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*Revolution of the Ordinary Literary Studies after  
Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* by Toril Moi (review)

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# REVIEWS

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

U of Chicago P, 2017. 304 pages.

These are good days for ordinary language philosophy (OLP). The last few years have seen the appearance of compelling books by Avner Baz and Sandra Laugier defending a kind of philosophical attention to the “ordinary” derived from the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Stanley Cavell. While those were books written by philosophers and mainly aimed at an audience of philosophers, Toril Moi’s new book, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*, undertakes an affiliated project for literary studies: a response to misconceptions of OLP pervasive among literary theorists, and a case for the distinctive contribution that OLP can make to our understanding of our relations to literary texts. The effect is a book that not only demonstrates an encyclopedic familiarity with the work of the philosophers of its subtitle (and with the secondary literature on those philosophers), but also expands most received conceptions of OLP, so that Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, Jean-Paul Sartre, and most importantly Simone de Beauvoir all plausibly emerge as philosophers of the “ordinary.” This expanded conception of OLP largely results from Moi’s attempts to procure more ethical and political significance from OLP than might be apparent to, say, a casual reader of Austin and Wittgenstein. This is an important project, and Moi’s work raises several questions that will shape future work in the field.

Before turning to some of those questions, I want to convey, by way of rough summary, the scope of Moi’s book: a scope that testifies to how much can result from conscientiously reading, as Moi does in her first chapter, the opening passages of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Indeed, Moi’s first chapter (“Five Red Apples”) is a particularly excellent introduction to those passages—and to Wittgenstein’s notion that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (*PI* §19)—strengthened by Moi’s juxtaposition of them with a scene involving language-learning and the distinctive vocabulary of bullfighting in Julio Cortázar’s novel *A Certain Lucas (Un tal Lucas)*. Moreover, Moi’s understanding of Wittgenstein’s opposition to the “Augustinian” picture of language (whereby the relationship between words and the world is principally representational) supplies her accounts of several important moments in literary theory, all of which she thinks have somehow involved

variations on the Augustinian picture: Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916); the emergence of a "post-Saussurean" tradition (as in Émile Beneviste's reading of Saussure and Vicki Kirby's use of Beneviste in her "new materialism"); and even Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's "Against Theory" (1982). Moi also elaborates on conflicts between OLP and the view of concepts at play in Derridean deconstruction; between OLP and the kinds of lessons about the relation between grammar and rhetoric that Paul de Man tries to draw from a scene from *All in the Family* (in his "Semiology and Rhetoric" [1973]); and between OLP and such critics of its supposed conservatism as Ernest Gellner and Herbert Marcuse.

In its last third the book takes the ethical and political turn prepared for throughout it, with Moi using Cavell's notion of "acknowledgment" to develop an ethics of reading meant to contrast with the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (as in her chapter "Reading as a Practice of Acknowledgment"). Moi takes this still further in her elegiac and personal final chapter on the ethics of attention, based on a pamphlet in Norwegian written from her experience attending parts of the trial of the right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik for his July 22, 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utøya, Norway, in which he killed 77 people.

A consistent theme of Moi's book is OLP's attention to particulars. It should be clear that "attention to particulars" cannot exclude placing certain particulars in wider contexts, including social practices, that are in a sense "prior" to those particulars. Thus, in a famous Wittgenstein-inspired discussion of social practices, John Rawls notes that though outside a baseball game one can "swing a peculiarly shaped piece of wood," no "matter what a person did he could not be described as stealing base or striking out or drawing a walk unless he could also be described as playing baseball." Rawls concludes, "The practice is prior to particular cases: unless there is the practice, the terms referring to actions specified by it lack sense" ("Two Concepts of Rules" 25).

It is doubtful that, as a Wittgensteinian, Moi would want to exclude such ideas in her invocations of "particulars."<sup>1</sup> (For example, she says that the point of Wittgenstein's using the term "language-game" is "to draw attention to the intertwining of words and practices, to show us that we can't understand a word or an utterance unless we understand the practice it is a part of" [Moi 44].) Her interest lies rather in how much theory-building is (in contrast) rooted in what Wittgenstein called "our craving for generality" (*Blue Book* 17). As her main case study of such tendencies, Moi takes up the rise of "intersectionality theory," particularly in feminist theory, since Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 discussion of how Black women find themselves at the "intersection" of multiple forms of oppression. According to Moi, the intersectionality theorist's

<sup>1</sup>Cavell's critical discussion of Rawls's paper in *The Claim of Reason* consists not in disputing such an idea of the relationship between particulars and practices (304), but in questioning Rawls's understanding of certain moral phenomena (principally promising) as practices in a sense derived from the model of games (292–312).

concern with avoiding “exclusionary” concepts not only manifests a yearning for generality, but also renders the term effectively meaningless: if “all identities are intersectional, the term does no work” (106).

To assess the full significance of Moi’s arguments, it would be helpful to bring them into conversation with recent criticisms of intersectionality theory by Marxist social reproduction theorists: for example, David McNally’s recent argument that intersectionality theory’s reliance on geometric metaphors (suggesting qualitatively independent lines “in intersection”) distorts the way in which different forms of oppression qualitatively depend on each other, much like the different parts of an organic system. Moi would (I suspect) see McNally’s Hegel-inspired treatment of social phenomena in terms of an organic “totality” as a further expression of the theorist’s “craving for generality.” And yet when Moi says that she also wants to account for how women’s oppression is “stunningly systematic . . . just like a language,” and when she cites Beauvoir’s similarly Hegel-inspired *The Second Sex* (1949) as her main example of a systematic but particular-oriented investigation of oppression, we might wonder whether we are converging on similar points from different traditions, and also wonder what is at stake in using language as opposed to life (i.e. the organic) as our principal model for understanding oppression’s systematic diversity (108, 109–110).

In another important part of *Revolution of the Ordinary*, Moi marshals OLP against the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and against the idea that a text must be understood as consisting of “surface” and of “depth.” This discussion contains a number of compelling proposals, including the idea that it is distorting to talk about approaching a text “suspiciously” as though that were a settled or prescribed method, as opposed to just *reading* with a suspicious attitude or according to a certain field of interests (179); as well as the idea that it is an evasion of one’s responsibility for reading a text to think that an attitude of suspicion can (as though it were a settled or prescribed method) simply supply one with an understanding of that text (180). This results in a thought-provoking treatment of Freud’s dream-interpretation as itself just reading (without needing reference to surface, depth, or suspicion [185–8]).

Moi also regularly draws a stark opposition between OLP and certain figures associated with the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” especially Herbert Marcuse, who upbraided Austin and Wittgenstein in *One-Dimensional Man* for supposedly enforcing social conformity. Regarding Marcuse’s differences with Wittgenstein, Moi says, “This is a clash of radically different philosophical sensibilities . . . Marcuse champions the hidden and the deep. Wittgenstein yearns for clarity . . . I am not sure that such an abyss can be bridged. It certainly can’t be bridged by simple persuasion” (Moi 150–51). But it is hard to see how this degree of emphasis on Marcuse’s differences from Wittgenstein (and Austin) is consistent not only with Moi’s (correct) claims that Marcuse misread those philosophers, but also with her (similarly correct) claims that Marcuse misunderstood the extent to which both Wittgenstein and Austin shared some of his own critical ambitions, especially his opposition to “posi-

tivism" (160–62). Once we stress this as a matter of misinterpretation rather than just a matter of irreconcilable philosophical sensibilities, it becomes easier to understand why Marcuse endorsed some of Austin's and Wittgenstein's philosophical ambitions (such as an analysis of ordinary discourse) in the course of criticizing them for supposedly not fulfilling those same aims (202). And it is tempting to think that at least some of this mis-encounter between Marcuse and OLP might have been averted had Marcuse only awaited Cavell's readings of Austin and Wittgenstein—especially Cavell's vision of *Philosophical Investigations* as revealing the everyday to be a pervasive "scene of illusion and trance and artificiality"—and perhaps had Marcuse seen in Cavell their shared dedication to non-conformity (Cavell 46).<sup>2</sup>

It is exactly because I have found it rewarding to think through such differences with Moi (as well as our many other areas of agreement), that I have found it rewarding to work through *Revolution of the Ordinary*. Moi's book is evidently written from a deep understanding of what leads philosophers and theorists to disagree; with an attention to examples that often goes much deeper than even that of the authors who first proffered those examples; out of a comprehensive acquaintance with OLP, and writing on OLP, that has opened many new texts to me; and that results in a convincing presentation of the misconceptions about OLP in literary studies that Moi productively combats. I hope it is widely read.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)."

<sup>3</sup>I thank Yi-Ping Ong for invaluable editorial advice on this review, and I acknowledge the support of UNAM's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program at the Institute for Philosophical Research, in which I am under the supervision of Carlos Pereda.