Philosophical Investigations 19:2 April 1996
ISSN 0190-0536

Truth, Yardsticks and Language-Games[1]

Bernard Harrison, *University of Utah*

1. I want to question a certain view of Wittgenstein's later philosophy; more precisely of the development of that philosophy; of that as involving a supposed shift in his interests.

The view I propose to attack is expressed with characteristic clarity by J.J.C. Smart in a paper called 'How to turn the *Tractatus* into (Almost) Donald Davidson'[2]. Smart remarks that the *Tractatus* 'after all attempts to show that there could be a certain sort of truth theory for a language', and goes on to suggest that 'the later Wittgenstein was unkind to his earlier self when he held that the one purpose of his later philosophy was to show how wrong he had been in the *Tractatus*.' For the main concerns of the later work are not really incompatible with those of the *Tractatus*. 'In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein is concerned to see language in terms of its use, its relation to intellectual, social or practical contexts (forms of life), or as Davidson put it in a letter to me in 1971, with what speakers mean, not with what words mean.'

What I shall try to show here is that this, very popular, indeed almost inescapable, account of Wittgenstein's intellectual development is at one hundred and eighty degrees to the truth. Wittgenstein did indeed hold at the time of the *Tractatus* 'that there could be a certain sort of truth theory for a language', although the views about the actual nature of the connection between truth and meaning that he advances there seem, *pace* Smart, rather remote from any other set of views on the topic advanced then or since. But what the later work renounces, I shall suggest, is not the Tractarian (and Fregean) notion that understanding the connection

1. This paper is a considerably shortened and revised version of the text of two seminars on 'Criteria and Truth' delivered to the Philosophy Department of Brigham Young University in October 1994 as a contribution to a series on Philosophy of Language. A subsequent draft presented at Swansea and St. David's, Lampeter in February 1995 has also undergone some minor revision to produce the present version.

2. In Lepore, Ernest, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives in the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Blackwell (1986), 92–100.

between meaning and truth is crucial to the philosophical understanding of language, nor some of the more fundamental Tractarian insights concerning that connection, but simply the conceptual framework within which, up to that point, he had attempted to articulate those insights. Far from representing a turning away from the topic of truth in favour of the wholly unconnected topics supposed to be introduced by such terms as 'use' or 'form of life', indeed, it represents a new assault on the old, the Fregean and Tractarian problem of how, exactly, the notions of meaning and truth are connected. Wittgenstein, in short, is still concerned in the later work with 'what words mean', not with 'what speakers mean'; and he still thinks truth is the key to understanding the former.

II

2. It is a very general, and entirely natural, presupposition of most kinds of truth-oriented philosophy of language that it is possible to give the truth-conditions of a sentence, and thus (using the term untechnically) its meaning, by associating it with natural circumstances in which it takes the truth-value 'true', and with natural circumstances in which it takes the truth-value 'false'. Call this *Presupposition A* (for 'Association'). A case in point of a theory honouring Presupposition A would be Quine's account of 'stimulus-meaning' in Chapter 2 of *Word and Object*, according to which a stimulus meaning is the ordered pair composed of the class of circumstances in which native speakers assent to the assertion of an observation-sentence taken together with the class of circumstances in which they dissent from such an assertion.

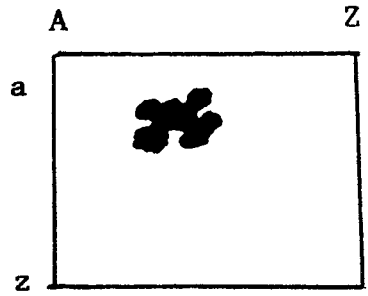
3. The *Tractatus*, I want to argue, contains among much else a rather powerful argument for the falsity of Presupposition A. That argument runs from 4.063 to 4.0641. It is worth recalling that, if we take Wittgenstein's numbering system seriously, these paragraphs, like the rest of the 4's, are comments on the fourth of the seven sentences of the *Tractatus*: 'A thought is a proposition with a sense'.

Proposition 4.063 introduces 'an analogy to illustrate the concept of truth'. It reads:

> An analogy to illustrate the concept of truth: imagine a black spot on white paper: you can describe the shape of the spot by saying,

> for each point on the sheet, whether it is black or white. To the fact that a point is black there corresponds a positive fact, and to the fact that a point is white (not black) a negative fact. If I designate a point on the sheet (a truth-value according to Frege), then this corresponds to the supposition that is put forward for judgement., etc. etc.
>
> But in order to be able to say that a point is black or white, I must first know when a point is called black, and when white: in order to be able to say, '"p" is true (or false)', I must have determined in what circumstances I call 'p' true, and in so doing I determine the sense of the proposition.
>
> Now the point where the simile breaks down is this: we can indicate a point on a paper even if we do not know what black and white are, but if a proposition has no sense nothing corresponds to it, since it does not designate a thing (a truth-value) which might have properties called 'false' or 'true'. The verb of a proposition is not 'is true' or 'is false', as Frege thought: rather, that which 'is true' must already contain the verb.

Let us give the analogy the visual aid it demands:



There is Wittgenstein's white sheet and spot. We can describe the shape of the spot by correlating with each point a colour-value: black or white. How does Wittgenstein intend this to constitute 'an analogy to illustrate the concept of truth'? 'If I designate a point on the sheet', Wittgenstein says, 'this corresponds to the supposition that is put forward for judgement.'

For Frege, what a complete sentence in the indicative mood expresses – a 'Thought' – is just that: 'a supposition put forward for judgement'. So what Wittgenstein seems to be saying is that what corresponds to a Fregean 'Thought', or in one of our terminologies a proposition, in his analogy is the designation of a point on the

sheet of paper, say 'Nn', where N is a point on the A–Z axis and n a point on the a–z axis.

What seem at first sight to be supposed to correspond to truth and falsity are the two colours black and white. Hence, following current usage, we may be tempted to identify one or other colour with 'the truth-value of' the proposition. But this is not what Wittgenstein says. What he explicitly says is to correspond in his analogy to 'a truth-value according to Frege' is 'a point on the sheet'. What sense are we to make of this? Black considers it 'a mistake', arguing that 'for Frege, the truth-value of a proposition was "the circumstance that it is true or false"', and suggesting that 'A point on the sheet of paper in W.'s analogy would probably be taken by Frege to correspond to the sense of the proposition in question.'[3]

This is honest perplexity, and deserves respect, but I think it can be dispelled. Recall Frege's nowadays notorious doctrine that the truth-value of a proposition is its reference (*Bedeutung*), which makes the proposition into a species of name. According to Frege, as we know, the *Bedeutung* of a name is an object. So if a propositional sign is a kind of name and 'a truth-value according to Frege' its *Bedeutung*, then presumably 'a truth-value according to Frege' must be regarded as an object of sorts, or as Wittgenstein puts it, a 'thing' ['*Ding* (*Wahrheitswert*)'] 'which might have properties called "false" or "true".' The point on the paper, with its alternative 'values', black and white, is precisely analogous to such an object, which is, I take it, why Wittgenstein identifies the point on the paper, and not its colour, as what stands in the analogy for 'a truth-value according to Frege.'

We have arrived, then, at the following suggestion. Wittgenstein's analogy 'illustrates the concept of truth' because it offers a way of thinking about a certain determinate theory – namely, Frege's – of how a proposition is related to the world by way of the notions of truth and falsity.[4] The analogy brings out the implications of Frege's

3. Max Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1964), p. 183.

4. It has been suggested to me that the target of 4.063 might well be the tendency on the part of Russell, around 1905/6, to treat 'true' and 'false' as names of unanalysable properties, somewhat in the manner of Moore's treatment of 'good' in *Principia Ethica*, and having, incidentally, also like Moore's non-natural intrinsic properties, essential connections with the ethical: tendencies manifest, for example, in the following passage from 'Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions'

doctrine that a proposition is a species of name. The spot on the paper represents the 'object' which according to that doctrine the proposition *qua* name must be supposed to pick out. If Frege's view were correct – so Wittgenstein's argument appears to run – then truth and falsity would have to be regarded as in some sense *properties* of that object. Hence, in the analogy, just as the spot corresponds to the 'object' required by Frege's account, so the colours black and white stand for the 'properties' true and false. But then, as Wittgenstein implies in the concluding sentence of 4.063, statements concerning the truth or falsity of a proposition would express genuine predications. 'p is true' or 'p is false' would ascribe genuine predicates, '---is true' or '---is false' to the object [*Ding*] designated by 'p'. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, 'The verb of a proposition would be "is true" or "is false".'

But now, according to Wittgenstein, 'the simile breaks down'. The ground of disanalogy is this. We can determine whether a spot on paper is black or white because we know 'When a point is called black and when white'. On the other hand, consider the sentence:

(T) p is true.

Here, though we have what looks like a subject/predicate sentence, we do not know how to set about matching it to reality. We do not know because 'is true' and 'is false' are not predicates in the ordinary sense. Expressions like 'The Black' and 'The White' do pick out aspects of the world; so we can consider a point-designation 'Nn' as functionally analogous to the sort of sentence whose sense is a Fregean 'Thought' (a 'supposition that is put forward for judgement') in that it picks out either The Black or The White, as a Thought picks out either The True or The False. But when we are

(Russell, ed. Lackey, *Essays in Analysis*, London: Allen and Unwin (1973), p. 76), drawn to my attention by R. R. Rockingham Gill. "Thus the analogy with red and white roses seems, in the end, to express the matter as nearly as possible. What is truth, and what falsehood, we must merely apprehend, for both seem incapable of analysis. And as for the preference which most people – so long as they are not annoyed by instances – feel in favour of true propositions, this must be based, apparently, upon an ultimate ethical proposition: 'it is good to believe true propositions, and bad to believe false ones'. This proposition, it is to be hoped, is true; but if it is not, there is no reason to think we do ill in believing it." There is certainly something to be said for this suggestion. If the argument of 4.063 is directed against the proposal that 'true' and 'false' name properties it is *a fortiori* an argument against the main claim advanced by Russell in the above passage. But I remain unpersuaded that the argument is directed primarily against Russell.

confronted with determining the fit with reality of a sentence such as (T) above, we cannot fall back on any knowledge of 'when a sentence is called true' or 'when a sentence is called false' analogous to our knowledge of 'when a point is called black and when white'. We can't, that is, fall back on our knowledge of The True and The False considered as aspects of reality, because the expressions 'The True' and 'The False' do not pick out 'aspects of reality' in the sort of way that 'The Black' and 'The White' do. Before we can set about matching (T) to reality, in short, it is going to have to be determined, by us, what is to count as truth or falsity for (T). As Wittgenstein puts it, "in order to be able to say '"p" is true (or false)', I must have determined in what circumstances I call 'p' true . . .".

Hence the copula of '---is true' and '---is false' is not, as Wittgenstein puts it, 'the verb of a proposition'. It is not, that is, functioning to link a property to the name of an individual, or Wittgenstein would say, an object (*Ding*). All the genuine 'verbs', the ones which really do that, are inside the genuine propositions whose truth values, having assessed them, we record in such forms of words as (T).

Let us look more closely at the point which clinches the argument of 4.063. That point is, in effect, that 'true' and 'false' do not pick out properties and that hence there is nothing nameable which 'has' the properties which we mistakenly suppose them to pick out. This effectively disposes of Frege's doctrine that propositions are names.[5] But it also threatens Presupposition A: the thought, taken for granted in so much philosophy of language since the 1950's, that it is possible to give the truth-conditions, and thus the meaning, of a sentence merely by correlating it with natural circumstances in which it takes one or the other truth-value. For unless we have *already* 'determined', as Wittgenstein puts it, 'in what circumstances [we] call p true', and thus *already* know the meaning of p (have already determined, 'in so doing . . . the sense of the proposition'),

5. Anscombe (*An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, London: Hutchinson, 1959, 58–59) agrees with Black, contrary to the sense of Wittgenstein's text, that the point on the paper corresponds to a Fregean 'Thought', and takes 4.063–4 to be defending the doctrine that 'having a sense' was one and the same thing with 'being true-or-false'. I am not sure that Frege would have disagreed with this somewhat gnomically-expressed claim, at least on some ways of taking it; equally I suspect that there are ways of taking it which would not be in conflict with the suggestion offered here.

the whole proceeding, at least so far as the determination of a meaning for 'p' goes, will be nugatory. For, if the sentence 'p' is really going to receive its meaning from the associative act, then *a fortiori* prior to that act it must be meaningless: a mere burst of sound accompanied by a gesture towards . . . towards what, exactly? If it were a gesture towards something 'which might have properties called "false" or "true"', and if it were clear to inspection what that thing's having either of those properties involved (as it is clear to inspection what a point on a sheet of paper's being black or white involves), then we might be getting somewhere. But there is no such thing, and there are no such properties, 'out there'. We are looking in the wrong direction for both truth and meaning. Hence the opening words of 4.064, which in effect brings the argument of 4.063 directly to bear on what I have termed Presupposition A: 'Every proposition must already have a sense: it cannot be given a sense by affirmation. Indeed its sense is just what is affirmed'.

4. In the context of the *Tractatus*, the argument of 4.063–4 forms, I take it, part of the justification for the Picture Theory of Meaning. To 'give a proposition a sense' is, as we have seen, for the author of the *Tractatus* just as much as for Frege, to determine its truth-conditions.

The *Tractatus*' discussion of the relationship between a proposition and its truth-conditions is, however, dominated by a curious form of holism, whose presence has never to my knowledge been altogether satisfactorily explained. A proposition is no more than a string of 'simple signs called names' [3.202] whose function is solely to 'mean an object' [3.203]. So far Wittgenstein's account more or less parallels Russell's account of fully-analysed propositions in the *Monist* lectures on Logical Atomism, and elsewhere. Wittgenstein's 'objects', however, are internally characterised by their possibilities of combination into states of affairs (*Sachverhalten*). Hence (*Tractatus* 2.0124): 'If all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are given'. Why, if we are to grasp the truth-conditions of one proposition, in the sense of knowing what state of affairs it asserts to be the case, should we need to know the truth-conditions of all other *possible* propositions? Wittgenstein here appears to be breaking at a very fundamental level with the Realist pluralism which lay at the root of Russell's opposition to Idealism.

I am inclined to think that we are dealing here with a suppressed

premise, which Wittgenstein, with his well-known distaste for saving others the work of thinking, saw no particular need to spell out, no doubt because he took it to be something any fool could see for himself. When spelled out it does indeed seem more or less uncontroversial; but it needs spelling out for all that. It is this: that to give the truth-conditions of a propositional sign 'p' is to determine for which propositional contents the issue of truth or falsity is foreclosed either way by the truth or falsity of 'p', and for which propositional contents, in each case, that issue is left open. It looks now *prima facie* as if a speaker could not know this for any 'p' if there were propositional contents of whose possibility he happened, merely as a matter of fact, to be unaware; since in that case the question whether the truth/falsity option was or was not foreclosed for these contents by the truth or falsity of 'p' would remain to be decided, and in consequence the propositional content of 'p' itself would, after all, not yet have been rendered determinate. So it may seem – seemed, I suggest, to the Tractarian Wittgenstein – that, if we are to be in a position to determine the content of any proposition p, we must be acquainted *a priori* with all possible propositional contents. The Picture Theory offers, *inter alia*, a theory of the proposition which seems to show how that requirement might be satisfied. If we read from that perspective we see at once why it has to be the case, as 2.0124 says, that 'if all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are given'. If that is the case, then the sense of a proposition can be read off from the propositional sign even though that sign is no more than a string of names, since, knowing 'all *possible* states of affairs' we know which state of affairs can alone be constituted by the particular objects picked out by these particular names, and are thus enabled to single out unambiguously the isomorphies of 'logical form' which for Wittgenstein constitute the link between the propositional picture and what it pictures. The names which make up the propositional sign thus come conjointly to constitute, merely by naming the objects they name, a sort of diagram of the specific state of affairs in which just those objects 'hang together', isomorphic with it in logical form. There is thus no need for a proposition to be 'given a sense by affirmation'. It has already a sense in virtue of diagramming a possible state of affairs, which it does merely in virtue of the reference of the names composing it; and if it did not '*already* have a sense' in that way it would not be a proposition, but merely a string of arbitrary marks.

But Wittgenstein abandoned the *Tractatus*. Or did he? Let us look now at another sort of isomorphy: that between the argument of 4.063–4 and one of the most familiar and disputed arguments of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

III

5. The argument I have in mind is the critique of ostensive definition which occupies roughly §§28–35 of Part I of the *Investigations*, of which I shall be concerned here only with §§28–29. The main line of argument here seems very simple. The central claim seems to be that one cannot give the meaning of a term by saying something along the lines of 'This is called "two"', or 'We call this the king', while ostensively indicating some element or feature of the surrounding environment, because it is always possible that one's hearer may mistake the direction of the ostensive gesture. He or she may take 'king', for instance, to be a name for a certain shape. Of course, if he or she is familiar with the general idea of board games, and of chess in particular, he or she probably will take 'king' to be the name of a type of gaming piece. But that only goes to show that quite a lot of what Wittgenstein calls 'scene-setting' is presumed by the technique of ostensive definition. Once we know 'the post at which we station the word' [§29] in language, ostensive definition can take off, but not until then. So ostensive definition can't be the sole process through which words acquire meaning. More fundamental is the learning of 'practices' or 'language-games', to which chess, if not quite an example, is at least analogous.

This argument is often taken as exemplary of the shift in Wittgenstein's interests and aims of which Davidson speaks in his 1971 letter to Smart. In the *Tractatus* he is interested in the relationship between meaning and truth, and takes seriously Frege's dictum that a name has meaning only in the context of a proposition. Now we find him apparently raising the question of how we give meaning to individual terms, and answering it not in terms of truth and propositions, but in terms of such notions as 'use' and 'practice'. I want to suggest, however, that the abandonment of Fregean themes and presuppositions in the later work is, as he himself suggested, more apparent than real. If that is the case, though, I don't think the reasons why it is the case are ones which we are likely to succeed in

prising out of the passages dealing with ostensive definition in the *Investigations* taken on their own. We are going to have to go back to *Tractatus* 4.063–4 and trace out, albeit sketchily, certain lines of development in Wittgenstein's thought which link those sections to *Investigations* I §§28–35.

6. Let us begin with a question. Suppose Wittgenstein is right, and Presupposition A is wrong. A propositional sign, that is, cannot be 'given a sense by affirmation', by associating it with some set of extralinguistic features, because, roughly speaking, a proposition has assertoric force (it asserts something, and what it means is what it asserts), and there is nothing extralinguistic which has assertoric force: nothing which 'might have properties called "false" and "true"'. If that is the case, then how *are* we to 'give a sense to' a sentential sign? To put it another way, if the truth-conditions of a proposition have to be made clear before it makes sense to speak of asserting or denying it, how *are* we to set about making those conditions antecedently determinate? I suggested in the last section that one of the functions served by the Picture Theory is that of allowing Wittgenstein, in a certain sense, to evade these questions; or to put that more precisely, to resolve them in a manner consistent with the thought that meaning enters language solely through the associative relationship between a name and what it names. According to the Picture Theory a propositional sign is related to the state of affairs it expresses in two ways. On the one hand, the elementary signs in the proposition pick out constituents of states of affairs. On the other the elementary signs are related to one another by a 'logical form' which is dependent upon their 'logico-syntactical employment' [3.327] and which is isomorphic with the 'logical form' of the relationship in which the elements of the state of affairs stand to one another. A proposition is not a name of something in the world which 'might have properties called "false" and "true"', but a picture, a diagram, of a *possible* way in which the elements of reality might stand to one another. We grasp the truth conditions of the propositional sign – we see for which propositional contents the truth-option is foreclosed by its truth or falsity and for which it is left open – by grasping the reference of its component signs, and thus (since the logical form of a state of affairs is internally related to the identity of the objects composing it) its logical form.

There is, now, a further deep advantage to this way of looking at

things which we have not touched on yet, but which enters the argument at 4.0641.

> One could say that negation must be related to the logical place determined by the negated proposition.
>
> The negating proposition determines a logical place *different* from that of the negated proposition.
>
> The negating proposition determines a logical place with the help of the logical place of the negated proposition. For it describes it as lying outside the latter's logical place.
>
> The negated proposition can be negated again, and this in itself shows that what is negated is already a proposition, and not merely something that is preliminary to a proposition.

The last paragraph of this, I take it, simply restates the conclusion of 4.063–4: 'what is negated' – 'p' – is a proposition, and not merely another species of Fregean incomplete symbol awaiting completion by the putative predicates '—is true' or '—is false'. But 4.0641 develops a new argument for this conclusion. The notion of 'logical place' is to be understood, I take it, by reference to the companion notion of 'logical space' introduced at 1.13 and amplified at 2.013:

> Each thing [*Ding*] is, as it were, in a space of possible states of affairs. This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space.

'Things' or 'objects' are the simplest constituents of states of affairs and the referents of the simplest constituents of propositions ('names'). One main reason, within the system of the *Tractatus*, for postulating simples on both levels is, as we have already noted, that it must be possible to sketch in language alternative possible worlds. Proposition 2.0214, 'If all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are given', implicitly invites us to think of each 'object' as surrounded, as it were, with a halo of possible states of affairs in which it might figure, and *pari passu* each proposition with a halo of possible propositions in which the names figuring in it might also figure. 'Logical space', I take it, is the total system of possible propositions. So Wittgenstein can speak of propositions or facts as points 'in logical space' (e.g. 1.13), and of course of regions or 'places' in that space. None of this, of course, is centrally important for our present purposes, but it should help to clear up at least the terminological difficulties which stand in the way of grasping what Wittgenstein is getting at in 4.0641.

Now, what Wittgenstein says in 4.0461 is that what a negating

proposition ~p asserts is that whatever states of affairs are realised they do not include the state of affairs pictured by p. A proposition and its denial cannot, therefore, constitute different propositions. The content of ~p, as distinct from its truth-value, is wholly derivative from p. p and ~p are, in effect, one and the same proposition viewed truth-functionally from different angles.

Now, again, the Picture Theory gives us a very satisfactory way of articulating this thought. The propositional sign 'p' pictures a possible state of affairs which may either be realised or not realised: adding successive tildes adds nothing to the content of 'p', but simply changes its truth-value from 'realised' to 'not-realised' and back again. Negation is, as it were, sequestered outside the limits of the proposition.

IV

7. Now, oddly enough, it is the breakdown of this intimate connection between the Picture Theory and a certain account of negation which led Wittgenstein in the 1920's to abandon not merely the former but, apparently, the entire metaphysic and theory of meaning of the *Tractatus*.

The problem, as we know, arises for Wittgenstein initially over the apparent necessary falsehood of 'a is red & a is green'. In an obvious sense the two conjuncts may be said to contradict one another – if 'a is red' is true, 'a is green' is false, and vice-versa – but there is no way of explaining the grounds of the contradiction truth-functionally. While we are no doubt tempted to say, loosely, that 'a is green' 'negates' 'a is red', there seems to be no way in this case in which the 'negation', if that is what it is, can be truth-functionally sequestered outside the limits of the proposition in the manner favoured by the *Tractatus*. These propositions cannot, then, we seem forced to say, be 'pictures' of truth-functionally independent and self-subsistent states of affairs. The only alternative offered by the Tractarian scheme of things is that they are analytically dispensable constructions out of more fundamental types of proposition which do represent, in the approved pictorial way, logically independent states of affairs. But what possible process of analysis could render propositions about colour analytically dispensable in that way; and in favour of what conceivable 'more fully-analysed' sorts

of proposition? Moreover, the problem doesn't just arise in connection with colour, but – at the very least – with all propositions involving measurement and degree: for instance, with 'the temperature of a is 80° Celsius' and 'the temperature of a is 85° Celsius', or 'a is 8 inches long' and 'a is 9 inches long'.

How did Wittgenstein deal with this crisis in his thinking? The *Philosophical Remarks* and the *Philosophical Grammar* (hereafter *PR* and *PG*), both dating from the late '20's to the mid-30's, are evidently likely to be fruitful texts in which to seek an answer. They are also voluminous texts. What follows rests upon a very small selection of passages from each work. Any conviction it may carry must partly depend upon the plausibility of the account offered so far of the genesis and nature of the difficulties which Wittgenstein was addressing at this point in his intellectual development.

8. One way of dealing with the type of contradiction exemplified by 'a is red & a is green' would be to say something along the lines of, 'OK, there just are inherently contradictory states of affairs. Greenness and redness, by their nature as properties, contradict one another, and that's all there is to it'. It is not immediately evident what sense, if any, can be attached to this curious remark, with its wholesale recasting of logical properties as natural ones. Wittgenstein, in any event, rejects its claim to offer a way forwards, precisely because it blurs the distinction between logical and natural properties.

> Immediate experience cannot contain any contradiction. If it is beyond all speaking and contradicting, then the demand for an explanation cannot arise either: the feeling that there must be an explanation of what is happening, since otherwise something would be amiss. [*PR* 74]

If redness and greenness are merely natural properties of things, incapable of possessing such purely logical properties as contradictoriness, then the demand for an explanation, whether metaphysical or naturalistic in character, of how they can possess such properties must be misplaced. In that case, we seem forced to say that what rules out the possibility of assigning the value 'true' to 'a is red & a is green' must be something that belongs on the side of language: something that arises in the elaboration of a notation. But that suggests, equally implausibly, that the difficulty is a creature of notational *convention*, and might be made to evaporate at the behest

of stipulation . Once again we seem to have arrived at an impasse. *PR* 84 opens a possible way forward.

> The situation is misrepresented if we say we may not ascribe to an object two incompatible attributes. For seen like that, it looks as if we must first investigate whether two determinations are incompatible or not. The truth is, two determinations of the same kind (co-ordinate) are impossible.
>
> What we have recognised is simply that we are dealing with yardsticks and not in some fashion with isolated graduation marks.

It would be easy to find this merely oracular. But I think its obscurity is not impenetrable, provided we keep our heads and continue to follow, one step at a time, the development of Wittgenstein's thinking. The thought here, I take it, is that when one is measuring with a yardstick the conjunction of one graduation mark with a given point on the object being measured excludes the conjunction of any other graduation mark with the same point. So it is not that 'a is 8 inches long and a is 9 inches long' is an intelligible but necessarily false sentence, for whose necessary falsity no explanation can be found save one invoking the mysterious 'incompatibility' of its component predicates. The truth is rather that it is not necessarily false, because it is not false, but senseless. It lacks a sense because it fails as a candidate for truth or falsity, and it does that because the technique of measuring with a yardstick fails to provide any means of arbitrating, in its case, between the options of truth and falsity. Wittgenstein's thought here remains faithful to Frege's, in other words, in its attachment to the dictum that explaining the sense of a proposition is explaining how to determine its truth value. It differs from Frege's in suggesting that, for the case of 'x is 8 inches long' and the like, the required explanation is given by explaining the nature and practical function of a certain technique: namely, the technique of measuring. Manifestly, the sense of 'a is 8 inches long and a is 9 inches long' cannot be established in that way; and in what other way could it be established? What seemed at first sight to need explaining here is that we have no way of assigning the latter 'proposition' the truth-value 'true'. Once we see that matters are in fact worse than that suggests, in that we have no way of assigning it either truth-value, we see that, given Frege's dictum that for a proposition to have a sense is for there to be a way of deciding its truth value, that we are dealing merely with a string of English words which fail to compose, in Frege's terms, a 'Thought', and for which, therefore, 'the demand for an explanation cannot arise'.

V

9. But to take this, at least broadly Fregean, way with the problem of incompatible predicates is implicitly to begin to sketch a new, and wholly un-Fregean, account of the detail of the relationship between sense and truth-value. For what is being said is that it is *the technique of measuring* which makes it clear for which propositional contents the issue of truth and falsity is foreclosed by the truth or falsity of a statement of length, and for which it is left open. It is by appeal to the terms of that technique that one determines, for instance, that what is asserted by the denial of 'a is 8 inches long' is that a is *some other length*. At this point, it seems to me, what should be echoing in our minds is the opening of *Tractatus* 4.061:

> One could say that negation must be related to the logical place determined by the negating proposition.

In the *Tractatus*, I argued, that condition for a theory of the proposition was met by the Picture Theory. Now Wittgenstein seems to be moving towards the view that that condition cannot be met by treating the proposition as the unit of analysis, but only by taking as the unit of analysis the system of propositions. He says as much at *PR* 82:

> . . . propositions turn out to be even more like yardsticks than I previously believed. – The fact that *one* measurement is right automatically excludes all others. I say automatically: just as all the gradation marks are on *one* rod, the propositions corresponding to the graduation marks similarly belong together, and we can't measure with one of them without simultaneously measuring with all the others. – It isn't a proposition which I put against reality as a yardstick, it's a *system* of propositions.

10. Let us now go back to the general question of how the sense of a propositional sign is to be made clear; the problem which rears its head with the conclusion at *Tractatus* 4.064 that

> Every proposition must *already* have a sense: it cannot be given a sense by affirmation. Indeed its sense is just what is affirmed.

On my reading, the argument whose conclusion is thus summarised is, in effect, that the truth-conditions of a proposition cannot be made clear by associating it with natural conditions, since any such explanation will be enigmatic or variously interpretable unless I have

already determined 'in what circumstances I call "p" true'. I argued further, following 4.641, that whatever explications specify the truth-conditions of 'p' must in so doing also specify the falsity-conditions of 'p'. And I suggested that, within the general framework of the *Tractatus*, the Picture Theory satisfies these conditions for an account of how the sense of a propositional sign is to be made clear. The solution it offers rests on the claim that in being acquainted with the objects picked out by the elementary signs which compose the propositional sign we are acquainted with all possible propositions: with the 'logical space' of all possible propositional contents. Thus, knowing the identity of the objects picked out by the elementary signs composing 'p', we know for which propositional contents the truth or falsity of p forecloses the truth/falsity option either way, and for which propositional contents that option is left open. The propositional content of p —its sense— is thus determined in a way which cannot be thrown into doubt by the contingent possibility that a propositional content might exist for which these issues had not yet been decided.

What the 'system of measurement' and the 'yardstick' of *PR* VIII do for Wittgenstein, it now appears, is to give him a limited and entirely un-metaphysical functional analogue of the 'logical space' of the *Tractatus*. Like the array of Tractarian 'objects', the yardstick, with the system of measurement within which it belongs, defines a closed array of alternative possibilities of propositional content, each expressed by a propositional sign 'p_M'. Grasping the rationale of the system of measurement makes clear, relative to any 'p_M', for which propositional possibilities the truth or falsity of p_M forecloses the issue of truth or falsity, and for which it leaves that issue open. Thus it is enough to grasp the rationale of measurement *per se* to see, for instance, that the truth of 'a is 8 inches long' forecloses the issue of truth or falsity in favour of falsity for any other determination of the length of a. So in explaining the rationale of measurement we have explained, in the words of 4.063, for a limited array of propositional signs set up in co-ordination with 'the system of measurement', 'in what circumstances' we 'call "p" true'; and in so doing have 'determined the sense of' those propositional signs.

11. The situation of a proposition within the closed and finite 'logical space' associated with a 'system of measurement', explains *inter alia* the possibility of negative description. If propositions were

assigned sense 'one by one', so to speak, by being associated with logically unrelated natural features, the denial of a proposition would amount only to the assertion of the absence of the feature in question. That is, while leaving it open that the thing under discussion might possess other features, it would contribute nothing to the *characterisation* of those other features. For,

> I don't describe a state of affairs by mentioning something that has nothing to do with it and stating it has nothing to do with it. That wouldn't be a negative description. [PR 82]

But, clearly, negative descriptions do contribute positive characterisations to what they describe. The explanation suggested by Wittgenstein's new account of the relationship between sense and truth-conditions is that they are able to do so because of the possibilities of characterisation already, and necessarily, built into the 'systems of measurement' which define the 'logical spaces' within which the propositions denied are situated. Thus 'It is not the case that "a is 8 inches long"' inches characterises a as being of some other *length*. Similarly,

> 'I haven't got stomach-ache' may be compared to the proposition 'These apples cost nothing'. The point is that they don't cost any money, not that they don't cost any snow or any trouble. The zero is the zero point of *one* scale. And since I can't be given any point on the yardstick without being given the yardstick, I can't be given its zero point either. 'I haven't got a pain' doesn't refer to a condition in which there can be no talk of pain, on the contrary we're talking about pain. [*PR* 82]

But, and importantly, it does not follow that a propositional sign given a sense by being situated within the pocket 'logical space' constituted by some specific practice or other, such as measurement, will continue to bear the same sense, or any sense, when we attempt to put it to use outside the boundaries of that space. That is, it does not necessarily follow that we shall be able to determine its truth-value in the same way, or any way.

> You can say 'Measure whether *that* is a circle' or 'See whether that over there is a hat'. You can also say 'Measure whether *that* is a circle or an ellipse', but not '. . . whether *that* is a circle or a hat; not "See whether *that* is a hat or red".' [*PR* 96]

12. This remark also has a deeper point, it seems to me: the one indicated by the italicised indexicals. When one says 'Measure

whether *that* is a circle or a hat', what does one take oneself to be indicating by means of the indexical? No 'individual' or 'object of reference' is, or could be, singled out by this opaque instruction. But the implication of this is that not only the truth-conditions of propositional signs but the intentionality of the indexical expressions they contain, can be made clear only relative to the sort of closed 'logical space' of propositional possibilities which systems of measurement (for instance), set up. Wittgenstein has moved away from thinking in terms of one, metaphysically grounded, 'logical space', embracing the totality of propositions irrespective of logical type, to thinking in terms of a multiplicity of closed and independent 'logical spaces' – island universes of meaning, as one might say – in communication, but only limited and partial communication, with one another. There is now no need for the metaphysic of 'objects' and 'states of affairs' which underpins the notion of logical space in the *Tractatus*, and *a fortiori* no need for the notions of elementary sign and fully-analysed proposition; since what guarantees the integrity of the 'logical space' against which the truth-conditions of propositional signs and the reference of terms and indexicals are now determined is not the internal properties of 'objects' but rather the machinery of the 'system of measurement' (soon he will replace talk of 'systems of measurement' with the —in some ways unfortunate and misleading – term 'language-game') which founds each independent, partial 'space' of possible propositions. This is why we find him saying, at *PR* 83, 'The concept of an "elementary proposition" now loses all of its earlier significance'. Finally, at *PG* 84, we find something like the summary of the account of the relationship between sense, truth and 'method of measurement' just outlined: textual support which the argument of the present section surely needs if it is to escape the accusation of spinning a reading out of disconnected passages:

> The role of a sentence in the calculus is its sense.
>
> A method of measurement – of length, for example – has exactly the same relation to the correctness of a statement of length as the sense of a statement has to its truth or falsehood.

13. The nature of the connection I wish to sketch between the puzzles of *Tractatus* 4.063–4.0641 and the critique of ostensive definition in the *Investigations* will by now, I imagine, be clear. When Wittgenstein raises, at *Investigations* I.§28, the issue of how

'two can be defined' by pointing to two nuts and saying 'That is called "two"', he is raising, at least, the question of what is to count as the referent of the indexical 'that'. (This group of nuts? The number of this group of nuts? The colour the nuts share? The property of having a soft kernel enclosed in a hard shell? . . .) That depends, of course, on what sort of property 'two' is supposed to pick out. But that in turn depends (remember Frege's dictum that a name has meaning only in the context of a proposition) on the truth-conditions we assign to 'That is two'. What we are attempting to do by pointing to the group of nuts is, in effect, to exhibit the meaning of a term by exhibiting circumstances in which a sentential sign containing it can be used to make a true affirmation. But a sentential sign 'cannot be given a sense by affirmation. Indeed, its sense is just what is affirmed.'

In the next paragraph [I. §29] Wittgenstein offers his solution to the apparent *impasse*:

> Perhaps you say: two can only be ostensively defined in *this* way: 'This *number* is called "two".' For the word 'number' here shews what place in language, in grammar, we assign to the word. But this means that the word 'number' must be explained before the ostensive definition can be understood. – The word 'number' in the definition does indeed shew this place; does shew the post at which we station the word. And we can prevent misunderstandings by saying: 'This colour is called so-and-so', 'This length is called so-and-so', and so on.

My suggestion, now, is that the train of argument, of collapse and reconstruction, which we have traced, in minimal but easily augmentable detail, from *Tractatus* 4.063–4.0641 through the *Remarks* and the *Grammar*, explains why Wittgenstein should take the move of I. §29 as offering a way out of the impasse of I. §28. The introduction into the terminal chain of examples of the formula 'This length is called so-and-so' should furnish a sufficient clue to those who recall *PG* 84. Explaining the word 'length' would, I take it, only be possible by way of an explanation of what *PG* 84 terms 'a *method* of measurement'. Explaining that will presumably involve explaining, with practical guidance, that, and why, we can usefully estimate the space required by one object by laying another, more portable object against it end-over-end, and counting the number of these iterated layings-on. It can then be explained that the resulting number is called the 'length' of the first object, the second object

the 'modulus of length', and so on. In explaining all this we shall doubtless be explaining what Wittgenstein has, by this point, already begun to call a language-game. But to what end? The answer, following the train of argument we have uncovered, is that we are doing so in order to site the class of propositional signs modeled by the dummy 'This length is called so-and-so' within a closed logical space of alternative propositional contents; and in turn that we are doing that (following *PG* 84) in order to make clear the truth-conditions of that type of propositional sign: to make clear for what propositional contents the attachment of the values 'true' or 'false' to such a sign forecloses the true/false option either way, and for which propositional contents it leaves that option open. We need to get that clear if we are to secure the possibility of establishing, in an actual context of use, the reference of the indexical 'this', and so the possibility of ostensively defining, by using such a propositional sign to make an assertion in appropriate circumstances, whatever term it is for which the dummy 'so-and-so' does duty.

Much more discussion, excluded here for reasons of space, would no doubt be needed to show that the account given at *PG* 84 of the relationship between 'method of measurement', sense and truth-conditions can be extended even to cover the other examples, of colour and number, canvassed at *Investigations* I. §29, let alone to develop it into a fully general account of the relationship between sense and truth-conditions. A suggestive account of how that discussion might go in the case of number was offered thirty years ago by the late Len Goddard,[6] and I have more recently offered some suggestions as to how it might go in the case of colour - and pain-language.[7] Perhaps enough has been said, though, to bestow at least initial plausibility on the suggestion that the question at stake in *Investigations* I. §§28–29 is not, or not finally, the ostensive definition of a term, but still, in the language of 4.061, the question of what it is to determine 'in what circumstances [we] call "'p'" true, and in so doing [to] determine the sense of [a] proposition'. What Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game is meant to illuminate, if I am correct in the account I have offered of how the terminology of

6. L. Goddard, 'Counting', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1962.
7. Bernard Harrison, 'Identity, Predication and Colour', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 23, no. 1, April 1986, 105–114, and in Andrew Harrison, ed., *Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co. (1987), 169–189; also 'Wittgenstein and Scepticism', in Klaus Puhl, ed., *Meaning Scepticism*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter (1991), pp. 34–69.

language-games evolved out of the discussion of 'methods'/'techniques' of measurement and 'yardsticks' in the surviving writings which immediately preceded the *Investigations*, is not the relationship between a term and a property (though it can certainly be seen, *inter alia*, as augmenting the critique of the terminology of 'properties' and their 'bearers' in Appendix 2 to Part I of the *Philosophical Grammar*), but the relationship between a propositional sign, its sense and its truth-conditions.

VII

14. At *Tractatus* 6.53 Wittgenstein offers the following characteristically hard-bitten account of the prospects for philosophy:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not satisfy the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – *this* method would be the only strictly correct one.

According to the account of the relationship between the sense and the truth-conditions of a propositional sign offered by the *Tractatus*, the failure of the imagined interlocutor of 6.53 to 'give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions' derives from an attempt to say what, according to Wittgenstein, can only be shown. A philosophical pseudo-proposition is senseless because it *pictures* nothing: no possible fact.

15. If, as *PR* 83 asserts, the concept of an elementary proposition 'loses all of its earlier significance' one would have expected that the Tractarian dismissal of metaphysics would fall with the collapse of its metaphysical basis. But, oddly enough, this does not happen. Wittgenstein's new account of the relationships between sense and truth-conditions gives him, among other things, a new account of how it is possible for someone, inadvertently, to 'fail to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions'. The *Tractatus* works – or can be regarded as working – by thinking out with unusual

rigour the implications of the idea that the ordinary language we speak is or might become what in the Seventeenth Century was sometimes felicitously termed a 'Real Character'.[8] A Real Character would be a system of signs, the articulations of whose elements into propositional signs mirror the actual articulations of the elements which compose Reality itself. One of the charming features of chemical notation, and no doubt part of what gave Primo Levi that sense of a quasi-metaphysical contact with Reality he felt himself to derive as a young man from chemistry, and which helped him, as he mentions in *The Periodic Table*, in some measure to resist the fantasies of Fascism, is that, with the power it gives us to sketch, as real possibilities, as yet unsynthesised compounds, it appears to come close to being a Real Character in just that sense.

The sentences of a Real Character would possess their sense and their truth-conditions, as one might say, absolutely. That is, there would be no possibility of our losing our grip on the sense and truth-conditions of any such sentence as a result of attempting to apply it in an unfamiliar context. To the extent that a Real Character is truly Real, indeed, there can be no sense in the idea that there might be 'unfamiliar contexts' for its sentences. All possibilities of propositional content will have been laid down in advance, just as they are in the *Tractatus*.

16. The *Tractatus*' objection to metaphysics is essentially that once the implications of the idea of a Real Character are rigorously thought out it becomes clear that no language so conceived can comment on the relationship between itself and the world, or on the conditions of possibility of that relationship. Metaphysics, perennially occupied as it has been with the attempt to elucidate just those matters, is thus engaged in a hopeless endeavour to speak of matters regarding which silence is the only option. The later work, if my account of its founding line of argument is correct, certainly represents an abandonment of the idea that the language we actually speak is, or could be, a Real Character. But with the evaporation of that idea goes the idea that the sentences we actually use possess their senses and truth-conditions absolutely. For suppose sense, reference and truth-conditions are not, after all, determined solely by appeal to 'the contents of the world' taken in a sense which pre-

8. John Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, London (1668).

scinds from everything in the way of human practice or convention, bar purely associative conventions connecting up elements of language with such contents, – i.e., with 'facts', 'objects', 'stimulus-conditions', 'nerve-hits' and the like. Suppose, instead, that sense, reference and truth-conditions can only be established relative to the 'logical space' of possible propositional contents constituted, in turn, by the range of possible outcomes, given the nature of reality, of implementing a practice. In that case our grasp of the truth-conditions, and thus the sense, of a propositional sign 'p' will be firm only within the limits of possibility of implementing the practice in question. Those limits will depend of course, partly on the nature of things and partly on the manner in which, and the purposes for which, we have chosen to set up the practice. So for the most part there will be no reason why those limits could not be extended. But extending them will for the most part require some alteration in the terms of the practice: what Wittgenstein habitually calls 'a decision'. And sometimes we shall encounter cases in which it is just not clear what decision would serve, in a given context, to give a sense to a propositional sign whose sense in other contexts is perfectly clear. Some set of stipulations extending our techniques of volumetric measurement might serve to define truth-conditions for 'The volume of that cloud is V', in the sense of defining the falsity-conditions of such a claim: of determining what alternative possibilities the assertion of its falsity would bring into view. But can we envisage, to use a favourite example of Wittgenstein's, any parallel decision which would give a sense to 'If it is two o'clock here it must be x o'clock on the sun'? Someone who, proceeding by analogy with 'If it is 5 p.m. here it must be 10 a.m. in Salt Lake City' asks 'And what time is it, then, on the sun?' has, in the terminology of *Tractatus* 6.53, to which the line of thinking we have traced in this paper *has* given a new and more viable sense, inadvertently 'failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions'. The stage is set, in other words, for the major enterprise of Wittgenstein's later work: that of showing that the philosopher characteristically trades in inadvertent error of this kind. The difference now, of course, is that that cannot be shown wholesale, in the manner of the *Tractatus*, by giving an account of the general nature of the proposition which excludes 'what cannot be said' by showing what can be said. The new account of sense-bestowal as a function of practices, given the number, and the variety, of sense-bestowing

practices dominating pocket 'logical spaces' (of 'language-games', that is to say) forces the adoption of precisely the methods which so many readers have found so baffling an aspect of the *Investigations*, and for which Wittgenstein half-apologises in the *Preface*: the piecemeal, constantly interrupted journeys 'over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction', the detailed 'phenomenological' investigations of concrete examples, the constant flirting with what frequently appears to come close to, but is never quite unambiguously identifiable as, outright conventionalism, the ease of grasping what is said when compared with the extreme difficulty, often, of grasping why it is said, and all the rest of it.

VIII

17. Which suggests a postscript. My friend Virgil Aldrich, having shaken his head over an earlier draft of this, said, 'Well, this is all very well. It's all very *scholarly* (he was trying to cheer me up). But, damn it, it *can't* be *Wittgenstein*. What's become of the *poetry*!'

At the time I just hummed and hawed, but now I should like to attempt an answer. Certainly the language of the later work is powerful *as language*, in the flow of striking metaphor with which Wittgenstein illuminates his points, for instance. Like much great poetry, too, the later work impresses one as a serious meditation on our situation as human beings. And that, to a man who wondered whether Shakespeare was 'perhaps a creator of language rather than a poet',[9] and thought of the poet as 'prophet or . . . teacher of mankind',[10] might have more to do with the nature of poetry, even, than power of language. No doubt, then, that Wittgenstein's later work can be 'read as poetry'. But what kind of poetry? Paul Engelmann records a moving and revealing remark:

> The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter the unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable, will be – unutterably – contained in what has been uttered.[11]

9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, tr. Peter Winch, Oxford: Blackwell (1980), 84e.
10. Ibid., 85e.
11. Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, tr. L. Furtmüller, ed. B. F. McGuinness, Oxford: Blackwell (1967), 83.

The later work shares with the best and most serious poetry its respect for detail and for what is the case, its hatred of the empty resonant phrase. But it is in a deeper sense than that, even, concerned with truth. It is concerned with truth in just the way Wittgenstein thought Uhland's poem was concerned with truth. Its whole method is by painstaking investigation of detail to bring the reader back again and again to the boundary of possible utterance, at which we confront 'the unutterable' in our situation as human beings. What I have tried to do here is to trace out, if only in very broad outline, the path followed by Wittgenstein's changing views concerning the nature of that boundary. However, Wittgenstein's middle-period reflections on sense and truth, if I am anywhere near right about their drift, may have in them the power to illuminate not merely the nature of Wittgenstein's philosophical 'poetry', but the nature of poetry and 'literary language' in general. The thing we find philosophically suspicious about the kind of literature we call 'creative' is that it is just that. It neither states facts nor propounds testable theories. In a phrase of Merleau-Ponty's, its language 'never has anything to do with anything but itself.'[12] A long tradition of philosophy views literature, precisely on that account, as without serious cognitive significance: views it as rhetoric, as ideology, as dream or free association only.[13] And the mainstream of post-Fregean philosophy of language, with all its undoubted intellectual rigour, stands squarely in that tradition. The way of relating sense and truth which we have uncovered here, however, while in as many ways as Fregean as Wittgenstein's own estimate of his debt to Frege might lead us to expect, is not, unlike so much Frege-influenced philosophy, implicitly anti-literary. It offers a view of the language we ordinarily speak as dumbly enshrining in its machinery for determining reference and truth (as 'showing') not merely the nature of the world but also the nature of our own multifarious activities as sense-constituting agents. Guided by that view we might begin to move away from the 'dissociation of sensibility' recorded by Eliot and deeply engrained in our philosophy and culture, and begin to see how a language having 'nothing to do with anything but itself' might nevertheless contrive to constitute a reflection both

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, tr Claude Lefort and John O'Neill, London: Heinemann (1974).
13. Cf. Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry*, 5, (1978), 31–47.

on our world and upon the routes along which, by constituting the logical spaces within which our discourse moves, we have become human in the ways in which we are human.[14]

Department of Philosophy
University of Utah
Salt Lake City
Utah 84112

14. For a more extended attempt at developing that sort of account of literary language, see my *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press (1991).