

A close-up detail from a painting, likely a religious scene, showing a woman with her eyes closed in a state of quiet contemplation or prayer. She wears a white, intricately folded headscarf and a green garment. Her hands are positioned to hold an open book, which is filled with dense, handwritten text in a medieval script. The background is dark and indistinct.

PETER KIVY

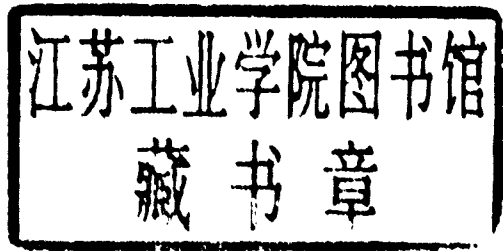
the performance of reading
essay in the philosophy of literature

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The Performance of Reading

An Essay in the Philosophy of
Literature

PETER KIVY



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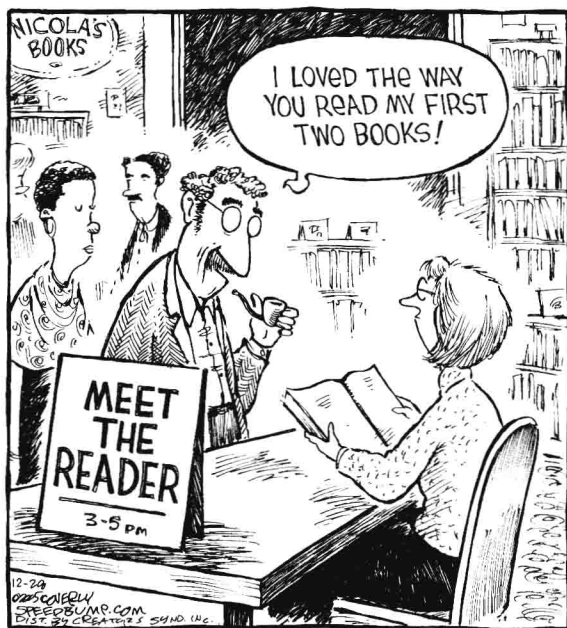
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Are not thought and speech the same, with this exception,
that what is called thought is the unuttered conversation of
the soul with herself?

Plato, *Sophist*, trans. B. Jowett



Preface

I can't recall how the thesis of this book came to me, but I do recall when and where. I was teaching, at the time, a course in the philosophy of criticism in the arts, at my place of business, Rutgers University. The idea came to me in the midst of a class discussion, whereupon I suggested it, tentatively, to be sure, to my students. I can't recall that any of them thought it was a very good idea. And perhaps they were right. But I decided, nevertheless, to try to work the thesis out, and this is the result.

The book is, to use a somewhat old-fashioned scholarly term, a "monograph," which I take to mean a book devoted to one single subject, which it pursues in a conspicuously single-minded way. Thus, although it is, as the sub-title states, *An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*, the reader must not expect to find treated in it the full panoply of issues the philosophy of literature comprises. I have stuck obsessively to one thing and one thing alone: the analogy that I argue for between the silent reading of literary fiction and *performance*. All else has been subjugated to that one thing. And where I have had to bring into the argument such concepts as interpretation, or the distinction between allographic and autographic arts, made famous by Nelson Goodman, I have tried to frame them in ways that will serve my own purposes, while keeping them general enough, and uncontroversial enough to be consistent with the views of a wide philosophical audience.

Of course, if the picture I attempt to draw, here, of the silent reading experience were consistent with *everyone's* beliefs about *everything* in the philosophy of literature and the philosophy of art, it would be empty: a blank canvas. If one says something that is completely uncontroversial, one says nothing at all, which is why, I suppose, the most fanatical of the Greek skeptics kept their silence.

That there are philosophical problems with my view that I have not

anticipated and discussed on these pages I am certain. How could it be otherwise? But what I do not yet know about I can scarcely address here. The most I can hope for, and do hope for, is that this attempt to analogize reading with performance will open up the subject to philosophical debate. The outcome of such debate I cannot guess.

As the reader will soon see, if it has not been surmised already from the epigraph, the dominant themes of this study are provided by Plato. Much to my surprise, that arch-enemy, although admitted admirer and lover, of literary fiction has turned out to have an enormous amount to teach me about the experience of fiction-reading: indeed, *such* an enormous amount that I am tempted to call what follows a Platonic theory, even though Plato and his contemporaries experienced literary fiction very differently from the way we do in some very important respects, as we shall see. What this goes to show, which every philosopher knows already, is how immanent the philosophical past is in the philosophical present.

Work on this book, during the academic year 2004–2005, was made possible by a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and through the financial support of the Rutgers University Competitive Fellowship Leave Program. I am deeply grateful both to the Guggenheim Foundation, and to my University, for the underwriting of my project and for their confidence in my ability to complete it.

I am grateful, as well, to the people who have taken the time and trouble to read my manuscript, and to provide critical comments. Two anonymous referees for Blackwell have given me very useful suggestions. And I owe a particularly heavy debt of gratitude to Alex Neil, who has read my text with the utmost care, and provided me with perhaps the most extensive as well as the most detailed criticism that I have ever received of one of my works, prior to its publication. This book would be far poorer were it not for his unstinting labor on its behalf.

The typescript of *The Performance of Reading*, at various stages of its evolution, has been the subject of three university seminars: at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, under the direction of Noël Carroll; at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, under the direction of Dom Lopes; and at Rutgers University, with the author presiding. I am deeply grateful to all of the participants in these seminars; and to Noël Carroll and Dom Lopes for their constructive, sympathetic criticism.

To the Rutgers graduate students, Samantha Bassler, Justin Burton, J'aimie Wells, Dennis Whitcomb, and Crystal Tychonievich, I owe a special debt of gratitude for taking time out from their incredibly busy lives to discuss my book with me. For me it was a deeply gratifying as well as intellectually fruitful experience.

I am grateful to the editor of *Philosophic Exchange*, Georges Dicker, for permission to publish material from an article in that journal, and to Dom Lopes for finding the delightful cartoon that serves as the frontispiece for my book.

Thanks are due, as well, to Eileen Power, for her always judicious and sensitive copy-editing.

Finally, I want to thank Jeff Dean, not only for his help and support, in his office as editor at Blackwell, but for his substantive philosophical comments. It is a great boon to have had an editor who is a philosopher as well. His assistance was invaluable.

As is customary, I want to take full responsibility for the mistakes I have made, while gratefully acknowledging the help of the above named.

Peter Kivy
New York City
October 2005

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The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature

1 Introduction

Common sense tells us that of the arts, some are performing arts and some are not. There are performances of musical works, but not of paintings; and there's an end on't.

Literature, in this regard, is, again according to common sense, a mixed bag. Plays are performed, novels, short stories, and narrative poems are not. And although one can read a play to oneself, or read a novel aloud as a kind of performance, even to the extent of saying the speeches as an actor would, a play is intended to be performed, a novel or short story or narrative poem to be silently read, full stop (as the English say).

Common sense is right, of course, to the extent that it remains at a suitable viewing distance, and remains suitably coarse-grained. Someone who sold tickets to a performance of *Hamlet* or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony would be considered by common sense, quite correctly, to be acting in a wholly rational, intelligible way. Whereas if someone were to attempt a sale of tickets to his *silent* reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, he would be considered by common sense to be either mad, or some kind of conceptual artist "making a point." And common sense would be right.

But common sense does not necessarily have the last word over philosophy in this regard if we focus down, and hone our conceptual apparatus. To that end, I intend to pursue analogies between reading and performance: in particular, between reading to oneself novels and stories, and performing or experiencing performances of musical works. In doing so I hope to discover some things about our appreciation of silently read literary works, and, in the end, to show that reading and performance have more in common than common sense suspects. This is not, I should add,

a *normative* claim, about how we *should* read fictional works, but a *descriptive* claim about how we, at least some of us, *do* read them. It is an exercise in analysis, not legislation.

2 A Little Ontology

Perhaps a good starting point might be the ontology of art works. In *Languages of Art*, the late Nelson Goodman made a distinction between what he called “allographic” and “autographic” arts, which is now in standard use among analytic philosophers of art.¹ The paradigm instance of autographic art is the art of painting. When a painter produces his kind of art work, it is a solitary, easily identifiable physical object, located in both spatial and temporal dimensions. There may be fake *Mona Lisas*, but there is only one, *echt Mona Lisa*.

By contrast, music, at least in the West and in the modern era, is an allographic art. The musical work, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, unlike the *Mona Lisa*, does not seem to be a solitary, easily identifiable physical object located in both spatial and temporal dimensions. Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony cannot be picked up, carried away, or, in any obvious way destroyed, the way the *Mona Lisa* clearly *can* be. Furthermore, unlike the *Mona Lisa*, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony can seemingly defy the ontological interdict against being in two different places at the same time since, clearly, it can be performed in New York City by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at the very same time it is being performed in Boston by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Goodman himself thought that a musical work like Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is what he called a class of compliants with the score.² Every performance of a musical work is a score compliant – that is to say, fulfills the conditions the score lays down for being a performance of *that* work – and the musical work simply *is* the sum total of all its performances, past, present, and to come. Thus, put succinctly, every musical work is a compliance class.

Goodman’s analysis of the musical work has problems very familiar to philosophers of art; and it would be beside the point to canvass them here. Without, therefore, arguing the matter, I am going to adopt, for the present discussion, a Platonic analysis of the musical work, and the work/performance relation. Platonism, of course, has its own repository of problems. But they too are, for present purposes, beside the point.

On the Platonic analysis of musical works like Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, they are universals or types, of which their performances are

instances or tokens. According to “extreme Platonism,” musical works are “discovered” types, as would be the case with the usual Platonist account of mathematical objects.³ According to “qualified Platonism,” works are “created” types.⁴ But on both views the relationship between work and performance is much the same. And that is all that matters here.

Turning now to literature, it would appear that drama is among the allographic arts, and that its analysis, along Platonic lines, closely parallels that of music. The written text of the play is the “score” of the work; a performance of the play is a “score compliant,” and token of the type.

Now as a matter of fact things are not that simple. For something stands between a particular performance, say, of *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare’s work: it is, for example, John Gielgud’s production. The production, cum direction, scenery, the entire *mise-en-scène*, is itself a version of the work, a token of the type; and the performance on a particular Saturday matinee is a token of the type “John Gielgud’s production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*,” the Saturday evening performance another token of that type. And, of course, Laurence Olivier’s production of *Hamlet* is *another* version of Shakespeare’s play, another token of that type; but, as well, a type in its own right, of which the various individual performances are tokens.

But, actually, the very same complication exists in the musical work/performance relation, although not so obviously, even if there is only one performer involved. Thus, Vladimir Horowitz’s performance, on some particular Saturday afternoon, of Chopin’s *Revolutionary Etude*, is a token of the type which is Chopin’s work. However, Horowitz, in a given year, performed the *Revolutionary Etude* numerous times. And each of these performances was quite recognizable to expert ears as a token of the type “Horowitz’s version of the *Revolutionary Etude*” (at least until such time as he might have seen fit to change his interpretation of the work radically enough to constitute a different Horowitz version of it). Thus, the type “Horowitz’s version of the *Revolutionary Etude*” stands between the type, *Revolutionary Etude*, and the token, Horowitz’s performance of the *Revolutionary Etude* on a given Saturday afternoon in 1950, as the type “Gielgud’s production of *Hamlet*” stands between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and a performance of Gielgud’s production of *Hamlet* on a given Saturday afternoon in 1950.

Nevertheless, given this complication, it is still true to say that Horowitz’s performance of the *Revolutionary Etude* on a given Saturday afternoon in 1950 is a token of the type Chopin’s *Revolutionary Etude*, as a performance of Gielgud’s production of *Hamlet* is a token of the type Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. And I will continue to talk that way in what follows.

3 A Little More Ontology

Turning now to read literature, which is my major topic, I will talk for a while of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, merely by way of example.

Now, clearly, novels and short stories are examples of allographic art. What kind of examples they are is not so obvious.

What *is* obvious is that *Pride and Prejudice*, like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, is not a physical object, located in spatial and temporal dimensions, at least for the extreme *or* the moderate Platonist. You can no more pick up, carry away, or destroy the novel than you can the symphony. It would appear that the novel is a type. But what are its tokens?

You have your copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, I have mine. But, I would urge, our copies of the novel are not tokens of the type *Pride and Prejudice*, any more than our scores of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony are tokens of the type Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. All of the many copies of *Pride and Prejudice* are tokens of a type, but that type is not the work: it is the notation of the work. Likewise with all of the many copies of the Fifth Symphony.

Furthermore, *Pride and Prejudice* does not *seem*, anyway, to have the same ontology as such other literary works as *Hamlet* or *Ghosts*, because, as I said at the outset, common sense has it that drama is a performing art and the novel is not. Of course, there may be copies of *Hamlet* and *Ghosts*, but these are no more tokens of the types, *Hamlet* and *Ghosts*, than the copies of the score are tokens of the type Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or the copies of *Pride and Prejudice* tokens of the type *Pride and Prejudice*. The tokens of the types *Hamlet* and *Ghosts* are their performances (as qualified above) as are the tokens of the type Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. But the novel is not, by hypothesis, a performing art. So whatever *its* ontology, it does not seem that it can be the work-type/performance-token ontology. So where do we go from here?

Well I think it pretty obvious that the answer is going to be: the novel is a reading art, and so it trivially follows that the tokens of the type *Pride and Prejudice* are its readings: your reading is one, my reading is another; and if I read it twice those are two tokens of the type. Needless to say, I do not think this answer is obvious in the sense of needing no further argument for its establishment. Indeed, the entire monograph to follow is its argument. But perhaps it is more correct to say that it is the most obvious *candidate*, and this has not gone unnoticed, as we shall see, although no previous writer, so far as I am aware, has ever given this candidate a run for the money. That is what I intend to do.

"Reading," of course, has a double meaning in these contexts, and it is of vital importance to what follows that we get this straight. There is

the sense of “reading,” which I was assuming in the last paragraph, where what is being referred to is the specific event of, say, my first reading of *Pride and Prejudice*. This event took a certain specifiable amount of time. And, as most people, myself included, do not read novels at one sitting, I shall assume that the reading of a novel is not one uninterrupted event, but the sum total of a number of reading events, separated by various, sometimes protracted periods. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that reading a novel at one go is not only unusual, and in some cases impossible, but contrary to authorial intention, and, consequently, not the most artistically correct way of experiencing such works. I will argue this point at length later on, and will only remind the reader at this point that many of the novels of Dickens and other great novelists of the nineteenth century appeared serially in literary periodicals, and hence *could not* be read at one go, unless you waited for all the installments to be published, nor, arguably, were they intended to be.

This sense of reading, that I am now discussing, is, as I have said, an event taking up a certain non-continuous period of time. It is the kind of event we would describe as an act or an activity: it is an action performed by a reader. And the most important aspect of this act is that it is, or results in an “experience.” The point of an act of reading *Pride and Prejudice* is to have an experience of it for the usual reasons people have for experiencing works of art of that kind. Some people might say that such a reading act has as its purpose the experiencing of the work “aesthetically.” But I will not say that. I will say rather that its purpose (usually) is the experiencing of it *qua* art work of that kind: all the art-relevant ways of experiencing it, of which the aesthetic way is one.

The second sense of “reading” I have in mind is the sense in which a “reading” of a novel is synonymous with an “interpretation” of it. Thus two literary critics might have, as we would say, two different “readings” of *Pride and Prejudice*, meaning that they interpret it in different ways. There is, to be sure, an intimate relation between the two senses; and I will be discussing interpretation later on. At this point it seems advisable simply to stipulate that I shall mean by a “reading” things like my first reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, or your re-reading of it, and use “interpretation” for the other sense of “reading.” In the rare case in which I depart from this usage it will be altogether obvious.

What I am suggesting, then, to bring out the major thesis of this section, is that the ontology of read literary works is the type/token ontology of musical and dramatic works. But whereas the tokens of music, drama, and the other performing arts are performances, the tokens of read literary works are readings. I now want to go on to elaborate further on this thesis.

4 Early Experiences of Literature

The type/token ontology works for the novel, as well as for drama and music. Furthermore, the best candidates for a novel's tokens appear to be its readings, whereas the *obvious* candidates for the tokens of plays and musical works are their performances. This *suggests*, at least, that it might be philosophically illuminating to pursue an analogy between readings and performances.

But which way should the analogy go? Should we try to illuminate the nature of readings by showing in what ways they are analogous to performances (besides the obvious way of their both being tokens of work-types) or should we try to illuminate the nature of performances by showing in what ways they are analogous to readings? I might just arbitrarily decide to try one rather than the other to see what results I get. However, there is a more rational way of making the decision. *Read* literature is a comparatively late development in the history of the Western literary arts. It, I shall argue, "comes out of" performed literature; and I think it is a reliable precept that we can frequently learn about a thing or a practice by learning about its origins and history. I am well aware of the danger, in this regard, of committing the genetic fallacy of inferring that something must have certain properties or a certain character merely because its historical predecessors and sources had those properties or that character. I shall try very hard not to commit the genetic fallacy. Certainly I am not saying that readings are performances, just because I *am* saying that read literature had its historical origins in performed literature. Anyone who draws an analogy between two things, as I am doing, obviously is acknowledging that they are not the same thing: one cannot analogize something with itself; or, in other words, analogy presupposes non-identity.

Another danger of my procedure, besides that of falling into the genetic fallacy, is committing the fallacy, if that is the right name for it, of doing "armchair history." I am not a literary historian, a cultural historian, or any other kind of historian. That being the case, any historical statements I make are at best highly suspect, and should be treated as such. Nevertheless, I shall try very hard to make historical claims only of the most obvious and (I hope) uncontroversial kind. And all I can do to guard against historical error is to keep my fingers crossed (and maybe you might do the same with yours). But let me just add, for those who are strongly suspicious of *a priori* history (and rightly so) that even if most of my historical speculations are mistaken, the general thesis of this book will not be invalidated on that account alone. It will simply have to rest on a less weighty evidential base.

Let's start at the beginning. The oldest texts in the Western literary canon that are more or less widely read are the Homeric epics.⁵ We read them in our easy chairs, in modern, paperback translations, but we hardly need reminding that that is not how they were experienced in their own time, or in classical Greek culture. They were both part of an oral tradition, and were, I like to think, recited (or sung?) around the campfire while the jug was being passed. However that may be, what we do know is that they weren't read but "performed." And since, presumably, there were no written texts, the work/performance, type/token ontology, if it applies at all, applies more loosely than in regard, say, to the nineteenth-century novel. The poems must have been in a continual state of flux, contributed to by many hands, so it would be hard to separate performance from work (although empirical research on living "storytellers" reveals that a very long narrative can be repeated over and over again with remarkable accuracy and little change, in the complete absence of a written text).

Where my real interest in the Homeric epics begins, and where they begin to have real significance for my argument is when, between approximately 750 and 700 BC the Greek texts, more or less as we know them, were written down and divided into the familiar 24 "books" of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Once we have written texts we of course have the type/token ontology in place. However, philosophers know, from Plato's dialogues, the *Ion* and *Republic*, that the tokens were not readings but "performances." The Homeric epics, and other Greek poetry that we naturally now experience as read texts, were apparently experienced in Plato's Greece as recited or sung. Poetry for the Greeks, it would seem, was a performance art even when it was not, as it was in the case of the tragedies and comedies, a staged performance, and even when, as in the case of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, there was an established, authoritative text.

What kind of performances were these? We know from Book III of the *Republic* that the recitations of Homer and the others were, to say the least, very "lively." Plato's descriptions may be more than somewhat hyperbolic, since his intent was to ridicule these performances so as to cast them in a bad light, both morally and epistemically. But if his account is to be at all credited, they must have involved quite a display of virtuosity, however misplaced Plato may have thought this virtuosity was.

Plato's idea of what the "model" performer of poetry should be is of one whose "style will be both imitative and narrative; but there will be very little of the former, and a great deal of the latter."⁶ What Plato means here is that there is, in Homer, for example, both straight narration and quotational "speeches." The performer, then, in his singing or reciting

of Homer plays two parts, as it were. He plays the part of the fictional or authorial narrator (and more of that later on) and he plays the parts of the characters whose speeches are quoted in the narrative. And because Plato thought playing the parts of characters, if they are wicked or unvirtuous ones, is bad for the performer, as is any other form of “imitation,” he advised performers to, as much as possible, steer clear of enacting the *dramatis personae* and stick to straight narration. For “a just and good man in the course of narration comes on some saying or action of another good man – I should imagine that he will like to personate him But when he comes to a character which is unworthy of him he will not make a study of that”⁷

The sort of performer that Plato deplures, and, I suspect, was the more commonly met with

will narrate anything; and the worse he is the more unscrupulous he will be; nothing will be beneath him: moreover he will be ready to imitate anything, not as a joke, but in right good earnest, and before a large audience. As I was just now saying, he will attempt to represent the roll of thunder, the noise of wind and hail, or the creaking of wheels and pulleys, and the various sounds of flutes, pipes, trumpets, and all sorts of instruments: also he will bark like a dog, bleat like a sheep, and crow like a cock; his entire art will consist in imitation of voice and gesture and there will be very little narration.⁸

I am far from knowing just how accurately Plato has represented the performers of the Homeric epics in his day. Be that as it may, whether you experienced it sung or recited by Plato’s puritanical practitioner, or by the one who is “ready to imitate anything,” it is clear that you were experiencing one of the performing arts, just as surely as if you were attending a tragedy by Sophocles, even if, in the poetry recitation, one man performed all of the parts.

But there is another aspect of the poetry performance that comes out in the *Ion*, which will seem to the modern reader perhaps even more odd than a reciter of Homer who imitates “the creaking of wheels and pulleys” and will “bleat like a sheep.” Ion, after whom the little dialogue is named, pursues the profession of “rhapsode.” He sings the poetry of Homer, to the accompaniment, it would seem, of a lyre. (Socrates specifically refers to Ion’s skill on this instrument.) He narrates the story and speaks the speeches, though whether he also creaks and bleats is not mentioned.

What is very interesting about *Ion*, and is in fact the main topic of the dialogue, is that he is a *specialist*. The *only* poet he performs well is Homer. That is not in itself odd, I suppose, to us, for we are quite happy with the