Meaning and Interpretation

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Meaning and Interpretation: Wittgenstein, Henry James, and Literary Knowledge.

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Given the importance of the concept of meaning to discussions of the arts and literature, and given the importance of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein to our understanding of that concept, it seems somewhat curious that scholars in aesthetics and literary theory have made no more use of Wittgenstein’s potentially illuminating work than they have. In this book I attempt to do exactly that, in the hope of shedding some light on the relations between linguistic and artistic meaning, between understanding persons and understanding works of art, and between literary interpretation and philosophical analysis. I hope to achieve results more affirmative or positive in nature than those usually associated with philosophy and criticism of a broadly Wittgensteinian sort. Indeed, the Wittgensteinian tradition has often been construed as little more than a project of confusion-removal, which closes and narrows rather than opens and expands explanatory directions and possibilities. I have much more to say about the more affirmative and illuminating aspects of the Wittgensteinian tradition, and about the dubiousness of the distinction between constructive and critical methodological categories. At present, however, a few words are in order about how Wittgenstein’s work has been
received by those working within the disciplinary boundaries of aesthetics and literary criticism.

Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance, as a contribution to the problem of universals, has been applied to the problem of definition in the arts, and this application has profoundly changed the expectations within aesthetics of how discussions of definition in the arts could proceed.\(^1\) Wittgenstein’s work on aspect perception and the nature of imaginative seeing has also been applied to the study of the interrelations between the perceiver and the perceived, and this work has profoundly changed expectations within aesthetics of how discussions of those problems would proceed.\(^2\) And that seems to be the extent of the acknowledged significance of Wittgenstein’s philosophy for aesthetic theory; the not-unreasonable consensus—given the limited range of Wittgenstein’s work that has been examined—is that this integration of Wittgenstein’s influence has been completed and that the time has come to return to the fundamental task of theory construction.\(^3\) As I attempt to

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make clear in this book, I believe the story to be vastly more complicated, and very much more philosophically and critically illuminating, than such a truncated narrative of philosophical progress would suggest.

The story that follows resists encapsulation, but I can say at least that, first, it does not seem to me true that the two areas of impact just mentioned, in fact capture what is of greatest significance in Wittgenstein’s philosophy for aesthetics and, second, it accordingly does not seem to be at all obvious that post-Wittgensteinian aesthetic theory is wiser in the way it should be if it wants to proceed as it does. So, although I do raise the issues of definition and aspect perception in this book, central to it are, rather, Wittgenstein’s investigations into the nature, or natures, of meaning, especially where those investigations bear directly on our understanding of artistic and literary meaning. Thus I discuss the extent and the limit⁴ of the relationship between aesthetic meaning and Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy as well as the problems they have in common. I also try to sustain a sensitivity to the shaping influences on our


⁴ See, for example, Richard Wollheim’s discussion of the discontinuities between artistic and linguistic meaning in Painting as an Art (Princeton: Bollingen, 1987), esp. chaps. 1, 2, and 4.
thinking about these topics in the very formulation of those problems. What, however, can be said of an introductory nature from a somewhat lower altitude?

Throughout aesthetics and literary criticism the use of emotive-descriptive terms and the conjoined philosophical problem of justifying such usage (where the fully articulated description of a work is often tantamount to a fully articulated interpretation of that work) have been undeniably central. Stated in terms that are familiar (but which are in fact, as we shall see, too philosophically stark to accommodate the facts of aesthetic practice), critical engagement with a work of art or literature generates descriptions that in turn demand justification; those then-justified descriptions, collected together, constitute an interpretation that should then (if we find the justification acceptable) shape our subsequent aesthetic experience.

The problem of justifying critical descriptions of a work, given form in this way, has led to ever more grand, and thus more general, theoretical construals of the relations between the critical perceptions in the mind of the beholder and the aesthetic object itself described by the articulation of those perceptions. This formulation of the problem presumes an aesthetic variant of metaphysical extensionalism, the belief that physical, extended objects are in both ontological and perceptual senses primary, so that we perceive only those objects directly or in an unmediated way; all other perceptions are thus taken to be indirect, mediated in a sense, and thus in need of justification. On this view, to put it simply, we see a bluish-green, but we only infer the nonextended or nonphysical quality of emotional depth. We read the words on the page, we only infer the human seriousness of the story. We hear a move from E to E-flat, we infer a darkening sense of foreboding. This view, which I hope to repudiate, has promoted ever greater levels of explanatory generality and an attendant disregard for detail, along with an insufficient grasp of the significance of
such detail not only for critical practice but for the conjoined philosophical problem of critical justification.

In place of such an ascent to explanatory generality, we need, I believe, a descent, indeed of the sort exemplified in the late work of Wittgenstein, to the critically and aesthetically site-specific, contextually grounded details that generate emotive-descriptive usages in the first place and that themselves justify (in, as we shall see, a noninferential way) those aesthetic-linguistic practices. I attempt such a descent in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this book. First, however, I locate the ground, and this is the project of Chapters 1 and 2, in which I pursue Wittgenstein’s answer to his own question that launched his later philosophy, “What is the meaning of a word?”

The Wittgensteinian analytical strategy of the language-game, insofar as it affords an exquisitely detailed and controlled examination of the uses of words within delimited contexts, provides insight into expressive limits, stylistic integrity, organic cohesion, incremental developments of expressive capacities, and the instrumental employments of artistic materials within analogous aesthetic microcosms. In Chapter 1, I pursue such connections between the linguistic and the aesthetic, and this pursuit introduces the topics of Chapter 2, in which I first assemble an overview, a general conception, of the difficult phrase “a form of life” as it is employed in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, and then proceed to a detailed consideration of cases within which thoughts and feelings are expressed in art as they are expressed through gesture and as they are embedded in ritualistic practices. The strikingly close relations, indeed the isomorphic parallels, between language-games and artistic styles, and between a form of life and a collection of artistic practices, lend new and positive content to

the analogy between art and language, given a conception of language strikingly unlike those which have heretofore been influential—often misleadingly influential—throughout aesthetic theory.6 Taken together, then, the first two chapters are an attempt to respond to the need for a fairly detailed examination of Wittgenstein's later conception of linguistic meaning as a way of constructing a large-scale foundation for an understanding of Wittgensteinian criticism and literary epistemology. The particular issues that arise in these first chapters are the nature, scope, expressive limits, and expansions of language-games; the significance of context for meaning within language-games; the ideas of linguistic use; aim, and function and the significance of these for art; examples of artistic and literary language-games; linguistically engendered insights into aesthetic qualities such as coherence and inventiveness; the definition and understanding of the concept "form of life"; meanings resistant to propositional formulation and gestural significance; the notion of artistic "spirit"; aesthetic rule-following; and the relations between artistic uses and interpretative meaning.

In addition to answering the need for the descent to the level of detail, Wittgenstein's phrase "to imagine a form of life" carries an implicit invitation to turn to literary examples, which, with the particular case of the philosophical novelist Henry

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James, the last three chapters of this book accept. Chapters 3 and 4 are investigations, via literary interpretation, into the varieties of linguistic meaning and the multiform moves made within the extended-yet-circumscribed language-games that constitute the Jamesian short story. The issues that arise here are the significance for linguistic philosophy of literary or, to be more specific, descriptively mimetic complexity; the circumstantial prerequisites for linguistic force; relations between aesthetic and ethical descriptions, by which I mean the very many ways we have of describing what we see in a work of art, what we see as the aesthetic aspects of an object or person, and what we see in the actions and the verbal and gestural expressions of a person that holds ethical value or significance; the fundamental analogies between the perception of works of art, of significant artifacts, and of persons; the misleading power—particularly in aesthetic and literary-critical contexts—of the distinction between perception and description; the inability of linguistic atomism to serve as a theory of meaning “beneath” literary interpretation; the significance of tone and silence for linguistic meaning; the irreducible complexity of aesthetic and critical descriptions, which is shown by their refusal to settle into traditional philosophical distinctions such as mind and matter, self and other, emotion and reason, inner and outer, and intrinsic and relational; the critical inapplicability of the all-too-familiar additive model (text plus interpretation) and its relation to Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect perception; perceptions, descriptions, and interpretations of human facial expressions and the “logic” of understanding facial expressivity; and the irreducibility of an aesthetic phenomenon as complex as literary meaning.

In Chapter 5 I extend the project of philosophical investi-

gation through literary interpretation and attempt to show the contribution the Wittgensteinian method of investigation can make to a larger understanding of literature and its epistemological value. The issues that arise here are the problematic character of the distinction between philosophy as an analytical activity and philosophy as an interpretative or literary-critical activity; the pragmatic question of the significance for literary-critical practice of the Wittgensteinian analytical method; the limitations on critical-methodological encapsulation; the anti-systematic diversity exhibited by the word "knowledge" and some of the categories of its usage; the vast range separating the spoken from the unspoken with regard to what one knows; the weaving of a fabric of simulated knowledge or self-deception; and, again, the prerequisite of detail to the achievement of a complex yet clarifying overview of a philosophically problematic concept such as knowledge.

Anyone who has read Wittgenstein should of course be wary of generalizations and, for that matter, of general remarks about the danger of generalizations. Nevertheless, to describe this project in general terms: I attempt to identify and elucidate Wittgenstein's nonreductive and contextualist views on meaning which hold special significance for our understanding of the experience of art and literature, and to show that significance through close readings (in what is perhaps a newly articulated sense of that phrase) of a writer whose fiction is itself one kind of epistemology.