

# Doing Ordinary Language Criticism

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## The Ordinary

In starting out, I should note that the “ordinary language” in my title is not being opposed to the jargon of the specialist. I’m sure that all of us here are too experienced not to know how useful critical jargon often is, and how treacherous so-called “everyday” or “ordinary language” can be. Nor is the term “ordinary” meant to be contrasted to so-called “literary” language. As J. L. Austin and Mary Louise Pratt and many others have shown over the years, these two concepts, “ordinary” and “literary” language, exist on a *continuum* of language uses, with nothing objectively inherent in them to clearly divide one from the other. Finally, I should preface my remarks by saying that they are all made within what the philosopher Stephen Pepper, in his book *World Hypotheses*, calls a “contextualist” philosophy, a philosophy which is but one of several different ways of making sense of the world. Among contemporary philosophies, American pragmatism might be the most familiar variant of contextualism, although some versions of analytic and continental philosophy, like Wittgenstein’s and much of Gadamer’s, are also contextualist.

If we need a contrast to ordinary language, then, and we do, I take ordinary language to be understood in contrast to language that is, as Wittgenstein says, “idling,” language more or less theoretically spinning its wheels outside any actual language games that people engage in with each other, in actual things they do in the world. In effect, this makes ordinary language co-extensive with the natural language that we all learn to speak. But to say this is not to say that our language is just fine, in all of its specific parts and uses, just as it is. On the contrary, Wittgenstein’s philosophical investigations, for example, like those of Plato or many other philosophers, are necessary to locate those aspects or uses of ordinary language that are, in fact, metaphysically dead-ends, and therefore “idling,” doing no reasonable work. It’s been a while since I last looked, but as an example of what I mean, despite Coleridge’s own embrace of “ordinary language,” and even while fully allowing for his dialectical as distinct from my contextualist philosophy, I take it that his account of “Reason,” as opposed to Kant’s, is also “idling,” just because its claims exceed plausible uses of how we speak about knowledge, truth, belief and the like. When that happens, it is ordinary language itself that is brought to bear, so to speak, from one sector of its active life, to correct the confused ordinary language in another sector, where it is ailing or lost, doing no rational work.

If ordinary language can become confused and need philosophical analysis, it is also true that ordinary language can be used for many *different* purposes and effects, used in different “language games,” such as those of poetry and criticism and philosophy, and so we need a few further distinctions to talk about the language games of literature and of certain kinds of literary criticism that I am most interested in.

By “literature,” a functional or pragmatic definition can illuminate how those of us here are likely to understand it. If literary language cannot be distinguished from ordinary language by some set of unique, objective characteristics, it is not likely that “literature” can either. And so far, efforts to define literature in that way have not been very successful. And yet literature can be defined *functionally*, that is, as a specific kind or range of *uses* of ordinary language. Throughout our history, and probably throughout human history, auditors and readers have come in various ways to recognize when certain uses of words are so dense, so rich, so implicitly productive of multiple pleasures and meanings, that our interest in them simply outruns any specific uses they might otherwise be reduced to in their structure or in their original situations of appearance or publication. “Literature,” in short, I take to be a linguistic phenomenon whose imaginative possibilities of meaning are of more interest to us than any of the settled actualities their authors or critics might have given them.

It follows from this that literary *criticism* must be pre-eminently interested in just such significant *possibilities* of a work of literature. If so, “ordinary language criticism” can be further contrasted to *empirical* uses of ordinary language, those that provide causal explanations of phenomena in or out of literature. Such causal explanations risk being too narrowly confined in their measurements of “texts in causal contexts” to do justice to, or better, to “dwell in,” individual works of literature. Argument from cause is a legitimate preoccupation in literature so long as it does not trump arguments from what, after Kant, are arguments from literature’s open-ended Purposiveness.

Third, ordinary language criticism and its contextualist views can be contrasted to textualist theories of language and literature—most notably, perhaps, those of structuralism and post-structuralism—which work by prising language off of its uses altogether in order to ask questions about atemporal structures, or breakdowns of structure, rather than temporal performances constituted by authorial and readerly acts. To be sure, this does not mean that empirical and textualist studies are irrelevant to the study of literature. Quite the contrary, in fact, for it is my belief that what the future of literary theory and criticism needs are *interdisciplinary teams* of trained scholars from different fields whose interests are precisely those areas of *intersection* between literature and other kinds of knowledge. In the meantime, textual and empirical studies are, or should be seen as, one, defeasible dimension of the interests of ordinary language criticism in the work as a performative act, an act that is uniquely rich, even inexhaustible, in its possibilities for meaning and significance.

One final word about “possibilities” of literary phenomena. I take “possibilities” to mean concepts, actions, situations, people, feelings, attitudes and so on that would otherwise count, outside of the literary work, as “examples-of-something,” but which, in literature, are put into play as *heuristic* possibilities for new intellectual subsumptions and connections. That is, given all of the tensions that arise, in a poem or novel, between ordinary words in their non-literary uses, how those same words are put under various pressures in the literary work, and how the work itself cannot be conceptualized clearly as a whole, then everything comprising the work can be understood to function as relatively indeterminate topoi, ready for a wide variety of possible employments.

Now, having said all this, I am the first to admit that the rubric of “ordinary language criticism” *may* not be worth the candle. When my colleague Ken Dauber and I coined it a few years ago, we meant it as a kind of trial balloon, intended to draw fire. It was our means for promoting, as the critic’s first responsibility, concerns with “meaning as use,” and with the rationality of criticism as a non-rule governed exercise of literary competence that could benefit from ordinary language philosophy and its cognates. Although one reviewer actually did claim to have found our phrase “felicitous,” I am afraid that, for most, it may seem impossibly vague or misleading. (And by the way, for a good essay on the problems long associated with the term, see Gilbert Ryle’s essay, “Ordinary Language”).

Ken and I were well-meaning, but we ought to have been rhetorically more savvy. But then it was I myself who was so foolish as to use this rhetorically bottom-heavy phrase in my book, *Rhetorical Investigations: Studies in Ordinary Language Criticism*, published in 2004. In that book a similar problem attends another coinage of mine, that of “American low modernism,” by which I meant to point to those artists, writers, and others in the first half of the twentieth century who authorially display or feature in their works, thematically and otherwise, specifically *rhetorical* strategies, tactics, subject matters, ideas, and attitudes, as ways of making sense of the modern world. Elsewhere I have included, as “low modernists,” figures ranging from Emily Dickinson to Robert Frost and much of Wallace Stevens, to W. H. Auden; from Susan Glaspell and Eugene O’Neill to Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Here again, the term “low modernist” is probably misleading, for I meant to signal a neglected *kind* of literary modernism, one that embraced rather than reviled “rhetoric” as a way of thinking about language and thought. For me “low” *and* “high” modernists must be seen as *on a continuum*—not in “opposition” to each other, but in “aposition,” as mutual modifications of different ways of thinking. The problem with my term is that many so-called high modernists also themselves sometimes feature rhetorical strategies and tactics as modes of thinking, just as do many writers who come *after* the period known as modernism. In short, my distinction is intended to be heuristic rather than ontological, though I fear that the term taken alone, like “ordinary language criticism,” leaves that and other distinctions easy to miss.

This mentioning of low modernism and its rhetorical modes of thinking is my way of pointing to just *one way* of undertaking ordinary language criticism. It is a way that many have been exploring for some time now. As a matter of fact, I expect that many of us here have long been ordinary language critics, and in any case I can think of many people who feature “rhetoric” in their theories and critical analyses. I might mention here, merely as a way of

arguing by authority, thinkers such as Charles Altieri, Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, John Hollander, Richard Lanham, Walter Ong and Willard Spiegelman—though there are *many* others who do similar work under different names.

One such rhetorical critic, Angus Fletcher, in his very rhetorically-titled book, *Colors of the Mind*, takes as his critical agenda what he calls “thinking the poem.” For me, *that*, at least, is a felicitous phrase—“thinking the poem”—signifying what I have been trying lately to do: to inquire into how, particularly in light of the aggressive swerve away from “rhetoric” in Romanticism and well into the twentieth century—how *some* poetry displays specifically rhetorical performances of mind and thought by both author and reader. Like Charles Altieri, like Willard Spiegelman, like the philosopher Stanley Cavell, I am trying to understand “intelligibility” in literature and “rationality” in criticism. Another way to say this is to say that I am interested in bridging the divide between philosophy and literature, by way of rhetoric. I don’t say that that divide should be abrogated altogether, much less that rhetoric is the only way to bridge it, but that it’s one important, neglected way.

### **The Exemplary**

My own way of linking philosophy and poetry through attention to contextual uses of ordinary language resists reducing “rhetoric” either to conceptually-calcified “topoi,” on the one hand, or to supposedly destabilizing “tropes” that “de-center” meaning, on the other. Topics and tropes themselves are, I think, a good, short-hand way to circumscribe rhetoric as a mode of thought and speech, that is, as a universal method of inquiry and judgment. But topics and tropes must be understood, first, as working together—not only on a continuum but as mutually constitutive and not reducible to law-governed terms and propositions or to runaway figuration. And second, tropes and especially topics must be reformulated for contemporary use, not only as structured terms and argument-forms but as flexible, inductively-generated, and contextualized terms for interpretation. And my own way of resisting reductionism is to borrow from and partly reinvent the traditional arts of discourse, namely grammar, rhetoric, logic, and dialectic, in order to attend to four major functions of rhetorical thinking: “invention,” which I take to be the signal preoccupation of rhetoric as such, its concern with possibilities; “judgment,” which overlaps on Wittgenstein grammatical investigations and which makes invention possible in the first place and helps keep it honest; “sequences and consequences” of thoughts and words, which expands traditional notions of logic as practical rather than formal reasoning; and the “creation and re-creation of community” through critical dialogue, which is one way of re-conceiving dialectic. In my view these four dimensions constitute an ongoing “ordering of the ordinary.”

Unfortunately there isn’t time here to elaborate on all of this, and in any case, each particular way of doing ordinary language criticism finally lives or dies *by example*—since rules go only so far and, as Wittgenstein says somewhere, the practice has to speak for itself.

Allow me, therefore, to give a brief example of how what I am talking about can work, by looking at a poem by W. H. Auden entitled “Law Like Love,” published in 1940 as the Second World War had gotten underway. This poem is not nearly as challenging as the work of Ann Lauterbach that I have just begun to read with pleasure and from which I am learning a lot; but this Auden piece will be more accessible here. Try to think of my reading as one possible “performance” of this poem, a performance that is intended to “think the poem” as a rhetorical act *about literature as cognitive without, however, being strictly conceptual*.

Auden’s witty discursiveness is a late incarnation of American low modernism—modernist, but a modernism turned towards rhetorical modes of reasoning, arguing, persuading, and showing forth provisional truths, or better, “exemplifications,” “possibilities,” of plausible ways of seeing the world. In short, Auden is a late, low modernist poet who particularly inclines toward the explicitly rhetorical (some will recall that one of his poetry collections is even entitled *The Orators* [1932]). Like many of Emily Dickinson’s rhetorical lyrics, “Law Like Love” emphasizes inquiry more than conclusion. Its sections are easily distinguished from each other in almost all available ways, by tone, meter, syntax, diction, punctuation, lineation, strophic layout, and subject matter. For my purposes, I have divided it into three sections: stanzas one to six, or lines 1-34; the following verse paragraph, lines 35-56; and the concluding quatrain of two couplets (the first in iambic tetrameter, the second in iambic trimeter, echoing the stanzas of section one), lines 57-60.

Now, Section One, it seems to me, double-voices others’ differing definitions of law, offering us readers a very mixed bag of topics as fixed commonplaces, made even more uninventive by virtue of their sing-song diction, syntax, and meter:

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,

Law is the one

All gardeners obey,

Tomorrow, yesterday, today.

Law is the wisdom of the old,

The impotent grandfathers feebly scold.

The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,

Law is the senses of the young.

As this litany of what “law is” unrolls, it appears that law “is” many things: Nature, wisdom, sensory experience, Scripture, ecclesial authority, established convention, social fashions, Fate, the State—and even nothing at all, a figment of the imagination. These views are retailed and allowed to stand in stark contradiction to each other, until the speaker of the poem, in an aside to his “dear,” interrupts with a riddling of homonyms and pronouns:

If we, dear, know we know no more

Than they about the law,

If I no more than you

Know what we should and should not do

Except that all agree

Gladly or miserably

That the Law is

And that all know this,

If therefore thinking it absurd

To identify Law with some other word . . .

And so on.

What sounds like a fairly skeptical drift of thinking here ends surprisingly, and paradoxically, in a “timid boast”—not about what Law “is” once more, but about what law is “like,” a simile that is comprised of quick, short sentences built chiefly around negatives:

Like love we don’t know where or why,

Like love we can’t compel or fly,

Like love we often weep,

Like love we seldom keep.

Formally, it might be noticed, this quatrain reaches back to the metricized commonplaces of section one. But in attitude and substance, it is continuous with the cautious skepticism of section two, proposing a middle term between dogmatic definition and a kind of negative theology of love, that makes of the poem a sustained argument-by-example of considerable power, at once almost mythical without, however, being mythicized.

For while section two politely declines to attempt to define law one more time in favor of speaking otherwise, the speaker has not dismissed those earlier commonplace definitions. In its lonely position at the end, it is true, “love,” as a moving metaphor for law is nevertheless characterized chiefly by its own via negativa: “we don’t know,” “we can’t compel,” “we often weep,” “we seldom keep.” Certainly such a trope “proves” nothing, and as a topic it is almost wholly indeterminate, hence of no obvious use for the task of determination as it stands.

But then, as noted, in its climactic position it does not stand alone, for it bridges the gap between the preceding section two and the very different section one. For the speaker has not refused by the end to speak about law; he admits that “No more than they can we suppress/ The universal wish to guess;” lines 47-48). The problematic indeterminacy is not going away. What, then, is the speaker, is Auden, up to? I’d like to propose that this poem itself points to a bridge between philosophy and poetry, by understanding “rhetoric” as the middle term between them. The poem does this in several ways.

First, if we read the final quatrain of the poem as a *new*, but not dogmatically exclusive, way to re-define law—not only as a trope but as an inventive *topos* based on possible contrasts between “similarity and identity,” and on possible similarities between “similarity and identity,” then the question ostensibly shut down earlier by narrow-minded ideologies (“What is Law?”) gets re-opened.

Second: In metaphorically providing his own new commonplace (“Law like love”), the speaker nudges us to see that those earlier identifications of law—“Law is the sun,” “Law is the senses of the young,” “Law is we,” “Law is me”)—these commonplaces, however categorically they were phrased earlier, were *themselves* no less metaphorical than the speaker’s own overt simile. From which it follows that they *need* not be taken as uninventive and dogmatic, as before, but might instead be understood as equally “open-ended” possibilities, and even as the necessary background against which “love” can be understood positively (rather than just negatively). That is, as metaphors, they are not exhausted by the uses others heretofore have made of them.

And that fact suggests, finally, that love itself—and in this regard, recall that parts two and three of the poem are addressed to the speaker’s “dear,” who proves to be none other than ourselves (for who talks quite like that to his “dear?”)—love itself, in the final stanza, transmutes those earlier clichés into powerful, even philosophical, topics of invention. They

do this by reminding us that those very commonplace metaphors of others are also the means by which they themselves *actually go about* loving others, or trying to. That is, while those earlier speakers may talk in terms of implicit rules, in fact the activities of following Nature, correcting the grandchildren, preaching the Word, accepting one's Fate, and so on—cannot be reduced to rules without remainder, precisely because they are themselves cast as topical metaphors, or metaphorical *topoi*. Again, we are not being asked to *choose* between the categorical "is" and the metaphorical "is like," but are rather learning *how to live* with both intertwined, as appropriate, in a given case.

"Law Like Love" is, to be sure, no more philosophy than it is information of the kind we find in newspapers: that is, it is not news, nor is it a doctrine about law. What then is it? From an ordinary language perspective, in the present case one focused on rhetoric, the poem offers us a way of schooling our abilities at invention, judgment, logic, and critical community. For the poem offers us a way to enact a progression that goes from thinking about "law" (or we might substitute here "philosophy" or "criticism") as rule-governed and dogmatic, bled of all its life-blood and purpose, to thinking about "law" as an open-ended, *exemplary activity of inquiry*, judgment, argument and community. Far from Auden's merely dismissing either those "others," whose rhymes we all recite for reassurance against the growing dark; and far from impatiently negating their efforts at logical identity, Auden is schooling our own skills in rhetorical transformations of commonplace routine into mastery of critical techniques. As Willard Spiegelman has put this point elsewhere: "Teaching, in the final analysis, does not take a direct object; the poets teach us *how*." And so I think do philosophers and literary critics, though each in their own way.