Review

Toril Moi, Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell

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Toril Moi’s Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell sets out to “rethink fundamental issues in literary theory in the light of the ‘ordinary’ reading” (18) of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language philosophy—largely departing from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations, dusted with a bit of J.L. Austen (the name-drop in the title of Moi’s book is misleading), and as read by Stanley Cavell. Over the course of a brisk, ten chapter-long book, Moi takes us on a journey in three sections. In the first part, “Wittgenstein,” Moi offers a brief but lucid presentation of some of the key concepts of Wittgenstein’s language philosophy—meaning, use, language-games, grammar, and forms of life—followed by a genuinely exemplary discussion of how these concepts work against both alternative views of language and as a means of rereading what are taken to be theoretical “problems,” in this case, intersectionality. In the second part, “Differences,” she expands from these arguments to show how language philosophy exposes the problems with “theory,” which here essentially means various forms of thought connected to structuralism and poststructuralism, and outlines the limits and deficits of “critique.” And finally in the third part, “Reading,” she sets out to posit a future of literary studies in which the efforts of “theory” to generalize reading are supplanted by greater attention to the specifics of our own experience with texts, the ways in which texts act on us, and other moods of reading which may already sound familiar to readers of recent arguments in favor of postcritique.

No short summary can do justice to the breadth of thought and the expansiveness of the ideas Moi lays out; and it would be a grave oversight to not note the dexterity with which Moi leads her readers through the thickets of language philosophy, with Cavell as her guide. Moi is a brilliant and generous writer, and an exemplary teacher, finding a strikingly good balance between the reiteration of key concepts, the development of her core ideas, and the explanation of the often complicated philosophy which she grounds her work on. Revolution of the Ordinary is a joy to read—a perfect example, indeed, of what she later calls “clarity,” a writing of theory in which what is written about and how it is written does not sacrifice accessibility for ordinary readers.

Yet it is still difficult, at least for me, to see an argumentative through-line for the book. As Moi’s minimalist sketch of her project indicates, there are a number of avenues she asks us to follow her down on. They are all sign-posted, at least to Moi’s mind, by Wittgenstein. There is no useful way to summarize, I think, Moi’s already succinct development of Wittgenstein’s ideas, but it is helpful to list some of the key thoughts Moi takes from Wittgenstein. Perhaps the most important of these, given that it engages much of criticism of theory, which, in turn, drives most if not all of Moi’s claims for a need for a renewal in literary studies, is the dictum that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.” Moi understands this to mean that “there is no ‘meaning’—no ‘it’ that a word means, no ‘something’ that adheres to words in isolation from their use. Words get their meaning from the sentences they appear in” (34). This is crucial to Moi because it allows her, in later chapters, to reject both poststructuralist ideas of eternal deferrals of meaning and that bête noire of postcritique, the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which, Moi suggests, share the belief that “true” meaning is elsewhere—“hidden,” “behind,” or otherwise spatially distinct—and not in the words (sentences, texts) themselves. It also grounds Moi’s insistence—itself taken from Wittgenstein—on the importance of examples, of attention to the specific case, which provides the particular use that establishes meaning. Moi’s interpretation of Wittgenstein is explicitly unoriginal, explicitly Cavellian, and it bears saying that at many points, it is not the only possible interpretation of what Wittgenstein is after, or what he
can be understood to say; but it lays out Moi’s points of departure succinctly. Somewhat problematically, however, not all of these terms make a return in the later sections.¹

The book is split into three distinct parts, but really, at least to this reviewer, falls apart into two: the strong beginning and the equally strong middle section, up to about chapter 6, which include Moi’s exceptionally clear presentation of how she understands Wittgenstein and powerful (if not, perhaps, always fully persuasive) responses to structural and poststructural linguistics and the ideas about literature that these have generated. One may well quibble with how necessary a thorough evisceration of Paul de Man’s view of language is, or a discussion of Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’s 1982 essay “Against Theory,” but there’s no gainsaying Moi’s dexterity here. The book’s final part, meant to lay out an alternative approach to literary studies, however, falls short: and it does so, I think, because it misses some of the injunctions Moi draws from Wittgenstein, fails to address others, and generally expects us to submit to the grounds of her overarching thesis—that a new literary studies is necessary—without establishing them first.

Part of the problem with the book may be said to be structural. What must be most striking to readers of this book looking for the literary studies element promised in the subtitle is how long—and I’m tempted to say inordinately long—it takes to arrive, and how thin it remains throughout. Of the book’s 242 pages of text, something like two-thirds are essentially devoted to arguments about language philosophy and linguistics, a preparatory setup that seems to assume what it should set out: namely, that any fundamental intervention into the practices of contemporary literary studies is required, why that should be the case, and what specific ways of reading we should avoid, if any; and importantly, in how far Moi’s suggestions are new beyond the Wittgensteinian philosophical backdrop she has chosen for them (a backdrop in whose development Moi ignores the prickly specifics of Wittgenstein’s intervention into a concrete problem of 1930s and 1940s philosophy, incidentally). Moi’s book also assumes, and never explicitly spells out, the connection between language philosophy, which is after all only also a philosophy of language, and literary studies. It’s obviously possible to puzzle this argument together. The steps which we are supposed to accede to are, apparently, from Saussurian linguistics to structuralism/poststructuralism as “theory” to critique as a consequence of theory and contemporary literary studies as both thoroughly invested in critique and thoroughly permeated by, if no longer actively practicing, “theory.” Readers are asked to take this on faith, or by something like a general knowledge of how the discipline functions (this is pretty much par for the course of postcritical theorizing). But in Moi’s case it comes in a book that insists on the importance of the concrete example and the particular case, a Wittgensteinian attentiveness to the specific use rather than grand claims of general truth. Moi sets out by suggesting how important it is that language philosophy asks us to turn away from the quest for generalizations and towards examples; and yet its entire engagement with its ostensible object, contemporary literary studies, is generalization without a single example of the kind of criticism Moi would like to improve. Indeed, beyond highly perfunctory accounts and little engagement with the defenses of critique offered by Ellen Rooney and Carolyn Lesjak,² Moi fails to offer anything concrete about literary studies published after about 2000. For a book that insists, later on, that we need to be willing to acknowledge others in texts, and that such acknowledgment requires “attention to particulars, and to language, our own as well as that of others” (221), that is certainly a telling failure.


I tie Moi in with postcritical theorizing of literary studies here because Moi effectively draws her view of contemporary literary studies, and the reflex to call for change, from Rita Felski, who, Moi suggests, “has shown how the mindset—the mood or attitude—characteristic of the hermeneutics of suspicion came to dominate literary studies” (175). It pays to quibble with the word choice here—Felski has certainly asserted this, but whether she has shown anything is a different matter. At any rate, however, we might be poised to suggest that one of the things Revolution of the Ordinary does is to give postcritic a philosophy, one which can appear to save much that postcritique has left undertheorized at best: the ordinary reader, the act of description (182-84), the positive relation to the text—“admiration, care, love” (176)—the call to foreground “one’s experiences” (195) in reading and in readings and to understand reading as a form of connection—“acknowledgment,” in Moi’s term. All of these ideas are not coincidentally echoes of postcritical theorizing over the last decade. Actor-network theory, on which Rita Felski staked her very limited offer of a new literary studies, was paradoxically inimical to many of these calls in a way language philosophy manifestly is not—if this was Moi’s intention, then I would say she succeeded. Now: I doubt that Felski had Wittgenstein in mind when she championed the ordinary reader (and despite early efforts to clear up the complex idea of the “ordinary,” I think Moi actually bungles this herself later on, or willfully allows us to mistake the idea, when “ordinary” readers appear), or that Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus were channeling Cavell when they disavowed deep reading and hidden literary truths. But postcritics may now turn to these philosophers, and to Moi, and imbue their terminology with less vagueness, if belatedly.

But I still would argue that her success is limited, and it is limited because it is not clear at all what work her intervention actually does. To unravel this point requires a bit more work, though. Partially, Revolution of the Ordinary fails because her intervention calls out the same issues that postcritique does in much the same fashion: without concrete examples, in terms that are generalizing and dichotomous and do not have—or at any rate are not shown to have—purchase on any really existing literary studies. Moi’s book, especially in the final four or so chapters, is full of assertions such as these: “The suspicious reader assumes that language itself hides its meanings from us” (180); “[t]he suspicious reader is convinced that the text leads us astray” (181); critics appear to think that “all readings must begin in suspicion” (205); or, in negation: “It doesn’t follow that all utterances are equally biased or equally unreliable” (184)—as the suspicious reader, apparently, has it. At first glance, there might appear to be a fairly simple opposition going on: here, the Wittgensteinian-Cavellian-Moian reader who pays attention to the use of language and its meaning in actual life-forms; there, absolutely suspicious critique ready to impose its preformed theories of literature onto texts. To make this more than a strawman, Moi’s engagement with actual critical practice, and indeed with criticisms of postcritique, would need to be more sustained—and even the “more” is charitable, given that Moi gives no example of the kind of “suspicious reader” that she holds to have sway over literary studies today. Where is the literary critic with the “permanent pose of knowing cynicism” (184), and where is the critic who suggests that the unmasking of ideology in all texts is their project, and their only project? Postcritical theorizing—Moi’s text included—would like us to buy into the idea that

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4 And at time, she comes close to outright fabrication, such as when she suggests that “[w]e have seen that partisans of critique believe that the only alternative to ‘deep’ reading is banal paraphrase, simplistic and superficial description” (188). It’s not even quite clear what she suggests she has shown that we have now seen, but of the “partisans” she actually quotes, Rooney is explicit that she simply does not think description is possible the way it is thought of by Best and Marcus.
5 And, not to put too fine a point on it, both Rooney and Lesjak in fact address these issues. I would also point to Barbara Foley, Marxist Literary Criticism Today (London: Pluto Press, 2019): 130-36 for a succinct explanation of the logics that postcritics, including Moi, dismiss rather too easily.
literary studies needs alternatives to this critic, without establishing her existence in the first place, or her outsized effect on literary studies.

What does Moi offer, in more concrete terms, against this version of literary studies? It’s really not quite clear that she offers anything much. The later chapters invoke a number of ideas that spell out an attitude more than any concrete proposal (even where she insists that she is talking about an actual “practice”). Given that Moi insists forcefully that literary does not have a method—for given definitions, that is absolutely correct, although Moi does pick her definitions (from science) precisely so that it is correct (178)—and that critique and postcritique are moods rather than reading practices, this makes sense. It also doesn’t seem to do a whole lot of work. It builds fully on Moi’s belief that there is an insidious reliance on preformed theoretical notions of how to read a text always suspiciously, producing always the same questions, always the same answers. Moi suggests we should engage texts with an open mind, ready to be challenged by it to ask a simple question: “Why this?” (190). She recommends understanding texts not as objects but as actions (196), and to consider reading as an “acknowledgment” (205), a practice of paying “attention”—“the right kind of attention” (234) even, although compared to what remains opaque. In practice, however, none of this amounts to much, and at closer inspection looks contradictory and shallow.

For much of the book, critique appears to be the opposite of what Moi is looking for. But paradoxically, I think Moi’s trouble actually is that she does not commit to that opposition; or perhaps more properly that she does not tease out where the Wittgensteinian commitments she offers may actually be in opposition to critique, or what of her proposal is. I take it that Moi realizes that there is no opposition, in fact. Take her “Why this?” As she repeatedly insists, especially when she begins developing a set of assumptions about how to do literary studies better, it is perfectly permissible to “end in suspicion, or develop suspicion” in the process of reading (205): “Wittgenstein’s philosophy does not prevent us […] from being feminists or Marxists” (171), she avers. “Why this” may be asked by “a Marxist interested in the class struggle, or in modes of production and ideology; a feminist in women, their social status, their relationships, their actions and expressions” (190-1). But if all this is still valid—and of course it is—then Moi’s point is miniscule. It begins and ends with the belief that literary studies is suffused by the notion that all readings must begin in suspicion: only when you hold this, and the belief that the text must guide you to the Marxist problematic, can you possible think “Why this?” is an intervention into critical practice. Moi would like the Marxist critic to be surprised by the presence of her Marxism-preconditioned “Why this?” in response to the text that she reads so that her Marxist reading of the text is also a way to “express [her] adventure” (221). But this is confusing the act of reading a book with the commitment to a reading of it. The Marxist may well have been surprised while reading—but why the expression of this surprise and an account of it should have any meaning in her Marxist interpretation, her written commitment to one possible version of the text’s meaning, is far less clear. What’s more, it’s difficult to think how a Marxist, to put it simply, could ever be “surprised” by the presence of ideology (or the class struggle) in a text: it’s his theoretical stance that this is bound be the case. The (according to Moi, permissible) theoretical stance of the Marxist critic seems here to fully militate against the notion that an acknowledgment of the text’s concerns and of the critic’s reading journey is important; this is a contradiction Moi never resolves.

Most of my criticism of Moi’s book traces back to what I take to be its cardinal sin, its assumption that there is a hegemonial and monolithic hermeneutics of suspicion that needs to be pushed back against: in that context, it may make sense to say that the notion of hiddenness encodes the belief in the fundamental intransparency of text. Moi and I are unlikely to see eye to eye on the matter. But the point must remain—and Moi, again, does not gainsay it—that there will still be grounds for suspicion, grounds for understanding a text as being properly read precisely in the mood
which the word “hidden” metaphorizes. What Moi shreds is not the practices of critique, but the words used to describe the relation of text and interpretation. This would be more convincing if we were unable to understand them as metaphors; but all the same, this is a Wittgensteinian intervention, we might say. The charge is that the practitioner of critique has been “careless, hasty, even wily in his use of language” (Cavell 1969, 58) when they speak of “depth” and “surface,” of “hidden” meanings. Moi suggests that language philosophy makes us understand that there is nothing hidden behind the text, or beneath its surface, that critical readers are not actually “unearthing” anything that isn’t there to be read. Anything that you can say about the meaning of a text will be in the text, and will be differently accessible to different moods of reading. “It was never hidden. We just failed to see it” (185). But this is a distinction without a difference (if you don’t see the car that is about to hit you, I’m saving you by shouting “Watch out!” no matter that the car wasn’t hidden), certainly for critical practice.

Two final points. The first is comparatively short: nothing necessarily connects Wittgensteinian language philosophy and Moi’s call to “write in admiration” or “to reveal what we cherish” any more than it would language philosophy and critique (a point well suggested by the dearth of reference to Wittgenstein and language philosophy in the later chapters!). As I have briefly sketched above, it’s no problem at all to trace a version of Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning as use in language/life-form to a “deep” Marxist hermeneutics—one that returns the same results as “critique,” in fact. As Moi herself points out, any appropriately expanded view of Wittgenstein’s sense of meaning takes in not just the level of the sentence, but indeed the level of the “form of life;” a term which Moi says early on “means both our cultural practices and their connectedness to the natural conditions of our lives” (55) fully bound up in “the order of history” (78). And more importantly, nothing connects practitioners of critique with an inability to “write in admiration” or to “reveal what we cherish”—I am reminded of something like Fredric Jameson’s “On Re-Reading Life and Fate” (2015).

The second part is a bit longer: it is to suggest that Moi makes it a little bit easy on herself by transferring arguments Wittgenstein raises about language, and philosophy, to literature, which, I would hesitatingly suggest, may be a category error. Literary studies, perhaps, is like philosophy in its use of words in different than their “ordinary” meanings, and sometimes in danger of making itself unintelligible (though it’s not clear Wittgenstein would mind terribly). But in part, the complaint in philosophy is about a claim to privileged access to something that is not, as such, “made”—the problems of philosophy, life, meaning, ethics, and so on, problems which may well be “ordinarily” accessible. Literary studies, by contrast, deals with something explicitly made—literature. Language has “ordinary” meanings. The words of literature have “ordinary” meanings. It seems far less clear that literary texts have ordinary meanings, or that recourse to ordinary uses of language is easily possible, let alone the best way of addressing their meaning. Or if it is, the work of establishing that necessary connection still needs to be undertaken—Moi does not even hand waive it. When Wittgenstein says “the meaning of a word is its use in the language,” he already hesitated (somewhat customarily) about the extent of this claim: it held, he thought, “[f]or a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning’” (§43). The question, untouched by Moi, is whether literary meaning is the same as linguistic meaning, a question much troubled by the question of the necessary backdrop to the determination of meaning in use—what use? What grammar? What life form? This is not just because of such pertinent questions as would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon, somewhat blithely smacked aside by Moi in saying that “modernist reading works brilliantly on texts written to be read that way” (215). It is also pertinent for ostensibly less self-conscious writing, for

6 Rooney explicitly discusses Best and Marcus’s invocation of “surface” and “depth” as metaphorical, and it’s deeply puzzling that Moi at no point feels the need to discuss this.

7 I expand on some of this on my blog: https://www.platonicmonkeywrench.wordpress.com.
which the illusion of easily accessible meaning through ordinary attention to the words on the page subsists, but would need to be discussed more thoroughly as writing, as literature, to be more than a convincing illusion.

Moi’s book is a tour de force, a great read—but I cannot quite shed the thought that it’s very much also a sleight of hand, a masterful conjuring trick, a text of much surface plausibility that hangs together by the persuasiveness of Moi’s voice, rather than her arguments. It’s a book chock-full of assertions that are not subjected to any kind of explanation. “Anyone who thinks of a text as an object will have trouble escaping the New Critics’ view of intentions as ‘outside’ the text” (202), Moi insists at one point. Why? It falls to the reader to make sense of the various pronouncements made over the course of her text, and to tie these and a host of other claims and assertions together to make an intelligible whole. And it’s not like that such a whole is not possible: it is just that one you go looking for a common denominator for all of the points raised, *Revolution of the Ordinary* makes a more than modest argument, which despite the amount of time spent on critique is not, in fact, “don’t do critique.” It is “also do something else.” It isn’t “don’t have a theory”—you can be Marxist!—but “have an open mind.” All that’s not nothing—I would fully endorse it—but it’s not much, either, for the effort expended.