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Reading Oneself in the Text: Cavell and Gadamer's Romantic Conception of Reading

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ABSTRACT

Can we gain knowledge by reading literature? This essay defends an account of reading, developed by Stanley Cavell and Hans-Georg Gadamer, that phenomenologically describes the experience of acquiring self-knowledge by reading literary texts. Two possible criticisms of this account will be considered: first, that reading can provide other kinds of knowledge than self-knowledge; and, second, that the theory involves illegitimately imposing subjective meaning onto a text. It will be argued, in response, that the self-knowledge gained in reading allows one to gain other sorts of knowledge too, and that the reading process described by Gadamer and Cavell avoids excessive subjectivism.

KEYWORDS

Stanley Cavell; Hans-Georg Gadamer; hermeneutics; literature; philosophy of literature; poetry; reading; Romanticism

Can we gain knowledge by reading literature? If we read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, we may come to know details of what it was like to be upper class in nineteenth-century London. For that reason, literary texts can serve as primary sources for historians. But other modes of knowing may be at work in literature too. When we read Oscar Wilde's descriptions of the appearance, personality and actions of the character Dorian Gray, each of us forms in our mind's eye an image of him. According to Wolfgang Iser's influential phenomenology of reading, "the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things."¹ On this conception, the reader imaginatively forms a picture grounded in what the text explicitly says that is not wholly dictated by the text itself. Taking their necessary point of departure from the written text, different readers imaginatively construct their own distinctive pictures of Dorian Gray. Iser restricts the cognitive upshot of reading to acquiring knowledge only from, and of, what is actually written on the page. This essay, however, will argue for a view that expands the knowledge gained in reading by going beyond the text's written contents to include also the experience of acquiring new self-knowledge by reading literature.

The American thinker Stanley Cavell and the hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer independently developed conceptions of reading with enormous commonalities in their emphatic arguments for reading's cognitive potential. Why Cavell—who wrote so appreciatively about Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Romanticism, all figures and movements within the orbit of Gadamer's hermeneutics—never so much as mentioned Gadamer in print remains a bit of a mystery. We may hazard a guess as to the

absence of Gadamer from Cavell's work. To the extent that he was aware of Gadamer's writing, Cavell may have found Gadamer's insistence on the ubiquitous possibility of understanding and communication, evident in his influential concepts of the fusion of horizons and language as paradigmatically a dialogue or conversation, alien to his understanding of the threats of skepticism and of alienation from the world and from other human beings. This essay will not compare and contrast Cavell's thinking with Gadamer's, although that would be an interesting and fruitful endeavor. Instead, my presentation shall emphasize one theme these writers have in common in their concern for art and aesthetics, namely their *shared conception of reading*. What do Gadamer and Cavell have to teach us about reading? According to their phenomenologically oriented understanding, one can recognize oneself being expressed in a literary text. These two philosophers convincingly suggest that when the text resonates with one in this way, one can acquire new and genuine self-knowledge.

Cavell and Gadamer's account involves four main claims. First, they appeal to the experience of feeling surprised and encountering the unexpected in reading to suggest that one can recognize oneself while reading a literary text. Gadamer expresses this idea by suggesting "we encounter art as something that both expresses us and speaks to us," while for Cavell, "the text's thoughts are neither exactly mine nor not mine."² In other words, the reader finds in the text some articulation of who she is. The text is not directly about her, yet she finds that it precisely expresses something about her experience. In expressing something about her, the text speaks to her in a surprising way. How does this recognition occur? The reader initially opens herself up to the possibility that the text will mean something; she takes the text seriously, which Gadamer calls an "anticipation of meaning (*Sinnerwartung*)" that does not determine in advance what that meaning will be.³ The reader does not typically anticipate that the text will speak about her, in particular, in any significant way. When she recognizes herself in the text, and the text rings true for her distinctive experience, she is startled. As Gadamer puts it, the text "expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed."⁴ What the reader learns from reading is something new about her experience that she did not know before but that can now be seen as having been hidden until now. The reader recognizes this truth as lying in wait to be discovered, and she learns that truth for herself through encountering the text. The text expresses who she is, perhaps in a way she had not seen before but which she now recognizes as true. By encountering the text, the reader encounters herself. Cavell refers to this theme as congeniality: "Author and reader will be like-minded if they are congeners, generated together, of one another."⁵ The text resonates with the reader, and the reader recognizes herself in what the text expresses. The reader and the text share something in common.

To clarify this suggestive argument, which purports to describe a genuinely possible experience we all could have, let us consider an example. Imagine I read W.H. Auden's poem about marriage, "In Sickness and In Health." In advance, I anticipate the possibility that this poem will possess a significant meaning that I look forward to encountering and dwelling upon, but I do not expect its meaning to apply precisely to me in any specific or profound way. Then I read a line in Auden's poem in which he compares romantic relationships to distorting mirrors that inform our self-understandings.⁶ While reading Auden's meditation on love, I linger upon this line. I suddenly grasp something not only about the text, but also about my own experience with love—for example, that in some past

or present relationship, my self-understanding has been distorted by a partner who led me to see who I am in a false light or in a one-sided way. Reading Auden's poem allows me to have this epiphany. The realization shocks me, since I never saw that fact about my experience in quite the way I see it after reading the poem. But I come to see that this feature of my life that the poem revealed to me has long been true, that this fact about my experience with love was waiting for me to find and come to terms with it. The text, by articulating my experience in a way I had never previously voiced, allowed me have this epiphany. By discovering the text's meaning, I have also discovered something about who I am. The text and I are congenial, as Cavell would put it, because we share something in common.

This description of discovering something true about oneself also suggests the second aspect of Gadamer and Cavell's account, namely that in reading one begins to understand who one really is in a new way. Cavell provocatively describes his argument as an attempt at "turning the picture of interpreting a text into one of being interpreted by it."⁷ When I read Auden's line about distorting mirrors that inform our self-understandings, and appreciate how profoundly this line articulates my experience, the text is also reading me, uncovering the depths of my being, just as I read the text and try to interpret its meaning. Gadamer agrees with Cavell when he says, "to understand what the work of art says to us is therefore a self-encounter (*Selbstbegegnung*)."⁸ In understanding what the text conveys to me—namely, that love can distort my self-image—I understand my life in a new way. I now grasp the text as speaking to me in a profound way and as containing a meaning that emotionally resonates with me, just as the text figuratively understands me by speaking to and about me. Reading allows me to work out my own self-understanding in the process of my attempt to understand the text.

Cavell and Gadamer also claim that reading allows the reader to imagine future possibilities for her life. Not only does she understand her past or present experience in a new way thanks to reading the text, but she can also see other ways she could be in the future. Cavell claims that the thoughts of the text "represent my further, next, unattained but attainable, self."⁹ As the reader recognizes herself in the text, she imagines how she could subsequently change or transform. The clarity the text affords the reader's self-understanding allows her to imagine future ways of being. As Gadamer suggests in a difficult passage, "we learn to understand ourselves in and through [art], and this means that we sublimate (*aufheben*) the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own existence."¹⁰ The text allows the reader to envisage her existence undergoing change in the future such that she could conceivably become a newly revised self. Art allows the reader to survey her past experiences and then sum them up into an overall account of her experience. To return to our example, after reading Auden's poem, perhaps I realize I have not yet achieved the emotional resilience to honestly see who I am while simultaneously allowing myself to be loved by another person, but I see now that my ability to act in this way represents my future and attainable self. The special clarity that the text offers my self-understanding permits me to see how I could subsequently become different in some profound or overall sense.

Finally, for Gadamer and Cavell, reading's ability to allow one to recognize, understand and envisage truths about and future possibilities for one's own experience constitutes genuine self-knowledge. This feature of their understanding of reading suggests that reading literary texts is a cognitive act. Both thinkers are invested in

validating the cognitive status of the arts: “I am interested in the possibility of art as a possibility of knowing” (Cavell); “art is knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge” (Gadamer).¹¹ For Cavell and Gadamer, the paradigmatic knowledge afforded by art is self-knowledge. As I recognize myself in Auden’s poem, I come to genuinely know something about who I am that I did not know before, and I also come to know what sort of self I might subsequently become. In the scenario sketched above of reading Auden’s poem, the realization about my experience that I arrive at has the intensity of an epiphany. I now appreciate that there is something about my life that is not merely possible, but actual and true; I come to recognize a fact about my existence that was hidden but which has long been genuinely the case. When the text allows me to see this aspect of my experience, I come to know myself in a way I did not before. I now see a real aspect of who I am. For Gadamer and Cavell, this recognition means acquiring *bona fide* self-knowledge. Cavell calls this process “becoming intelligible to oneself.”¹² In encountering the text, the reader comes to know herself better and will thereby acquire a more accurate and coherent account of who she is. Similarly, for Gadamer, the beautiful in art is “the mode of appearing that causes things to emerge in their proportions and their outline.”¹³ Beautiful art illuminates things in a new and clear way, shining light on what could not be seen before. The reader’s perception of reality and of her experience gets transformed and improved by experiencing the beautiful. In reading a beautiful literary text, the reader comes to know and recognize aspects of her life and being that she previously never understood or saw.

These two philosophers want to establish art as a way of knowing, and their account suggests how reading allows us to know ourselves better. Gadamer and Cavell’s theory of reading counts as Romantic insofar as it seeks to establish this cognitive potential. German Romanticism took its cue from the idea, expressed in the anonymous “Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism” from 1796/1797, that “the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act.”¹⁴ Similar ideas were voiced a few years later in British Romanticism when Wordsworth called poetry the consummation of knowledge.¹⁵ Romanticism unites Gadamer and Cavell across the fault lines of their respective historical and linguistic traditions. They make the less sweeping, more modest and restricted claim that reading literary works of art can allow us to achieve self-knowledge. In this way, they champion the Romantic project of investing art with cognitive capacities. The shared proximity of both these thinkers to Romanticism allows us to see why their understandings of reading share so much despite their other philosophical and historical differences: “We are not beyond the demands of romanticism, but you will have to hope that the demands of romanticism are not beyond us” (Cavell); “I am caught up . . . in the tradition of German Romantic and post-Romantic philosophy” (Gadamer).¹⁶ These two thinkers, emerging out of disparate philosophical traditions and rarely mentioned side by side, share a common Romantic heritage, leading them both to make a robust claim for reading as a form of knowing.

To suggest the viability of this conception of reading, we shall answer two possible criticisms of it. One critique might suggest that reading literary texts allows one to acquire knowledge of things other than the self—such as history, other ways of life, human experiences other than one’s own, and aspects of the world one has never seen or considered before.¹⁷ According to this objection, reading makes possible stronger

forms of knowing than merely self-knowledge. Rather, reading also allows us also to know aspects of reality and of the experience of other people that we did not previously possess. Cavell and Gadamer have perhaps restricted reading's cognitive potential to self-knowledge alone, and so their model is too subjective when compared to the experience of acquiring genuine knowledge of the world and of other human beings.

Here it is important to recognize that both Gadamer and Cavell, by resuscitating Romanticism, self-consciously react against philosophical movements that robbed art of any possibility of knowledge whatsoever. Gadamer advances a critique of the Kantian view that dominated German aesthetics, according to which judgments of taste must be disinterested and devoid of all claims to knowledge. The second chapter of Part I of *Truth and Method* outlines a powerful and sustained objection to "The Subjectivization of Aesthetics through the Kantian Critique."¹⁸ Cavell's position, meanwhile, emerges in response to positivist arguments in the Anglophone philosophy of his youth that only what can be established or verified by the natural sciences counts as knowledge. In his autobiography *Little Did I Know*, he recounts a story of hearing a young philosopher in the thralls of logical positivism appallingly declare, in response to the idea that a poem could express truth, that "every assertion is either true or false or else neither true nor false," and in response, Cavell announces that his attempt "to discover a different mode of response to such an assault [on the arts] became as if on the spot an essential part of my investment in what I would call philosophy."¹⁹ Gadamer could only agree. These are strikingly parallel philosophical motivations. By establishing the possibility of self-knowledge in reading, they have advanced reading's cognitive potential beyond Iser's suggestion with which we began: not only the written part of the text enables knowledge; the act of recognizing oneself in the text also produces self-knowledge. This conclusion represents a definite, even if limited, improvement over the Kantian and positivist frameworks from which Gadamer and Cavell took their respective points of departure.

Even more strongly, however, this phenomenological account suggests that the self-knowledge gained in reading makes possible other forms of knowing. Recall that for Gadamer, the beautiful "shines forth most clearly and draws us to itself."²⁰ The beautiful illuminates aspects of reality we did not see before, including qualities about our own lives. Once the reader's encounter with the beautiful allows her to know more clearly who she is, this achievement may permit her to see aspects of the world more clearly too. For example, if reading a literary text forces the reader to see that she has been selfish in her personal conduct, this experience will force her to see what she has overlooked in the lives of people she knows and of aspects of the world that she ignored in favor of her selfish interests. She may come to know, by reading about selfless characters or actions, that in the future she could become less selfish. Iris Murdoch develops a movingly resonant version of such an experience. Murdoch describes a mother-in-law who haughtily overlooked aspects of the personality and way of being of her daughter-in-law, but eventually sees those things anew through increased and willful "attention" to her daughter-in-law's behavior once she realizes how uncharitable she has been to the younger and more inexperienced woman.²¹ Though Murdoch's example does not concern literary texts *per se*, the scenario she develops suggests the possibility of gaining understanding of someone or something else after realizing something about oneself. The self-knowledge gained in reading a beautiful text, which provides a coherent self-understanding as well as imagined possibilities for future

ways of being, also enables knowledge of things outside oneself, as Murdoch's example concretizes.

Cavell provocatively calls his account of reading an attempt at "letting ourselves be instructed by texts we care about."²² As we have seen, this instruction takes the form of learning something true about who we are. The most arresting and profound initial encounter with a text is one that resonates with our own experience. As Gadamer claims, the beautiful text "speaks to us most directly."²³ After the initial act of recognition that profoundly resonates with our own experience, we see who we are more clearly and coherently in light of the text. Only after we gain such clarity about ourselves by reading might we then gain increased knowledge of others and of the world, insofar as a correct self-understanding bears on those other forms of knowing. If I have not seen the fact of my own selfishness, I will not be able to grasp what my selfishness previously blocked me from seeing. Gadamer and Cavell's account of reading literary texts opens up the possibility, after gaining increased clarity about oneself, of these other ways of knowing.

Even if it is conceded that Gadamer and Cavell have successfully established how art enables self-knowledge, though, one might still worry that their theory legitimates the imposition of subjective meanings onto a text. Even if the reader recognizes something about herself in reading, this does not thereby imply that she has learned anything genuinely true *about the text*. This second criticism suggests that Gadamer and Cavell's account involves imposing the reader's experience onto a text while illegitimately claiming that such subjective truths apply also to the text. This emphasis on the objective side of interpretation has a long history in hermeneutical theory, and is powerfully instantiated in Friedrich Schleiermacher's methodological recommendation: "One should not unconsciously or indirectly think possible for him [the author] what is only possible for us One should not attribute our material to his."²⁴ This criticism would suggest that Cavell and Gadamer fail to provide a method for successful interpretation in their phenomenology of reading.

In response to this concern, one might respond that Gadamer and Cavell describe just one particular mode of reading, namely instances in which reading involves startling personal self-realizations. Their conception may not necessarily exclude other, more objective forms of textual interpretation, such as the reconstruction of an author's intention, but rather constitutes a specific phenomenological account of one particular way reading takes place. Unfortunately, both thinkers complicate this possibility: Cavell identifies interpretation with "reading and being read," while Gadamer claims "there is in principle no radical separation between the work of art and the person who experiences it."²⁵ These claims may sound implausible, but they still can be defended.

To get down to basics, for Gadamer and Cavell, the defining feature of the experience of art is that, as Gadamer puts it, "communication really occurs (*wirklich vollbringt*)" between text and reader.²⁶ The artwork speaks to us as if we are in dialogue with it. Such an account of reading is not hopelessly subjective, for three reasons. First, as described earlier, in reading, we acquire genuine knowledge. Reading teaches me, as Cavell says, "that one among the endless true descriptions of me represents *the* truth of me, tells me who or what I am."²⁷ For Gadamer and Cavell, reading does not produce unreliable information, but rather justified true beliefs about the reader's real self. The worry about subjective meanings begins to fade as soon as it is grasped that reading conveys real truths. Next, the acquisition

of knowledge that takes place in reading involves objectifying one's experience. Gadamer argues that the artwork "transforms our fleeting experience into the stable and lasting form of an independent and internally coherent creation."²⁸ Gaining self-knowledge via the text forces the reader to see herself from a new perspective. In reading, she steps back from her own fleeting, confusing and unreliable point of view, and sees herself in a new light thanks to the text's perspective. This "stable and lasting form" provides a third-person understanding of the self that could not be seen before, but which the literary text now affords. Cavell claims that gaining self-knowledge involves "[making] oneself an other to oneself."²⁹ Reading forces the reader to see herself from a third-personal standpoint, such as when Auden's poem afforded me a glimpse into my experience with love that I could not have gained otherwise. Cavell and Gadamer do not equate reading with subjective impositions onto a text because they think the text forces us to see who we are in a more genuinely accurate light. Finally, it is only by reading and engaging with the text itself that the reader recognizes herself in it. To gain self-knowledge, the reader comes to see herself from the perspective that reading provides only once she hears what the text has to say. It is by hearing the experience of the speaker in a poem or of the characters or narrator of a story that the reader gains a new perspective on who she is. The self-knowledge reading provides is gained by engaging with the text, forcing us to go beyond ourselves in an encounter with a hermeneutical object so as to better understand who we are.

Cavell and Gadamer's phenomenology of reading provides a compelling and powerful account that validates reading literary texts as a form of knowing. These two writers share a substantively similar and phenomenologically sensitive account of reading that can withstand critical scrutiny. If this essay has persuasively made that case, then this fact suggests not only the promise of debate between this account and other positions in contemporary aesthetics about the relationship of art and knowledge, but also the need to put Cavell and Gadamer into dialogue with each other. Cavell's thinking, with its roots in Emerson, Thoreau, Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language Philosophy, converges with Gadamer's hermeneutics in a remarkably similar phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience. These connections invite further investigation.

Notes

1. Iser, "The Reading Process," 288.
2. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 51/*Gesammelte Werke* 8, 141; and Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 57.
3. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 101/*Gesammelte Werke* 8, 6.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 12.
6. Auden, *Selected Poems*, 112, line 7.
7. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 52.
8. See note 3.
9. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 57.
10. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 83/*Gesammelte Werke* 1, 102.
11. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 47; and Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 84/*Gesammelte Werke* 1, 103.
12. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxxvi.
13. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 478/*Gesammelte Werke* 1, 487.
14. Anonymous, "The Oldest Systematic Programme," 4.
15. Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," 606.

16. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 114; Gadamer, "A Letter from Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer," 262.
17. Gadamer and Cavell qualify as what James Harold calls "weak" literary cognitivists who accept only non-propositional knowledge gained via literature. See "Literary Cognitivism," 382–93.
18. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 37–70/*Gesammelte Werke 1*, 48–87.
19. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 252–3.
20. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 15/*Gesammelte Werke 8*, 106.
21. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1–44.
22. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 53.
23. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 95/*Gesammelte Werke 8*, 1.
24. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 263.
25. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 51; and Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 28/*Gesammelte Werke 8*, 119.
26. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 52/*Gesammelte Werke 8*, 142.
27. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 388.
28. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 53/*Gesammelte Werke 8*, 142.
29. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 459.

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