these two intuitions, these basic visions we have of literature as somehow at once both thoroughly our-worldly and other-worldly.

Of these two intuitions, the humanist’s has lost out in current philosophy of fiction. The reason for this, of course, is not that anyone believes that we have come to realize that literary fiction is after all irrelevant to life. It is because in many minds humanism is associated with a crude and antiquated tendency in the history of aesthetics. In attempting this reconciliation, humanists have often been guilty of two sins, namely that of forging the connection to our world by taking literature to be a mimetic rendering of reality – and thus relying on the now much disfavored representational view of literary fiction – and then going on to treat as the ultimate object of literary appreciation not the literary work of art itself but this world of which the text is thought to be just a mirror. There is an odd expression Derrida has popularized, “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*.” If tamed slightly into stating that, at least from the literary perspective, nothing outside the text *matters*, Derrida’s curious proclamation brings to light a widely accepted claim. The extra-textual is thought to be the extra-literary, beyond the reach of anyone who wants to illuminate the nature of what we experience when we look between the covers of a novel. To try to step from literature to the extra-textual is to take a step away from the very object of

literary theory. And the humanist is typically taken to be the theorist who has failed to learn this basic lesson, the dolt, in a word, who keeps trying to turn the *hors-texte* into the object of literary investigation.

It takes very little argumentation to bring to view the reason many philosophers believe that the humanist necessarily cannot correct his intuition, that in attempting to forge the connection between literature and life he will always end up losing the literary text. The sceptic who doubts that the humanist can offer this reconciliation has a very simple argument at his disposal. The sceptic argues that the humanist must accept the following constraint: he must prove that the value he wants to attribute to a literary text is an actual property of the text itself. If he does not meet this constraint, the sceptic reasonably points out that the humanist will fail to identify a proper literary value, and thus he will default on his promise to tell us something about the nature of literature. But if the humanist accepts this constraint – and he clearly must if he wants to shed light on what we come into contact with in our experience of a work of literary fiction – there seems to be no possibility of giving a linguistic ground to the humanist’s claim that literary language can tell us something about the way our world is. As Peter Lamarque argues:

The particulars presented in a novel are *fictional*, and how can any view, however objective, of *fictional* particulars, give us truth? Ex hypothesi, it is not a view of the real world.²

Implicit in the above reasoning is a claim that has the status of a truism in most corners of the philosophy of fiction: literary language eschews worldly reference and representation. It thus appears to cast aside the very tools by which we can use language to create a picture of how things stand in our world. We take, habitually, the notion of reference to describe how a string of words can be understood as being *about* something (by referring to it or otherwise offering a linguistic representation of it). But literature sends its words out to fictional rather than actual addresses, referring to and so “about” the contours of purely imaginary worlds.

We might recall Plato’s famous anti-literary fulmination in the *Republic* here. His insight, a reasonable one itself, is that there is something genuinely odd in the very idea of literary language: literature speaks our language as it were – it borrows our words and grammar, our idioms and cultural references – but it does very strange things with these words. In the language of narrative fiction the rails of reference run not from word to world but from word to chimeras, creatures of an author’s imagination. And from this it might well appear that literature talks quite literally about nothing, that it is a mere *flatus vocis*. Very few would agree with the conclusion Plato draws from this – that literature should be banned because it invites the innocent among us to mistake fictions for reality – but his claim that the fictional element in literary language implies that it speaks of worlds other than our own would strike much contemporary philosophy as neither odd nor antiquated. For when we find a use of language that neither refers to nor represents reality, it appears to us, just as to Plato, that we have lost all linguistic justification for claiming that this use of language could be trying to tell us something about reality.

The language of literary fiction shares in the sense of our language, of course; an occurrence of the word “pain” in a literary text still means “pain.” But it does not *use* our language to talk about *our* world. Rather, it uses it to talk about imagined worlds (or possible worlds, or make-believe worlds, depending on the precise theory to which one is committed). There is, as it is often described, a referential barrier that runs between our world and fictional worlds, a representational divide we appear unable to bridge. Thus if the humanist must show the connection to reality to be in some sense *internal* to a work of literary fiction, and if all we find when we look inside a literary text are words, all of which reach out to fictions rather than reality, the sceptic claims that the humanist intuition must be senseless. Indeed, the humanist’s conception of literary language appears to be built upon a paradox, a desire to understand literature in terms of precisely what literature turns out to be contrasted with: a vision of the way our world is.

III.

Yet why, *precisely*, do we feel that the humanist must embrace a paradox if he still wants to claim that literature speaks about our world? The sceptic responds by simply repeating his argument: he tells us that he has already answered this question. And at first we do feel the tug of necessity here; we do feel that there is just no other option open to the humanist. But with a few moments of reflection we can see that the sceptic’s anti-humanism does not simply fall in fine *a priori* fashion from his reflections on the absence of worldly representation and reference in literature as, say, idealism does from Berkeley’s famous *esse est percipi*. In the latter case, the position is implied by the very words used to state the argument: it just says so much. The same is not true of our sceptic’s claim. Saying that literature refuses to represent reality does not in any straightforward sense just amount to the claim that there is *no* point of contact between world and literature. There is an implicit assumption we need to unearth, something that explains why we feel the force of entailment here – we need to ask what gives us this sense that the sceptic’s argument reveals the impossibility of the humanistic conception of literary language.

As with most cases in which we feel the presence of paradox without quite seeing its source, there is a larger picture in place, exerting its force on us from behind the scenes. This is what is happening here: there is another commitment, some more basic picture we are beholden to, by virtue of which the sceptic’s arguments appear so reasonable. We know that the sceptic hangs his anti-humanism on his arguments against the presence of worldly representation and reference in literature. So the question becomes: what makes us think that humanism is senseless just because of their absence?

What we feel, in feeling the pull of the sceptic’s arguments, is the presence of a certain picture of how language and reality are basically hooked up. We feel that there is a divide between language and reality, and that bridging the gap requires the semantic tools the sceptic has taken from the humanist. The sceptic’s argument that

these semantic tools are unavailable to the humanist has much force because of the role these tools play in this picture. They are *the* tools for bringing language to bear on reality, and naturally we feel that the humanist is lost when they are taken from him. Without them we appear to be left with mere language, words with no worldly point of contact. Our readiness to accept the sceptic's argument is explained in terms of how we hear his arguments. And we do so standing on this more basic picture of the word-world relation, that of *a gap between language and reality* that can only be bridged by the semantic tools that the sceptic has turned against the humanist.

The idea of the divide is at best metaphorical, though two thousand years of debates between idealists and realists have provided many occasions to invoke the picture of a separation in kind between the conventional and the natural, language and reality. It is the idea of the gap between world and word that we must bridge if our words are to connect us to reality, the picture – however one precisely wants to describe it – that informs many of philosophy of language's basic dualisms, that of the divide between (to play on the famous Sellarsian distinction) the logical space of nature and the logical space of language, between the things we talk about and the things in themselves, between the natural and the conventional, word and world.

This picture can be illustrated in a great number of ways, but for our purposes we might say that it tells us that language and world are separated by a window. When language speaks about reality, it looks out of the window and describes what it sees. It attempts to mirror or, as it is more commonly put, "represent" what is on the other side of the window. When we explain the relationship between a linguistic representation and its object, we invoke the common distinctions between a referring expression and its referent, a word and the bit of world to which it corresponds, or reality and our sentential renderings of it. We look through the window and use our words (however we want to explain this) to mirror, like landscape sketchers, what we see. The idea of wedding word and world becomes a question of representational accomplishment, of whether what we say when we look out the window, is a fair portrait of how things stand on the other side.

A picture of this sort explains why the sceptic casts doubt on humanism with such ease. How can we, if we have a picture of this sort in place, see literature as ever connecting us to the world? When reference to reality and representation of world drop out, we lose the idea that a use of language can describe the actual, and with this picture in place we cannot even envision an alternative mode of contact: humanism is made utterly senseless. For the question obviously becomes: since literature does not look out of this window when it speaks – since it does not even attempt to mirror the actual, or to refer to and represent the real – how could it possibly have *anything* to say that is genuinely informative of extra-textual reality? We just cannot imagine what a point of contact would look like if we speak of literature within this framework of the word-world relation.

IV.

The view of language that the sceptic exploits is this picture in which the relationship between word and world is cast in terms of an initial opposition; this picture that tells us that they remain divided from one another until we succeed in uniting them by way of representation. As intuitive and entrenched as this picture of the word-world relation may be, it is not compulsory. It has been widely attacked by philosophers working in the tradition in which, as Blackburn puts it, “Wittgenstein is admired as the high priest.”³ This tradition distinguishes itself from representationalist and other divide-endorsing pictures by refusing to cast the relation between world and word in terms of a basic opposition. Hilary Putnam, in what is perhaps the most succinct statement available of this alternative, writes:

What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call “language” or “mind” penetrate so deeply into what we call “reality” that the very project of representing ourselves as being mappers of something “language independent” is fatally compromised from the very start.⁴

The interesting thing about this alternative picture (and more generally the philosophical tradition that underlies it) is that it can be best seen as an inversion of a very traditional question. It asks us to approach the understanding of the word-world relation by beginning not with the standard question *how does word inform us of world?* but rather by turning this question around and asking *how does world inform word?* In the first case the discussion begins by asking how language might get beyond itself and touch reality, and thus the roots of the idea of the divide are in place in the very way we formulate the question. In the second case we begin by asking how it might be possible to see language as in some (yet unspecified) sense having world *within* it. This distinction moves us away from wondering how a purely contingent and arbitrary creature of convention such as a natural language might be an accurate mirror of independent reality. And in its place it asks us to explore the possibility that language is informed by the world in the very building of its systems of speech; indeed that world is woven into the fabric of our language. We try to find a level at which reality is blown so directly into language that we are entitled to claim that world “is fused into the foundation of our language game.”⁵ And this allows us to see, I will argue, to reject the idea of a gap between the world and language that is presupposed in the reasoning that makes literary language look like an oddity and humanism an impossibility.

There is a fear that, if we speak of our connection to the world by first stating that language is our sole point of contact, we will ultimately end up trapped by language, unable to escape it and find our way to reality. The first step in the argument I will present – Wittgenstein’s argument that we cannot get between “language and its object” – is also the same step that is often thought to lead directly to linguistic idealism. The fear, more specifically, is that if we begin by claiming that we are linguistic creatures through and through, fully determined in what claims

we can make about reality by the conceptual categories and vocabularies we inherit from our language, we will then slide hopelessly into a sort of prison of pure convention, locked in language as it were. One of the reasons we are inclined to think this way is that, still clinging to the picture of the divide, we think that opting for language is just a way of opting for the linguistic side of the divide to the exclusion of the side of reality. But, we might notice, this leaves us in the curious position of seeing our language, our perspective, our form of life, as alienating just because they are *ours*. We come to see language and culture as an obstruction to our connection to reality rather than an expression of it. And this, as the Wittgenstein-inspired position I will elaborate tells us, is precisely what we must try to avoid.

The following quotes from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* henceforth) offer a good point of entrance into our discussion:

Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (*PI* § 373)

Essence is expressed by grammar. (*PI* § 371)

What Wittgenstein is attacking here is the idea of a second voice – that of reality as it “really” is apart from how it is expressed in our language – that can add a claim to the effect that “you are right to say thus” when we speak about the world. And Wittgenstein means this not in the linguistic idealist’s sense that we have nothing but *mere* words, that nothing but *mere* linguistic convention plays any role in validating what we say, without any participation of the extra-linguistic (as though it is not the fact that there is a chair in the corner of my room that entitles me to claim so much but some linguistic oddity, not a “worldly” fact but only a “wordy” fact, whatever this might be). He means it in the sense that “grammatical” rules – the constitutive rules of language – specify what we can meaningfully claim to be the case, and thus we look there to see what we can sensibly say of reality. There is no sense to the idea that the justification of what we say lies fully outside language, as though in speech we send our words out into the world and wait to see whether reality will receive them. It lies within our language, within the perspective with which we confront reality. Grammar, in the broad sense in which Wittgenstein uses the term, provides the conditions for claiming anything to be (as Aristotle often said) a *this*, the very condition for discerning a thing as this or that sort of thing, for speaking about anything as being something at all. The “essence” of what we speak about – conceived not as a metaphysical presence but as this linguistic expression of “what kind of object anything is” – is found within our frame of reference, our language. What the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* found in logic, the later Wittgenstein finds in grammar, the rules of everyday natural language. Whereas he once thought that the structure of an ideal logical language would reflect the structure of the real – logic was for the early Wittgenstein “the great mirror” of reality – he later came to embrace the grammar of natural language for establishing this connection between word and world.

When we ask questions about the nature of the things we speak about, we cannot think of this as implying a comparison between the “real” object and the way language frames the object; it cannot be thought of as guided, even in principle, by

an idea of establishing an adequate match or representational relation between the expression of world in language and the way the world really is. The reason for this should be clear: it makes no sense to think that we can step outside our linguistic frame to query how our “picture” compares to the reality it “depicts.” But this is not because what is outside our frame is simply unavailable to us – if we mean by this that *reality lies there only we cannot see beyond our representations of it*. For what we fail to notice if we think this way is that talk of representation and “mirroring” is illicit at this point, or at any rate uninvited by anything we have said thus far. We begin by accepting that “language tells us what kind of object anything is.” But we do *not* take “language” here to imply “rather than reality,” as though there is a choice between the two and our opting for language intimates the absence of any participation of reality in determining the linguistic specification of “what kind of object anything is.”

Wittgenstein wants us to see that we can understand how words might refer to or represent world only if we ask the much more basic question of *what sorts of prior connection between word and world are presupposed in the very possibility that sentences can represent and refer?* He asks us to see that understanding the basic association between word and world requires an account of how language draws various items in the world – various bits of reality – into its grammar, which it can then use as instruments or standards of representation. As he argues in his famous example, the Paris meter-stick

is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long [...] But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule. – Let us imagine samples of colour being preserved in Paris like the standard metre. We define: “sepia” means the colour of the standard sepia which is there kept hermetically sealed. Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not. – We can put it like this: This sample is an instrument of the language used in ascriptions of colour. In this language-game it is not something that is represented, but is a means of representation [...] It is a paradigm in our language-game, something with which a comparison is made. And this may be an important observation, but it is none the less an observation concerning our language-game – our method of representation. (*PI* § 50)

We find in this example an elegant metaphor for the relationship between grammar and representational and referential uses of language. The metre-stick in the above example is “not represented but is an instrument of representation” because we give it status in our language as the standard (what grammar calls “essence”) of being a metre long, for representing objects in the world as *counting* as a metre. Of course the full story of how language comes to use world as a standard of representation will be more complex than this. In the case of simple objects such as chairs and rocks, the story may be the fairly familiar one of coming to name an object and agreeing on the name we have given it – more complicated, but perhaps not too

interestingly so, than what we find in the example of the metre-stick. In the case of our more complex terms such as “personhood,” “goodness,” “love,” and so on, the story will likely boil down to social history. Jealousy, to give a simple example, develops grammatically as our culture develops institutionally. We develop institutions based on the pledge of fidelity (such as in marriage); and once we have examples of people betraying these institutions, we can use the behavior of the wounded (Dido of Virgil’s *Aeneas*, for example) as a standard by which we can, so to say, go on to represent the word “jealously.”

The point is, we are able to represent and refer to the world in speech because we use the world as a standard of representation and reference when speaking about the sundry objects we experience. And so when we want to illuminate the nature of the objects we talk about – what we are saying about the way the world is when we say that this is that sort of thing – we do not try to take a stab at the nature of the thing as it “really” is apart from how we say that it is. We come to our understanding of the reality of the things we talk about by reflecting on the story of how these bits of the world have been brought into and given shape by our way of life. We come to understand the way our world is, in short, by reflecting not on represented objects but on our standards of representation.

Thus we are not to think that the act of using sentences to refer to or represent the world carries the entire burden of our linguistic connection to reality. We use the world to fix the use of the words in our language, and thus we make the leap to representational and referential speech because language already aligns us with reality – and we should hear this as running very much contrary to the notion that representation explains the basic, initial if you like, union of language and reality. Language absorbs world, building it into the fabric of its grammar. And we account for this not by claiming that language can perform some mysterious metaphysical act. We rather show that the story of the source of our standards of representation is a tale of cultural activity, a matter of how a living practice develops standards of representation by building words upon world.

These aspects of our natural world and human history that we draw into language as standards of representation become what Wittgenstein calls linguistic *criteria*. Our descriptions of reality are made possible by the fact that we possess these shared linguistic criteria. They explain how it is that we are able to speak in a common tongue of anything as being *this* sort of thing, how it is that we are able to “word the world together.”⁶ They do not “make it the case” that the world is really as we say it is or “establish the truth” of what language calls reality. They provide the conditions of any sort of talk, talk of truth included. Criteria determine the boundaries of meaning and sense, of what we can intelligibly claim to be the case. They are the specifications of the rules of the game, as it were, the standards that account for our alignment with others in communication. They do not function in Wittgenstein’s philosophy as a replacement for representation and correspondence talk. The possession of shared criteria expresses the condition, the bedrock, of the possibility of any talk at all.

There is a temptation to think of social theories of meaning of the sort Wittgenstein offers as yet one more chapter in the book of anti-realism, as though

saying that criteria are a product of social engagement with one another and our world leads to what it is now fashionable to call “constructivism.” The fear is that offering a social rather than metaphysical ground to our criterial connection to reality will invariably lead us to see these criteria as so contingent and arbitrary that we end up finding ourselves with no justification for speaking of these criteria as connecting us to something real at all. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein offers an argument that allows us to overcome this fear, one which shows us that an insight into our criteria is indeed an insight into something “thickly” real. Like many of Wittgenstein’s most interesting arguments, it expresses a profound point with the simplest of insights. It begins by drawing us precariously near anti-realism, and the beauty of the argument lies in how it allows us to keep our balance just before falling over. Consider the following quotes:

I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish the true and the false. (*OC* § 94)

And:

If the true is what is grounded, the ground is not true, nor yet false. (*OC* § 205)

At first glance this may strike us as nothing more than a revised argument for idealism, for the claim being made is that the ground language offers us for speaking about the world – our linguistic criteria – cannot be said to be true. But notice also that the ground cannot be said to be false. And this is curious. I cannot claim truth or falsity for it, so what can I say about it at all? Does not this imply that there is just *nothing* to say, that – as Rorty prods for much the same reasons – there is no longer any reason to talk about a connection between language and reality? Indeed, is it not right to say what linguistic sceptics have always said, that we cannot *know* that language offers us an alignment with the way the world is?

The answer to this question, like most honest answers, is yes and no. I certainly cannot *know* that the criteria of language *truly* reveal how the world is, for there is no truth to be mentioned here that would support my claim that I know it. Criteria express the conditions of truth and falsity, and thus they are not open to assessment for truth and falsity themselves. This much Wittgenstein makes clear and this much the linguistic sceptic has right (and this is why he is so often hard to silence: we cannot just say that he is wrong, that his sceptical hypothesis is simply *false*). When she says “you do not *know* that language gets the world right” I *must* answer “no, I do not *know* that.” But notice that, unlike the linguistic sceptic, my saying that I do not know this is not a concession that a truth-value is missing where there should be one. It is not a concession that there is some adjudicating fact that is unfortunately unavailable to us. The sceptic takes our inability to claim knowledge here to qualify what sort of *belief* we can have about the worldly reach of criteria. But what Wittgenstein is saying is that *there is no belief at this level*. Whereas the sceptic takes this mandatory “I do not know” to show up an epistemic defeat, a failure of

knowledge, Wittgenstein responds by saying there is no defeat because the battle is not epistemic: it is not a failure of knowledge because knowledge-claims do not apply here. This is an unusual first step in an argument that promises to unite language and reality, but if we follow the idea it will lead us somewhere very interesting.

The specific problem with the linguistic sceptic is that he demands grounds for the very grounds we have for speaking. Now the grounds the sceptic argues we lack are indeed absent: there is nothing that could voice an assurance that language *truly* expresses reality as it is. But this is not because linguistic criteria are *groundless*, if we mean by this that we have somehow managed to see they are free-floating and that where we once thought that there was a kind of metaphysical anchor we now see that there is nothing at all. What is wrong with saying “groundless” is precisely that we are speaking about the *grounds* of language – to use “groundless” here is to fail to understand what we are talking about: bedrock, beneath which we cannot go. To ask to have our linguistic criteria, our language, vouched for is to ask for grounds for our criteria. But this, of course, amounts to asking for criteria with which we can evaluate the truth of *our* criteria, grounds for our very grounds of meaningful speech. And by this logic we then must ask for an evaluation of these newly acquired criteria and grounds – what grounds them? – and so on until we find ourselves with a very nasty infinite regress. The sceptic’s question ceases to be meaningful at this point, requiring as it does that he speak without the support of criteria in fashioning her repudiation of our criteria. Whose criteria does he use to carry out this repudiation, to state his sceptical hypothesis? They cannot be the criteria of our language, for these are what he is questioning. He asks, “How do I know that things are as we say they are, that this is really a chair, the sun, a human, etc.?” What else should we say? What else could we coherently call these things? And on what do we stand when we picture an alternative?

The sceptic’s question does not place a wedge between what we say and the way the world is so much as it dissolves the possibility of meaningful speech altogether. In this respect the sceptical impulse is not unlike a certain Scholastic penchant for asking how much time elapsed before God created time. Language refuses to be an ally here. In trying to repudiate the alignment with reality we find in criteria the sceptic speaks from the dark, asking an impossible question rather than one which makes us doubt that our criteria reach all the way into our world. The sceptic does not reveal a gap between language and world in this sense, then: the vocabulary he employs in stating his sceptical hypothesis is drained of its force and empty. He attempts to take up a cognitive perspective towards the possibility of having any sort of cognitive perspective at all, and in so doing he loses language – he is in effect silenced by his own words.

Wittgenstein’s response comes at a price, but one that brings reality down to earth and thus to the our-worldly level in the process. We lose the idea that we can have our linguistic alignment with reality vouched for, shown to be true all the way down as it were. We might call this the metaphysical craving, and its satisfaction is denied us. The sceptic, for his part, does make us realize this. Since we cannot respond to his “how do you know” with “of course we know,” he makes us realize

that we cannot step outside our form of life and speak meaningfully about its linguistic success. But Wittgenstein wants to say that if we lose the ability to claim truth for our alignment with reality, we also lose the ability to doubt it in the way the sceptic envisions.

This is the reward for what might appear to be a huge sacrifice. What forces us to accept that language aligns us with reality is not a right we win from any metaphysical or ontological insight: “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*” (PI 226e), and we cannot step outside the conditions of meaningful speech to try to see what grounds it. We cannot speak of a match between criteria and the way the world is, nor of adequate representation. *But this is because there is no gap that can be meaningfully mentioned at this level.* It is not a hypothesis that our criteria match the facts. It is not a deduction or inference that allows us to make this claim. It is a “grammatical truth,” a claim forced on us by the very words we use to communicate with one another. We can say that an insight into criteria is an insight into reality not because criteria show us how word *truly* matches up with world, but because there is, we might say, no dividing distinction to be made between the two at this level. This picture brings the idea of the word-world relation down to earth by making their alignment a fact of life, evidenced by the simple but profoundly revealing point that we succeed in making ourselves understood to one another. The union of word and world is grounded and given expression in the fabric of our living human practices, made visible not through any feat of metaphysical inquiry but by seeing what is already plainly before us: a shared form of life.

V.

The humanist’s sceptic, like the traditional semantic sceptic, plays on our fear that a view into language, cut off from any actual thing we might use language to talk about, is a view of words divorced from reality. What we have done is to replace this picture of language that makes literature look to be isolated from reality because of its failure of worldly representation with one in which language is seen as expressing world within itself, not as connecting to an independent reality by mapping it but by building it into its “grammar,” its criteria, in such a way that there is no longer any sense to the idea of language as empty of world just on account of its failure to represent or refer to it. What Wittgenstein allows us to see is that the connection between language and reality is prior (in understanding, as Aristotle might say) to the level at which the humanist’s sceptic gives his arguments. But Wittgenstein also offers us a way to structure the humanist intuition, as we should be beginning to see. What we have now is a vocabulary that allows us to meet the sceptic’s challenge directly, namely to show that we can identify something quite densely real immediately within the literary work, internal to it rather than *hors-texte*.

What I am going to call the “basic humanist claim,” the ground-level claim Wittgenstein makes possible for the humanist, can be characterized as follows. We

want to say that for some aspect of a work of literature that arouses our worldly interest, we can claim of it that “*this is φ*” in such a way that there is no wedge to be placed between the fiction’s presentation of ϕ and what ϕ is. We take the demonstrative as functioning to pick out not a represented worldly object (the sceptic has taken this from us) nor a pure creature of fiction (which the sceptic says it must pick out) but ϕ *just as it is*. For those aspects of cultural life that fuel the furnaces of literary creation, we want to say that they are *seen*, just as they are, in the text: that *this* is jealousy, *this* is anger, *this* is suffering, and so on. And we want to be able to say this in such a way that the force of the demonstrative is one of identifying directly within the text something more properly called “life” than the merely lifelike, *veritas* rather than verisimilitude, world rather than a fictional mimesis of it.

Let us give some structure to this discussion with a concrete critical example. In re-reading *Othello* I see that I have missed something; it is one of those instances of finding a new layer of complexity in a work read a number of times before. Although I very well know that Othello is the subject of Iago’s angry discussion with Roderigo in the first act, I notice for the first time that never once is Othello mentioned by name. The first time Othello is explicitly referred to it is not by his proper name but by his ethnicity: he is “The Moor” (I.i.40). Iago is Othello’s *ancient* and confidant – they know each other intimately – and if not for his anger we would certainly expect him to call Othello by his proper name, and this I now see is subtly suggestive. A few lines later Roderigo adds color to our picture of this nameless Moor by calling him “thick-lips” (I.i.66); and I begin to see a progression – in that vague way we become attuned to something taking shape when we read a literary work – that culminates in the first important scene of the tragedy. Iago decides to deliver his initial blow by telling Brabantio that his daughter has secretly married Othello. Again, Othello’s name is never used, and the words Iago uses reveal why:

Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, an old Black ram is tugging your white ewe; arise, arise, Awake the snorting citizens with the bell, Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you. (I.i.87-90)

Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not service God, if the Devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, you think we are ruffians, you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans. (I.i.110-13)

I am one, sir, that come to tell you, your daughter, and the Moor, are now making the beast with two backs. (I.i.115)

Iago’s tactic in the above passages is to appeal to the crudest part of Brabantio: his gut-level sense of blood and purity, his racial instinct. Iago offers an image, cunningly crafted to pierce Brabantio’s paternal instinct, of his daughter with an African animal, being “tugged” by a black ram who will bring not proper grandchildren but cross-breeds into his family line.⁷ There is neither a marriage nor a man depicted in Iago’s words, just the image of a “white ewe” copulating with a

black beast. One would have to be quite naïve to call Iago's tactic here something other than racist. What is striking, and certainly brilliant, about the passage is how perfectly it captures racism, how, we might say, *essentially* racist it is. We see the gradual construction of a dehumanized picture of Othello. It begins with a reduction of his identity to what separates him from everyone else, his ethnicity; and from here on all of the attendant expressions of racism are brought to life: the notion of the perversion of mixed blood, the idea that an act of love with a racial outsider amounts to sex with a sub-human, an animal, and so is a violation of one's body and family.

In order to eliminate a few possibilities that humanists have traditionally and mistakenly used when trying to forge a connection between literature and life, let me say a few words about how one ought *not* try to make *Othello* speak about our world. To begin with, by "this is racism" I do not mean to pick out some *mimetic* function of the work, say, the fact that Iago is acting as a real racist would. Trivially he is, or else we would not be inclined to call his tactic racist. But I mean something deeper than that the racism we see there *looks* like or imitates real racism. I want to say that it *is* racism. Nor – to dismiss another possibility – is my claim to be taken as saying that the text refers to or represents some extra-textual state of affairs. How would we explain this? Do we say that it represents a universal of some sort, that by "this is racism" I mean to say that the text is a representation of some strange metaphysical entity, perhaps Racism As Such? This is one of the faults of many older forms of humanism – their (bloated) metaphysicalism – that we should try to avoid. It is an unwanted idea, and in any case most current literary theory has, I think, finally shown us that the only legitimate application of notions of reference and representation to a work of literature is that of *fictional* reference and representation, to record how a novel describes an imaginatively created world. Lastly, I am not saying with my "this is racism" that the text or the scenes we have reviewed amount to the claim that racism is thus and such sort of thing, as though my "*this*" functions to pick out a proposition of some sort that is implied by the text. As far as I can see, the text does not state either directly or indirectly a truth-valued proposition about the nature of racism. Again, the sceptic is right here: what the text describes and makes assertions and claims about, is the (fictional) world of its narrative line.

Wittgenstein allows us to avoid these errors of traditional humanism without silencing *Othello* on the way our world is. To let the cat out of the bag, the sort of humanistic explanation Wittgenstein opens up for us is the following: when I claim of *Othello* that "this is racism," my "this" has, I suggest, the force of registering that the text speaks on what Wittgenstein would call the *critical* level of what racism is, bringing before us language as it is involved with reality at "bedrock" rather than in acts of reference and representation. With slight but instructive bombast, we can say that when Iago sets to turning Brabantio against Othello, he becomes our word for racism – so complete is Iago's expression of racism that we see exposed in his words the criteria for this fixture of our form of life.

This is not to attribute any extraordinary powers to Shakespeare, except that

power over words we know that writers of his endowment possess. To account for this we need only to point out that, as we have already seen, Shakespeare's Iago, though a creature of fiction, is nonetheless a fiction that draws together at such a level of clarity and order everything we call "racism" that no wedge can be placed between the text's expression of it and what this fixture of our culture most basically *is*. The "is" here, of course, is not the existential "is" of the actual or the empirical. It is the "is" of what Wittgenstein calls "essence," our language's specification of what the world *is* for us. Just as language "expresses essence," (*PI* § 371) we are claiming that the language of *Othello* expresses racism. Just as criteria tell us "what kind of object anything is" (*PI* § 373), we are claiming that literary language in general can be a specific mouthpiece of "what kind of object anything is." My "this is racism," then, does not record either the referential or representational successes of *Othello*, for there is no success to be spoken of here. It records the success of its expression of racism, not as a simple expression of *Sinn*, but of the fundamental connection to our world that underlies what the sceptic took to be just a "mere" word.

In *Inconvenient Fictions*, Bernard Harrison expresses the distinction as I want to recommend it:

Literary language, the language of narrative fiction and poetry is, root and branch, constitutive language. As such it is non-referential and it makes no statements [...]. It is a language occupied solely with itself, *in a sense*. The mistake promoted by the Positivistic vision of language is to suppose that this sense can be absolute. Language is everywhere hopelessly infected with the extra-linguistic: the relationship between its signs runs ineluctably by way of the world. So there is, just as the critical humanist has always maintained, a strong connection between language and reality; only it does not run by way of reference and truth. Rather, it permeates the thickness of the language we speak.⁸

Our humanist argues that he has provided a picture of language that permits us to make a similar claim, that literature can bring before us reality as it lies within our language rather than reality as we come into contact with it in referential and representational speech. For if literature represents nothing real, we now can see it as bringing into full view our *standards* of representation, our linguistic criteria "for what the world 'is', without themselves being removed from that world."⁹ When we say of what we find in a work of literature that *this* is racism, *this* is jealousy, *this* is suffering, we are testifying to the fact that literature has the power to open up language and expose this reality as it is woven into the fabric of our language – that it has the power to beat, if you will, the world out of our words. In this respect, when we find ourselves in the presence of the literary we come into contact with something very much like what Harrison calls "constitutive" language, for we see language showing us its structure and admitting the reality upon which it is built.

We thus find that we do not need worldly reference and representation to account for literary language's ability to speak out our world. Indeed we do not need to look outside the literary work to explain the humanist connection at all, for there is nothing outside of the text that matters to the humanist. We do not need to attempt to unite the literary with anything *hors-texte*. We can look deeper into what is

already within our language. Wittgenstein shows the humanist that if he looks deep enough, he will find there our world as well, not as a represented object but as reality as it “permeates the thickness” of the language both we and the literary work of art speak. If this is the case, the humanist, far from being incoherent, is right to insist that literary fiction can offer crucial cognitive insights into the way our world is.

¹ See Bernard Harrison (1993) and David Schalkwyk (1995).

² Peter Lamarque, 1996, p. 105.

³ Simon Blackburn, 1998, p. 231.

⁴ Hilary Putnam, 1990, p. 28.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1980, § 558. Referring to a disposition of water, Wittgenstein says: “This fact is fused into the foundation of our language-game.”

⁶ Stanley Cavell, 1979, p. 316.

⁷ Should it be worth mentioning, I am not, in emphasizing the text’s references to Othello’s blackness, asking that we understand the matter as though it is in some way of a piece with race and blackness as it is addressed and understood in (for example) twentieth-century American literature. Iago’s strategy here is to dehumanize Othello by making him an outsider, an “other” as it is fashionable to say; and Othello’s race is clearly the brush with which Iago paints this picture, regardless of what race and blackness might signify for Iago, Shakespearean audiences, or the structure of the first act. Critics of *Othello*, at least since Coleridge (whose argument against reading Othello as a “veritable Negro” is arguably itself a classic of racist reasoning), generally agree on this interpretation. The Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom puts the point well, if grandiloquently, when he writes of Iago: “the passed-over officer becomes the poet of street brawls, stabbings in the dark, disinformation, and above all else, the uncreation of Othello, the sparagmos of the great captain-general so that he can be returned to the original abyss, the chaos that Iago equates with the Moor’s African origins” (1998, p. 438).

⁸ Bernard Harrison, 1991, p. 51.

⁹ David Schalkwyk, 1995, p. 288.

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