



Book Review

The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature, by Peter Kivy

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We need a modest attitude, recognizing that ‘science is well done without metaphysics.’ But this does not imply the unambitious attitude of simply accepting the results of science for metaphysical questions. We must have an own domain of questions and an own method in order to be, at the same time, ‘modest but ambitious.’ How we achieve these aims, is not an easy matter, but it is clear for Hofweber that the appeal to esoteric terminology (like Schaffer’s ‘priority,’ or Fine’s ‘reality’) is not the best option.

The book is without doubt one of the most substantial publications in metaphysics and its methods in recent years. One last very positive aspect of the book is its unity: the reader constantly feels the pleasant tension of the dispute between deflationists and anti-deflationists. Both sides are well represented. And, different from many other books, it is clear that all the authors are engaged in directly answering to each other. This becomes especially clear by the great number of mutual cross-references. ‘Talking past each other’ is one of the main diagnoses of deflationists against practicing metaphysicians, but by no means applicable to the authors in this book.

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The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature, by Peter Kivy. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, xiii + 155 pp.

The philosophy of literature is typically concerned with the theory of literary creation, the ontology of literary works, or the theory of literary reading. *The Performance of Reading* offers a theory of literary reading. The book contains thirty-five titled short sections.

The main thesis presented is that the reading of literary fiction, including the silent reading of fictional works such as novels, is a performance. The theory is meant to be descriptive of the practice of reading, as opposed to being normative: it is ‘a *descriptive* claim about how we, at least some of us, *do* read [literary works]’ (p. 2). But the theory appears to be, as the author admits, counterintuitive. Kivy’s project is to show that the appearance is misleading and that the thesis is plausible.

Kivy explores the analogy between reading and performing, and he construes the reading of literary works as similar to the ancient rhapsode's action of performing literary pieces. His analysis focuses on the most difficult case for the theory: the silent reading of a novel. Kivy wishes to demonstrate that even this consists of a performance, albeit one that is 'in the head.' The model he frequently invokes is the rhapsode in Plato's dialogue *Ion*. Not uncontroversially, Kivy sees Plato's rhapsode not only as a performer but also as a commentator on Homer's work, and he understands the reading of novels accordingly, as a mental performance consisting of both enacting and commenting upon the text: 'an illuminating way of characterizing the silent novel-reading experience is as a performance in the head of a rhapsode who, like Ion, not only tells a story but comments on its philosophical, moral, or other content' (p. 121).

Kivy defends his core thesis in four main ways. The first is to appeal to historical considerations, and to claim that literature has been, throughout its history, fundamentally a performative art. The second is to draw an analogy between the silent reading of literary fiction and the reading of musical scores by highly competent musicians. Thirdly, Kivy believes his thesis has the merit of allowing us to see the ontology of literature as similar to the ontology of music: both literature and music can be seen as performative art forms, as opposed to painting and sculpture (Kivy's examples), which are not performative. The fourth reason cited in favour of the core thesis is that it accords with Kivy's own experience of reading (p. 135).

In Section 13, Kivy identifies some 'predecessors' who have either defended or at least 'entertained the idea' (p. 47) of an analogy between the silent reading of literary fiction and the reading of a musical score. This analogy is central to the defence of Kivy's core thesis. He acknowledges that various philosophers have considered the same thought, although not at length. Kivy mentions Edward T. Cone, Nelson Goodman, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Richard Shusterman, Richard Wollheim and J.O. Urmson. Goodman's discussion is addressed in some detail. In particular, Kivy rejects Goodman's view that in literature the text produced by the author is 'ultimate,' whereas 'a score is a means to performances in music' (*Languages of Art*, p. 114, quoted by Kivy, p. 47). Smith, according to Kivy, holds the same thesis as Kivy's, but claims that what the reader of silent reading performs are 'pseudo-sounds,' and Kivy disputes this. Shusterman is cited because he argues that the silent reading of literary

fiction is not essentially a performance because it is a private event, thereby not being open to be criticized, as performances such as musical ones are. Kivy's reply is that the reading of musical scores by highly competent musicians is a performance itself (although a mental one) because it is '*potentially* hearable in that another token of its type, that is, the *performance's* type, could be produced in the normal way, and criticized in the normal way' (pp. 50-51). If that is accepted, the view that silent reading of literary fiction is a performance becomes 'at least initially plausible' (p. 51). Furthermore, Kivy adds, the reading of a novel can also be publicly performed and thereby the performance can be publicly criticized. Wollheim's view, which focuses on the case of poetry, an art form more easily understood as performative, is addressed at some length. Wollheim at least considers, '*as a possibility*' (p. 55), that if we accept that in an opera the tokens are the performances, not the printed score, then tokens of a literary work could be its performances, rather than copies of the text: 'if we insist that it is the performances of the opera that are the tokens, then, it is argued, it must be the many readings or "voicings" of the poem that are its tokens' (*Art and Its Objects*, pp. 69-70, quoted by Kivy, p. 54). Urmson's position, according to Kivy, is that literature is in an important way like music, and unlike painting or sculpture, in that it involves the performance of a score. But for Urmson the score is equated with a 'recipe,' and so the silent reading of a musical score is not understood as a full musical performance of the work. Accordingly, the analogy Urmson sees between reading and playing to oneself is limited. Kivy quotes, from an essay by Urmson entitled 'Literature,' the suggestion that 'in reading a literary work to oneself, one is simultaneously performer and audience, just as when one plays a piece of music to oneself' (p. 56). But Kivy wishes to go further and construe score reading, and ultimately the silent reading of novels, as a complete performance to oneself. His main argument for this thesis is put forward very clearly:

if the optimal score reader can get a full performance in the head — then, if we are to press to its ultimate conclusion the analogy between silent reading of musical scores and silent readings of novels, we will have to be prepared to accept the notion that what silent reading of the novel produces in the head is a performance in the fullest sense of the word. (pp. 58–59)

Kivy considers five main possible objections to his view that the silent readings of novels are performances. Three of them are presented in Section 19. The first is that silent readings of literature are 'private events' (p. 76), and so they cannot be objects of perception; but works of art are objects of perception; so silent readings cannot be works of art. Kivy replies by giving the example of Mozart's compositions 'in his head,' which only later were written into a score. His claim is that the works existed prior to being scored. The second objection is that silent readings of literature are 'ordinary, everyday sorts of things' (p. 77), and so they do not have the special status we usually give to works of art. Kivy's reply is that some are indeed artistic readings, and 'performance *works of art*' (p. 83). The example he gives is of an actor's out-loud reading of *Jane Eyre*, and the actor's previous reading of the same work in silence. Kivy suggests that the latter is as plausibly a performance as a conductor's reading of a score prior to a concert. The third objection is related to the second: readers of literature are ordinary people, and so they do not have the special status we usually give to artists. The reply similarly proceeds by deflating the thesis, by claiming that at least *some* readers are artistic readers. The fourth objection is that it seems 'really weird to suggest that (say) in reading silently to myself *Pride and Prejudice* I am appreciating, enjoying, *both* the novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, and my reading of *Pride and Prejudice* as well' (p. 83). In other words, the thesis seems true only concerning unusual circumstances in which someone is both appreciating the text and his own silent reading of the text. Kivy replies to this objection by granting that in many cases readers are not aware of their action of reading and they are only appreciating the work but he insists, although in a less vigorous way, that at least some performances '*can ... become an object of consciousness and appreciation much in the way a musical performance does*' (pp. 86-87). The fifth objection is that the analogy between novel and music appreciation does not hold, since we tend to read novels only once, whereas we tend to experience musical pieces various times (Section 21). Kivy replies that with respect to the art of painting, for example, we also tend to wish to experience the works repeatedly, and yet they are not 'performance works' (p. 88). So it seems that our wish to experience paintings again is not because they are performances, but because of something else. So the fact that we often wish to experience novels only once cannot be a reason to claim that novel-readings are not performances either. This is perhaps the

weakest of Kivy's arguments. That we look at paintings more than once shows that the experience of the paintings is worthwhile. That we listen to musical pieces more than once shows that the experience of the musical performance (if we wish to locate the work there) is worthwhile. So, indeed, that we usually attend to certain artworks repeatedly tells us nothing about the performative nature of those works: they might or might not be performances. But we usually read novels only once, whereas we at least do not mind attending more often to the same play, film or poem. This seems to indicate a disanalogy between the clearly performative arts and the case Kivy considers, which would be, as he admits, the least obviously performative of literary forms. Lack of 'repeatability' seems at odds with performative art forms. The fifth objection concerns the nature of the performance (Section 32): why see silent reading as *hearing* in the head, and not as *seeing* in the head? Kivy provides four replies to this question. First, the analogy Kivy makes is with the silent reading of musical scores by highly-trained musicians. Testimony and history show, he claims, that such exceptional human beings can hear entire pieces of music performed in their heads. Kivy invokes empirical evidence of this ability to hear in the mind 'far beyond the ability to see in the head' (p. 123). Second, Kivy claims that most people with schizophrenia have *auditory* (rather than visual or tactile) hallucinations. This leads him to suggest that 'auditory hearings in the head are so much more vivid and complete' (p. 124), so that the auditory imaginings appear to be (auditory) perceptions to the mentally ill. Third, many people, starting with Plato, 'have experienced their own thinking as the hearing of a voice in the head' (p. 124), and this seems corroborated by the connection many see between language and thought. Fourth, the pace of reading aloud seems to equal roughly the pace of thinking, whereas 'the pace of visual imagining in the mind does not' (p. 124).

Some important problems, however, remain, I believe, concerning the proposal that the silent reading of literary fiction is best seen as a performance. The author uses the words 'absurd,' 'weird,' and 'bizarre' to characterise the appearance of his own thesis, in anticipation of scepticism. A powerful objection is expressed with perfect clarity by Kivy himself, in the crucial Section 19:

If silent readings of fictional works are analogized to musical performances, then they should be seen as art works ... They are 'versions' of

the works they are readings of, which is to say, performances of; and, by consequence, art works in their own right, apart from the literary works they are readings, performances of. And surely that seems highly counterintuitive, if not absurd. Why? (p. 76)

The author asserts that these performances are works of art and, to my understanding, he does not entirely reply to the objection. The only plausible solution he gives to this problem involves weakening his thesis and claiming that the silent readings of (say) novels *can* be performance art works.

Finally, the author seems to neglect that the reader, even if he is a performer, is also his own audience. Intuitively, this status as consumer, rather than creator, is fundamental to his being a reader. Kivy acknowledges this intuition, but to me at least, it is not entirely clear as to how his account accommodates it. If we are to abandon it in favour of a theory of literary reading with which it clashes, then that theory ought to be highly compelling.

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Relative Truth, edited by Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 314pp.

The book is the result of the international workshop ‘Relativizing Utterance Truth’, held in Barcelona in September 2005. The high quality of the essays and the varieties of approaches to an issue that is gathering momentum make this volume an essential read for everyone who wants to work seriously on relativism, especially within semantics and philosophy of language.

The overall purpose of the collection is the attempt to understand whether and how certain linguistic data that come from ordinary communication support relativism and impose certain constraints on how one should do semantics. There is a general agreement between philosophers that relativism is invoked in order to explain away certain apparent contradictions that generate in disputes about some domains of discourse — for instance, between speakers who hold apparently irreconcilable gustatory points of view — in a way that avoids the attribution of error to either side. This phenomenon is called ‘faultless disagreement’; most of the essays in this collection