

## David A. White The Labyrinth of Language: Joyce and Wittgenstein

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 203).

Let us grant as a working premise that both literature and philosophy since, say, the death of Descartes in 1650 have in a sense become increasingly introspective. One aspect of this groping self-awareness is a joint concern for language itself, its strengths, weaknesses, and potential possibilities to illuminate some of the more inscrutable levels of human consciousness. It is perhaps more than coincidental that two of the most penetrating expositions dealing with the limits of language—"expositions" in a broad sense—occur almost contemporaneously in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and James Joyce.

Many feel that the respective autonomies of philosophy and literature become tainted with loss of rigor or excessive abstraction if interrelated in some way. But there is an obvious common ground—language. Both forms of expression channel experience through words but each does so in its own way. Given this common ground, it should not be too surprising to discover that comparative study will yield insight into the nature of language. Some attention paid to the linguistic odyssey endured by Wittgenstein and Joyce should be of interest to both disciplines, albeit interest that is broad-based and which must be developed with care if applied to a particular argument or a specific literary endeavor.<sup>1</sup> Of course, any attempt to slide over the methodological differences between Joyce and Wittgenstein for the sake of a few comparative similarities would do more harm than good. But I do not intend to make Wittgenstein into a novelist nor Joyce into a philosopher. And the fact remains that these similarities are present and should be pointed out.

Some chronology will be helpful. Wittgenstein was born in 1888, six years after Joyce, and died in 1951, outliving Joyce by some ten years. A parallel can be drawn between a) the period 1914-18 when Wittgenstein began sketching notes for the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (published in 1921) to the middle and late thirties when Wittgenstein underwent his crucial change of mind about the nature of language (the results of this change of mind published posthumously in 1953 as the *Philosophical Investigations*) and b) the cycle connecting Joyce's *Portrait* (1916) through *Ulysses* (1922) to *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

If we observe how Wittgenstein extended the boundaries of language further and further into experience, then we become equipped with conceptual and critical apparatus to approach and understand what Joyce was trying to do with language in the cycle from *Portrait* through *Ulysses* to the *Wake*. It should be stressed at the outset that my argument does not attempt to demonstrate that later Wittgenstein is "better" philosophy than early Wittgenstein, nor that later Joyce is "better" literature than early Joyce. What I have attempted is an exposition of Wittgenstein's conceptual development as a basis for appreciating Joyce's linguistic development.

### I

It is a characteristic of philosophy to describe in conceptual fashion the different contours of our various experiences. Now Wittgenstein was not a philosopher who felt the need to take on all experience, but he was passionately concerned with exploring that through which we enunciate all experience—language. Wittgenstein waged continuous battle with the vagaries of language, and his philosophical importance lies in the fact that even when his conclusions are incomplete, his technique and sensitivity to linguistic nuance often light up areas which previously were not even recognized as problematic. The feature of his work relevant here is the shift found in the so-called later Wittgenstein to language constituted by an indefinitely large number of what Wittgenstein calls "language-games." (I have provided an abstract of the early Wittgenstein to set in relief the difference in the two ways Wittgenstein looked at language.) My contention is that critical literary insight into the gap between language and what language expresses is derivable from an examination of how language functions in Wittgenstein's language-games. It is not my intention to further significantly an already booming Wittgenstein scholarship, except perhaps to suggest a somewhat humanized Wittgenstein, a thinker castigated by some as captive in his own logical prison, by several proxy comparisons with Joycean style. The pressure exerted from Wittgenstein's arguments will be more helpful in understanding how language wended its way through Joyce than in contributing new dimensions to Wittgenstein's academic philosophical personality.

The young Wittgenstein thought that the great chain of wisdom wrought so carefully by philosophers from the Greeks to the present was basically misconceived. The weak link, or the link relatively unnoticed, was the relation between language and extra-linguistic reality, whatever might be "outside" language. Wittgenstein took

for his task in the *Tractatus* to lay down the nature of this relation. The following is a brief summary of Wittgenstein's theory of language as developed in the *Tractatus*.

"The world is all that is the case" (1).<sup>2</sup> The term "case" means "the totality of facts, not of things" (1.1). What is a fact? It is "the existence of states of affairs" (2). Here language makes its appearance, for in stocking his universe with facts (and not things) Wittgenstein needs something with which to construct facts—thus "we picture facts to ourselves" (2.1) and this pictorial representation of the world takes place in and through language. Now language is composed of words constructed in the form of sentences, and if sentences assert the existence of "states of affairs" they are "the simplest kind of proposition, an elementary proposition" (4.21) and as simplest constitute a mirror image of reality at its most ultimate. (The precise nature of an "elementary proposition" is left inchoate in the *Tractatus* and is highly disputed in the secondary literature.)

From a synoptic point of view, then, "the totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world" (3.01) and here philosophy as a sort of therapeutics comes upon the scene. For it is Wittgenstein's belief that "language disguises thoughts" (4.002), especially everyday language which "is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it" (4.002). Thus, "the object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts" (4.112). Most of the problems that puzzled philosophers, Wittgenstein argues, are illusory and arose because those of a reflective bent did not understand the logic of the language in which they were carrying on their normal linguistic activities, much less when they attempted to employ this same language on such inherently murky matters as, for example, the relation between beauty and truth. The young Wittgenstein concludes that what "can be said" with most confidence are "the propositions of natural sciences" (6.53). And since all language is beholden to logic—"logic pervades the world; the limits of the world are also its limits" (5.61)—there is much which "cannot be said," the pseudo-problems of classical philosophy at one end and how the most plebeian fact about the world displays its logical form at the other.

Such was Wittgenstein's view around 1920. However, the next decade saw him grow disenchanted with what he recognized as an overly simplistic account and he began to sketch the short studies which were later to comprise the *Philosophical Investigations*. There are several anecdotes purporting to relate the "exact" moment of this alteration in Wittgenstein's attitude toward language. One tells of a conversation he had with an Italian friend. Both men were teaching at Cambridge at the time and both were intensely concerned about

language. Wittgenstein's friend, convinced that Wittgenstein was incorrect in the *Tractatus* analysis, interrupted what had become a heated discussion with a sudden gesture, a gesture popular in Italy for conveying a certain amount of ill will (it may have been what was graphically termed by the Roman historian Suetonius the *digitus infamis*). "What's the logical form of that sentence?" he challenged. Meaningful? Certainly! But amenable to any form of logical schematism? Wittgenstein had gotten the message.

Consider the following as a representative passage of his change of heart toward language:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

Further, "the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (*PI* 23). It should also be noted that Wittgenstein by no means uses the metaphor "game" in any sense of fun or play. Language is serious business, at least most of the time. But the notion of a game carries with it the notion of rules and just as there are numerous types of games, each with its own set of rules, there are also numerous, in fact countless types of language-games, each, and this is of crucial importance for unravelling philosophical tangles, each with its own set of rules—when the game can be played meaningfully, when not.

What are some typical games? Wittgenstein lists a few, among them asserting, questioning, reporting, speculating, making jokes, asking, thinking, praying, cursing (*PI* 23). With such a diverse array of utterances in tow, Wittgenstein cautions that we can never know in advance what a word will mean in a new context. "One cannot guess how a word functions: one has to look at its use and learn from that" (*PI* 340). Linguistic nonsense, which ultimately means philosophical nonsense as well, springs from confusing the rules of one language-game for those of another. An example: consider the two sentences "The rose is red" and "The rose is beautiful." Wittgenstein argues that it is one thing to look at an object in terms of color-predicates and quite another to look at the same object for what might be called valuational-predicates. However, it often happens that we are befuddled by the similarity in form built into these types of sentences and that we then confuse the rules of the language-game involving "red" with the rules of the language-game involving "beauti-

ful"—possibly thinking that the latter is something inherently perceptual in the same way as the former.

The justification for this abstract excursus will soon be evident.<sup>4</sup> For if we restrict ourselves to Joyce's major prose works—*Portrait*, *Ulysses*, and (in this paper only parenthetically) *Finnegans Wake*—we discern an interesting parallel between a) the stylistic development of Joyce's language, his increasingly complex use of words as a tool to dissect consciousness and b) the content of Wittgenstein's philosophical analysis of language, from language as an icy mirror-image of logic (the *Tractatus*) to market-place language that lives and breathes in the myriad differentia of everyday discourse (the *Investigations*). Joyce began with language any literate man could understand and savor and ended with words that in many cases are a closed book to all but the most erudite. Wittgenstein began with language that partook of the most deathless forms of logical rigor and ended with an approach that could only be called democratic in its attempt to capture for purposes of philosophical revelation all the nuances of ordinary speech.

To illustrate the parallel mentioned earlier I shall attempt to show how Wittgenstein's move to greater catholicity in linguistic comprehension bears on individual words and larger passages from Joyce's work. The key concept for purposes of comparative study is Wittgenstein's notion of "language-game." Here we find crystallized not only Wittgenstein's different approach to the intricacies of language but also, if coaxed a bit, an apt tool with which to study the alteration in Joyce's development of linguistic form. First let us focus a bit more closely on the nature of a language-game. Recall that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein considered only the propositions of natural science to be "what can be said." Then, under a variety of influences, he gradually saw that there was no adequate reason why this limitation exhausted the type of linguistic activity the philosopher should consider as model-language. In a sense, he then went to the opposite extreme by asserting the existence of numerous types of language-games and the resultant need to look at the use of a word in its own context.

A complete philosophical analysis of Wittgenstein's concept of a language-game would take us too far afield, but some consideration of selected texts will be instructive. Mention has been made of the intimate relationship between a game and the specific rules by which that game is "played." Just what does Wittgenstein mean by a "rule"?

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on.—To

obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions) (PI 199)

And since there is nothing iron-clad about "customs," there is also a certain amount of leeway in the rules of a language-game:

For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one, for none has so far been drawn (PI 68)

As an example, Wittgenstein notes that there are no "rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard, yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too" (PI 68). Yet rules are flexible only to a certain point; beyond that point we must bow our heads in obedience, for "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases" (PI 201). Any language-game necessarily involves *some* rules in order to be a meaningful game and this is what Wittgenstein wants to get across when he talks of grasping the rule without putting an interpretation on it. In other words, "What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*" (PI II, 226). And to recognize how language relates with these forms of life involves careful and minute observation of the human animal and its many diverse activities.<sup>5</sup>

Here is a pertinent example of Wittgenstein's new tactics. "Think how many different kinds of things are called 'description': description of a body's position by means of its co-ordinates, description of a facial expression; description of a sensation of touch, or a mood" (PI 24). No longer does one sacrosanct logic "pervade the world" as it did in the *Tractatus*—now there are an indefinite number of "logics," each corresponding to a word and its operation in a language-game. And in some cases words like "description" must be pursued even further to determine just exactly what is under observation. Describing a mood or feeling is far different from reckoning the location of a mountain on a field-map, yet both can be labelled "description." It is this attention to variegated meanings within the use of a single word and the philosophical relevance of each of these meanings that distinguishes the later from the earlier Wittgenstein.

## II

A commentator on Wittgenstein has remarked that "Reading the *Investigations*, I have a vision of an inland sea, tideless and with no very distant horizon."<sup>6</sup> It is time to examine whether this somewhat

liquid impression can be made to flow into the streams of Joyce's consciousness. In a rather perverse volume entitled *Three Studies in 20th Century Obscurity*, Francis Russell complains as follows: "Joyce maintained that he could do anything he wanted with language, forgetting in his logomathic isolation that language is at best a faulty tool, a poor substitute for life itself." This could well be taken as an instance of what Northrop Frye calls pseudo-criticism, for it is not clear what import the remark has beyond rumblings of discontent. Such discontent with Joyce is not uncommon and Russell's observation sets the tone for many quires of splenetic criticism to the effect that somewhere along the line Joyce became entrapped in a jungle of words and never quite made it back alive.

Now surely neither reader nor writer (Joyce included) is under the illusion that language is a *substitute* for life, that we actually live in and through the blotches of ink on the page. The source of Russell's discontent must lie in the hazy area separating life as lived from life as written about. But it is within this area that the creativity of style takes wing and surely it is the duty of those surveying new styles to stretch their sensitivities to the utmost before damning anything seriously written as "alien" to life as lived. A writer must have the knack of translating the type of observation described in Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game into connected sequences of words, words chosen and arranged in such a way that they reflect what the writer feels is worth saying. The end result for the two disciplines in question is naturally different—the writer will produce novels, stories, poems, plays, while the philosopher will construct (more or less literary) arguments. But both must be open to as many aspects of what they want to describe as possible. The problem at hand is to reveal and develop those functions of a language-game which will disclose literary secrets. My feeling is that if it is possible to understand what compelled Wittgenstein to move from *Tractatus* language to *Philosophical Investigations* language, then our appreciation of linguistic subtleties will be enlarged to an extent allowing comprehension of the twists and turns of Joycean prose. Perhaps Joyce via Wittgenstein can then be acquitted of the charge of logomania.

Beginning with the beginning, consider the well-known first sentence of *A Portrait*: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. . . ." This is an account of a father telling a bedtime story to his son and such baby talk, appropriate for babies, is also appropriate at the start of the story of the artist's life. But scrutiny reveals that it is baby talk with definite stylistic designs. If we

examine "moocow" both objectively in terms of the type of life encountered and subjectively in terms of who is doing the encountering we see that by joining what a cow does (or at least part of what a cow does, i.e., "moo") with what a cow is (i.e., "cow"), Joyce mixes the role of verb with noun in such a way that a vivid picture of this type of being results, a picture that would certainly impress a child, and anyone else, with the reality of said cow. (Looking ahead, this technique prefigures the splitting and rearranging of "normal" word construction that begins in earnest in *Ulysses* and is one of the driving forces in *Finnegans Wake*.)

Again in the first chapter of *A Portrait*, Joyce is describing the prefect of studies Father Dolan as he is about to exercise himself on Stephen's heretofore unpandied hands: "Stephen lifted his eyes in wonder and saw for a moment Father Dolan's whitegrey not young face, his baldy whitegrey head with fluff at the sides of it, the steel rims of his spectacles and his no-coloured eyes looking through the glasses" (P 50). Here also are unusual ensembles of words—"whitegrey," "not young," and "no-coloured." Joyce sees the priest as primarily a pathetic figure, an entity riddled with contradiction and non-being. Note the tension implicit in the mixture of adjectives "white" and "grey" into one word; further, the man is not "old" but "not young," his eyes not "washed out" but "no-coloured." Joyce has made us recognize the flaws and emptiness in the priest by introducing simple negatives along with simple adjectives to form not so simple compounds—a tactic again hinting at the much more radical reconstruction of language that is to come.

Now even the most experienced reader tends to be a naive realist with a tinge of Platonism when it comes to the relation between word and thing. "Things" are out there—"words" are attached to those things in basically a one-to-one relationship—words are independent of the things they denote and describe. Thus, there will always be the verbal entity "cow" even if for some reason four-footed milk-givers cease to munch contentedly in pastoral bliss. But in fact, there will always be "moocow" now that Joyce has imprinted this ontological stripe on man's herbivorous friend. However, why does the reader feel somewhat ill at ease when his eye stumbles across "moocow"? Why, to use a currently popular philosophical adjective, does something like "no-coloured" strike him as counterintuitive?

Here Wittgenstein's dicta that 1) in every language-game "to obey a rule" is only a "custom" and 2) that the boundary of a game cannot be "given" in an a priori sense but can be "drawn" help to explain the possibility and insight in such stylistic inventions as "moocow" and "no-coloured." For though the relation between word and thing is

complex and mysterious, it is (if Wittgenstein is correct) at least true to say that it is highly fluid. In the case at hand, Joyce ceased to abide by the custom of separating the entity from one of its functions and instead drew a new boundary, generating a verbal which introduced the vocal activity of the animal *before* the term which normally specifies what will produce this particular sound—"moocow" instead of simply "the cow moos," or something of the sort. Underlying all is "the given" or the "form of life," with the crucial proviso that language may absorb the given in an indefinitely large number of ways, ways that include what is perhaps the most striking aspect of a cow when that entity is in the presence of youthful ears (Moooooowooooo!)\* The possibilities are endless—the form of life might even be the *absence* of life ("no-coloured," "not young," etc.), a negativity brought out by emphasis on nothingness and its variants.

Wittgenstein's triad of custom, boundary, and form of life carry similar weight when, instead of fine-grained analysis of single words or phrases, they are applied to stylistic packets in Joyce's later work. From the first "Yes" to the final "I will Yes" occurs a form of life unique in the annals of literature, Molly's great yea-saying to the Heraclitean onrush of this, that, and everything else. Noting the omission of the customary punctuation is only the initial step in confronting this colossal interpretation of insomnious existence but it is a step toward reconciling the form of life as lived with the way one would normally write about a reverie of this sort. The vivacity of Molly's spate, especially after a day fraught with her womanly chores, is an unusually volatile "given," and this is emphasized by the fact that "boundaries," whether grammatical or otherwise, are gently removed, allowing her matriarchal and climactic charm to shine forth in its full glory.

There are many other instances. When Bloom is stumping for the publication of an advertisement, Joyce punctuates the narrative with snippets of the prose often found in the headlines of newspapers—the effect is that the wind of daily journalism mirrors the real wind of the corresponding Homeric episode, with the larger than usual type an attempt to capture the literary potpourri of a newspaper headline. This is an especially intriguing new boundary. Anyone who has spent time in a large city will verify that the headlines of the different papers published at different times during the day provide considerable linguistic excitement. Literary custom had dictated that the size of the print is not relevant to the total meaning of what is printed in the text; but the form of life demanded as close an approximation as possible to the ocular experience of fluttering headlines. Joyce accomplishes this end by means of a shakeup through visual effects of our

rigidified reaction to book print and our disregard for the power in the blackness and shape of print.\* The successive deadpanners who bore the signs "K.M.A." and "K.M.R.I.A." in the cinema version of *Ulysses* made this point in a delightfully double way.

The preceding is only an introductory attempt to correlate Wittgenstein's philosophical vision with Joyce's literary technique. I have argued that in the transition from language controlled by logic to language controlled by language-games Wittgenstein developed concepts both flexible and sensitive to the finest shades of language's penetration into experience. And the same pressures which forced Wittgenstein to alter his views on language and the resultant new conceptual framework will show, if filtered through Joyce's work, that for all his experimentation and seeming obsession with verbal expertise Joyce should not be convicted of disregarding life and replacing it with the maniacal joys of verbal self-abuse. If madness it be, it is madness on the same sophisticated level as Wittgenstein's later philosophical activity. Analysis has indicated how the notion of a language-game offers guidelines to Joyce, both in terms of individual words or phrases and longer more self-contained passages. A provisional conclusion might be that the linguistic labyrinth explored by Joyce and Wittgenstein has many paths, with some of them entering life from strange and unusual angles. But perhaps those paths we have considered are converging toward the common goal of fresh linguistic expression of our experience.

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#### NOTES

1. Some work on the relation between Wittgenstein and literature has already been done. See Marcus B. Hester, *The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor. An Analysis in the Light of Wittgenstein's Claim that Meaning is Use* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967). Colin Falck's article "Poetry and Wittgenstein" in *The Review*, No. 18 (Apr. 1968), 3-16; and the essays "Poetry and Philosophy" and "A Philosophical Commentary on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*" in Warren Shibles, *Wittgenstein, Language & Philosophy* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1969).

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (New York: Humanities Press, 1961). The book is divided into seven central themes, each numbered from 1 to 7. Comments on these themes are numbered 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, etc. Comments on the comments 1.11, 1.12, etc. Citation is normally made according to the passage number rather than the page number of the text.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), sec. 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *PI* with the appropriate section number.