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Stanley Cavell, Shakespeare and 'The Event' of Reading

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Abstract

In the context of a third-level liberal arts education, this article interrogates the idea and practice of 'reading'. Questioning what might be at stake more publicly in this most private of acts, I am interested particularly in how certain conceptualizations of reading inhibit the pedagogical moment in its essential unpredictability. When we refer to reading as a process of 'comprehension', 'absorption' or 'appropriation', I argue, there is a real danger that we obstruct or close down the horizon of textual experience. In development of this argument, I draw on the philosophy of Stanley Cavell. I focus particularly on Cavell's reading of *King Lear*, arguing that the philosopher's engagement with the Shakespearean text is interestingly at odds with the model of 'active criticism' so beloved and encouraged by departments of English Literature. As it forgoes typical educational emphases on the known and the fully certain, this Cavellian engagement aligns in interesting and important ways with the weak pedagogy of Derrida and Caputo. I conclude that this Cavellian mode of reading creates an enlightened space for teaching as event.

Contributor Note

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I

On one conception of a liberal arts education, in teaching our students we teach them how to read. Beyond the acquisition of language or literacy skills in primary or secondary schooling, in the educative process at university level what we are engaged in as teachers, most visibly in the lecture theatre but perhaps most importantly in the seminar room, is the encouragement of our students as they tentatively take on the text – the encouragement of our students as they respond to literature or philosophy with due sensitivity and care. As university teachers, we take the act of reading seriously and we expect full seriousness in return. We appreciate that texts can be difficult and we know that this difficulty can lead to pain at one and the same time that it leads to insight. But what exactly do we understand by the term ‘reading’? What is at stake more publicly in this most private of acts? If reading well is a capacity that one can teach, when and where does one begin to teach it?

In the context of Higher Education, ‘reading’ has multiple connotations; at least initially we can identify three. In the first sense of the term, ‘reading’ relates to decoding or comprehension. Readers aspire to mastery of meaning and their practice is deemed successful when they have reached the end of the written words and can offer their own paraphrase or summary. In the second sense of the term, ‘reading’ involves stepping into or becoming fully absorbed by the text. Much more than decoding or understanding, readers in this second sense have followed the writer’s words so diligently that they find themselves fully immersed in the textual world. The engrossed reader of fiction is the typical

example here. In a third sense of the term, ‘reading’ relates to interpretation. Here the reader appropriates or makes the text their own. No longer confined by the writer’s intentionality, no longer absorbed by the text’s internal world, the reader as interpreter imposes her own ordering and her own analysis on the textual object.

Interestingly, in the classroom scenario at university level, it is this third sense of reading that is usually prioritized. Such prioritizing is understandable when considering the multiple resonances of our terms; if reading for ‘absorption’ implies learner acceptance (inaction and surrender), reading for ‘appropriation’ implies learner ownership (creativity and control). In a distinction most frequently appealed to in Departments of English, pedagogical attention is often drawn to the ‘passive reader’ and the ‘active critic’. Both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, students are encouraged to think of themselves on the model of the second rather than the first.

What draws my interest here is whether these initial senses of ‘reading’, and their related connotations of passivity and activity, are to be understood as exhaustive. As a reader and teacher I wish to consider the possibilities and limitations of conceptualizing reading in these terms. Might there be more to reading than ‘comprehension’, ‘absorption’ or ‘appropriation’? To what alternative visions might we appeal? And how might these alternative visions of reading inform our pedagogical approach in the classroom?

I am interested particularly in how certain conceptualizations of reading

inhibit the pedagogical moment in its essential unpredictability. My suggestion is that in conceptualizing reading as we do we run the very real risk of obstructing the learning experience. Take for example the reader of English Literature who has been increasingly encouraged (by university tutor or seminar leader) to picture herself on the model of the active critic. This same reader is inclined to view herself as intelligent and independent and she is inclined moreover to rise to her tutor's expectations. Thus, in this particular instance, she is inclined to welcome the very available attitude that the set text for the week is hers to 'master', hers to 'appropriate', hers to 'know'. In important ways this attitude develops creativity and confidence. Our reader from the outset is encouraged to value her responses and intuitions and to treat with healthy circumspection the intuitions and responses of others. Surely at the level of tertiary education this appreciation is to be applauded and encouraged.

However, this attitude occasions at least one philosophical worry. If our reader thinks dominantly in terms of 'assertiveness' or 'appropriation' she thinks only secondarily if at all in terms of 'receptivity' or 'acknowledgment'. If she brings to every textual encounter the desire for knowledge (picturing every novel or poem as an object to be managed or tamed), she closes down in every textual encounter the possibility for surprise (never allowing said novel or poem to be *truly* radical or interrupting). Therefore, our reader runs the risk of predicting what is unpredictable and foreseeing what is unforeseen. She fails to allow that the text under consideration might hold meanings and resonances beyond her current horizon of experience, preferring to imagine that she is entirely equipped to appreciate all

that this particular text has to offer or to withhold. There is no allowance for the unprecedented or the novel and no appreciation for slippage or excess. Thus, in picturing her process as that of 'active criticism' or 'textual mastery', our reader in the act of reading hampers or inhibits or prematurely closes down. We might say following John Caputo that our reader fully disrupts the act of reading as awakening – that she fully forecloses the act of reading as 'event'.

Drawing on the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, I present in this article one alternative vision of reading or textual encounter, one interestingly at odds with the 'active criticism' so beloved and encouraged by departments of English literature. This alternative vision aligns more readily with the 'weak pedagogy' of Caputo and Jacques Derrida, allowing as it does for exposures to the unprecedented and receptivities to the unknown. Caputo and Derrida hold themselves open to the arrival of what is radically other, to the incoming of subjects surprising or unforeseen, 'to shatter[ing] the horizon of possible experience' (Caputo 2013: 11). In a similar sense, Cavell appreciates the ultimate 'weakness' at the heart of the educational event. His is the pedagogical insight that in the moment of genuine learning we fully and finally surrender our desire for control.

Cavell develops his philosophy of reading against the complex intellectual backdrop of other-minds scepticism; in all of his writings, he is characteristically open to the philosophical possibility that we might never truly know the mind of another. This intellectual context is important. It speaks to the admirable ambition of Cavell's philosophy that he endeavours to pursue the rich similarities between our encounter with

persons that we have not created and our encounter with texts that we have not composed. In both cases, to be observed are certain measures of intellectual and emotional humility. Comparable to our affinity with those others that we love and cherish, Cavell urges, we can never assuredly *know* or *possess* the texts that we encounter. Rather, our attitude towards these texts must be one of receptivity and openness. The best that we can achieve is acknowledgment of their complexity and their difference; the worst that we can impose is predetermined evaluation of their constitution or their worth.

I will argue that it is primarily in his reading of Shakespeare – more specifically still, in his reading of *King Lear* – that this model of Cavellian reading is most finely articulated and explored. While the possibilities for careful reading and writing are elaborated throughout Cavell's corpus, it is in his engagement with Shakespearean tragedy that we are asked to fully consider his guiding ideal of acknowledgment. Bringing forward in philosophical criticism the dramatic tragedies of Othello and Desdemona, of Cordelia and Lear, Cavell prompts us to think again about reading (and living) with full humanity and care.

II

In a body of work traversing at least ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism as well as Shakespearean tragedy and Hollywood film, Stanley Cavell never offers a final formula for good reading, a complete set of principles or curricular objectives that might usefully inform our practice in the seminar room. Cavell never gifts us with

taxonomies or methodologies of reading. Rather, he is engaged throughout his philosophical life with a radical rethinking of humanist pedagogy. At issue are the standards and styles of reading that have been received as the legacy of Western metaphysics. And in critiquing these standards and styles, crucially, Cavell's philosophy of education is performative. In different ways and by different audiences acknowledged for the challenge and complexity of his work, Cavell teaches his readers to read and to write at the very same time that he brings these pedagogical practices into question.

This sensitivity of approach is particularly evident in the collection of essays, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. In this collection, Cavell performs painstakingly his readings of Shakespearean character – his own philosophical encounter with Othello and Desdemona, with Hamlet and Ophelia, with Cordelia and Lear. In performing these encounters he is mindful of a tradition of literary criticism threatening to isolate these characters from the words they are given to express. Cavell is critical of the school of 'New Criticism', particularly, not least for its prioritizing of words, symbols and sentences over the fictional persons that think and speak them. He writes:

How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about specific characters is to care about the utterly specific words they say as and when they say them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men or women are having to give voice to them. Yet apparently both frequently happen. Evidently what is to be remembered here is difficult to remember, or difficult to



do – like attending with utter specificity to the person now before you, or to yourself. (Cavell 2003: 41)

Thus for Cavell, it is imperative that fictional persons are reinstated to their position of interpretive importance. It is imperative that we understand Shakespeare first and foremost through an understanding of his characters. The philosopher is fully aware that such a critical approach will strike some contemporary readers as charmingly old-fashioned or romantic, and other contemporary readers as laughably misguided or jejune. Still, he perseveres, aware that the stakes of his discussion extend from literature to lived experience.

In Cavell's reading of *King Lear*, the defining tragedy of Shakespeare's play is the king's unwillingness to accept Cordelia's love. On the Cavellian schema, it is not that Lear actually believes that Cordelia doesn't love him; rather, he wishes to deny her love because accepting it would place him in too vulnerable a position. Lear can never fully know Cordelia – for him there will always remain a part of his daughter hidden and unpossessed – and so in his lived experience it is actually much easier to disown or to deny her altogether. Accepting her love would force him into a relationship of openness and uncertainty, would force him to rely on a person outside of himself and further admit the limits of his own knowledge. What is at issue here, as it is perennially at issue in Cavell's work, is the classic problem of philosophical scepticism. In the demand for a level of certainty foreclosed by our own finitude, and in the consequent avoidance and denial of true human relationship, Lear's

failure is a failure not of knowledge but of acknowledgment.

Lear for Cavell does not attend with due responsiveness to the person standing in front of him, to the person *willing* him to respond. Cordelia is intelligent, loyal and pure but Lear refuses to see what is obvious. He refuses to accept Cordelia in all her humanity, choosing instead to invent her as a character or as a projection of his own imagination. For him it is easier to understand her in the simplest possible terms, as the youngest and most spoiled daughter of an indulgent king, a daughter incapable of feeling or expressing true gratitude. It is easier to understand her as fully undeserving of his love and to transfer this love instead to the undeserving Regan and Goneril. More than this, Lear does not reveal his own self to Cordelia. He does not allow himself to be fully seen or to be fully appreciated for the complex and needful figure that he is. Typifying for Cavell the figure of the male sceptic, Lear chooses instead to keep himself hidden, in the silence and isolation that foreshadow his demise.

What is striking about the Cavellian response to *Lear* is that the burden of acknowledgment is taken up in the very act of reading. Though not directly stated in Cavell's essay, there is a definite symmetry between his understanding of the Lear/Cordelia dynamic (what it might mean to acknowledge, or to fail to acknowledge, the person in front of us) and his understanding of what it means to read a text (what it might mean to acknowledge, or to fail to acknowledge, the written word). Paul Standish is the most recent critic to draw attention to this characteristic doubling in the philosopher's work, to the characteristic symmetry 'between relations to other people and relations to the objects of



our understanding' (Saito and Standish 2012: 85). For both relations what Cavell seems to be recommending is an attitude of deliberation, of patience and of openness. His is a perspective on alterity that is responsive before it is assertive.

Translating this attitude or perspective to practice is not easy. We might say at least that in Cavell's vision of reading we are asked to hold back from any analytical or positivist attitude, from any interpretive process figuring the reading process in terms of 'mastery', of 'tools' or of 'strategies'. Rather, Cavell asks us to take the words of the characters as fully meant. He asks us to read *Lear* with faithfulness and with trust, to take seriously the specificity of particular words and how these words could only be articulated by a particular person at a particular time. These are, at the very least, highly demanding pedagogies. How exactly might readers dedicate themselves in this way? How might readers acknowledge fictional characters in a text?

Cavell urges repeatedly that we must be attentive. We must direct ourselves to the words of the dramatic work, to the particular voice that says these words and, through that, to the phenomenology of the straits of mind in which only those words said in that order will suffice. When Cordelia says, in the famous abdication scene, 'What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent', we needn't interpret this, as many critics have, as indicating her decision to refuse her father's demand (Cavell 1969: 62). Cordelia simply asks herself what it is that she can say; there is no necessity to hear her question as rhetorical. From Goneril's proclamation and from Lear's response, Cordelia is aware of what will make her father happy. Her words and

deeds appear completely understandable as the actions of an ordinary human being in the everyday contexts of familial intimacy and emotional stress from which other interpretations have dislocated her. On Cavell's reading, the difficulty and brilliance of Shakespeare is this very insistence on seeing the syntax in a new and less conventional way, this heightened attention to the specificities and contexts of language and of action. Literary characters must be understood by us as *really meaning* what they say and, moreover, as meaning *one thing completely*.

Undoubtedly, this is a strikingly old-fashioned textual approach. As readers, Cavell calls us to adopt a very particular attitude – one where we trust the text, where we trust the author's words as fully meant. He asks us to move away from the idea of the active critic, to read instead with patience and with an openness to the text where we are prepared to be surprised. The philosopher is only too aware that the process of acknowledgment, in our relations with other texts as well as our relations with other persons, is intellectually and emotionally demanding. Again, in his words, 'What is to be remembered here is difficult to remember, or difficult to do – like attending with utter specificity to the person now before you, or to yourself' (Cavell 2003: 41). Recognising this difficulty, Cavell goes well beyond the standard curricular objectives of textual interrogation or textual mastery. The emphasis rather is on care and *waiting*, on allowing the text to reveal its own significances. In writing of Cavell and Simone de Beauvoir, Toril Moi has made the case that the kind of criticism valued by Cavell is not the sort of attention that arises from a spirit of suspicion (Moi 2011: 2011). Rather, reading in the



Cavellian sense is first and foremost an act of acknowledgment, a recognition that the text is fully meant, fully complex, fully sincere. It is a deliberate and chosen process, an act of faith involving reader vulnerability and exposure.

This vision of reading is deeply rooted in Cavell's understanding of language. Taking guidance from the ordinary language philosophy of John Langshaw Austin and the later Wittgenstein, Cavell pictures language as a product of communal agreement between others, as a form of trust. What finds emphasis in Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is the astonishingly complex background against which our everyday judgements take place. As Cavell writes, 'We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place [...] That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life"' (Cavell 1976: 52). On this understanding, language is not a fixed system of rules and regulations but a flexible practice based on our everyday willingness to speak together, our everyday willingness to remain in tune.

In other words, although we might be hard pressed to account for these judgements rationally – to ground them in theories of mind or knowledge – they nevertheless reveal an extraordinary depth of mutual attunement. Wittgenstein's manner of phrasing this is to say that we agree *in* rather than on

language. As Cavell writes, 'In judging (saying something true or false) you have to be able or willing to judge a contraction of the face as a wince, to recognize a smile as forced, to find a slap on the forehead to express the overcoming of stupidity by insight, a fist to the heart to express the overcoming of stiff-neckedness by contrition, a tone of voice to be that of assertion' (Cavell 1979: 35). It is this establishment of shared criteria, grounded in nothing more than human convention, that allows us to think and to communicate in language. Our relation to the world is not exactly one of knowing but more precisely one of mutual attunement.

Coincident with the appeal to ordinary speech, Cavell's attention as a philosopher is characteristically directed to what people say and do in this or that situation. His attention is directed to what he terms 'the ordinary', to fictional characters and situations *as if* they were real. Indeed, at several points of his work Cavell stresses that the 'ordinary' does not merely refer to those words of our everyday expression. Rather:

It reminds us that whatever words are said and meant are said and meant by particular men, and to understand what they (the words) mean you must understand what they (whoever is using them) mean, and that sometimes men do not see what they mean, that usually they cannot say what they mean, that for various reasons they may not know what they mean, and that when they are forced to recognise this they feel they do not, and perhaps cannot, mean anything, and they are struck dumb. (Cavell 1976: 270)



Thus Lear, in his failure to open himself to Cordelia's love, experiences a tragedy that is characteristically human: as persons we are constitutionally incapable of acknowledging our limits and these failures of acknowledgment lead ultimately to confusion, to disappointment, to silence.

Certainly, Cavell's readings display an openness and a generosity demonstrably out of tune with his postmodernist contemporaries. There is a therapeutic dimension to these reading practices, one counselling patience and working-through in the face of dispiriting odds and the inevitability of disappointment. Cavell champions the ability to read slowly, to be open to a text's destabilizing moments. He expands on this idea when prefacing his discussion of moral perfectionism: 'What I call slow reading is meant not so much to recommend a pace of reading as to propose a mode of philosophical attention in which you are prepared to be taken by surprise, stopped, thrown back as it were on the text' (Cavell 2005: 13).

We might draw a comparison here with Cavell's philosophical contemporary, Richard Rorty, who distinguishes in his late work between 'methodical' and 'inspired' criticism, between 'knowing what you want to get out of a text in advance and hoping that the person or thing or text will help you want something different' (Rorty 2009: 145). While there are important disjunctions between Cavell and Rorty, at the very least on the topic of scepticism and the problem of other-minds, both philosophers acknowledge the importance of reading as event. Both philosophers resist textual strategies intending to pre-empt or foreclose. For Cavell, to a much greater extent than Rorty, reading as acknowledgment

requires response before assertion and anxiety before triumph. Reading for Cavell is first and foremost a *risky* act; though it can promise redemption it can never guarantee repose.

III

Thinking one final time with these ideas and ideals of reading, let us return to the context of contemporary liberal education. Let us picture a student, lively and confident, arriving at her graduate seminar in Week 2 of the Autumn Term.

Our student is talkative and upbeat, fully engaged with her graduate classmates and fully familiar with the graduate scene. She nods hello to her seminar leader and takes her seat in the centre of the room. Her notes are open before her as her seminar leader begins to speak. And then, subtly but perceptively, her demeanour changes. In response to her seminar leader's opening address, our student avoids full eye contact and looks downwards to her page of scribbled notes. She becomes quiet, hesitant, and even a little embarrassed. Certainly she does not offer her opinion as the discussion unfolds. Those familiar with seminar teaching might presume that this same student has failed to complete her required reading and is straightforwardly ashamed of this failure – that her silence is rooted in fear of classroom exposure, even opprobrium. But this presumption would be false. Our student has indeed read the assigned text as her seminar leader asked last week and as she asks again today. She has taken copious notes on the assigned text and has her own intuitions on its significance. Patently, however, she does not feel that she can claim this reading with confidence. She does not feel that

her reading is entirely valid. And we might ask ourselves why.

When reading at a high level – engaging with complex texts whether critical or creative – it is fully understandable that university students experience stress or anxiety. It is fully understandable that their self-confidence falters, particularly given the high-stakes scenario of a seminar room packed with peers and teachers. It is often through this same high-stakes scenario that students' profoundly held self-images (images of themselves as readers, as thinkers, as debaters) are initially developed and put to the test. Unaccustomed to speaking and performing in this way, students suffer greatly from the worry that they will sound stupid, that they will cause offence, that they will point out the obvious, or that they will get it badly wrong. These anxieties and worries allay somewhat in the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate work but they never completely disappear. The best seminar leaders will be aware of these worries and the best seminar leaders will take them seriously.

It is at this precise juncture that Cavell's writings are instructive. Audible particularly in the later work is a distinct call to intellectual independence, a call acutely sensitive to the barriers that inhibit. Beyond the writings on Shakespeare, Cavell emphasizes repeatedly the educational importance of recovering cultural artefacts from attitudes long entrenched and ossified. I must 'confront' the culture along the lines in which it meets in me, Cavell writes; I must never take for granted any established critical position (Cavell 2005: 82). As readers and learners, we are called in this context to re-consider our aesthetic reactions in a framework of personal responsibility and heightened

responsiveness. To be avoided at all costs is an unreflective acquiescence to cultural legacy – what Cavell will call, on considering a Broadway arcade, 'an American scene of mechanical self-praise' (Cavell 2005: 80). That we must properly engage with our culture, that we must carefully *insist* upon the significance of our experience, is shown to have consequence beyond the realm of the civilizing or merely aesthetic. As Cavell puts it, 'If I am to possess my own experience I cannot afford to cede it to my culture as that culture stands. I must find ways to insist upon it, if I find it unheard, ways to let the culture confront itself in me, driving me some distance to distraction' (Cavell 2005, 82).

Confronting our cultural experience is in practice a matter, as Cavell writes elsewhere, 'of momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation, turning your experience away from its expected habitual track, to find itself, its own track, coming to attention [...]'. Such 'coming to attention' guards against the threat of experience lost, or missed, or simply passing us by, leaving us without a leading voice in our own history, 'without authority in our own experience' (Cavell 1981: 12). This drive to recover the lost or glossed over is the precise struggle Cavell has in mind when claiming in autobiography that 'in America we are free, or forced, perpetually to fight battles for our memories of our country' (Cavell 2010: 180). Cavell's readings of Shakespeare partake in this ongoing struggle for culture and for nation. They attempt a reframing of cultural as well as intellectual inheritance – an appeal to all readers not to cede their personal experience but to possess it.

And so Cavell's call for reading as acknowledgement is paired insightfully

with a call to intellectual independence. We are called, on the one hand, to be open to the text in front of us, to read with care and with patience and with full readiness to be surprised. Reading in this mode is a therapeutic and careful process, an act of faith rendering the reader susceptible and at risk. We are called, on the other hand, to take seriously the act of reading as relationship, to 'confront' the text in front of us independent of interpretations received. Thus, in instructive and interesting ways, Cavell's philosophy of

reading involves both a letting go (the text is a presence not to be mastered or known) *and* a coming forward (the text calls us to account for our own culture and our history). As he foregoes like Derrida and Caputo educational emphases on the known and fully certain, Cavell creates space in his teaching for the event of reading. Particularly in the acknowledgment of Shakespeare, Cavell creates space in his teaching for the extraordinary and the strange.

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