

# THE ADVENTURE OF READING: LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY, CAVELL AND BEAUVOIR

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## *Abstract*

Is there a way of reading philosophically without imposing a pre-existing philosophy on the literary text? Turning first to the work of Stanley Cavell, then to Simone de Beauvoir's often neglected accounts of reading, this essay shows that such a philosophical reading can be understood as a form of aesthetic experience in which the reader lets the work teach her how to read it. The reader must be willing to let her own experience (of philosophy, of life) be educated by the work. A similar view can be found in Cora Diamond's (and Beauvoir's) suggestion that the reader must be open to the adventure proposed by the text.

I was honoured to receive an invitation to be a keynote speaker at the 2010 Biennial Conference of the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture. I chose to speak about philosophy and literature, in the hope that the questions I raise about the relationship between literature and philosophy, and about how to read a literary text, will be relevant also for people working in the fields of religion and theology. This text is a much-revised version of the lecture I gave at the conference in Oxford in September 2010.

## I. THE QUESTION OF LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

'The clash between literature and philosophy does not need to be resolved. On the contrary, only if we think of it as permanent but ever new does it guarantee us that the sclerosis of words will not close over us like a sheet of ice,' Italo Calvino writes.<sup>1</sup> He was right: the relationship between

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philosophy and literature is not a thing to be discovered and described once and for all, but rather a question constantly recreated by writers, critics and philosophers responding to new situations. People become interested in the relationship between philosophy and literature for different reasons at different times, and different reasons for raising the question will require different answers.<sup>2</sup>

Attempts to define the relationship between philosophy and literature have often been formalistic in the sense that they set out a list of binary oppositions (universal versus particular, reason versus imagination, insight versus emotion, argument versus form) intended to settle the question once and for all. Such lists often disappoint.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to find exceptions on both sides of the divide, and it is only too clear that they flatter the self-image of philosophers more than the self-image of writers. To cast philosophers as the guardians of universality, reason, insight and argument is to strip literature of its ambition to provide knowledge, thought and truth. It is also to ban passion and beauty from philosophy, although I haven't seen too many philosophers complain about that. Such lists also have an unfortunate tendency to reproduce a stereotypical gender hierarchy, in which the terms on the left get coded as masculine and superior, and those on the right as feminine and inferior. Men think, women feel; men do philosophy, women write romantic novels.

Lists of features assume that the answer to the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy must take the form of a definition of the two terms. Given that philosophers have never agreed on what philosophy is, and given that even the most agile minds have failed to produce a convincing definition of literature, this is not a promising path. Moreover, most of us don't wonder about the relationship between philosophy and literature because we have trouble telling them apart. (If we did, a checklist of features that could help us decide whether we were dealing with an instance of philosophy or literature would be quite useful.) Rather we raise the question for other reasons, reasons we often fail to make completely clear even to ourselves. No wonder we often feel that the answers we get don't address what we really want to know.

The challenge for someone who wants to think about literature and philosophy, then, is to figure out what her question actually is. Usually, the question is triggered by a sense of irritation, a conviction that someone is failing to do justice to something we care about. In the post-war era, for example, the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy often took the form of complaints about the 'novel of ideas' (the '*roman à thèse*') or novels with a 'message'. This reaction was triggered by the popularity of existentialism, its faith in the philosophical novel, and its call for committed literature. Fundamentally, the debate turned on aesthetic norms: adherents of

the aesthetic values of late modernism rejected what they took to be the message-oriented realism of the existentialists. In this case, then, the answer to the question of literature and philosophy would have to be something like a theory of the novel.

My own interest in the relationship between literature and philosophy has to do with the question of philosophical reading. I have long been frustrated with criticism that reduces the literary text to an example of a pre-existing theory or philosophy, whether this means looking for convincing illustrations of existing positions in moral philosophy in Dickens or Woolf, or tracking down Foucault in Jane Austen, Derrida in George Eliot, or Deleuze in Ibsen. What is the point of reading literature if all we manage to see in it is a theory we already know? Why not simply stick to reading theory and philosophy if that's what we really want to do? At the same time, I don't want to separate my interest in literature from my interest in philosophy and theory. I share the conviction that literary criticism would be the poorer without them. In the hands of the best practitioners, to read literature with philosophy is to enrich both. The question is how to achieve this.

I would like to find ways to read philosophically without falling into the trap of casting the critic, the theorist or the philosopher as necessarily wiser, deeper, more intelligent, more politically correct than the writer. The tendency to turn the critic into a champion of critique has been a common failing of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which has dominated literary criticism for a long time. The spirit of the hermeneutics of suspicion has made us believe that to read critically is necessarily to debunk, deconstruct, take apart, and tear down, not to praise and admire. On this view, it is easier to justify the role of critics (they defend us against the ideological machinations of the text) than the works they labour so mightily to take apart.

For me, then, the question of literature and philosophy really is a question of reading, or, more broadly, of criticism. How can we read philosophically without reducing the text to a witting or unwitting illustration of a pre-existing theory? How can we read literature with philosophy in ways that suggest that the writer may actually have something to tell the philosopher? Moreover, more radically: Is there a way to read philosophically without having recourse to a given philosophy at all? Can criticism itself be philosophy?

As I formulate these questions, I realise that I probably would not have expressed them in just this way if I had never read anything by Stanley Cavell. (Even the most deeply felt ideas are inspired by others.) To deepen my sense of what it might mean to read philosophically, therefore, I shall turn to Cavell's own reflections on literature and philosophy. How does he conceive of the question? What can someone interested in reading literature learn from the way he connects the two fields?

II. CRITICISM AS PHILOSOPHY: CAVELL ON  
 LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

Cavell ends his reading of *Othello*, which itself ends *The Claim of Reason*, by raising a version of the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy: 'Can philosophy accept them [Othello and Desdemona] back at the hands of poetry? Certainly not so long as philosophy continues, as it has from the first, to demand the banishment of poetry from its republic. Perhaps it could if it could itself become literature. But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?'<sup>4</sup> By 'still know itself' I think Cavell means still recognise itself as philosophy, still be philosophy.

One way to take this question is to say that Cavell wonders whether Shakespeare, and Othello and Desdemona, could ever be recognised as philosophers by other philosophers. For someone who believes that a work of art can have philosophical insights this is a natural question. After all, if philosophy is taking place in works of art, philosophers ought to be able to recognise it as philosophy. This raises the question of what Cavell thinks philosophy is:

[P]hilosophy, as I understand it, is indeed outrageous, inherently so. It seeks to disquiet the foundations of our lives and to offer us in recompense nothing better than itself – and this on the basis of no expert knowledge, of nothing closed to the ordinary human being, once, that is to say, that being lets himself or herself be informed by the process and the ambition of philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

To do philosophy we have to be willing to have philosophy unsettle the 'foundations of our lives'. Philosophy will ask awkward questions about why we do what we do, and why we think what we think. (There is more than a shade of Socrates here.) Since the activity requires no expert knowledge, we should expect to come across it outside academia, and in texts not traditionally marked as philosophy. So, why not in plays and films? For Cavell, it is quite natural to claim that the film director Frank Capra can enter into a productive philosophical conversation with the philosopher Immanuel Kant. (This may be the moment to stress that insofar as they turn on the question of aesthetic judgment, most of the questions raised in this paper are equally pertinent to literature, theatre and film.)

At the end of *The Claim of Reason* Cavell does not just offer Shakespeare, but specifically his own attentive elucidation of Desdemona's love and Othello's plight of mind back to philosophy. The question, therefore, is not just whether philosophy can acknowledge literature, but whether it can acknowledge that *criticism*—the work of reading, thinking and writing about literature and other art forms—can be a part of philosophy. Cavell's own work—his many books

on film and theatre—shows that for him criticism is a privileged site for philosophy. Criticism is an activity in which the philosopher, encountering the work of art, can attempt to get clear on questions he couldn't get clear on in any other way. Thinking about *Othello*, Cavell pushes his own understanding of scepticism further than he could have done otherwise.

In a dense passage from 2002, written in a moment when he looked back on his work, Cavell connects self-expression and self-exploration to the question of literature (and film) and philosophy:

Only in stages have I come to see that each of my ventures in and from philosophy bears on ways of understanding the extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words. This establishes from the beginning my sense that in appealing from philosophy to, for example, literature, I am not seeking illustrations for truths philosophy already knows, but illumination of philosophical pertinence that philosophy alone has not surely grasped – as though an essential part of its task must work behind its back. I do not understand such appeals as 'going outside' philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

Literature works 'behind philosophy's back'. Yet its work is not 'outside' philosophy, but 'essential' to it, as if philosophy has to turn around, to look behind itself to find fundamental 'illuminations' it can't find in any other way. By neglecting the turn, or return to literature, philosophy will overlook fundamental insights available only to the philosopher willing to stop, pause, turn back and pick up the pearls strewn on a path he thought he had already explored. Criticism—the work of reading—is here connected to the idea of stopping, pausing, paying attention and looking more closely.

However, what has all this to do with the 'extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words'? I think this phrase gestures towards Cavell's larger philosophical project: to work out a vision of language in which words and world are intertwined, to understand language as something we do (rather than, say, as a purely formal structure), so that our words reveal us, our values and commitments, and what we take ourselves to be responsible for. What I say or write will reveal my blindness and my callousness, my insights and my generosity, my failures and my achievements. The enduring themes in Cavell's criticism—marriage and remarriage, scepticism, acknowledgement, loneliness and madness, voice, melodrama and opera—show what he takes himself to be responsible for.

Cavell wants to make a place for literature within philosophy, both because he thinks literature contains illuminations of value to philosophy, and because he thinks that the question of expression and experience lie at the very heart of philosophy. On this view, criticism—the act of accounting for one's experience of a work of art—can be philosophy.

## III. CRITICISM AND EXPERIENCE

Good criticism requires a wide range of skills and knowledge. However, whatever else it takes, criticism is always based on the critic's judgment. To make an aesthetic judgment, Kant claims, is to be willing to stake one's authority on nothing but one's own experience: when we declare that something is beautiful we have nothing but our own subjectivity to go on. While we feel, spontaneously, that others simply *must* see what we see, we can't ground the claim in anything more tangible than our own judgment that this is beautiful.<sup>7</sup> This feels risky. It exposes our judgment to the potential ridicule of the world. (Surely this is another reason why we are so quick to hide behind the authority of acknowledged master thinkers in our readings and viewings.)

To account for one's experience of a work of art requires a willingness to pay close attention to that experience. It also requires us to trust it, and to find it worth expressing: 'Without this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, without thus taking an interest in it, one is without authority in one's experience' (PoH 12). There are four tasks here: to be willing to have the experience (in the sense of paying attention to it), to judge it important enough to be expressed, to find words for it and to claim authority for it.

I am struck by the parallels between this view and the work going on in feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s. The purpose of these groups was to encourage women to take an interest in their own experience, to be willing to voice them and to claim authority for them. The result was revolutionary. The women's understanding of themselves and their experiences was transformed. This goes to show that the difficulties involved in 'taking an interest in one's experience' are the same in life and in art, as Cavell points out: 'The difficulty of assessing [one's experience of a film] is the same as the difficulty of assessing everyday experience, the difficulty of expressing oneself satisfactorily, of making oneself find words for what one is specifically interested to say, which comes to the difficulty, as I put it, of finding the right to be thus interested' (PoH 41-42). For Cavell, aesthetic experience is not divorced from ordinary experience: to find out what it means entails the same difficulties and joys as the investigations of ordinary experiences.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1970s, many feminists made the mistake of considering experience to be infallible. To them, the 'authority of experience' meant that a woman could never be wrong about the nature of her own experience, once she had found the words to express it. This is not Cavell's view. It 'needs constant admission,' he writes, 'that one's experience may be wrong, or misformed or inattentive and inconstant.'<sup>9</sup> Cavell's sense of the fallibility of experience

coalesces around the idea of ‘checking one’s experience’ against the work of art. He uses the term ‘checking’ to:

capture the sense at the same time of consulting one’s experience and of subjecting it to examination, and beyond these, of momentarily stopping, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupations and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust. (PoH 12)

The education of one’s experience by paying careful attention to it: what a hopeful idea! Experience is not fixed; previous experience does not doom me forever to repeat the same mistakes. (This is like psychoanalysis: There is a way to break the old patterns! Experience can be trained!) I must be prepared to discover that my sense of the work was profoundly mistaken, but that discovery will itself be part of my further education as a critic. Here too there is no difference between aesthetic experience (our experience of the work of art) and ordinary experience (what we experience in life).

Sometimes a book will completely transform our understanding of a phenomenon or a problem. Reading *Ulysses* changed many readers’ understanding of the novel and of literature too. Films and plays and books can help us overcome, or undo, our existing beliefs. Just like other experiences, the experience of film, theatre, literature has the power to change us. This means that we won’t regularly be transformed by reading (we aren’t regularly transformed by ordinary experiences either), but it also means that reading (and viewing) can expand our understanding of the world, and ourselves, if we let it.

My original question was how to read philosophically in a way that avoids imposing my pre-existing theory on the work of art. While Cavell’s insistence that I must be willing to let the work of art—my experience of the work of art—change my previous beliefs or perceptions is helpful in this respect, it doesn’t provide a method for how to do this. Cavell is not interested in laying down requirements for how to read. The nearest I can get to some kind of Cavellian guideline for how to read philosophically is an appeal ‘to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it’ (PoH 10). But how are we to do that? The only hint Cavell provides is to say that we usually have no trouble letting a work of theory or philosophy teach us how to read it. I think this means that the right sort of reading would emerge if we simply read literature or watch films in much the same way as we read philosophy.

What does this sort of reading look like? Well, we often begin by trying to get at least a general idea of what the work is about, what its major concerns

and concepts are. At first, we may only form a hazy idea of the whole. To get a clearer view, we zoom in on key concepts, study the examples, circle back to passages that illuminate them, look for the arguments, the contradictions and the exceptions. In the end, we come out with a workable understanding of the book's concerns. If it really fascinates us, we may engage with it again, maybe revise some of our initial impressions, try to get clear on why it strikes us as important and reflect on what we can use it for in our own work.

Why do we imagine that it is always much harder to let a novel or a play teach us how to read it than it is for a theoretical essay to do so? Why do we so quickly reach for the philosophy or theory and try to make the work fit its concepts, rather than trying to figure out what the work's own concepts and preoccupations might be? Maybe because we lack practice. We are not used to looking for the work's own concepts when that work is a novel or a play. In addition, we may fear that a reading emerging from such a process might not look all that impressive. After all, it would have to be built on concepts supplied by the work itself, rather than concepts supplied by a specific philosophy.<sup>10</sup> When the critic 'checks her experience' against the work, however, she will draw on her full knowledge of those concepts. This may (or may not) give rise to philosophically interesting readings. A critic who proceeds in this manner may easily come to look guileless, as if she hadn't heard of the sophisticated concepts on display in the work of the masters of suspicious critique. To be willing to learn from the work requires a critic capable of a certain degree of humility.

#### IV. THE WRITER'S POINT OF VIEW: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S UNDERSTANDING OF READING

Cavell raises the question of literature and philosophy from the point of view of the philosopher, in the sense that he begins by wondering whether a philosopher can find philosophy in literature and other arts. I have shown that his answer makes criticism a potential place for philosophy, and also addresses the literary critic's question about how to read philosophically. Missing so far is the writer's perspective. To ensure that I don't unwittingly give priority to philosophy's notion of what it is to read, it seems useful to check the philosopher's point of view against the view of a writer with a strong passion for philosophy. At this point, Simone de Beauvoir's reflections on philosophy and literature strike me as particularly relevant.

All her life, Beauvoir was passionately engaged in both philosophy and literature. In the mid-1940s, Beauvoir's interests were strikingly similar to Cavell's. She was obsessed with the question of the other and, like Cavell, thought of writing as an act implicating the other.<sup>11</sup> '[A]ny speech, any



expression is an appeal', she notes in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, an essay written immediately after the publication of her first novel, *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*, 1943).<sup>12</sup> Like Cavell, Beauvoir also took for granted that literature and philosophy worked on the same kinds of problems, and that these problems were relevant to ordinary life. 'In truth, there is no divorce between philosophy and life', she declared in 1948.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, in her first attempt to investigate the problem of the other, Beauvoir did not hesitate to write a novel rather than a philosophical essay. In *L'Invitée* Beauvoir studies the situation of a woman, Françoise, who suffers from a severe case of solipsism: she has trouble understanding that others exist.<sup>14</sup> When another woman, Xavière, begins truly to exist for her, Françoise constructs her as a hostile presence, as a threat to her own existence. At the end of the novel, she kills Xavière because she cannot live in the presence of her alien consciousness.

To understand Beauvoir's conception of the relationship between literature and philosophy in *L'Invitée*, it would be necessary to read it in detail, and situate it against the background of the French preoccupation with the 'metaphysical novel' in the 1940s. However, this is not the place to do this.<sup>15</sup> Let me just say that there is no doubt that both Beauvoir and her old friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty considered *L'Invitée* to be a significant 'metaphysical novel', by which they meant a novel setting out to convey the attitude a human being takes up in relation to a fundamental aspect of human existence: being, time, consciousness, the other, freedom, separation, finitude and so on.<sup>16</sup>

Why did Beauvoir prefer to write a novel rather than a philosophical essay about otherness? In her 1946 essay 'Literature and Metaphysics', she claims that only the novel enables the writer to convey 'an aspect of metaphysical experience that cannot otherwise be manifested: its subjective, singular and dramatic character, as well as its ambiguity.'<sup>17</sup> She also stresses that the novel alone conveys the temporal nature of existence.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, however, much of her essay on the novel focuses on the reader's experience. Here, as everywhere else in her writings on literature, Beauvoir writes as the passionate and voracious reader she was. (Her memoirs and diaries are full of examples of her passion for reading.) Unlike the philosophical essay, Beauvoir writes, a good novel 'imitates the opacity, ambiguity, impartiality of life; spellbound by the story he is told, the reader responds as he would to events he had experienced.'<sup>19</sup> To read is to have experiences one would otherwise not have. Readers of fiction have a larger world than non-readers of fiction. For Beauvoir, a philosophical essay doesn't draw the reader in the same way, doesn't produce the sense of experience that literature offers.

A good novel, for Beauvoir, is an invitation to the reader to share the author's sense of exploration [*recherche*] and discovery, to join her on an 'authentic adventure of the mind'.<sup>20</sup> Beauvoir's reader has to be open-minded. She has to

be willing to take up the writer's invitation to join her on an adventure. If the experience of reading disappoints, the responsibility for the result does not rest with the writer alone. The reader can fail the book by refusing to 'participate sincerely in the experience the author is trying to involve him in; he does not read as he demands that one writes, he is afraid of risks, of adventure.'<sup>21</sup> When both parties participate in equal measure, however, nothing, not even pure philosophy, is more powerful than a novel: 'A metaphysical novel that is honestly read, and honestly written, provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression.'<sup>22</sup>

A reader who willingly participates in the adventure of the novel lets herself be absorbed by it. All her life, Beauvoir praised novels that allowed her to feel immersed, absorbed, spellbound. A novel had to 'take' [*prendre*]: take her in (make her believe in it) and take her over (spellbind her).<sup>23</sup> She read novels not just to learn, but to feel, and to identify with the author, or the characters, or both. For Beauvoir, then, a good novel had to have the power to absorb, to hold and bewitch, to transport the reader into its world, to make him or her not so much take the fiction for reality, as to be able to experience the fiction as deeply as reality, while full well knowing that it is fiction.<sup>24</sup>

The power to absorb and transport distinguishes literature from philosophy, according to Beauvoir. In an essay on literature from 1964 she notes that however artful, and however full of information it may be, an essay or a scholarly book fails to transport the reader out of herself ('I don't change universe').<sup>25</sup> Only literature has the power to let the reader see the world from the other's point of view.<sup>26</sup> Reading a novel enables Beauvoir to feel that she, for a moment, genuinely becomes the other without ceasing to be herself. This is surely why Beauvoir quotes fiction and autobiographical writing so copiously in *The Second Sex*: such works provide windows on to the world from the perspective of another person and thus give access to insights and experiences we would never otherwise have:

Kafka, Balzac, Robbe-Grillet seek me out, convince me to move, at least for a moment, to the heart of another world. And this is the miracle of literature, which distinguishes it from information: that an *other* truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I renounce my own 'I' in favor of the speaker; and yet I remain myself.

It is an intermingling ceaselessly begun and ceaselessly undone, and it is the only kind of communication capable of giving me that which cannot be communicated, capable of giving me the taste of another life.<sup>27</sup>

Literature is privileged over non-fiction or academic writing (what she calls 'information') because it allows us to see the world from the point of view of the other without ceasing to be ourselves.

Here Beauvoir has reached Cavell's neighbourhood: writing and the other are intrinsically connected. Rather than asking whether philosophy can accept Desdemona and Othello back at the hands of poetry, Beauvoir inspires us to reflect on the reader's experience of the 'miracle of literature'. However passionately we may feel about it, philosophy does not offer the reader the same degree of absorption, loss of self, as literature, nor the same possibilities for identification.<sup>28</sup> This is a major reason why Beauvoir chose to write fiction and memoirs: she wanted to write works that would give readers a chance to identify with her, and her characters, in the same way she identified with George Eliot and Maggie Tulliver. After reading *The Mill on the Floss* the fourteen-year-old Simone cried for hours over Maggie's death, and vowed to become a writer herself: 'one day another adolescent girl would bathe with her tears a novel in which I would tell my own story.'<sup>29</sup> Although the adult Beauvoir no longer cried for hours over a novel, she continued to think that only literature could provide this kind of experience.

We don't have to choose between Cavell's and Beauvoir's way of raising the question about literature and philosophy. Beauvoir's emphasis on the experience of reading fiction, on the reader's willingness to respond to the author's invitation to set out on an adventure, and Cavell's conviction that literature can offer illumination to philosophy are not incompatible. Both Beauvoir and Cavell agree that writing and the question of the other are intertwined, that literature offers the reader new and potentially transformative experiences, and that these experiences can be relevant to philosophy as well as life.

#### V. TALES OF ADVENTURE: ON READING IN A CERTAIN SPIRIT

What kind of philosophical reading emerges from these considerations? Is there a case for calling it 'ordinary language criticism'?<sup>30</sup> The latter has the advantage of economically signalling the connection to Cavell's 'ordinary language philosophy'. However, there are significant drawbacks. As far as I know, Cavell never uses the term.<sup>31</sup> I think this is because he rightly thinks that his responses to Shakespeare, Hollywood remarriage comedies and Hollywood melodrama may just as well be called philosophy. The term 'ordinary language criticism' risks turning Cavell, Wittgenstein and Austin into a new set of master thinkers whose characteristic preoccupations are now to be imposed on the literary text. While I want to acknowledge that many texts (and films and plays) are preoccupied by the same concerns as Cavell (expression, language, human embodiment, knowledge, acknowledgement and scepticism, for example), a criticism frantically searching for 'Cavellian' themes is not an answer to my question of how to read philosophically without reducing

the text to a reflection of a pre-existing theory. It would also flatly contradict Cavell's own advice to let the work teach us how to read it.

Cavell neither proposes a specific method for literary criticism, nor lays down requirements for what a criticism inspired by his work, or by ordinary language philosophy more generally, must be about. That is not surprising, since he stresses that ordinary language philosophy itself has no specific thematic limits: 'Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about' (MWM 95). Similarly, ordinary language criticism, if the word is to be used, would have to be about whatever works of literature or films or plays are about. ('Let the work teach you how to read it', is a different way of saying the same thing.) A critic inspired by ordinary language philosophy claims her identity not by invoking a set of pre-existing philosophical themes, and certainly not by making a show of her knowledge of Wittgenstein or Cavell, but by approaching the work, and the task of the critic, in a certain way, and in a certain spirit, a spirit that may be exemplified and defined by, but certainly not limited to ordinary language philosophers. For this reason, I feel that 'ordinary language criticism' may actually be too constraining a term for the kind of criticism that comes to mind after reading Cavell. For now, I'll leave open the question of what to call this kind of practice, and turn instead to the mysterious 'spirit' I just mentioned.

To describe that spirit is no easy task. It does value a certain kind of attention, one that understands itself as being a response to a work. Moreover, the kind of attention valued by Cavell and Beauvoir is not the sort of attention that arises from a spirit of suspicion. The Wittgensteinian philosopher Cora Diamond, who called her own collection of essays *The Realistic Spirit*, offers a thought-provoking alternative, by suggesting that to read well is to bring to the text a certain quality of attention which she characterises as a willingness to participate in the 'adventure' offered by the text. As we have seen, fifty years earlier, Simone de Beauvoir used the very same term to describe what she expected from a reader.

Diamond introduces the idea of reading as an adventure by quoting the British mountaineer George Mallory, who disappeared on Mount Everest in 1924. Asked why mountaineers climb mountains, he answered: 'Our case [. . .] is not unlike that of one who has, for instance, a gift for music. There may be inconvenience, and even damage, to be sustained in devoting time to music; but the greatest danger is in not devoting enough, for music is this man's adventure. . . . To refuse the adventure is to run the risk of drying up like a pea in its shell.'<sup>32</sup>

Diamond finds in Henry James a very similar understanding of what the reader's adventure may be: '[F]or James, the adventurous reader is one who delights in there being more in things than meets the eye, who delights in the

invitation the tale offers to find, to make, adventure in reading.<sup>33</sup> Adventure and attention are intrinsically linked. The bad reader is the inattentive reader, the reader who ‘misses the adventure’. Such readers miss the characters’ adventures, miss ‘[their] own possible adventure in reading,’ and, finally, miss the chance to emerge from their shell, to open themselves to the new, the different, the challenging: ‘The greater danger is inattention, the refusal of adventure’, Diamond writes. ‘The risk there, as Mallory puts it, is of drying up like a pea in its shell.’<sup>34</sup> To be open to adventure is to be ready to be illuminated by the text, to assume that it can work the ‘miracle of literature’ and show us things we had never suspected, show us ‘another world’, as Beauvoir puts it.

There is self-exposure in aesthetic judgment. It makes us vulnerable. The critic reveals how she sees the work, and the world, and what matters to her, existentially, intellectually, politically, morally. She reveals, too, the quality of her attention, the depth of her imagination, her capacity for philosophy. Aesthetic judgement, moreover, is an appeal to the other: the critic’s characteristic gesture is to say ‘This is what I see. Can you see it too?’<sup>35</sup> The appeal may go unanswered. We may discover, painfully, that we are alone in our perceptions of what matters in the world.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, to retreat from the challenges of honest judgment is to choose to ‘[dry] up like a pea in its shell’. To give an account of one’s reading is to tell the tale of an adventure. The best criticism is at once an account of an adventure and an invitation to new adventures.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, ‘Philosophy and Literature’, in *The Uses of Literature: Essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 40.
- <sup>2</sup> This attitude is inspired by Stanley Cavell’s reminder: ‘How we answer the question “What is X?” will depend, therefore, on the specific case of ignorance and knowledge’—Stanley Cavell, ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 20. (Hereafter this volume will be quoted as MWM).
- <sup>3</sup> The terms listed here, as well as my general sense of dissatisfaction with this way of setting up the problem of literature and philosophy, echo Richard Eldridge’s account of the question, in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 4–6.
- <sup>4</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 496. (Hereafter quoted as CR.)
- <sup>5</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 8–9. (Hereafter quoted as PoH.)
- <sup>6</sup> The quotation comes from the preface to the updated edition of *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*

- (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. xxiv–xv. (Hereafter quoted as MWM.)
- <sup>7</sup> See particularly, the discussion of the two ‘peculiarities’ of the judgement of taste in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (eds), trans. Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 162–66.
- <sup>8</sup> It doesn’t follow that Cavell is uninterested in aesthetic form. One’s experience of a work of art is not divorced from the experience of its form. Form can itself be a kind of philosophical reflection. In my own work on Henrik Ibsen, I found his plays to be rich sources of reflections on theatre as an art form, both explicitly and implicitly, as an effect of the form. See Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- <sup>9</sup> Cavell, ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, in MWM, 218.
- <sup>10</sup> Sarah Beckwith’s forthcoming book *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011) offers an exciting example of such procedures. In Norway, Christine Hamm explores the grammar of motherhood in Sigrid Undset’s work in *Moderne moderskap hos Sigrid Undset* (forthcoming).
- <sup>11</sup> ‘[M]y fascination with the *Investigations* had to do with my response to it as a feat of writing. It was some years before I understood it as what I came to think of as a discovery for philosophy of the problem of the other: and further years before these issues looked to me like functions of one another’ (CR, pp. xvi).
- <sup>12</sup> [toute parole, toute expression est appel], Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), p. 107; trans. Marybeth Timmermann as ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas,’ in Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader (eds) *Philosophical Writings*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 134.
- <sup>13</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *L’Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), p. 12. My translation.
- <sup>14</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *L’Invitée* (Paris: Gallimard (Coll. Folio), 1943); trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse as *She Came to Stay* (London: Fontana, 1984).
- <sup>15</sup> Originally, this article contained a substantial reading of Beauvoir’s novel, but the analysis started to take on a life of its own, so much so that it no longer fit the frame of this essay. Ashley King Scheu has written a fine essay on philosophy and literature in *L’Invitée*, and Alexander Ruch has shown that Beauvoir genuinely does philosophy in her travel book *America Day by Day*. See Ashley King Scheu, ‘The Viability of the Philosophical Novel: The Case of Simone de Beauvoir’s *She Came to Stay*’, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (forthcoming), and Alex Ruch, ‘Beauvoir-in-America: Understanding, Concrete Experience, and Beauvoir’s Appropriation of Heidegger in *America Day by Day*,’ *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 24 (2009) 104–29.
- <sup>16</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Metaphysics and the Novel,’ in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 26–40, and Simone de Beauvoir, ‘Littérature et métaphysique,’ in *L’existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), pp. 103–24; trans. Véronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison as ‘Literature and Metaphysics,’ in *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 269–77. From now on references to ‘Literature and Metaphysics’ will be abbreviated to LM. References to the English translation will be marked by an ‘E’, to the French original by an ‘F’. I am grateful to Ann Jefferson for drawing my attention to the importance of the term in France at the time, and to the special

- issue of the journal *Confluences* dealing with the novel, published during the Occupation. See Jean Prévost (ed.), *Problèmes du roman* (Lyon: n.p., 1943).
- <sup>17</sup> [un aspect de l'expérience métaphysique qui ne peut se manifester autrement: son caractère subjectif, singulier, dramatique et aussi son ambiguïté] LM, E275; F119.
- <sup>18</sup> See LM, E274; F119.
- <sup>19</sup> [imite l'opacité, l'ambiguïté, l'impartialité de la vie; envouté par l'histoire qui lui est racontée, le lecteur réagit ici comme devant les événements vécus.] LM, E270; F106. My translation. The published translation has: 'imitates life's opacity, ambiguity and impartiality. Bewitched by the tale he is told, the reader here reacts as if he were faced with lived events.'
- <sup>20</sup> [recherche] LM, F109; 'Exploration' is my translation; the English translation has 'search' (LM, E271). [une authentique aventure spirituelle] LM, E272; F112.
- <sup>21</sup> [participer sincèrement à l'expérience dans laquelle l'auteur tente de l'entraîner: il ne lit pas comme il réclame qu'on écrive, il craint de prendre des risques, de s'aventurer...] LM, F122-23. My translation. The published translation is: 'participate sincerely in the experiment into which the author tries to lead him; he does not read as he demands that one write; he is afraid to take risks, to venture' (LM, E276).
- <sup>22</sup> [Honnêtement lu, honnêtement écrit, un roman métaphysique apporte un dévoilement de l'existence dont aucun autre mode d'expressions ne saurait fournir l'équivalent], LM E276; F123-2. In 1947, Jean-Paul Sartre further developed the idea that the work of art is an appeal to the reader in his discussion of the 'pact of generosity' [pacte de générosité] between reader and writer. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays*, ed. Steven Ungar, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 61.
- <sup>23</sup> She uses the word 'take' both in LM and in her contribution to Simone de Beauvoir et al., *Que peut la littérature?*, Yves Buin (ed.), 10/18 (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1965), pp. 73-92. Hereafter references to Beauvoir's contribution to this volume will be abbreviated to QP. All translations of QP are mine. For a fuller discussion of QP, see Toril Moi, 'What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist,' *PMLA* 124 (2009), 189-98.
- <sup>24</sup> Beauvoir is at pains to stress that she doesn't think that readers ever forget that they are reading fiction: 'Only very naïve readers, or children, believe that a book allows them to go straight into reality' [il n'y a guère que les lecteurs très naïfs, ou les enfants, qui croient que par un livre ils entrent de plain-pied dans la réalité] (QP, 81). Beauvoir's emphasis on the need to be 'taken over,' to be absorbed by a book, as well as her insistence that this does not make her forget that she is reading fiction would repay further investigation in the light of Michael Fried's understanding of the emergence of modernism. His discussion of Diderot's aesthetics in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) would provide a good point of departure.
- <sup>25</sup> [Je ne change pas d'univers.] QP, 82.
- <sup>26</sup> Beauvoir's example of a formally innovative essay which nevertheless fails to provide the absorbing experience that literature alone can provide is the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: The Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961). See QP, 82.
- <sup>27</sup> [... Kafka, Balzac, Robbe-Grillet, me sollicitent, me convainquent de m'installer, du moins pour un moment, au coeur d'un autre monde. Et c'est ça le miracle de la littérature et qui la distingue de l'information: c'est qu'une vérité autre devient mienne sans cesser d'être autre.



J'abdique mon "je" en faveur de celui qui parle; et pourtant je reste moi-même.]

[C'est une confusion sans cesse ébauchée, sans cesse défaite et c'est la seule forme de communication qui soit capable de me donner l'incommunicable, qui soit capable de me donner le goût d'une autre vie.]  
QP, 82–83.

<sup>28</sup> I discuss Beauvoir's notion of identification in 'What Can Literature Do?', 193–94.

<sup>29</sup> 'A travers son héroïne, je m'identifiai à l'auteur: un jour une adolescente, une autre moi-même, tremperait de ses larmes un roman où j'aurais raconté ma propre histoire.' Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 140; trans. amended; Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (Paris: Gallimard [Coll. Folio], 1958), p. 195.

<sup>30</sup> I was happy to write an entry for the term 'ordinary language criticism', in Michael Payne and Jessica Rae Butto (eds) *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010),

pp. 514–6. The very existence of such dictionaries, in fact, is a case for having a relatively specific term.

<sup>31</sup> The term 'ordinary language criticism' is used in the title of Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (eds) *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Quoted by Cora Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure: Reply to Martha Nussbaum,' in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 313. The square brackets are my omissions, the dots are Diamond's. I have corrected a misprint in Diamond's quotation. The original can be found in David Robertson, *George Mallory* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 217.

<sup>33</sup> Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure', 315.

<sup>34</sup> Diamond, 'Missing the Adventure', 315.

<sup>35</sup> Cavell writes: 'At some point, the critic will have to say: This is what I see.' Cavell, 'Aesthetic Problems' (MWM, 93).

<sup>36</sup> See MWM, 89.