

The Turn to Logic and the Transformation of an Ancient Quarrel

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Abstract The development of an analytic tradition in philosophy is bound up with a newly intensified interest in logic, and Frege’s development of a new form of logical notation — an early form of what is now called predicate logic — is one of the conditions that made that tradition possible. At the same time, the development of analytic philosophy is also tied to a turn away from what had until that time been a natural and often mutually beneficial exchange with poetry, drama, and fiction. It is easy to assume that the turn away from literature is a necessary consequence of the turn to logic. This essay argues that in fact there are good reasons to think that if we follow the turn to formal logic through, it instead pushes philosophy back into a transformed and perhaps deeper kind of conversation with literature. The terms that organize this renewed conversation are those of a shared preoccupation not with certain ideas or content but with the power of form. The upshot is that the turn to formal logic returns philosophy to a transformed version of the “ancient quarrel” with which it began.

Keywords say/show distinction, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gottlob Frege, Henry James, resolute reading

The development of an analytic tradition in philosophy is bound up with a newly intensified interest in logic, and Gottlob Frege’s development of a new form of logical notation — an early form of what is now called predicate logic — is one of the conditions that made that tradition possible. At the same

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time, the development of analytic philosophy is also tied to a turn away from literature. Early analytic philosophers such as Frege and Rudolf Carnap do not ignore literature or the other arts entirely, but they draw attention to it only to use it as a specific sort of object for comparison, one which clarifies what philosophy is by throwing into sharp relief the common concerns that define both philosophy and science and reinforce the proximity between them.

The strategy of defining what philosophy is by using some sort of literary art as a foil has a distinguished pedigree, one which reaches back as far as the “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry that Socrates famously invokes in book 10 of Plato’s *Republic*. At least initially, many of the early analytic references to literature can seem to echo their ancient counterparts. As we will see in part 1, Frege and Carnap, like Socrates, make their remarks in the context of an effort to insist on philosophy’s privileged relationship to, and responsibility for, reasoning and truth. However, when Socrates invokes the ancient quarrel with the poets, his aim is arguably to compete with them: to offer his new forms of philosophical conversation as a successor to, and improvement on, the epics and tragedies that were one of the primary means by which a citizen was formed (or, as the case may be, deformed) out of the raw material of a person. When early analytic philosophers like Frege and Carnap distance philosophy from literature, by contrast, there is no suggestion that they are challenging or competing with it. Carnap in particular makes it clear that he is more than happy to cede whatever may remain of an aspiration to the transformation of persons to the arts. Good specialists that they are, they are simply delimiting the proper scope of specific enterprises.

Indeed, as we will see in part 1, part of the attraction of turning to formal logic in the first place is the promise that doing so will help delimit the boundaries of philosophy more clearly and rigorously. And one upshot of such delimitation can easily appear to be that reasons for continued exchange between philosophy and the arts, whether quarrelsome or otherwise, have for the most part simply ceased to exist. I argue that things are not so simple, that in fact there are good reasons to think that if we follow the turn to formal logic through, we find that this turn does not make it easier for philosophy to break off its conversation with “the poets” but, instead, pushes philosophy back into a transformed and perhaps deeper kind of “conversation” with literature.

In parts 2 and 3 of this article, I explore two ways of conceiving this transformed conversation, both of which take shape in response to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ([1922] 2000), Wittgenstein draws, but does not elaborate on, an intriguing connection between logic on the one hand and ethics and aesthetics on the other. In an effort to

understand this connection, interpreters have returned to some unexpected difficulties that Frege appears to encounter, once he starts paying especially careful attention to logic. The problem is, or at least appears to be, that the clearer Frege gets about the nature of basic logical distinctions, the more difficulty he has stating what he knows. The upshot of this difficulty is, or at least appears to be, the recognition of a need, arising from within philosophy itself, for a distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown.

It is the felt need from within philosophy for a distinction between saying and showing that pushes philosophy back into a new kind of conversation with literature, which has sometimes reached for similar terms to understand itself. (Henry James is perhaps the most famous example.) How one understands the new possibilities for conversation that are opened, though, depends on how one understands the distinction between saying and showing itself.

A common way to understand this distinction, especially from the vantage of an interest in the relationship between philosophy and literature, is as one between two different kinds of contents or truths: effable truths that can be straightforwardly stated and ineffable truths that transcend the limited means we have for expressing them fully and can only be gestured at or shown. As we will see in part 2, when the distinction is parsed in this way, it can seem to make a new kind of philosophical room for literature because the possibility has been opened that there are some truths that can be conveyed only by special literary means. When the distinction is understood in this way, the turn to logic does not get philosophy and literature back into conversation exactly, but it shows them to be engaged in a shared task, which neither can complete alone: the task of conveying all that is true.

Part 3 turns to a second, less familiar way to parse the distinction between saying and showing, one which seeks to do fuller justice to the depth of the distinction. On the first way of unpacking the distinction, what is shown is understood to be like what is said, but somehow richer: we can try to say it but the resources we have for doing so will always be inadequate to the task. Parsed in the second, alternative way, what is shown is not construed as some unusual sort of content toward which expressive resources can only gesture. Instead what is shown is understood to be the reader's confusion, represented to that reader in such a way as to allow them to recognize and overcome it.

It is beyond the scope of the present article to assess the relative adequacy of these two ways of parsing the say/show distinction as interpretations of Wittgenstein's (or Frege's) work. I will argue, though, that the alternative way of parsing the distinction pushes philosophy toward a conversation with literature that is of greater interest philosophically for three reasons. First, it is a more genuine conversation, one from which neither the potential for

conflict nor the necessity for renegotiating the self-understanding of either party can be removed. Second, this more genuine conversation depends on a deep and surprising connection between logic and literary form. Third, it shows us the possibility that the turn to formal logic within philosophy may return philosophy to a transformed version of the ancient quarrel with which it, at least in its Western “academic” forms, began.

1. Turning to Logic, Turning away from Literature

If we consider the specific and limited way that Frege draws attention to drama and poetry from the perspective of the preceding generation, it appears as a significant departure. The culture of nineteenth-century Europe was characterized by a natural and robust exchange between philosophers and literary artists. As Kristin Gjesdal (2018: 13–14) puts it, “Generally speaking, in the nineteenth century, Philosophy and literary criticism went hand in hand. . . . Philosophers were expected to be steeped in history and culture,” and the “streams of communication and influence” ran both ways. Frege, by contrast, draws attention to poets and dramatists only as a point of comparison that can serve to clarify the single-minded commitment to truth that, in his view, unites philosophy and science and distinguishes them from everything else. Thus concerning Homer’s *Odyssey*, he writes: “In hearing an epic poem, for instance, apart from the euphony of the language we are interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for an attitude of scientific investigation” (Frege [1892b] 2003: 157). Although the distinction Frege makes between images and feelings on one hand and “truth” on the other echoes the Platonic emphasis on higher and lower parts of the soul, there is in Frege’s comparison no echo of the ancient sense that poets and philosophers are in some sort of competition. They are simply doing very different things, and it can sometimes help us single out and appreciate the specificity of what science and philosophy are doing to make this kind of comparison.

Frege’s interest in truth guides his interest in logical notation. If occasional references to the arts can help us single out and appreciate the specificity of what the commitments are that organize both science and philosophy, logical notation can help us isolate and pay a better kind of attention to that of which it makes sense to ask the question: is it true? Frege calls such items “thoughts” or “judgeable contents” ([1879] 2003: 53; [1918–19] 1984: 353–54). Frege’s new form of logical notation, his *Begriffsschrift*, makes it possible to single out such thoughts and direct a new kind of attention to their structure.

When Frege ([1897] 2003: 229–30) explains the importance of the concept of “thoughts” understood in the “logical” sense, he does so by again turning to a comparison to literature, this time Friedrich Schiller’s *Don Carlos*:

In the case which alone concerns logic the sense of an assertoric sentence is either true or false, and then we have what we call a thought proper. But there remains a third case of which at least some mention must be made here. . . . If the sense of an assertoric sentence is not true, it is either false or fictitious, and it will generally be the latter if it contains a mock proper name. The writer, in common with, for example, the painter, has his eye on appearances. Assertions in fiction are not to be taken seriously: they are only mock assertions. Even the thoughts are not to be taken seriously as in the sciences: they are only mock thoughts. If Schiller’s *Don Carlos* were to be regarded as a piece of history, then to a large extent the drama would be false. But a work of fiction is not meant to be taken seriously in this way at all: it is all play. Even the proper names in the drama, though they correspond to names of historical persons, are mock proper names; they are not meant to be taken seriously in the work.

Part of what animates Frege’s efforts to improve on existing logical notation is his deep sense of how difficult it is to live up to a commitment to truth. He returns repeatedly to the worry that too often mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers avoid the demands such a commitment places on them, and he seeks to show that his new notation will make it more difficult to hide such lapses from oneself.¹ Frege ([1918–19] 1984: 362) characterizes those who have fallen short in this way as “wandering into fiction without knowing it or meaning to.” The only difference between such a philosopher or scientist and a dramatist like Schiller is that the playwright makes no pretense of concerning himself with the truth. He does not intend to be taken seriously.

It is the power of predicate logic to open up and analyze the structure of “truth-evaluable content,” which gives meaning to the idea of a distinctively analytic tradition in philosophy. The term *analytic* often first brings to mind a contrast to *continental*, but a contrast that is at least as relevant is that to *synthetic*. As Wilfred Sellars ([1963] 1991: 7) reminds us in “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” philosophy has always depended on the systole and diastole of synthesis and analysis. “The aim of philosophy,” as he articulates it, is synthetic: “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” But if the systole of philosophy is synthesis, its diastole is analysis, the impulse to open things up and examine the parts.² So-called analytic philosophy emerges in

1. For some specific examples, see Boyce 2015. For a wonderful treatment of the ethical commitments that animate Frege’s treatment of logic more generally, see Conant 2003.

2. Sellars ([1963] 1991: 10) explains the rhythmic interrelation between synthesis and analysis in philosophy with a metaphor from painting. One can appreciate how the complex whole of a

response to the possibilities opened by a powerful new analytic tool—logical notation—which has important implications not just for philosophy but also for science and mathematics.

As philosophers in the next generation explore and develop the philosophical implications of this powerful tool, they continue to make use of the kinds of comparisons to literary art, and to art more generally, on which Frege repeatedly relies. Perhaps the most influential example in this respect is Carnap. Carnap shows no more interest in picking a fight with artists than does Frege, but he throws himself into a vicious quarrel with those philosophers who fail to recognize the clear and definite boundaries which formal logic helps establish between philosophy and science on one hand and everything else on the other. In his view, philosophy proper limits its attention to that which can in effect be translated into formal logical notation and subjected to the forms of evaluation that such translation makes possible. Philosophy and science, he argues, are concerned with theory construction—that is, with producing “a system of statements” which “relate as premises and conclusions” (Carnap 1932: 146). He attacks philosophers like Martin Heidegger who, he argues, take themselves to be constructing theories when in fact their “pseudo-statements” function only to express an attitude. “Metaphysicians,” he writes,

are musicians without musical ability. Instead they have a strong inclination to work within the medium theoretical, to connect concepts and thoughts. Now, instead of activating, on the one hand, this inclination in the domain of science, and satisfying, on the other hand, the need for expression in art, the metaphysician confuses the two and produces a structure which achieves nothing for knowledge and something inadequate for the expression of attitude. (147)

Carnap’s notion of pseudo-philosophy, along with his characterization of art in terms of the “expression of attitude,” can seem at once to invite and refuse comparison with Socrates’s ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. On the one hand, it is tempting to see in Carnap’s juxtaposition between the construction of theory and the expression of attitude a descendent of Socrates’s contrast between reason and the passions. On the other hand, Carnap’s enthusiasm for formal logic reflects a quite un-Socratic confidence that the purview of philosophy is limited to the products of reason—products per-

painting hangs together only by paying the right kind of careful attention to its parts: “To the extent that there is one picture to be grasped reflectively as a whole [by the philosopher], the unity of the reflective vision is a task rather than an initial datum. The search for this unity at the reflective level is . . . appropriately compared to the contemplation of a large and complex painting which is not seen as a unity without a prior exploration of its parts.”

spicuously displayed by logical notation — and need extend in no way to the reasoner.

2. Transforming the Conversation, Take One: Logical Content and Literary Form

In part 1, I tried to give full voice to the temptation to assume that an embrace of the philosophical possibilities opened by a turn to formal logic comes with an inevitable cost: the trailing off of a conversation between philosophy and literary art that, quarrelsome though it sometimes became, had been a robust and mutually invigorating exchange for centuries. By contrast, what fascinates me, and what I explore in parts 2 and 3, is the possibility that if philosophy follows through on its turn to logic, what it finds is that this turn leads not to a breaking off of the conversation with literature but to the resumption of it on terms that are at the same time both new and old. For the conversation that philosophy finds itself immersed in is not the natural exchange of ideas that Gjesdal (2018: 14–15) so powerfully evokes, in which the art of a playwright like Henrik Ibsen functions as a kind of “laboratory” for exploring the same cultural self-understandings that philosophers are working out “in discursive form.” It is instead a conversation organized by questions about form. What is most surprising about this, I will argue, is that the turn to formal logic returns philosophy to the questions about its shared responsibility for forming, reforming, and transforming human beings with which its quarrel with literature began.

The possibility that the ongoing conversation between philosophy and literature might evolve in such a way that it comes to turn not so much on questions about ideas or content as on questions about form is less surprising if we consider that philosophy’s turn to formal logic coincides with a turn within literary arts and criticism to formal considerations. In the same decades that Frege and others are rethinking the philosophical possibilities of logical form, Henry James, among others, is transforming the novel from what he calls a “baggy monster” into a form so intricately structured that T. S. Eliot ([1924] 1963: 55) can entertain his readers by imagining critics who accord James “the kind of praise usually reserved for some useless, ugly, and ingenious piece of carving which has taken a very long time to make.” So if, as I will argue, the turn to formal logic pushes philosophy back toward a new kind of conversation with literature, the literature toward which it is pushed has undergone its own sea change.

So how might the renewed interest in logic, followed through, lead philosophy down a rabbit hole and into a world in which conversation with literature is harder, not easier, to avoid? For many, the rabbit hole is found in an intriguing connection that Wittgenstein draws (but does not explain) in his

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. After describing logic as “transcendental” in section 6.13 ([1922] 2000: 169), Wittgenstein goes on in 6.421 to describe ethics and aesthetics as transcendental, too: “It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. /Ethics is transcendental. / (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)” (183). For better or worse, Wittgenstein does not interrupt the series of hierarchically numbered sections that compose the body of the *Tractatus* to explain what this one might mean (as, for instance, Spinoza might have done).

Many important interpreters of Wittgenstein, starting with Peter Geach (1976), have argued that the effort to understand 6.421 and related remarks in the *Tractatus* should take us back to what Wittgenstein ([1922] 2000: 23) refers to in the preface to the *Tractatus* as “the great works of Frege,” specifically to problems that Frege encountered in attempting to carry out his reconsideration of logic. One central argument that Frege makes for his new notation is that it more adequately reflects the deep differences between the basic logical categories of concept and object. Frege ([1884] 1950: x) begins his early masterpiece, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, with three principles, the third of which is “never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.” It is not easy to get a clear grasp of what Frege thinks it means to keep this distinction adequately in view, or why he thinks it matters that we do so, but it would be difficult to overestimate how much importance he accords to this task. What is important for our purposes is that it is Frege’s insistence on this point, which might appear to be of interest only to a handful of the drier of formal logicians, that pushes philosophy back toward a new and perhaps deeper kind of conversation with literature.

The problem that arises is that if Frege takes his own view of logic seriously, it appears to be impossible to state it, where stating it is understood to amount to formulating it in such a way that it could be represented in his formal notation. For it seems that any statement that could express the truth about the distinction between concept and object would have to take the logical category of concept as its object, thereby violating the distinction. Given how fundamentally important Frege takes logic to be, these difficulties cannot be shrugged off as inconsequential. What are the implications of acknowledging that we cannot say—at least not rigorously—some of the most basic things that we know?

One of Frege’s most important efforts to grapple with this problem occurs in his article “On Concept and Object.” In this article, Frege ([1892a] 2003: 184) responds to fellow logician Benno Kerry, who discusses Frege’s work, sometimes in a critical vein, in eight articles “On Intuition and its Psychical Elaboration,” which appeared in the *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philo-*

sophie from 1885 to 1891.³ One of the things to which Frege ([1892a] 2003: 184) responds in his article is a counterexample that aims to undermine the absoluteness of the distinction between concept and object upon which he (Frege) insists: “Kerry . . . gives the following example: ‘the concept “horse” is a concept easily attained,’ and thinks that the concept ‘horse’ is an object, in fact one of the objects that fall under the concept ‘concept easily attained.’” What Frege objects to here is the idea that this sentence expresses a statement in which a concept—the concept picked out by the words “the concept ‘horse’”—plays the logical role of an object. Frege responds to Kerry by trying to show him that he has not in fact produced the kind of counterexample that he takes himself to have produced. This effort involves Frege in making what he calls “elucidatory” remarks, one paradigmatic example of which is, “The concept *horse* is not a concept” (Frege [1892a] 2003: 185).

There has been a great deal of discussion about how to understand such elucidations, especially how best to understand the ways they differ from ordinary assertions that express or state judgeable contents.⁴ However one comes to understand the nature of Frege’s elucidatory remarks, one can see how the need for some special sort of distinction between saying and showing starts to make itself felt from within philosophy.⁵ And it is in the arising of this felt need that the turn to logic starts to push philosophy back toward some sort of conversation with literature. For at some critical junctures, when literature has felt pressed to explain itself, it too has reached for a distinction between the mere act of saying or telling something and the more artistically powerful and fruitful act of showing it. As Tobias Klauk and Tilman Köppe (2014) have pointed out, “some variants of the telling vs. showing distinction have been traced back to the diegesis/mimesis distinctions known from the writings of Plato,” but the influence of the distinction in more recent times is usually attributed to the critic Percy Lubbock, who grounds his account of it in the writings of novelists such as James and Ford Madox Ford. Thus, for instance, in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, James ([1908] 1984: 1154) writes, “The real ‘fun’ of the thing would have been exactly to sacrifice my comparative platitude of statement—a deplorable depth at anytime, I have attempted elsewhere to signify, for any pretending master of representation to sink to—without sacrificing a grain of what was to be conveyed.” Lubbock

3. According to the editors of Frege’s *Posthumous Writing* (1979: 87), “in the second and fourth articles Kerry had gone into Frege’s views in particular detail.”

4. For a helpful discussion of Frege’s exchange with Kerry, as well as the critical literature that surrounds it, see Jolley 2007.

5. There is, of course, a very ordinary way of distinguishing them: I can tell you how to get somewhere, or I can show you on a map. Or both. However, the distinction for Frege appears to be more freighted than that.

([1922] 1954: 52–53) glosses this observation by James (and others by artists such as Ford, Leo Tolstoy, and Anton Chekhov) by saying, “The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself.”

How one understands the kind of conversation with literature toward which the logical difficulties that Frege encounters might push philosophy depends on how exactly one understands his elucidatory remarks. One way to understand these remarks is as functioning to gesture at or show logical truths which cannot be stated—truths that lie somehow not just beyond the limits of what one person can figure out how to satisfactorily express at any given time, but truths that are ineffable—that is, truths that lie beyond the limits of (direct) expression as such.

Geach is a powerful advocate of this way of interpreting Frege’s response. As he understands it, the purpose of a remark like “the concept ‘horse’ is not a concept” is to highlight the way that efforts to express such ineffable truths misfire by, in effect, putting logical parts together in a way that violates the laws of logic. As Frege ([1892a] 2003: 193) himself puts it: “By a kind of necessity of language. . . I mention an object when I intend a concept,” and for this reason “my expressions . . . miss my thought.” However, by drawing our attention to the way such expressions misfire, Geach (1976: 54) argues, they help us grasp the distinctions that they fail to express. In this way, the remarks function to convey or show the fundamental logical features of reality that “cannot be put into proper propositions.” What Geach finds in 6.421 of the *Tractatus* is an extension of this thought to ethics and aesthetics—the suggestion that there are ethical and aesthetic insights that, like their logical counterparts, transcend the powers of language to express them directly, even if it is less clear what exactly creates the problem with expressing those insights, what alternative means might be taken to convey them, or even what might count as an aesthetic insight.

This way of parsing the implications of Frege’s logical difficulties pushes philosophy toward a kind of conversation with literature that has powerful appeal. The basic picture is of an exchange marked by mutual respect and clear division of labor. Exchange remains relevant because philosophy and literature share responsibility for, as it were, mapping different regions of the domain of that which is true. The purview of philosophy is clearly delimited as that region of what is true and can be translated into logical notation. However, even within the territory that philosophy takes to be most fully its own, one has to recognize the need for other expressive resources if the aim is to convey or show all that is true. Some of those truths can be gestured at only by means of the resources afforded by a range of literary forms and styles.

Something like this basic picture has had powerful appeal for interpreters of James. The distinction that James draws in the prefaces is one between two different ways of conveying the same content—one by means of the “mere platitude of statement,” the other by means of “artful” and “vivid” representation. Thus, for example, in his preface to *The Tragic Muse*, James ([1884] 1934: 94) writes, “Processes, periods, intervals, stages, degrees, connexions, may be easily enough and barely enough named, may be unconvincingly stated, in fiction, to the deep discredit of the writer, but it remains the very deuce to *represent* them.” However, in some places in his later work, his formulations can easily seem to lend themselves to a distinction between two kinds of content: effable content that can be stated or said, and ineffable content which exceeds the limited resources of language and can only be gestured at or shown. In “Is There a Life after Death?” James (1910: 223) characterizes the task of the artist as that of “carrying the field of consciousness further and further, making it lose itself in the ineffable.” This second parsing of the distinction has been picked up and amplified by more than one critic. For example, J. Hillis Miller (1980: 109) attributes to James the “impossible task” of “reducing the infinite to the finite,” that is, of attempting to express it in “finite form.” Similarly, John Bayley (1960: 47, 209–10) attributes to him the aspiration to express with the “closest compression of form” a subject that “cannot be clearly stated.”

It is not difficult to see what makes this basic way of conceiving the relation between philosophy and literature seem compelling. It affords a way to do fuller justice to the persistent conviction (shared by many who respond to literature most deeply) that the power of literature is a function of the unique power that it has to mediate what is real or true. Thus understood, the turn toward formal logic pushes philosophy to acknowledge not only that it shares with literature a responsibility for a commitment to truth but also that literature has a unique and necessary role to play with respect to that commitment—for there are, so the idea goes, some truths that can be expressed only in literary forms. This might appear to protect literature from a kind of creeping subordination to philosophy that is latent in the picture of the kind of natural and mutual exchange in which literary artists are understood, as Gjesdal suggests, to explore, play with, and perhaps shed new light on philosophical ideas.

3. Transforming the Conversation, Take Two: Logical Notation and Literary Form

Powerful though this way of conceiving the basic terms of a transformed relation between philosophy and literature might seem, there are compelling

reasons to think twice about it. For one thing, the extent to which the conception in part 2 captures a genuine form of exchange is arguably minimal. Although philosophy and literature are conceived as sharing a commitment to and responsibility for truth, they are at the same time conceived as limited to ever more clearly defined areas of specialization and expertise which do not overlap. A second reason to think twice about this conception — at least as a conception of how the turn to logic might lead to or even require of philosophy that it return to a new kind of conversation with literature — is that the reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy on which it depends has come under powerful attack from James Conant and Cora Diamond, who originated what is now often called an austere or resolute reading of Wittgenstein.⁶ As Conant and Diamond interpret him, Wittgenstein is committed not to gesturing at ineffable truths but, instead, to diagnosing and helping his reader take a different kind of responsibility for a basic and persistent vulnerability that manifests itself in the illusion that one is gesturing at, or somehow conveying, some special, ineffable kind of truth.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the austere reading of Wittgenstein, let alone to assess its adequacy. What is important about it for the present purpose is that it can point us to an alternative conception of the kind of conversation with literature toward which the turn to logic leads philosophy. We can get a clearer view of the alternative that the austere reading affords by returning to the question of what gets shown in Frege’s response to Kerry. By the lights of the austere interpretation, the point of explicitly self-defeating remarks like “the concept ‘horse’ is not a concept” is not to gesture at some fundamental truths about logic that cannot be said; it is, rather, to draw Kerry’s attention to his own words in such a way that he comes to recognize that he is confused — that is, that there is no thought of the kind that he takes himself to be expressing.⁷

It is here that an important aspect of the philosophical potential of Frege’s new logical notation becomes more evident. For that notation can serve as an important aid in the task of allowing someone like Kerry to represent their own thinking to themselves in such a way that they are able to recognize that they are confused. The challenge to Kerry is to clarify his thought by translating it into the logical notation of the *Begriffsschrift*. Frege wagers that the effort to do so will allow Kerry to recognize that he is suffering an illusion in taking there to be thought of the kind that he thinks he has expressed. If he

6. For early formulations of this approach to Wittgenstein, see especially Conant 1989, Conant 1991, Diamond 1991, and Crary and Read 2000.

7. Conant and Diamond disagree with each other about how fully and consistently Frege himself understands and follows through on the potential in his response. See Conant 2002 (386–98) for a discussion of this point.

holds onto the idea that the words “the concept ‘horse’” pick out something that functions predicatively, he’ll translate that thought into *Begriffsschrift* in such a way that the result is simply a very ordinary thought such as “Bluebell is a horse.” But such an ordinary thought isn’t the kind of thought Kerry took himself to be expressing. If, on the other hand, he holds onto his insistence that the words “the concept ‘horse’” pick out something that is functioning as an object, then translation into *Begriffsschrift* will make it clear that the words “the concept ‘horse’” are not in fact picking out something that functions predicatively. As Frege ([1892a] 2003: 187) himself puts it,

In logical discussions one quite often needs to say something about a concept, and to express this in the form usual for such predications—viz. to make what is said about the concept into the content of the grammatical predicate. Consequently, one would expect that the *Bedeutung* [meaning] of the grammatical subject would be the concept; but the concept as such cannot play this part, in view of its predicative nature; it must first be converted into an object, or, more precisely, an object must go proxy for it.

Here again, then, translation affords only an ordinary thought, not one of the kind that Kerry took himself to be expressing. On this interpretation, then, what is shown is not some true content that transcends the limits of language and logic but instead a form of confusion: the confusion that Kerry suffers, in taking himself to be expressing some true content, is shown, if Frege is successful, to Kerry himself.

It can seem like splitting hairs to insist that no truth is shown, given that the ideal Kerry, as he is interpreted by Conant and Diamond, has almost certainly gained some insight that is reflected in a change in what he does: for example, stop arguing with Frege, stop trying to express the kind of thought he has taken it upon himself to express, and so on. It can help clarify what kind of difference this difference makes—especially for an understanding of the kind of ongoing fruitful exchange between philosophy and literature that might be possible or even necessary—to compare the confusion at stake in Frege’s exchange with Kerry to the kind of confusion that logical notation is more commonly understood to clarify.

Notation represents arguments (be they philosophical, scientific, mathematical, or practical) in a logically perspicuous way. One primary reason to represent such an argument using such notation is to make apparent the mistakes or gaps in inference that might otherwise escape notice. In such instances it is natural to think of what gets clarified as the argument. One need not know who formulated the argument or how it got formulated to determine whether it is valid. In an important sense, the point of the notation, so conceived, is precisely to render the argument more fully detachable from

considerations of by whom or how so it can be considered objectively, on its own merits, by anyone who has mastered the relevant procedures.

The point of the clarification that is at stake in Frege's exchange with Kerry (austerely interpreted), by contrast, is that it cannot be understood in this way: as the clarification of an argument considered in isolation from a person who might make it. Because there is no content there, the clarification is first and foremost, even necessarily and ineliminably, the clarification of someone's confusion.

Considered in isolation, it is not immediately obvious that the exchange between Frege and Kerry, when it is understood in this alternative way, pushes philosophy back toward any kind of conversation with literature. If anything, it appears to shrink the room for literature that the exchange, following Geach's interpretation of *Tractatus* 6.421, appeared to create. Without the distinction between effable and ineffable content, there is no "special" philosophical work of the kind that it appeared literary form and style might do (i.e., the work of showing those truths that cannot be said). If, though, we pay the right kind of attention to the connections between Frege's exchange and the *Tractatus* that are made apparent by an austere interpretation, we can begin to see as well the possibility of a different, and by some measures philosophically more fruitful, conversation with literature.

For the present purpose, what is most important about the austere interpretation of Wittgenstein is the connection it makes possible to draw between the function of one highly structured form, Frege's logical notation, and another, the unprecedented literary form of the *Tractatus* itself. Written in short, carefully numbered paragraphs, the *Tractatus* does not look like any book of philosophy that has come before or after. The elaborate numbering system gives the impression that the ordinary paragraphs that one might find in a philosophical or scientific journal are far too blunt an instrument to register the precise and elaborately hierarchical relationships between thoughts that are unfolded here. It has proved difficult, though, to parse the nature of the structural relations between paragraphs that the numbers are registering. On one hand, the hierarchical nature of the numbering system seems designed to invite comparison to the nested corollaries that are part of the proof of an elaborate theorem. The numbering of sections on the first page, for example, is 1, 1.1, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.2, 1.21, 2, 2.01, 2.001, 2.012, 2.0121. On the other hand, the paragraphs themselves hardly seem the kind of thing that could play a role in such a proof. They give the impression of extreme compression, with no word unnecessary or out of place, but the kind of sparseness and precision they have invites comparison to poetry or even mystical writing than mathematics. Section 6.421, which we've already considered, is a good case in point. How could one paraphrase what is expressed there in such a

way as to show it to be something that could play a role in the elaborate inferential hierarchy of some sort of proof?

Especially given the (at least apparent) subject matter of many of the numbered sections—the relation between formal logic and the “structure” of reality—it is tempting to see the extraordinary juxtaposition of mathematical rigor and poetic precision as a kind of extension of the special, illogical proposition that, in misfiring, indicates the essential but inexpressible truth about logic. Indeed, this kind of reading of the book has so much purchase that it has made it on to the back cover, which describes its author as “fascinated by its vision of an inexpressible, crystalline world of logical relationships.”

The austere reading, by contrast, argues for an alternative interpretation of the unprecedented form of the *Tractatus*. By the lights of this alternative, the unusual literary form of the *Tractatus* in effect takes over the work done by the logical notation in cases like Frege’s exchange with Kerry: the work of representing (i.e., showing) someone’s confusion to them in such a way that they are (in successful cases) able to recognize and overcome it.

One way that Conant and Diamond develop this alternative interpretation is by distinguishing between framing and body sections, in which framing sections provide guidance about how to read the rest (i.e., the “body” sections). For the present purpose, the most important framing section is the final one, 6.54 (Wittgenstein [1922] 2000: 189): “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me in the end recognizes them as nonsense.” Like Frege inviting Kerry to translate what he takes to be a special kind of thought into his logically perspicuous form of expression, Wittgenstein is, by the lights of the austere interpretation, inviting the reader to put himself or herself, to put one’s thought, into the *Tractatus*. As Wittgenstein acknowledges in the first sentence of his preface, the book will be “understood” only by those who recognize themselves in it: “This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts” ([1922] 2000: 27). If what Kerry recognizes in the mirror held up to him by the logical notation is the confusion he suffers in taking himself to be expressing a special, illogical thought, what the reader of the *Tractatus* sees reflected back to him or her from the pages of the *Tractatus* is the confusion he or she suffers, no matter how inchoately, in taking there to be some special “inexpressible, crystalline world of logical relationships” that ground and justify the apparent mess of the everyday world.

On this second way of parsing the say/show distinction, the difference between what is said and what is shown is understood to be a deeper one. According to the first parsing, what can only be shown is very much like what

can be said: we can try to say it, but our efforts will always fall short and we will have to resort to special expressive resources to help us gesture toward it instead. On the alternative view, in contrast, what is shown is not construed as some special sort of unusual content toward which special expressive resources can help us gesture (even if they cannot enable us to directly state them). Instead, logical notation and literary form are shown to point the reader not forward toward some sort of special, inexpressible content, but back to oneself in such a way that one is (in successful instances) able to recognize his or her own confusion and, in recognizing it as confusion, to overcome it.

It is worth recognizing that the second way of parsing the say/show distinction, like the first, resonates with some ways James describes his own literary project. For instance, in his preface to *What Maisie Knew*, James ([1908] 1984: 1164) describes his aim as that of representing the “muddled state”: “The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in the face of the constant force that makes for muddlement. The great thing is indeed that the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has colour and form and character.” It is, though, beyond the scope of the present article to assess the relative adequacy of these two ways of parsing the say/show distinction as interpretations of either James’s or Wittgenstein’s work.⁸ What I do want to argue, though, is that this alternative parsing pushes philosophy toward a conversation with literature that is of greater interest philosophically, for three reasons. First, the transformed conversation depends on seeing deep and surprising connections between early analytic philosophy’s preoccupation with new logical forms of expression and literary modernism’s preoccupation with formal innovation.

Second, the transformed conversation toward which philosophy is pushed on the second parsing is in an important sense more genuinely a conversation. Although on the first parsing, literature and philosophy are shown to share a responsibility for and commitment to truth, they are responsible for clearly defined, and for the most part nonoverlapping, regions of all that is true. Although this clear division of labor promises to minimize conflict and underscores an ineliminable role for both literature and philosophy, it also eliminates the need for, or perhaps even the possibility of, much actual exchange between them. For the way boundaries are drawn depends on the assumption that there can be no common language that could simultaneously express the truths with which philosophy and literature are respectively concerned and so make possible some discussion of their relationship to each other. In the

8. For a fuller discussion of the philosophical significance of James’s literary efforts to represent the muddled state, see Boyce 2010. For a fuller discussion of the say/show distinction in James, see Boyce 2014.

alternative view, by contrast, the transformed relationship between philosophy and literature affords the possibility of genuine conversation, one from which neither the potential for conflict nor the necessity for renegotiating the self-understanding of either party can be removed. Insofar as the effort to help a reader recognize his or her muddled state as muddled pushes both philosophy and literature into new forms, there is no clear way of determining in advance what is going to count as a philosophical or literary way of facilitating such clarification.

The third, and perhaps the most compelling reason to give careful attention to the alternative way of parsing the say/show distinction is that it suggests that if we follow the turn to formal logic within philosophy through, what we find is not only that it pushes philosophy into a transformed conversation with literature, but that it shows there to be surprising connections between that transformed conversation and the “ancient quarrel” with which philosophy in its Western, academic forms begins. It shows that, despite efforts to narrow the scope of what counts as genuinely philosophical, we have yet to settle basic questions about what responsibility philosophy still may bear, not just for what content we hold to be true but for how clearly and truly we as individual persons are able to see things.

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