

Revolution of the Ordinary by Toril Moi

Robert Vinten

Moi, Toril. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. 290 pages.

Toril Moi's new book about the relevance of what she calls 'ordinary language philosophy' to literary studies is clear, intelligent, and thought-provoking. If the revolutionary implications of what she says are taken on board it would undoubtedly transform literary studies for the better. In the introduction Moi makes clear that by 'ordinary language philosophy' she does not mean "a certain Oxford-based post-war linguistic philosophy centered on Austin" (p. 6) but rather "the philosophical tradition after Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, as constituted and extended by Stanley Cavell" (p. 1) and she also acknowledges debts to Richard Fleming and Cora Diamond. However, her book is a long way from rehashing old debates around the New American Wittgensteinians' interpretations of

Wittgenstein.¹ Moi sees herself as responding to Peter Hacker's lament in discussing those debates, that "[f]ew attempt to apply his [Wittgenstein's] methods to new domains in philosophy or in conceptual criticism of the natural sciences, the sciences of the mind and brain, and the social sciences" (Hacker 2013: xvii–xviii). This book moves beyond those debates and engages in discussions about how careful reflection on Wittgenstein's remarks might bear fruit in literary studies.

In the early chapters of *Revolution of the Ordinary* Moi takes up Cavell's suggestion of reading the first few pages of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* slowly and considering Wittgenstein's remarks carefully. She examines the Augustinian picture of language and shows how Wittgenstein reveals its limitations (the way it

¹ See Crary & Read 2000; Hacker 2001 & 2003.

focuses on representation and naming, on concrete nouns, to the exclusion of various other kinds of words or uses of words: numerals used in counting, exclamations like ‘help!’, words for properties of objects, and so on). In the remainder of Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2 she then discusses an alternative way of thinking about language that Wittgenstein develops. This involves recognition of the way that language is intertwined with life, and involves thinking about meaning in terms of use. In doing so Moi makes inventive use of Julio Cortázar’s short story, *A Certain Lucas*, to illustrate how the language of bullfighting is entwined with the practices of bullfighting, how acquiring language involves being trained in practices, and highlights the limitations of using a dictionary.

Having outlined Wittgenstein’s response to the Augustinian picture, Moi then shows that Wittgenstein’s insights have not been fully taken on board by the various ‘theories’ in literary studies and shows how they might benefit from paying more attention to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein’s critique of Frege’s demand for sharp concepts (for example, *Philosophical Investigations* §71) is used to undermine Derrida’s conception of concepts and the deconstructionist project. The fourth chapter criticizes feminist intersectionality theory – not because Moi objects to understanding complex forms of oppression – but rather because “the very notion of theory, as understood

in the field, blocks the important and necessary project at stake” (p. 91). Moi encourages feminists to be more attentive to particulars and to resist the “craving for generality”.²

Chapters 5 and 6 draw parallels between Saussurean (and post-Saussurean) theories and the Augustinian picture. Moi argues, plausibly, that despite the fact that people in literary studies deny that people read Saussure or Saussureans any more, literary studies is still riddled with Saussurean assumptions (“that language is a closed system; that the sign must be split into a signified and a signifier ... that it makes sense to speak of the ‘empty signifier’ or the ‘mark’” p. 16). This is reminiscent of the way in which few in philosophy would identify themselves as Cartesians but Cartesian assumptions are found throughout modern philosophy of mind (the logical separation of the mind and behavior, privacy, transparency, some form of dualism, and so on). In these chapters Wittgenstein’s remarks are used to undermine Vicki Kirby’s materialist re-reading of Saussure as well as neopragmatist and deconstructionist work in the post-Saussurean tradition, such as Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michael’s “Against Theory” and Paul de Man’s discussion of Archie Bunker in “Semiology and Rhetoric”. This second part of Moi’s book is rounded off with a chapter about Wittgenstein and politics. In it she criticizes accounts of Wittgenstein as a conservative philosopher (Gellner,

² See Wittgenstein BBB: 17.

Marcuse), and also discusses the “smug anti-intellectualism” (p. 163) of the Bad Writing Contest³ as well as Žižek on ideology and ordinariness.

The range of Moi’s targets suggests that this book will be very controversial in literary studies and despite Moi’s avoidance of disputes between Wittgensteinians it is likely to be controversial amongst them too. The third part of the book (chapters 8–10), on reading, is likely to be the most controversial amongst Wittgensteinians. In the ninth chapter Moi deploys the Cavellian notion of *acknowledgement* in suggesting that reading should be seen as a practice of acknowledgement (in contrast to, for example, the practice of the hermeneutics of suspicion which Moi criticizes in chapter 8).⁴ In connection with this claim she makes the further controversial claim that texts are actions (p. 196). One reason for making this claim is that Moi rejects W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley’s objections to judging texts by divining the author’s intentions. Using arguments from Elizabeth Anscombe

and Cavell, Moi objects to the conception of intentions as mental causes of an external object (the text)⁵ (p. 203) and, citing Cavell, objects to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s claim that if a poet/author did not succeed in doing as they intended then the poem/text will be inadequate evidence of an intention,⁶

in ... the case of ordinary conduct, nothing is more *visible* than actions which are not meant, visible in the slip, the mistake, the accident, the inadvertence..., and [in] what follows (the embarrassment, confusion, remorse, apology, attempt to correct...). (Cavell 1969/2002: 226–227, “A Matter of Meaning It”)

Having objected to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s causal model of the relation between author and text (as being between a mental cause and an object) the space then seems to be open to reconceive the relation in terms of reasons, intention, and (text as) action, but it isn’t clear that this conclusion follows. We can say that writing a particular word, sentence or passage is an action, without committing ourselves to the view that

³ The Bad Writing Contest was a competition run by the journal *Philosophy and Literature* between 1995 and 1998 designed to “[celebrate] the most stylistically lamentable passages found in scholarly books and articles published in the last few years” (Dutton 2016). Judith Butler responded to an op-ed by Denis Dutton (Dutton 1999) in the *Wall Street Journal* with an op-ed of her own in the *New York Times* after she won in 1998 (Butler 1999).

⁴ For a good recent critical discussion of Cavell’s account of Wittgenstein as a modernist (including a discussion of his

notion of acknowledgement) see Moyal-Sharrock 2017.

⁵ As presented in Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946: 469.

⁶ Wimsatt & Beardsley (1946: 469) say that “[o]ne must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem ...”.

the text itself is an action.⁷ After all, we are not so hard up for categories that a text must be either an object or an action.⁸ This would preserve the claim that intentions are relevant to literary criticism (in at least some cases) without resorting to making the claim that texts are actions, which conflicts with Moi's own claim that actions are indicated by a verb (p. 48) ('text' being a noun, unless we are talking about what people do with their mobile phones) and conflicts with the respect for ordinary use that Moi professes. Literary critics might concern themselves with what the author intended to do and what the author did, but they might also concern themselves with what the author failed to do or omitted to do (and, of course, understanding an artwork may very well have little to do with what the author intended or failed to do). The claim that texts are actions, if it is taken just as a shorthand way of saying that we judge texts in the light of what an author intended to do or what an author did, de-emphasizes the role of highlighting failures/omissions of an author in literary criticism.

Moi's book is certainly thought provoking and many of her criticisms

of literary and political theories hit their mark. It should stimulate both more fruitful work in literary theory and interesting debates about literature, reading, authors, and texts amongst philosophers.

Universidade Nova De Lisboa,
Portugal
robertvinten @ gmail.com

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⁷ As Constantine Sandis (2017: 356) says, "the failure to understand an artist's works is akin to the failure to understand a person's actions. This is not because artworks *are* actions, but because both are things that we produce intentionally, with varying degrees of success". For Sandis own, plausible, account of the role of intentions in aesthetic understanding see §4 of the same paper (pp. 373–376).

⁸ Candidates for the category into which 'text' falls include 'object', 'action', 'expression' (Moi, p. 196), 'nonhuman actors' (Felski 2011: 574), 'object' (Felski 2011: 577; 580), object-to-be-read (Bennett & Woolacott 1987: 64). Cavell says that "[i]t is as true to say of poems that they are physical objects as to say of human actions that they are physical motions" (Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', p. 228).

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