Wittgenstein, Pedagogy, and Literary Criticism

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F R. LEAVIS REPORTS THAT HE once had a conversation with Ludwig Wittgenstein about the poetry of William Empson in which Wittgenstein asked, "What are the poems like?" Leavis rather archly replied that Wittgenstein didn't know enough about English poetry for a description to be meaningful, to which Wittgenstein answered, "If you like his poems, you can describe them." Leavis went on to make a few "lame observations" about Empson's relationship to Donne and then gave up. Some time later, after Leavis had read Wittgenstein one of Empson's poems, Wittgenstein peremptorily said, "Explain it!" When Leavis attempted to do so, however, Wittgenstein kept interrupting him, asking, "But what does this mean?" In exasperation, Leavis finally declared, "I'm not playing," and handed the book to Wittgenstein. At this point, Wittgenstein asserted, "It's perfectly plain that you don't understand the poem in the least," and then proceeded to look at the poem and deliver precisely the interpretation that Leavis himself was about to provide.[1]

Wittgenstein's claim "If you like a poem, you can describe it" echoes his call to replace explanation with description in the *Philosophical Investigations.* Leavis's resistance, however, shows that for each man there were different modes of "description"; Leavis's "description" required a placing of Empson's work in a literary tradition, while for Wittgenstein, "description" was simply part of the response to the poem. When the two men read the poem together, Wittgenstein's demand "Explain it!" seems perfectly transparent to Leavis, but his "explanation" seems somehow inadequate, continually interrupted by Wittgenstein's questions. Leavis's statement "I'm not playing" should perhaps make us think of Wittgenstein's "language-games"; but here it is Wittgenstein who seems not to understand the rules, whose understanding of "understanding" does not intersect with that of the literary critic. And yet, in the final analysis, Wittgenstein and Leavis converge upon the very same interpretation of the work at hand.

The encounter between Wittgenstein and Leavis, between the philosopher and the literary critic, indicates some of the questions that are

raised when Wittgenstein's philosophical inquires are brought to bear on literary criticism. It shows us the vexing disagreements that seem to arise over even the most basic terms of criticism—"explain," "describe," "mean"—and highlights the different ways in which we use those terms. But it also leaves us with the strange sense that nothing has been changed by our inquiries, that a Wittgensteinian study of literary criticism, to paraphrase the *Investigations*, "leaves everything as it is" (§124).[2]

Wittgenstein's philosophy and writings have become increasingly influential in American literary and literary-critical circles; a recent search of the MLA Bibliography reveals nearly a thousand entries linking Wittgenstein and literature. This can be attributed in part to the uniquely literary quality of Wittgenstein's own writing. Stanley Cavell is perhaps the most eloquent advocate of the position that the "ostentatiously literary gestures" and aphoristic style of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* are "essential to his philosophizing," making Wittgenstein himself an important modernist writer.[3] Marjorie Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder* demonstrates the resonance of Wittgenstein's writing with that of major twentieth-century authors such as Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett, and traces the direct influence of Wittgenstein on later poets from Ingeborg Bachmann to Robert Creeley.[4]

The most ambitious attempts to reconcile Wittgenstein and literary criticism have sought in Wittgenstein's thought a more positive foundation for literary theory—often as a counterpoint to the ostensibly debilitating influences of deconstruction and postmodernist relativism, or as a means of distinguishing among competing theories of literature and interpretation. Charles Altieri, whose work represents one of the most sustained efforts to develop a Wittgensteinian literary theory, sees Wittgenstein as a means to "recover the force of humanistic claims about literature" in the face of the deconstructive skepticism of the past three decades.[5] Charles Bernstein, the leading theorist of the contemporary language writers, argues that Wittgenstein restores the agency to writing that Derrida denies: "What Derrida ends up transforming to houses of cards . . . Wittgenstein locates as *meaning*, with the full range of intention, responsibility, coherence, and possibility for revolt against or madness without."[6] And Stanley Fish's notion of the "interpretive communities" that help determine literary meaning bears a resemblance to the "forms of life" in which Wittgenstein grounds the use of language.[7]

Philosophers have been skeptical of many of these projects, not least because of the questionable procedure of constructing a "theory" at all from Wittgenstein's work (*PI* §128: "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them"). Walter Glannon's article "What Literary Theory

Misses in Wittgenstein" is a typical response, arguing that literary-critical applications of Wittgenstein are based merely on "misleading analogies" and ignorance of his philosophical context.[8] Joseph Margolis, while granting that Perloff has made an "inventive *use*" of Wittgenstein as "an exemplary poet of a new kind," laments that she "leaves the implied philosophical issues largely unexamined, even neglected."[9] Indeed, some philosophers have sought to enlist Wittgenstein as an active antagonist of contemporary literary criticism, using Wittgensteinian tenets to debunk supposedly misguided literary-critical views of interpretation and meaning and to provide a more rigorous framework for our understanding of literature.

But it's questionable whether philosophers have been any more successful than literary critics in bringing Wittgenstein to bear on literature. Philosophers' attempts to think through Wittgenstein's relevance to aesthetics run up against the limited scope and quantity of Wittgenstein's own comments on the matter, and they are generally based upon assumptions that literary critics would find inadequate and naïve. Glannon, for instance, simply writes off literary criticism for its "aversion to truth."[10] Sarah E. Worth's essay on Wittgenstein on music gets us no farther than the intentional fallacy: "What sounds 'right' is determined by [a composition's] creator and confirmed and recognized by the understanding listener."[11] Indeed, these philosophers of literature might themselves be charged with neglecting a basic Wittgensteinian insight: by demanding that literary critics adhere to philosophical definitions of "interpretation," "intention," and "meaning," they fail to ask how such terms are actually used in the language-game of literary criticism.

The use of Wittgenstein in thinking about literature that I wish to propose is more modest than the projects I have described above—although I hope no less valuable to the Wittgensteinian task of clearing up confusions and misunderstandings about the study of literature. What I suggest is not a "Wittgensteinian" literary theory; in fact, I suggest that the construction of such a theory is precisely not what Wittgenstein's thought allows us to do. Where philosophers and literary critics alike have erred is in supposing that Wittgenstein can provide a firmer foundation for our discussions of literature—that his work can provide us a means of adjudicating questions about what literature is, what kinds of literature are good and bad, and which conceptual or theoretical frameworks and critical styles we ought to use when discussing literature. Such questions are not prior to the practice of literary criticism; rather, they are *part of* the ongoing language-game of criticism, and the fact that they remain unanswered does not prevent us from continuing to read, discuss, debate, and disagree about literature and literary value.

When we encounter a disputed term like "interpretation" or "meaning" in the discussion of literature, our solution cannot be to turn to Wittgenstein for definitions of such terms. Instead, the appropriately Wittgensteinian move would be to ask how we actually learn and use such terms. And most academic literary critics are confronted with this question on a daily basis, as we seek to train our own students in styles of literary reading and interpretation.

In working through some of Wittgenstein's remarks on music and poetry in *Zettel* and applying them to the reading of a poem, I hope to suggest that Wittgenstein does not give us a "new" way of reading a poem, but perhaps does give us some tools for clearing up misunderstandings about our process of reading. Just as Wittgenstein sought a method that "gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question" (*PI* §133), the strange convergence of Wittgenstein's and Leavis's readings may suggest to us not only that literary theory leaves criticism as it already is, but also that reading Wittgenstein may help us give literary criticism peace—allowing us to see that our disagreements about critical styles do not prevent us from carrying forward the day-to-day practice of criticism. Wittgenstein's focus on how we learn to use words turns our attention away from literary theory and toward literary pedagogy, reminding us to think about how we learn and teach the very terms that we debate and question.

The most obvious use of Wittgenstein in literary criticism is to debunk the broader, more metaphysical claims literary critics may want to make for their work. Wittgenstein's remarks in *Zettel* on the understanding of music and poetry (§155–76) provide a rather neat dismantling of some of these kinds of claims.[12] The first insight, in accordance with Wittgenstein's critique of mental states and private experience, is that we cannot think of the terms that we often use to describe successful literary communication—such as "expression" and "understanding"— as referring to well-defined inward experiences that accompany the performance or reception of a literary work: "But if I hear a tune with understanding, doesn't something special go on in me—which does not go on if I hear it without understanding? And *what*?—No answer comes; or anything that occurs to me is insipid" (*Z* §162). The problem here, Wittgenstein suggests, is that we could never explain "expressive playing" or "understanding" in terms of any single experience or sensation; all we can observe is that "*signs* of understanding may accompany hearing" (*Z* §162). Wittgenstein's discussion of "understanding" here echoes his discussion of the word in the *Investigations*, where saying "Now I understand" in writing out a mathematical progression does not indicate a

specific mental experience (for example, the appearance of the correct formula before one's mind), but is rather an utterance more equivalent to "Now I can go on," demonstrated by one's ability to actually continue the series. For a work of art, then, "understanding" is not simply inside the head, but is an ability to "go on" and do something with the piece—"talk about it, play it, compare it with others etc" (*Z* §162).

The *Zettel* remarks also warn us against critical projects of "decoding" that attempt to "translate" a work of art into determinate referents: "Mightn't we imagine a man who, never having had any acquaintance with music, comes to us and hears someone playing a reflective piece of Chopin and is convinced that this is a language and people merely want to keep the meaning hidden from him?" (*Z* §161). We might be tempted to take this imaginary character seriously (he does, after all, resemble the benighted student of literature convinced by his teacher that all works of poetry are infused with some secret "symbolism") were it not for the condition that this man must be imagined as having no acquaintance with music; in other words, for him to even be possible, we must imagine him outside what Wittgenstein calls the "special conceptual world" (*Z* §165) of music, or what we might even call music's "language-game." (As Wittgenstein writes in *Z* §172: "Understanding a musical phrase may also be called understanding a *language*.") What Wittgenstein shows us here is that to imagine a situation where the language of music and poetry is perfectly transparent is to imagine a form of life utterly different from our own and utterly alien to the uses to which we put music and poetry: "Soulful expression in music—this cannot be recognized by rules. Why can't we imagine that it might be, by other beings?" (*Z* §157). The visitor's belief in a secret language of music is in fact a complete *failure* to understand the more impressionistic, less rule-bound way in which we experience music and its attendant emotions.[13]

These caveats are useful ones, but it might well be argued that they don't get us very far—after all, few literary critics would insist that "expression" and "understanding" are purely private experiences or that poems can be unproblematically decoded.[14] In any case, these are purely negative guidelines. Do Wittgenstein's remarks actually provide us any kind of positive framework on which to base literary criticism? At this point, we might turn to the work of Charles Altieri, who has labored steadily over the course of his career to construct such a Wittgensteinian framework. At the risk of doing an injustice to Altieri's complex and evolving reading of Wittgenstein, which has developed over the course of some five decades, I focus my remarks on his early attempts to use Wittgenstein as a kind of metatheoretician who intervenes in the charged literary-theoretical debates of the 1970s and 1980s.[15]

Altieri's 1976 article "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Literary Theory" presents Wittgenstein as an alternative to the then-ascendant critical modes of deconstruction and reader-response theory. Altieri understands the major conflicts in literary theory to be rooted in the problem of self-consciousness, where the idea of "consciousness . . . as a separate structuring force," combined with an obsession with the "problem of personal identity," leads to a problematization of representational schemes in general, so that literary critics find themselves "torn between two unacceptable poles": that of (metaphysical) "pure naturalism" and that of (skeptical) irony (*WCL* 1399). The result, Altieri suggests, is that literary theory seems confronted with a choice between untenable assertions of aesthetic absolutes and divisive or paralyzing admissions of relativism.

Altieri uses Wittgenstein to launch a two-pronged attack on this problem. First, he argues that Wittgenstein helps us avoid the pitfalls of self-consciousness by turning our attention outward rather than inward: "[T]hinking is not a separate activity but a way of proceeding in other more specific activities" (*WCL* 1402). Meaning is generated not from our own solipsistic frameworks but rather within learned actions and situations that can be more or less objectively described; grounding meaning in use, Altieri argues, provides a "fundamental public norm for assessing statements" that does not rely upon structures of consciousness or representation (*WCL* 1411). One corollary of this, which Altieri develops in his 1984 essay "Going On and Going Nowhere: Wittgenstein and the Question of Criteria in Literary Criticism," is that literary interpretation is much less problematic than we might believe: "[E]motional response or assessment of the qualities exhibited by an utterance can be as relevant and objective as any other way of responding to language when called for by the relevant method of projection" (*WCL* 1414). But Altieri's second point is even more provocative. He argues that literature itself displays these Wittgensteinian qualities: "Literary texts provide images of the various attitudes we can take up toward the world; they focus attention on the ways we normally engage in experience without reflectively attending to it. These texts do not lead us to consider the way we subjectively constitute our responses, but give us a perspective on an involvement in acts which can also take place without thought" (*WCL* 1405). In other words, literature itself, like Wittgenstein's philosophy, gives us a model of reflectivity that is not reflexivity, a model of self and self-examination that doesn't lead to corrosive skepticism.

Altieri may be correct in suggesting that Wittgenstein, who encourages us to simply stop asking vexing metaphysical and representationalist questions, provides a much less paralyzing backdrop for literary criti-

cism (or, for that matter, for any kind of activity) than Derrida does. But his idea that Wittgenstein can provide us with "fundamental public norms" seems like an overstatement. The grammars that Wittgenstein offers us are descriptive rather than prescriptive (*PI* §124: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it") and hence cannot provide regulative norms for critical practice. Nor does Wittgenstein allow us to argue that there is any "fundamental" principle to which we can appeal for judgment in a given situation. Altieri's desire to use Wittgensteinian grammars to bolster aesthetic and even ethical precepts is even more visible in "Going On and Going Nowhere," where he argues, against relativist models of interpretation, that Wittgenstein's model of "knowing how to go on" provides a reliable, yet flexible, grounding for criteria in literary criticism: "We test hypotheses about the meaning simply by seeing whether a person can go on to make the desired connections by initiating or continuing a practice that produces the desired results or degrees of mutual understanding."[16] Certain basic critical principles can be understood as embedded in our "forms of life," so that to challenge them would be to imagine a mode of "reading" utterly different from our own; for example, we can agree broadly on what makes for "bad" criticism (*GO* 214). In most cases we do know how to go on reading, talking, or critiquing; those cases where we're not sure don't destabilize our more deeply embedded procedures.

Altieri's main target in this essay is not Derrida but Stanley Fish, who, Altieri claims, shares the Wittgensteinian insight that "meaning is use" but distorts it into a radical relativism that claims that "because descriptions are not determined by natural laws and because judgments on conventions take place within conventions, one can treat terms for judgment as 'arbitrary'" (*GO* 205). It's true that Fish's link of norms to an "institutional structure" in *Is There a Text in This Class?* seems rather too definite for a Wittgensteinian's taste, as it suggests that one might be able to identify particular sets of institutional "rules" that apply in given cases and, moreover, that one could legislate changes in those rules by altering the institutions (*ITT* 306). "Form of life," in Altieri's argument, gives us a broader and more flexible context in which to understand rules, allowing us to avoid the narrowness and arbitrariness that Fish's model suggests. For example, if you and I inhabit different academic institutions, different schools of criticism, different ideologies, and so forth, are our claims simply incommensurable? To Altieri, "form of life" suggests a human bedrock beneath these merely institutional disagreements.

But even if it is true that Fish does not entirely share Altieri's Witt-
gensteinian lineage, are the implications for criticism really much
different? As Fish writes, "A literary critic already knows what to do
simply by virtue of his being embedded in a field of practice; it is hard
to see why his performance would be improved or altered by bringing
to bear the categories and urgencies of another field of practice [that
is, philosophy]" (*ITT* 334). Altieri calls Fish a relativist, but Fish would
certainly dispute this label: "[W]hile relativism is a position one can
entertain, it is not a position one can occupy" (*ITT* 319). Indeed, Fish
seems just as interested in maintaining the norms and values of liter-
ary criticism as Altieri does—"The fear [of relativism] . . . is groundless
because no one is indifferent to the norms and values that enable his
consciousness" (*ITT* 319)—and he seems just as convinced as Altieri that
our theorizings do not threaten our ability to go on with literary criti-
cism: "[T]he shared basis of agreement . . . is never not already found,
although it is not always the same one" *(ITT* 318). Altieri hopes to use
Wittgenstein against Derrida and Fish to "recover the force of human-
istic claims about literature" (*WCL* 1398); but Fish himself, in attacking
the ordinary/literary language distinction, strives to do much the same:
"[O]rdinary language is extraordinary because at its heart is precisely
that realm of values, intentions, and purposes which is often assumed
to be the exclusive property of literature . . . . [A] theory which restores
human content to language also restores legitimate status to literature
. . . . (It levels *upward*.)" (*ITT* 108). Fish even echoes Altieri's desire for
objectivity by calling aesthetics "an empirical rather than a theoretical
study" (*ITT* 109–10). And at times it is Fish who sounds more Wittgen-
steinian than Altieri, replacing Altieri's earnest struggle for norms with
Wittgenstein's desire to give philosophy peace: "[M]y message is finally
not challenging, but consoling—not to worry" (*ITT* 321).

So while Altieri may need Wittgenstein to ground his argument and
differentiate it philosophically from deconstruction and reader/response,
in literary-critical terms Fish seems to have reached much the same place
without any help from Wittgenstein. Indeed, Wittgenstein's relevance
becomes even more tenuous in Altieri's claims about the ethics of criti-
cism. It's tempting to read an ethics of criticism into isolated remarks of
Wittgenstein such as "Ethics and aesthetics are one,"[17] and Altieri takes
this claim quite seriously. In "Going On and Going Nowhere," Altieri
argues that the Wittgensteinian model of knowing how to go on allows
us to think about how a particular mode of reading or critical style is
part of a particular set of "cultural filiations"—in other words, that it
comes from a particular history of readings and can be understood to
lead to certain kinds of consequences: "Because this history [of previous

readings] dictates the filiations possible to a given way of going on, it enables disputants to shift the burden of argument from descriptive categories to the realm of ethos . . . . [T]he crucial questions become—do you want to be able to claim affinity with a set of writers and theorists, and how will you project the value of your way of going on in relation or in opposition to these historical filiations? . . . We make decisions by projecting the kind of person one becomes through making choices that involve cultural filiations" (*GO* 221–22). Altieri's model is an attractive one for critics who wish to link criticism and ethics, since it proposes to judge critical styles not through a priori theoretical considerations, but through the consequences of those modes for human life, through a judgment of the "kind of person one becomes" by reading a certain way. Here Altieri is reading Wittgenstein's "going on" as a means of imaginative projection that encourages us always to consider the consequences of our modes of reading.

But I do not think that such modes of projection—of projecting "the kind of person one becomes"—can be defended within a Wittgensteinian framework. The issue of extrapolating from a given rule or method is discussed in *PI* §185, where Wittgenstein gives the example of the pupil who, having successfully written the series 0, 2, 4, 6 . . . up to 1000, then begins to write: 1000, 1004, 1008 . . . : "We say to him: 'Look what you've done!'—He doesn't understand. We say: 'You were meant to add *two*: look how you began the series!'—He answers, 'Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it.'—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: 'But I went on in the same way.'—It would now be no use to say: 'But can't you see . . . .?'—and repeat the old examples and explanations" (*PI* §185).[18] It would be erroneous, Wittgenstein suggests, to believe that a particular rule or method somehow contains its own extrapolation—that we could have "meant" in advance that the pupil should continue in a certain way after 1000. Instead, Wittgenstein suggests that our obedience to a rule is a "custom" (*PI* §199) or a "practice" (*PI* §202), embedded in a form of life. Altieri seems to turn this idea on its head, imagining that we can project a form of life from different modes of obedience to a rule. In fact, Wittgenstein strenuously denies that we make decisions about "going on" through this kind of projection: "When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*" (*PI* §219). Mastering a particular mode of "going on" is *part of* a form of life; we do not *choose* between different forms of life by choosing one way of going on over another. So it does not seem plausible that we could judge a given instance of criticism or even a particular critical style by the modes of going on it would generate or the kinds of people it would produce; we can only (as we usually do) judge those cases that

have already occurred. Again, Fish seems more Wittgensteinian than Altieri does on this point: "[A]nti-foundationalism says nothing about what we can now do or not do; it is an account of what we have always been doing and cannot help but do."[19]

I have argued to this point that Altieri's attempt to construct a positive model for literary criticism from Wittgenstein, while attractive, is not defensible when read against Wittgenstein himself. So the question still remains: does Wittgenstein offer the literary critic anything but a few commonplace caveats? To return to my opening anecdote, I think that Wittgenstein and Leavis's convergence on a single interpretation illustrates Fish's point that philosophical considerations have little bearing on individual acts of literary criticism. I do think, though, that Altieri is right in part, and that Wittgenstein may be of some help in navigating through (though not in solving or choosing within) the metadiscourse of literary criticism, specifically in thinking about how we answer literary-critical questions about such things as "meaning" and "explanation." To this end, I return to the *Zettel* remarks on music and poetry, suggesting that we can use them to ask useful questions about how we play the game of literary criticism without reducing Wittgenstein's insights (as Sarah Worth's reading does) to critical platitudes or to Wittgenstein's own literary opinions. And I argue that a careful reading of *Zettel* undermines philosophers' attempts to use Wittgenstein to ground the terms of literary analysis, showing instead how Wittgenstein points us back toward a consideration of how certain terms are actually used in literary criticism.

Wittgenstein begins his remarks here with a statement that might well be found in a work of literary criticism: "A poet's words can pierce us" (*Z* §155). But rather than using this metaphor to talk about an inward state that a poem generates, Wittgenstein moves in what seems to be the opposite direction: "And that is of course *causally* connected with the use that they have in our life" (*Z* §155). To talk about a poem's effects as "causal" seems somewhat odd to the ear of a literary critic, who is more used to using terms like "meaningful," "evocative," "moving," or "beautiful"—terms that seem more connected to a private mental state or to the poem's inherent aesthetic value. But Wittgenstein wants to direct us away from the idea that a poem's operation is entirely inward (hence private and mysterious) and toward the activities and behaviors that accompany the reading or hearing of a poem. (Wittgenstein's metaphor of "let[ting] our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words" (*Z* §155) gives us a picture not of linguistic decoding but of movement through a known landscape.) We can agree that there are certain "*signs* of understanding" (*Z* §162)—such

as discussion, comparison, performance—that might accompany the hearing or reading of a poem and that might lead us to say, "Yes, he understands the poem"; the error would be to ask, "But does he *really* understand? Is he experiencing the state of mind that I refer to when I talk of 'understanding'?"

Wittgenstein does acknowledge that we can talk about "understanding" as an experience—but only in certain circumstances: "The understanding of music is neither sensation nor a sum of sensations. Nevertheless it is correct to call it an experience inasmuch as *this* concept of understanding has some kinship with other concepts of experience. You say 'I experienced that passage quite differently.' But still this expression tells you '*what happened*' only if you are at home in the special conceptual world that belongs to these situations. (Analogy: 'I won the match.')" (*Z* §165). This remark is, I think, the crucial one for understanding the relevance of these issues to criticism. What Wittgenstein is showing is that a word like "experience" has a particular use within the language-game of talking about music or poetry. The phrase "I experienced that passage quite differently" might be used to distinguish one's own interpretation of or response to a particular passage from someone else's; but we must not allow the grammar of the word "experience" to delude us into thinking that one's "experience" of a passage is a specific and well-defined mental state that could be compared to another listener's mental state. When confronted with a question about a term like this, Wittgenstein tells us not to ask what the term "really" means in isolation, but to look at how it is used in the "special conceptual world" in question.

I think this insight can be generalized to a wide range of terms in criticism. For example, let's say someone asks me, "What does this poem mean?" I might respond by paraphrasing the poem, by talking about a particular set of motifs in the poem, by talking about the author's intentions, or (like Leavis) by talking about the poem's place in literary history. But if my interlocutor were then to say, "No, what I want to know is what it *really* means," I would probably look at him in a rather dumbfounded way and then repeat my previous explanations. "What does this poem mean?" is a question I have learned how to answer in various ways; it makes no sense, in a Wittgensteinian account, to take this utterance out of its language-game and insist, for example, that "meaning" must be a discernible object that a poem possesses. I could give no general account of poetic "meaning" that would supersede the kinds of things I would do in talking about some particular poem.

I think this is what Wittgenstein is getting at when he describes a remark like "What a lot that's got in it!" as generating a kind of "optical illusion" (*Z* §173). The remark is perfectly comprehensible (leading us

to talk about, say, the passage's imagery, emotional power, or original-
ity), unless we insist on understanding "in it" in terms of a different
language game, for example, "The box has a beetle in it." In general,
I think Wittgenstein's insights point us away from an idea of meaning
as somehow located "in" the text and toward an understanding of the
text's use in a context: "[T]hey got their significance only from the sur-
roundings. . . . Only in the stream of thought and life do words have
meaning" (*Z* §170, 173).

But what this procedure does *not* do is to give any more specific
content to critical terms like "meaning" and "understanding" than they
already have; in other words, it cannot be used to defend any particu-
lar critical style or to define our terms. That Wittgenstein tempts us to
read him as defending our own prejudices about criticism is visible not
only in Altieri but in Sarah E. Worth's work on Wittgenstein and music.
Worth correctly notes that "Wittgenstein asks us to shift our attention
away from thinking of understanding as an inner process." But rather
than reading Wittgenstein's argument that understanding is not an
experience as an extension of his more general argument against as-
sociating words like "understanding" with specific mental states, Worth
reads Wittgenstein as implying that the criteria for "understanding" are
somehow more rigorous and desirable than for "experiencing": "Thus
the reactive feelings for music are not equated with understanding,
and neither is *merely* experiencing the music grounds for calling the
experience an understanding."[20] Worth compounds this misreading
by taking Wittgenstein's comparison of music to a language (*Z* §172)
as a suggestion that "properly" understanding music means having a
mastery of its "rules," for example, counterpoint, orchestration, forms.
She argues that Wittgenstein's analogy gives us a very particular sense
of what understanding music means: "Understanding a musical theme
consists of comprehending the interrelations between the aspects of the
music and of appreciating the way that the parts form the whole."[21] I am
arguing, however, that a careful reading of Wittgenstein would prohibit
us from ever making such a pronouncement. For we can and do talk
of "understanding" a melody in ways much different than this—we can
appreciate its structure in isolation from the rest of the piece, we can
grasp its emotional power, we can recognize it from another context, and
so forth. In fact, I think the greatest strength of a Wittgensteinian way
of thinking about terms of criticism is that it turns our attention away
from any one definition of a term like "understanding" and toward the
myriad ways in which we use the term in critical discourse.

I would like to turn, finally, to the question of whether having Witt-
genstein in mind is of any help in confronting a particular literary text.

There are certainly many poems that can be read as Wittgensteinian philosophical allegories; Altieri, for instance, likens Wittgenstein to Wallace Stevens in his pursuit of "an ontology of what will suffice" (*WCL* 1413), while Marjorie Perloff sees Wittgensteinian gestures in Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett. Such observations lead Stanley Cavell, among others, to regard Wittgenstein himself as a modernist writer. But reading, say, Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry" as an allegory of Wittgensteinian philosophical concerns does not answer the rather different question of Wittgenstein's usefulness in understanding our processes of reading themselves.

My arbitrarily chosen example here is a brief poem by Emily Dickinson, "Circumference thou Bride of Awe," as presented in R. W. Franklin's variorum edition—a context that highlights the problems of interpretation more clearly than a simple confrontation with an unadorned text.

Circumference thou Bride of Awe
Possessing thou shalt be
Possessed by every hallowed Knight
That dares - to covet thee[22]

Now, let us say that I, having read this poem, am confronted with Wittgenstein's demand to Leavis: "Explain it!" What do I do? Rather than theorizing about what it means to "explain" a poem, I might follow Wittgenstein's advice: "In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we *learn* the meaning of this word?" (*PI* §77) As a student (or teacher) of literature, I am confronted with this kind of question in all sorts of situations: on an exam or in a paper, by a teacher in a classroom, or by a puzzled student in office hours. In these situations, I might begin by paraphrasing the poem; but it would be an error to suppose that my paraphrase were somehow the "real" meaning that the poem's literary language serves to conceal. As Wittgenstein observes in *Zettel*, "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information" (*Z* §160). So I could gloss the first line—"Circumference thou Bride of Awe"—as something like "Limits are necessary to the experience of the sublime"; but this paraphrase is simply another way of describing what Wittgenstein calls a causal relationship between Dickinson's line and the use I make of the line in my life. The relationship between the line and its paraphrase is not one of semantic equivalence, and the paraphrase is not the "actual" meaning that the line somehow contains. One can see the problems with this model of "actual" meaning by imagining a particularly stubborn student who insists of asking of each paraphrase,

"Yes, but what does *that* mean?" thus threatening us with the problem of infinite regress in our explanations. So we should be reminded here of Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Investigations* about interpreting and restating a rule: "[A]ny interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning" (*PI* §198); "[W]e ought to restrict the term 'interpretation' to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another" (*PI* §201).

Paraphrase is not the only way I might respond to a demand for explanation; I might talk about the poem's imagery, its tone and diction, or its meter and rhyme. A Wittgensteinian approach cannot help me decide which of these is a better mode of "explanation" in any absolute sense; nor would it help me determine what "explanation" would be in the abstract. Rather, it would point out that these are the activities with which I have learned to respond to the demand for explanation of a poem, and that some are successful in some situations and not in others.

I think I can sum this up by saying that Wittgenstein's mode of inquiry forces one to think *pedagogically*. One quite naturally uses different modes of explanations with different kinds of students, and a good teacher must understand the situations in which certain modes of explanation will be effective. But no one would claim that, say, the mode of explaining a poem to a third-grader, because it is the most "basic," is the "correct" mode of explanation; nor does the fact that one usually does not begin a remark on a poem in a graduate seminar with a paraphrase invalidate paraphrase as a mode of explanation. Similarly, a Wittgensteinian way of thinking about literary terms may be much more pedagogically useful than an approach that seeks ironclad definitions. In thinking about my use of the word "tone" in talking about a poem, I must realize, for example, that "tone" in poetry is quite different from something like "tone" in music, and that "tone" is a notoriously slippery term that students are laboriously taught to use in high-school English courses, so that if I wish to correct my student's use of "tone," I had better *teach* that student a new way of using the term rather than simply saying, "You are using this term incorrectly." As Wittgenstein says of explaining words like "regular" and "uniform" to someone who does not understand them: "[I]f a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I shall teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *practice.*—And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself" (*PI* §208). In short, the way we learn how to use literary terms is a much more reliable guide to what they mean than, say, glossaries of literary terms, which are used much more frequently by professionals in the field who are refining their own uses than by undergraduates approaching the terms for the first time.

Let's move on to the somewhat more sophisticated critical issues that the Franklin edition of the poem raises. The apparatus that accompanies the poem's text is fairly typical of a variorum critical edition; the poem's text is prefaced with information about the manuscript and its dates, followed by variants and then by historical information about the poem. In what sense is this information—knowing, for instance, that the poem was written in April 1884 on a fragment of a note to Otis Lord—an "explanation" of the poem? Is it, in fact—as a close reader might argue—irrelevant to the poem's meaning? This case is a little trickier, but I think that at the least we can say that, in our current critical practices, trying to separate "the poem's meaning" from such historical information is misguided, since giving historical information is part of the conceptual world of literary explanation. (We can plausibly imagine someone beginning a response to the question "What does this poem mean?" with, "Well, it was written in 1884. . . .") We can imagine situations where such a mode of explanation might be unsuccessful, perhaps because the hearer is a close reader who does not believe in the relevance of such historical context. But perhaps acceptance or rejection is beside the point; surely the opposing critic would *recognize* the historical information as a mode of explanation, rather than looking at his opponent in puzzlement. In this limited sense, I think Altieri is right to assert that our critical agreement is much broader than it might seem; we can understand the mode of explanation offered by a competing critical style as an attempt to explain, even if we disagree with the explanation offered.[23] As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Investigations*: "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (*PI* §241). Altieri would likely make the further argument that choosing to accept historical information as explanatory allows us to "go on" in other ways with the text—for example, to compare it to other poems written at the same time, or to understand it as referring to contemporary historical events—that excluding such information wouldn't allow. Choosing a mode of explanation would mean choosing the mode of "going on" it enables. But I think this argument tries to have it both ways: Altieri wants to establish broad critical agreement by calling criticism as a whole a "form of life," but he also wants to understand competing critical styles as "forms of life" with their own modes of "going on." It still seems an overreach to suppose that Wittgenstein will help us decide whether, say, deconstruction is preferable to new historicism as a mode of explanation.

Ultimately, what I think Wittgenstein gives us in thinking about debates in literary criticism is an approach that we might think of as pragmatic

or even pedagogical. Wittgenstein's injunction to always consider how we learn to use a word seems particularly relevant to the literary professional who is both a critic and a teacher, and who is faced on a daily basis with questions like how to explain a poem or what a poem means. As students, we do learn how words like "meaning," "explanation," "tone," or "postmodernism" are used in an English classroom or in an English paper, and as teachers we show our students how to use such terms. So when literary theorists attempt to define these terms, or try to establish what they *really* mean, or question whether they can have any meaning at all, we can look to our own procedures of learning and teaching as a firmer ground on which to stand, while acknowledging the use such gestures of definition have in the literary-critical game.

While Wittgenstein can help us avoid these sorts of philosophical errors, I do not believe that he can provide a positive project for literary criticism; nor can he provide us with a means of choosing between competing literary styles. The fundamental argument made by Altieri— that literary critics, despite their disagreements, still speak the same language—undermines his more ambitious claims that Wittgenstein can help us link particular modes of criticism to particular ethical consequences. And while Wittgenstein can help us clear up certain misconceptions about our interpretations, his philosophy does not enrich those interpretations beyond what we already do. But what Wittgenstein can do, to a limited degree, is to give literary criticism peace, encouraging it to focus its energies on what it has been doing—reading, writing, teaching—all along.

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NOTES

1   F.R. Leavis, "Memories of Wittgenstein," in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 66–67. This encounter, and the Wittgenstein-Leavis relationship more broadly, is discussed at some length in Stanley Stewart, "Was Wittgenstein a Closet Literary Critic?" *New Literary History* 34, no. 1 (2003): 43–57.

2   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958) (hereafter cited as *PI*).

3   Stanley Cavell, "The *Investigations*' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25–29.

4   Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996).

5   Charles Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Literary Theory," *MLN* 91, no. 6 (December 1976): 1398, hereafter cited as *WCL*. A few studies, including Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984), find extensive parallels between Wittgenstein and Derridean deconstruction.

6   Charles Bernstein, "The Objects of Meaning: Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), 181.

7   Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), hereafter cited as *ITT*.

8   Walter Glannon, "What Literary Theory Misses in Wittgenstein," *Philosophy and Literature* 10, no. 2 (October 1986): 265.

9   Joseph Margolis, "Unlikely Prospects for Applying Wittgenstein's 'Method' to Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 323.

10   Glannon, "What Literary Theory Misses in Wittgenstein," 264.

11   Sarah E. Worth, "Wittgenstein's Musical Understanding," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37, no. 2 (1997): 165.

12   Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967). All further references to *Zettel* marked by *Z*.

13   Joachim Schulte claims that Wittgenstein means to distinguish between different kinds of composers and performers with this remark, and that "if our visitor from a culture without music is to mistake a reflective piece (*pensieroso*) by Chopin with utterances in a secret language . . . the performer will have to play it in a reflective manner." But it is not at all clear how this visitor would know the difference between a piece played in a "reflective" manner and one played in, say, a "vivacious" manner, since the visitor completely lacks the previous experience of music that allows us to make such distinctions. Perhaps the visitor can perceive the way in which the audience responds to the performance, and presumes (erroneously) that the performer is communicating directly to the audience in some kind of code, rather than grasping the far less systematic means by which a musical performance can evoke emotion in its hearers. Joachim Schulte, "'The Life of the Sign': Wittgenstein on Reading a Poem," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, 155.

14   Some "Wittgensteinian" critiques of literary theory do, in fact, assume a straw-man version of literary criticism that is reduced to such projects of decoding. Severin Schroeder asserts that "Twentieth-century literary theory is almost entirely ruled by the view that the value or interest of a work of literature lies in its conveying to us a certain message"—a statement that few American literary critics at least since the New Critics would endorse. Severin Schroeder, "The Coded-Message Model of Literature," in *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (New York: Routledge, 2001), 210.

15   In his more recent work, Altieri has moved towards using Wittgenstein less as a metatheoretician than as a kind of model reader, whose practices can provide an example for literary-critical reading. For instance, in a 2012 essay, Altieri argues that Wittgenstein's method "shows how careful attention to small differences can produce immense consequences for specifying what particular actions involve" and offers "a subtle and general theory of how aspects of meaning, like poetry, carried by exemplification rather than description have major roles in shaping what counts as sense within language games." Altieri, "How the 'New Modernist Studies' Fails the Old Modernism," *Textual Practice* 26, no. 4 (2012): 775–76.

16   Charles Altieri, "Going On and Going Nowhere: Wittgenstein and the Question of Criteria in Literary Criticism," in *Philosophical Approaches to Literature: New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. William E. Cain (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1984), 211, hereafter cited as *GO*.

17   Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 183.

18   Wittgenstein continues: "In such a case we might say, perhaps: It comes natural to this person to understand our order with our explanations as *we* should understand the order: 'Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on'" (*PI* §185). Altieri might argue that Wittgenstein seems to be excluding such unpredictable behavior from our form

of life, and that if the wayward pupil were a wayward critic, his behavior would not be recognized as part of the critical school with which he sought to affiliate himself. However, I do not think that the example can be used to make such fine distinctions; the wayward pupil is not simply a poor mathematician, but deviates in some important way from "the common behaviour of mankind" (*PI* §206).

19   Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1989), 323–24.

20   Worth, "Wittgenstein's Musical Understanding," 159–60, emphasis added.

21   Worth, "Wittgenstein's Musical Understanding," 161, emphasis added.

22   Emily Dickinson, "Circumference thou Bride of Awe," in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 3: 1434–1435.

23   This also goes to one of the most controversial elements of Fish's argument: the question of how narrowly an "interpretive community" should be defined. If "interpretive community" is understood to be analogous to a Wittgensteinian "form of life," it does not seem possible that different *schools* of criticism—say, Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism—could be considered separate interpretive communities, since then they would simply be mutually incomprehensible. It seems more plausible to say that the Marxist critic will still recognize a psychoanalytic interpretation as a different kind of move within the larger language game of literary criticism, albeit one with which the Marxist critic might not agree—just as a chess player might recognize that her opponent's rather puzzling move was part of a coherent strategy or gambit that differed from her own. Sonia Sedivy makes a related point in "Wittgenstein Against Interpretation," although the thrust of her argument is that Fish's overly narrow notion of interpretive communities leads to an un-Wittgensteinian "predetermination of meanings" according to preexisting "interests, goals, and assumptions." Sonia Sedivy, "Wittgenstein Against Interpretation: 'The Meaning of a Text Does Not Stop Short of Its Facts," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 165–185.