

12 Literature as the Measure of Our Lives

Danièle Moyal-Sharrock

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1993), Toni Morrison said: “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” With these words, Morrison may have captured the distinctive importance of language in the constitution and expression of human morality, sociality, psychology, science, and art; but this is not to say that, as the Tractarian Wittgenstein had it, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (TLP 5.6). Whatever linguistic idealism may or may not have informed this Tractarian remark, the *later* Wittgenstein was no linguistic idealist: he did not share the view – as Bernard Williams (1973) would have us believe – that there is no reality independent of our conception of it.¹ What Wittgenstein groundbreakingly realises is that we do not read off our concepts from nature – as if nature could even be in the business of offering concepts. Our concepts do not track a conceptual ghost line in reality but rather create an order in reality – an order conditioned, but not dictated, by reality. Wittgenstein does not therefore preclude the existence of a language-independent reality to which our language connects; only the connection is not due to our *discovering* tracks in nature but to *making* them. The connection is not a correspondentist or empirical one, but a grammatical one: “The connection between ‘language and reality’ is made by definitions of words, and these belong to grammar” (PG 97).

Nor does this grammatical or conceptual ordering preclude reality’s impact on our ordering. Though we don’t read off our concepts from nature, “[t]he rule we lay down is the one most strongly suggested by the facts of experience” (AWL, 84). And so our concepts are closely interwoven – though not inferentially – with what is most fundamental in our way of living (LW II, 43–44). The later Wittgenstein well understood that language is rooted in and *conditioned* by the extra-linguistic; by natural *facts* which are fundamental or salient for us: “very general facts of nature” such as the “common behaviour of mankind” (PI, 56; PI §206).² “Indeed” – he asks in *On Certainty* – “doesn’t it seem obvious that the *possibility* of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts?” (OC §617).

I have elsewhere addressed the ways in which language is embedded in the extra-linguistic;³ what I would like to do in this paper is explore how its being impacted by the extra-linguistic – how its being “reality-soaked” – makes language the vital and *autonomous* force that it is. I am *not* interested here in how we use language to describe and refer to the world, but in how we use language aesthetically to evoke what cannot be described or referred to veridically, and yet deeply generates or enhances understanding. Inasmuch as the most potent manifestations of language carrying life and conveying understanding are to be found in literature, I will use literature to help me flesh out how, in this non-referential and nonpropositional way, language is, immeasurably, “the measure of our lives”.

The aim of the *Tractatus*, writes Wittgenstein in its Preface, is “to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts”; and that, he adds, can only be done by drawing the limit in language.⁴ We might also put it this way: the *Tractatus* aims to demarcate “what can be said” from nonsense. That the limit of thought can only be drawn in language is not to say that the limit of thought coincides with that of language, for language exceeds “what can be said”. Though the *Tractatus* narrows down what can be said or spoken about to a specific subgroup of propositions – the propositions of natural science (TLP 6.53) – language consists of far more than this. If what can be said, technically speaking, is narrowed down to what can be true or false – that is, what is verifiable: empirical propositions – there is much that cannot be said but is nevertheless dependent on language for its expression. When, at the close of the book, Wittgenstein writes: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (TLP 7), he is alluding to 1) that which *can* be put into words, but is not strictly speaking sayable because not truth-evaluable; and 2) that which *cannot* be put into words but shows itself through the use of words. It is the latter ineffable that I am concerned with here: how some of the most acute and sensitive manifestations of “the measure of our lives” depend on language, though they cannot be formulated.

1. Language “Is in Order as It Is” (PI §98)

Wittgenstein writes that the ethical and the aesthetic are not sayable (TLP 6.421). Our words will give us “facts, facts, and facts but no Ethics” (LE, 40). The “mere description” of the facts of a murder, in all its physical and psychological detail, “will contain nothing which we could call an *ethical* proposition. The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone” (LE, 39). This is a version of the fact-value distinction. Value cannot be said because all that can be said is natural (or factual) meaning, and value is super-natural. This does not mean that value finds no expression; only that its

expression is not, and should not be confused with, empirical or natural/factual expression. The ethical value of the murder cannot be *said* for there are no ethical propositions; it can only *show* itself *in* what is said: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*” (TLP 6.522).

On the other hand, many of the things that *can* be put into words – such as tautologies (including propositions of logic) and contradictions – “say nothing” (TLP 4.461, 5.43, 6.1, 6.11). And so language can be misleading in that what looks like it *is* saying something – simply because it doesn’t *look* as if lacking sense, (e.g., the propositions of logic) – in fact does lack sense and says nothing (TLP 4.461).⁵ Indeed Wittgenstein regularly complains about “the misleading uniformity of language”. From the *Tractatus* where he thanks Russell for “showing that the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its real one” (TLP 4.0031), to the *Blue Book* where he notes the confusion provoked by “the outward similarity between a metaphysical proposition and an experiential one” (BB, 55f); or in *Philosophical Grammar*, “the confusion caused by the form of word-language, which makes everything uniform” (PG, 422); and the *Investigations*:

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!

(PI §11)

This is why the philosopher’s task is “[t]he clarification of the use of language” aimed at dismantling the “[t]raps of language” (PO, 183 /BT, 311). However, though the problems that arise through our misinterpreting the forms of our language go deep (PI §110), this cannot generate a desire for another language; it can only prompt the philosopher to alert us to instances of language going on holiday (PI §38) – as, for example, when philosophers say that radical “doubt” is possible. Here, language goes on holiday because philosophers use the word “doubt” in a way that transgresses its use in our ordinary language games and thereby confounds us; for, Wittgenstein reminds us, to speak of radical doubt is nonsense: “A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt” (OC §450); “Doubting and non-doubting behavior. There is the first only if there is the second” (OC §354). For in order even to doubt we must at least be certain of the meaning of our words (OC §370).

In spite of his wariness about the misleading uniformity of language, Wittgenstein does not fall into what Ben Ware calls “the modernist-linguistic impasse” (Ware 2015, 120). His acknowledgement of the “traps” that come with the nature of language – and which are compounded by our inattention to context, our misleading reifications, our violations of

grammar – in no way betrays a dissatisfaction with ordinary language. Quite the contrary, Wittgenstein finds it perfectly in order as it is – and this, from the *Tractatus* onward:

In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.

(TLP 5.5563)

On the one hand it is clear that every sentence in our language “is in order as it is”. That is to say, we are not *striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us. – On the other hand it seems clear that where there is sense there must be perfect order. – So there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence.

(PI §98)

These remarks are all on the side of ordinary language: not only is it in no need of interference or improvement, it *cannot* be improved, for it is – even in its vaguest sentences – in “perfect order”. However, that “philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language” (PI §124) does not mean that it should not correct *philosophical* use when it goes “on holiday”. Conceptual elucidation is the philosopher’s job:⁶ she is responsible for discerning “differences” in “the misleading analogies in the use of language” (P, 163), and so ought not to use concepts indiscriminately. Though Wittgenstein refuses to admonish or correct the ordinary use of language when prey to misleading analogies, the philosopher must be corrected:

For when Moore says “I know that that’s a . . .” I want to reply “you don’t *know* anything!” – and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention.

(OC §407; original emphasis)

Here Wittgenstein inveighs Moore for his carelessness; for the “wrong use” he made of the proposition “I know . . .” (OC §178).

As is well known, Wittgenstein himself struggled with language: “Here I am inclined to fight windmills, because I cannot yet say the thing I really want to say” (OC §400). However, Wittgenstein’s struggle with language⁷ is not a struggle with the limitations of language; it is a struggle with thought, a philosophical struggle. Language is perfectly adequate; it is the philosopher who may not be: “I do philosophy now like an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys” (OC §532). We should therefore take neither the incapacity of language to say “the supernatural”

(i.e., the aesthetic, the ethical or the mystical generally), nor the philosopher's struggle with language, to be indications of any shortcoming in language. In the latter case, the philosopher's struggle, though it involves a struggle with language, is not due to any failing on the part of language, but to the philosopher's difficulty in apprehending and perspicuously relaying "something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement" (PI §92). In the former case, it is simply that the *mode* of expression is not *saying*, but *showing*; language is perfectly adequate and indeed, where literature is concerned, essential to the evocation of the ineffable.

2. The Language of Literature: Showing, Not Saying

For there is meaning that can be explained and meaning that does not come out in an explanation.

(Z §156)

For Wittgenstein, the significance of aesthetics lies in the artist's ability to present objects, not as they exist in the empirical world, but *sub specie aeternitatis*.⁸ Literally: "from the point of view of eternity"; that is atemporally, or non-contingently; from outside the world. This can mean something as metaphysically loaded as "from God's eye view" or more simply: "with detachment". Whereas the "usual way of looking at things sees objects . . . from the midst of them", the artist views them from outside, with aesthetic wonder ("*Künstlerische Wunder*") (NB, 86). This means that she views them with the kind of *detachment* that contemplates not facts, but the fact of existence: "Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is" (NB, 86).

The world the artist sees is not factually different from the world we ordinarily see; it is her attitude to, and perspective of, that world that are different and transformative. For Wittgenstein, a kind of Gestalt switch takes place in artistic contemplation: where we "usually" see "the bare present image" as a "worthless momentary picture in the whole temporal world", the artist in aesthetic wonder sees it as "the true world among shadows" (NB, 83). It is the same "bare present" world for nothing has been added or removed from it, and yet an altogether different world, where the contingent and temporal fade out to allow the atemporal significance to emerge: "only an artist can represent an individual thing as to make it appear to us like a work of art. . . . A work of art forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other" (CV, 4–5).

And so the very same thing which had not otherwise made an impression on us will make one – indeed, the "right" one – when presented

from an artistic perspective. This brings to mind Wittgenstein's notion of a "perspicuous presentation" – whereby something which had always been in plain view, and yet overlooked by us, when properly arranged (or *perspicuously presented*) is brought to our attention and strikes us significantly and as never before. There is something about the *artistic presentation* of a woman throwing herself under a train out of despair that a newspaper report of such an event cannot convey. Why is this? Many attempts have been made to explain it, but I find Wittgenstein's view (which he shares with F. R. Leavis) the most compelling. It is all in the term "presentation" – to be contrasted with report. If literature – the creative use of language – enables us to see in an event, a face or a gesture, a significance that the ordinary use of language is unable to evoke, it is because literature *presents* it so that we see it "in the right perspective"; but also because literature does not try to *say* what cannot be said. Wittgenstein is right, all that really matters in human life cannot be put into words, but it can be intimated or presented *through* language – particularly the language of literature:

The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered.

AuQ59

(EL, 7)

The poem does not make its point by what it literally says, but by what its words evoke or show – and *that* cannot be said. Wittgenstein's friend, Paul Engelmann, writes:

The "positive" achievement of Wittgenstein, which has so far met with complete incomprehension, is his pointing to *what is manifest in a proposition*. And what is manifest in it, a proposition cannot also state explicitly. The poet's sentences, for instance, achieve their effect not through what they say but through what is manifest in them, and the same holds for music, which also says nothing.

(EL, 83)

For Wittgenstein, literature – where words are used not naturalistically, but in a dance (CV, 37) – is capable of showing the ethical. It is (non-paradoxically) not through *saying*, but only through *showing* that it can do this. I have elsewhere made a rapprochement between Wittgenstein's "showing" or "presenting" and Leavis's "enactment" or "presentment", of the ethical in literature;⁹ here, I want to flesh out what it means for language to present or show something.

Here is Leavis, defining a reader's task: "What we have to look for are the signs of something grasped and held, something presented in an

ordering of words, not merely thought of or gestured towards” (Craig 2013, 24). And Wittgenstein:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)

In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)

(PI §531)

Both Wittgenstein and Leavis are here acknowledging the inseparability of form and content in literature. Because the formal properties of a creative work essentially contribute to its meaning, attempting to prise apart meaning from its creative presentation will result in vacuous paraphrase. Garry Hagberg puts it well:

The question what is the meaning of a work of art, where “meaning” carries an implicit analogy with language and where in turn language implies a fundamental separability of meaning from materials, is a question that ought to be treated with extreme caution.

(Hagberg 1995, 74)

“Art is a kind of expression. Good art is complete expression” (NB, 83), writes Wittgenstein. Complete, in that nothing can be changed without sacrificing the expression. Yes, as Engelmann is right to point out, language is incalculably necessary, but the expression is equally dependent on the form: “[p]oetry can produce a profound artistic effect *beyond* (but never without) the immediate effect of its language. It is true that it needs a rare and felicitous conjuncture to bring off that effect.” (EL, 84.) Alluding to Wittgenstein’s recitation “with a shudder of awe” of Mörike’s *Mozart’s Journey to Prague*, Engelmann remarks:

In the rare cases where the venture succeeds . . . we are in the presence of sublime peaks of poetic language, and thus of verbal expression altogether. Here was one of the great passages in literature touching on Wittgenstein’s most central language problem: that of the border of the unutterable and yet somehow expressible.

(EL, 86)

This border where the unutterable somehow gets expressed is where meaning is not uttered or said but shown. *Saying* is not enough because the aesthetic and the ethical are not expressible in literal or naturalistic

terms. We are not here in the realm of the verifiable but of what Wittgenstein calls “imponderable evidence” (LW I, 920–924): where the buzzing indeterminacy, spontaneity, and irreducibility of human life¹⁰ hinges on its basic regularity and predictability so that though it is impossible to “put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words” (PI, 227), it is not impossible to *show* it. We have here to do with imponderable evidence – evidence that cannot be demonstrated, but can be “monstrated”, as it were, or *shown*. Evidence that can only be apprehended non-discursively: through the blood, rather than the mind, would say D. H. Lawrence, for whom the novel, more than any other artistic medium, has this capacity for presentment or showing. Literature, and the novel in particular, gives us what philosophy, or any other discursive medium, cannot: “a passionate, implicit morality, not didactic. A morality which changes the blood, rather than the mind. Changes the blood first. The mind follows later, in the wake” (Lawrence 1964, 162). The idea here is to deintellectualize the ethical, to get us to see it as an attitude, a way of being and acting; and to deintellectualize, too, ethical understanding: morality reaches the mind through the blood – that is, through the immediacy of the aesthetic which is another kind of “perspicuous presentation”. “A poet’s words can pierce us” (Z §155) in a way a philosopher’s cannot. For it is in the inextricable interrelatedness of *form and content* that meaning is made manifest; this is done by language that enacts rather than says: “Shakespeare displays the dance of human passions, one might say. . . . But he displays it to us in a dance, not naturalistically.” (CV, 36–37.)

For, meaning enacted in literature is grasped – as it is given – nondiscursively, with what Leavis calls “irresistible immediacy” (Leavis 1948, 204). The kind of grasp or understanding that requires no interpretation: we get the meaning or the point; we grasp it – the way we ordinarily grasp language, or the way we see an aspect emerging from a configuration, or the way we see emotion on a face. This is the *spontaneous, immediate intelligence* Christiane Chauviré recognizes as characterising much of what Wittgenstein means by “understanding”:

The relation of works of art or even musical phrases to the understanding we may have of them is not causal but internal, just as the relation of words that we read or hear in ordinary language is internal to our understanding of them. The drawback of interpretation is that it denotes an explicit verbal development that can engender others *ad infinitum*, each interpretation replacing the previous “as if we were content with one for the time being, until we thought of the next waiting immediately behind”. And so, whether with regard to art or to rule-following, Wittgenstein reinstates spontaneous intelligence, immediate, silent at times, but always expressive.

(Chauviré 2012, 338; my translation)

Wittgenstein clearly articulates this kind of nonpropositional understanding prompted by music and literature: “If a theme, a phrase, suddenly means something to you, you don’t have to be able to explain it. Just *this* gesture has been made accessible to you” (Z §158); that is, you “understand it” (Z §159).¹¹ We can be impacted by, or “understand”, the words of a poem, *directly*, which means without interpretation; for it speaks to us, writes Wittgenstein, “[t]he way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.” (Z §160.) For there is meaning that can be explained and meaning that does not come out in an explanation (Z §156). I would now like to give an idea of how a novel can *show* us what I can only poorly explain.

3. The Perspicuous Presentations of Literature

In *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert depicts the life and state of a woman prey to *ennui*. To say that she finds herself engulfed in “a feeling of listlessness and dissatisfaction arising from a lack of occupation or excitement” (OED) would certainly summarize her state, but it would give you nothing of the texture of *ennui* or of the texture of Emma’s life engulfed in it. Short of reading the novel, one cannot perceive and penetrate the ways in which ennui in turn builds up and corrodes Emma’s feelings, moods, expectations, dreams; how it comprises the recurring cycle of the fabrication of and luxuriating in what Baudelaire calls the “Ideal” and its slow, desperate consumption by the “Spleen”. But perhaps these passages, albeit in translation, might give us a glimpse:

[Charles] came home late – at ten o’clock, at midnight sometimes. Then he asked for something to eat, and as the servant had gone to bed, Emma waited on him. . . . He told her, one after the other, the people he had met, the villages where he had been, the prescriptions he had written, and, well pleased with himself, he finished the remainder of the boiled beef and onions, picked pieces off the cheese, munched an apple, emptied his water-bottle, and then went to bed, and lay on his back and snored. As he had been for a time accustomed to wear nightcaps, his handkerchief would not keep down over his ears, so that his hair in the morning was all tumbled pell-mell about his face and whitened with the feathers of the pillow, whose strings came untied during the night.

. . . .

She asked herself if by some other chance combination it would have not been possible to meet another man; and she tried to imagine what would have been these unrealised events, this different life, this unknown husband. All, surely, could not be like this one. He might have been handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive, such as,

no doubt, her old companions of the convent had married. What were they doing now? In town, with the noise of the streets, the buzz of the theatres and the lights of the ballroom, they were living lives where the heart expands, the senses burgeon out. But she – her life was cold as a garret whose dormer window looks on the north, and ennui, the silent spider, was weaving its web in the darkness in every corner of her heart.

. . . .

As he grew older his manner grew heavier; . . . after eating he cleaned his teeth with his tongue; in taking soup he made a gurgling noise with every spoonful; and, as he was getting fatter, the puffed-out cheeks seemed to push the eyes, always small, up to the temples.

Sometimes . . . she told him of what she had read . . . for, after all, Charles was something, an ever-open ear, and ever-ready approbation. She confided many a thing to her greyhound. She would have done so to the logs in the fireplace or to the pendulum of the clock.

At the bottom of her heart, however, she was waiting for something to happen. Like shipwrecked sailors, she turned despairing eyes upon the solitude of her life, seeking afar off some white sail in the mists of the horizon. She did not know what this chance would be, what wind would bring it her, towards what shore it would drive her, if it would be a shallop or a three-decker, laden with anguish or full of bliss to the portholes. But each morning, as she awoke, she hoped it would come that day; she listened to every sound, sprang up with a start, wondered that it did not come; then at sunset, always more saddened, she longed for the morrow.

Scenes such as these penetratingly *show* the effect of ennui, with all the colour, light and shadow that language is capable of. To that effect, nonpropositional devices are used, such as image, metaphor, symbolism, juxtaposition, tension, mood, tone, cadence, irony etc. It is through the internal connectedness – or “subtle interrelatedness”, as Lawrence puts it (Lawrence 1961, 528) – throughout the novel of these literary devices, as also of description, dialogue, action, enactment, that a nonpropositional, immediate, impact is made on us. As Leavis says: “The duly responsive reader cannot but *see* what it is that he has in front of him” (Leavis 1986, 63). And indeed we cannot but see the hopeless circularity that besets Emma’s life through the novel as she perpetually fabricates an “ideal” only to watch it dissolve into vacuity. And beyond the force of individual passages, it is their being woven together to bolster, echo, and resonate from each other that gives the novel that structured, penetrating, coherence which is not of a discursive or philosophical kind. It leaves us with, as Leavis puts it, the “certitude” that we have “taken possession of . . . perceptions, intuitions and realizations communicated with consummate delicacy” to us in the creative work of a great writer. “Such certitude of

possession is an ultimate; what could a proof, if proof were possible, add to it?" (Leavis 1982, 192). This immediate, irresistible, grasp of what literature *shows* resembles the certainty Wittgenstein describes in *On Certainty*. A certainty whose objects we take hold of, the way we directly take hold of a towel "without having doubts"; "And yet this direct taking-hold corresponds to a *sureness*, not to a knowing" (OC §§510–511). An immediate nonpropositional certainty; a certainty where mistake is "logically excluded" (OC §194).

What great literature does is flesh out the density and texture of psychological and moral lives or experiences, thereby enhancing our understanding of what it means to be prey to ambition, remorse, alienation, jealousy, gnawing envy, and so on. So that, having read *Macbeth* and seen with exceptional clarity how the killing, spurred by ambition, of an innocent person can infect a life to the point of no return, sowing unbearable remorse, near-madness and the will to die, we are indubitably more perspicuously acquainted with the psychological and moral complexions of ambition and murder. Or, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, having observed how a man persuades himself of the permissibility of unprovoked murder, we close the book a couple of hundred pages later having witnessed in irrefutable clarity what it can be like to live the life of a murderer in its unrelenting existential reminders of the irreparability and consequences of a gratuitous act, and why it is not a life worth living. As also, having observed the vicissitudes of Emma Bovary's relentless aspirations, relentlessly crushed, we come to understand how an unquenchable thirst for the Ideal makes it impossible to see life in the every day.

In all these works, we live through the insidious, devastating, waste of a life. We are struck by the imponderable rightness of the narrative; its capturing, in wit-like acuity, what strikes us as not just *approximate*, but irrefutable. An irrefutability knitted in the intricate coherence of the whole work, so that, as Wittgenstein's certainty, what stands fast does so not on its own merit but because "it is held fast by what lies around it" (OC §144). And that is the power of the *story*, or what Aristotle called, the plot, and Amélie Rorty "a *structured* representation".¹² It is the importance of this *structured* or artistic representation that the words "not naturalistically" allude to in the following passage: "Shakespeare displays the dance of human passions. . . . But he displays it to us in a dance, not naturalistically" (CV, 36–37).

In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert illuminates and extends our concept of boredom, showing how our mundane understanding of it as an occasional event cannot encompass the Existential malady Emma is continually prey to. Flaubert's original depiction of it takes us to the extreme, though not uncommon, manifestation of what we would call "boredom" and gives it more clarity and definition than, arguably, any other work preceding it.¹³ And, of course, Flaubert does this through a struggle with language. Here is Maupassant's account of Flaubert's manner of composition:

Possessed of an absolute belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing, one word to call it by, one adjective to qualify, one verb to animate it, he gave himself to super-human labour for the discovery, in every phrase of that word, that verb, that epithet.
(Maupassant 1884, 59)

We may find excessive, even when applied to literature, Flaubert's alleged belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing. Although, as we shall see, Flaubert would by no means be the exception here, it may perhaps be better to say, as Richard Beardsmore does, that the writer's goal is "in some sense . . . to get things right" (Beardsmore 1971, 61). Or as we have seen Wittgenstein put it, to see things "in the right perspective" (CV, 4–5). But if Flaubert's concern is to get things right, "what does 'right' mean here?" it might be asked. As suggested earlier, the answer would not be: "a veridical concordance with reality or with a principle"; but rather something like: "you know it when you see it". However, in striking our psychological and moral chords, a great novel attunes or enhances, not our knowledge, but our understanding. It does this by presenting things in such a way that we "recognize" them as right, rather than "discover" them to be right because we are not aliens reading the novel, but human beings ensconced in human ways of living and responsive to the common behaviour of mankind. The language used by the creative writer is rooted and soaked in psychological and moral "promptings and potentialities" (Leavis 1976, 26) – as Leavis puts it – that have been "won or established in immemorial human living" (Leavis 1975, 68). It is human life that resonates in language, and the reader – the attentive and sensitive reader – will be "pierced" only by the right resonance – the one that coheres beyond (or rather beneath) explanation.

Flaubert had to wrestle with, and away from, the common conception of boredom to show us its Existential face: *ennui*. Thanks to Flaubert, and other writers, we are now more or less fluent with that new or revised concept: able to recognize its difference from mere boredom. In English, we mark that difference by adopting the French word; in French, when writing: we either italicise the word or capitalize its initial letter; when speaking, we qualify it somehow: "l'ennui *existential*" or use a near equivalent: "le spleen". The word "boredom" just won't do. However, what a creative writer does to our understanding is not always explicitly reflected by a change of word; and yet it behoves us to recognize it even where it is not thus flagged. Even when not signalled by a new word, the ongoing clarification and enrichment through writers of the concepts, virtues, vices that are most salient in our lives – love, ambition, jealousy, daughterliness, parenthood, friendship, sexuality, joie de vivre, faith, loyalty, deceit, war, depression, loss, death – are immense. Creative writing is a struggle with language in an effort to release from it an enhanced understanding of our basic and evolving humanness.

Wittgenstein well understood this power of literature. For reasons that will immediately be obvious, I cannot resist mentioning yet another occasion which testifies to that. In 1945, Malcolm wrote a letter to Wittgenstein in which he alludes to the war as a “boredom”. This is Wittgenstein’s reply:

I want to say something about the war being a “boredom”. If a boy said that school was an intense boredom, one might answer him that, if he could only get himself to learn what can really be learned there, he would not find it so boring. Now forgive me for saying that I can’t help believing that an enormous lot can be learned about human beings in this war – if you keep your eyes open. And the better you are at thinking the more you’ll get out of what you see. For thinking is a digestion. If I’m writing in a preaching tone I’m just an ass. But the fact remains that if you’re bored a lot it means that your mental digestion isn’t what it should be. I think that a good remedy for this is sometimes opening your eyes wider. Sometimes a book helps a little, e.g., Tolstoi’s *Hadshi Murat* wouldn’t be bad.

(Malcolm 1958, 41)

And here the philosopher hands over to literature. As Wittgenstein writes: “You cannot lead people to what is good: you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts” (CV, 3). Well, literature leads us to some place or other, outside the space of facts, or what Wittgenstein calls “natural meaning”, to a space of stories. And, there, *shows* us, not THE Good, but ways we ought to live and not live. In my attempt to understand how literature measures our lives, I was led to the active role of language in literary creation. Our moral being, as so much else, is embedded in language, and this is perhaps why in the same way that great creative literature cannot get away with stylistic blunders, it cannot get away with moral ones either. It is internally connected, as Wittgenstein rightly thought, to ethics.

“What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language” (TLP 4.121; original emphasis). There is in this sentence a hint of language transcending any individual voice; of our shared language as an autonomous and irresistible force. The next and final section acknowledges language as a force whose measurement of human life which, though emerging from human life, we do not control.

4. The Irresistible Force of Language

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

(LW II, 24)

Language is public property and so it has a force and a life of its own – the life of generations of reality-embedded, reality-soaked, use. It carries shared concepts, feelings, meanings, emotions, and values, as well as density, precision, and a huge array of descriptive potential that the gifted user of language needs to wrestle with and interrogate, rather than manipulate. And of course we know – as Leavis and Wittgenstein have, in their different ways, enabled us to – that language is not a mere vehicle for thought but the *sine qua non* enabler of thought. Here is Leavis:

Without the English language waiting quick and ready for him, Lawrence couldn't have communicated his thought: that is obvious enough. But it is also the case that he couldn't have thought it. English as he found it was a product of an immemorial *sui generis* collaboration on the part of its speakers and writers. It is alive with promptings and potentialities, and the great creative writer shows his genius in the way he responds.

(Leavis 1976, 26)

Because language is a collaborative achievement, in using it, we tap into a collective source of meaning – that “apprehended totality of what, as registered in the language, has been won or established in immemorial human living” (Leavis 1975, 68). And inasmuch as “the fullest use of language is to be found in creative literature” (Leavis 1982, 143), it is there that we find the fullest engagement with the precipitate of immemorial human living, with human values, the human psyche and the question of how to live. If the creative writer is going to render us to ourselves with any acuity and depth, it will be through her confrontation with, and abandonment to, language. It is in the act of creation, in her intense and unimpeded head-to-head with language, her strenuous delving into its resources and potency for expression, that the artist finds she is not totally in control. In the “interplay” – as Leavis puts it – “between the living language and the creativity of individual genius” (Leavis 1975, 49), the writer finds not only the source of creativity but also her own limits. Language has fight and mettle: as she measures herself against language, the writer finds that she is “playing with elastic, indeed even flexible concepts. But this does not mean that they can be deformed *at will* and without offering resistance” (LW II, 24). Words cannot be manipulated without resistance; they can only be appealed to, interrogated, and acquiesced to. This is not to say that the creative writer does not also transform the language, but that she cannot do so without first abandoning herself to its deep-lying embeddedness in the reality of human living and fighting the fight from which both writer and language come out triumphant. As Bernard Harrison splendidly puts it: “The writer’s occasional power to

enlighten us comes, not from a special cognitive faculty, but rather from his power to ride the reality-gorged tiger of language” (ms, 19).

Creative writers often speak of themselves as the passive receptacles of an inspiration beyond their control. They say that the creative flow takes over, leads them; many of them speak of *watching* the characters in their novel develop and take on a life of their own; of *discovering* their characters’ personalities and intentions; of *following* the morality of the plot as it *emerges*. In his study of “Creative Writers and Revision”, David Calonne finds descriptions of “inspiration” by writers to be fairly consistent: “The writing seems to take place almost ‘against the writer’s will’ – it is ‘automatic’ in a sense, or autonomous” (Calonne 2006, 156). Although it is also clear that inspiration does not exclude perspiration – or, as Ionesco puts it: “spontaneous creation does not exclude the pursuit and consciousness of style” (~~Ionesco 2006, 155~~), the autonomy of language prevails in the following extracts from Calonne’s study:

AuQ60

in writing a draft, writers often speak of finding what they have to say in the process of trying to say it. They find their way to their true thoughts about a subject only through wrestling through the fierce struggle of putting words down on paper. In the search for expression, one finds out that to which one is really committed. And there is often great surprise for the writer as he/she discovers in the act of writing what lies dormant within the self.

(Calonne 2006, 144)

The author himself/ herself clearly often does not know where the trail will lead as they embark on a poem, play or novel.

(ibid., 173)

The writer is the caretaker of an indwelling genius, an inner daimon/demon which speaks in riddles like an oracle – speaks sometimes seemingly unintelligibly but in the pure language of the poetic unconscious.

(ibid., 156)

“Not I, but the wind that blows through me”, writes D. H. Lawrence.¹⁴ Such accounts of inspiration have often been given a metaphysical or spiritual reading, but they needn’t have. What is in play here is the autonomous force of *language*. Inspiration is the active participation of language in a writer’s attempt to bring something to clarity, and yes it also involves perspiration: it is the mysterious welling-up and laborious harnessing through language of notions, feelings, apprehensions unformed. It is only through language that the writer can achieve the perspicuous presentation of her unformed notions and perceptions in all of their subtle interrelatedness. As their testimonies make clear, writers feel that

creation and revelation are brought about *in the process of* composition; as *resulting* from their immersion in, and struggle with, words. In an interview, Ernest Hemingway said “I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.” When asked by the interviewer “Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?” Hemingway replied “Getting the words right” (Calonne 2006, 149). This struggle of the writer with language signals both the *potency* of language and its *autonomy*: language has, as it were, a life of its own.

The creative imagination is really creative; it doesn’t stage the ethical, but allows it to emerge from the artistic fabric. The morality is in the novel, not in the novelist: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale”, writes Lawrence (Lawrence 1964, 8). This perhaps clarifying what Wittgenstein means by “What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language” (TLP 4.121). And so the important things don’t get expressed by our *saying* them; it is when language is used in a creative way that the important things get expressed. This dovetails with what Leavis calls “creative impersonality” (Leavis 1986, 67). None of this is meant, as post-modernists have tried, to “kill” the author: writers are the writers they are because of the individuals they are, but this has to include an acutely sensitive attention to, and engagement with, language.

The way literature enlightens us is not through *saying* but through *showing*. Of course words are used, but the insight they evoke is not of the propositional kind; it cannot be said. And so we conclude this journey in the realisation that when we reach the power of language at its peak – in literature – we have simultaneously also returned to its limits. And yet those limits – literature’s inability to *say* the most important things – should not blind us to its unlimited ability to *show* what can never be demonstrated, neither by the language of science nor by that of philosophy.¹⁵

Notes

1. For a fully-fledged argument, see Moyal-Sharrock 2016a.
2. I have not adopted the 2009 translation of PI because I find its rendering of several passages either less pertinent (e.g., “shared human behaviour” rather than “the common behaviour of mankind” for “*die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*” (PI §206)) or less felicitous (e.g., “marshalling recollections” rather than “assembling reminders” (PI §127)) than its predecessor. References are to the 1997 edition.
3. See, for example, Moyal-Sharrock (forthcoming).
4. “[T]he aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn” (TLP, 3).
5. For a more in-depth discussion, see Moyal-Sharrock (2007).

6. “The philosophical problem is an awareness of disorder in our concepts, and can be solved by ordering them” (BT, 309).
7. This struggle is also manifest in the multiple times Wittgenstein begins his sentences with: “I want to say.”
8. “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics” (NB, 83).
9. See Moyal-Sharrock (2016b).
10. “What is . . . difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words” (PI, 227).
11. “But you do speak of *understanding* music. You understand it, surely, while you hear it! Ought we to say this is an experience which accompanies the hearing?” (Z §159).
12. Alluding to Aristotle’s notion of tragedy in the *Poetics*, Rorty writes: “While there is sorrow, grief, loss, pain in life, there is *tragedy* only when the actions and events that compose a life are organized into a story, a structured representation of that life” (Rorty 1992, 3–4; my emphasis).
13. Including Chateaubriand’s *René* (1802) which was hailed as the first to diagnose this French *mal du siècle*. *Madame Bovary* was published in 1856, one year before Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which starts off its section on *Spleen et Idéal* with a poem referring to “l’Ennui, ce monster délicat”.
14. This is the first verse of Lawrence’s poem: “Song of a man who has come through”.
15. I am grateful to Constantine Sandis and Keith Farman for their valuable and sensitive comments on the final draft of this chapter. I feel prompted by these to dispel the impression that I do not value the role of *saying*, or indeed of philosophy, in moral understanding. In fact, having argued against Cora Diamond for the importance of philosophical ethics for moral understanding (Moyal-Sharrock 2012), my aim in this chapter was to highlight and flesh out the important difference of *showing* and of literature for moral understanding. The “perspicuous presentations” of philosophy are of a different kind from those of literature; because philosophy’s mode is *saying* rather than *showing*, it lacks the tools to transmit the fine-grained texture of being. However, philosophy has other tools. Take, for instance, Russell’s sentence – “I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don’t like it” (Russell 1999, 165). It summarizes in a nutshell one of the deepest and most persistent problems of ethics; and if one were to replace the ethical values in that passage with aesthetic ones, it would be a brilliant summary of Kant’s *Third Critique*. Literature is not able to do this: it takes philosophy to make perspicuous presentations of that kind. Russell’s sentence describes, without literary texture, the problem we have with ethical objectivity or intersubjectivity, and elucidates beautifully in articulating the problem simply.

References

- Beardsmore, Richard W. (1971) “Art and Understanding”, in J. Haldane and L. Lloyd (eds), *Art, Morality and Human Nature: Writings by Richard W. Beardsmore*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2017, 55–79.
- Calonne, David S. (2006) “Creative Writers and Revision”, in A. Horning and A. Becker (eds), *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice*. Indiana: Parlor Press, 142–176.

- Chauviré, Christiane (2012) “L’Art Incorporé: A propos des réactions esthétiques”, in C. Romano (ed), *Wittgenstein*. Paris: Cerf, 225–251.
- Craig, David (2013) “Thank God for the Leavisites”, *London Review of Books* 35 (20), 24. www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n20/letters#letter9
- Hagberg, Garry L. (1995) *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning and Aesthetic Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harrison, Bernard (ms) “Making Room for the Human: On the Unity of a Philosophical Project”, 1–25.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1961) *Phoenix I: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence*. Edited by Edward D. McDonald. London: Heinemann.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1964) *Studies in Classic American Literature*. London: Heinemann.
- Leavis, F. R. (1948) *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Leavis, F. R. (1975) *The Living Principle: ‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Leavis, F. R. (1976) *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Leavis, F. R. (1982) *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*. Edited by G. Singh. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Leavis, F. R. (1986) *Valuation in Criticism and other Essays* (posth.). Edited by G. Singh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malcolm, Norman (1958) *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maupassant, de, Guy (1884) *Etude sur Gustave Flaubert in La Revue bleue*. Quoted in and translated by Walter Pater in *Appreciations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1910.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle (2007) “The Good Sense of Nonsense: A Reading of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as Nonself-Repudiating”, *Philosophy* 82 (1), 147–177.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle (2012) “Cora Diamond and the Ethical Imagination”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (3), 223–240.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle (2016a) “Wittgenstein, No Linguistic Idealist”, in S. Greve and J. Mácha (eds), *Wittgenstein and the Creativity of Language*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 117–140.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle (2016b) “Wittgenstein and Leavis: Literature and the Enactment of the Ethical”, *Philosophy and Literature* 40 (1), 24–64.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle (forthcoming) “Through Thick and Thin: Wittgenstein’s Grammar”, in S. Wuppuluri (ed), *wittgensteinian (adj.): Looking at Things from the Viewpoint of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy*. Berlin: Springer.
- Rorty, Amélie (1992) “The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy”, in A. Rorty (ed), *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1–22.
- Russell, B. (1999) *Russell on Ethics: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Edited by C. Pigden. London: Routledge.
- Ware, Ben (2015) *Dialectic of the Ladder: Wittgenstein, the Tractatus and Modernism*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Williams, Bernard (1974) “Wittgenstein and Idealism”, in G. Vesey (ed), *Understanding Wittgenstein* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures 7, 1972–1973). London: Palgrave Macmillan, reprinted in his *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 144–163.