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Stanley Cavell's Philosophical Literary Criticism. An Outline of Method

**Filozoficzna krytyka literacka Stanleya Cavella.
Zarys metody**

Abstract

An American philosopher Stanley Cavell (1926–2018) is one of those philosophers who, consciously starting from the assumption of the mutual complementarity of philosophy and literature, develop their theoretical reflection at the meeting point of both these fields and treating their reflection as a form of writing. In Cavell's opinion, literature is in no way inferior to philosophy in terms of its cognitive values. He goes so far as to question the validity of the rigid, insurmountable division into these two areas, and describes his own writing as epistemic criticism which is a kind of philosophical literary criticism. Although he comes from the analytical school, Cavell remains extremely critical of this tradition of philosophizing, accusing it, as he puts it, of "forgetting the human voice", losing touch with reality and being alienated from life and in the result calling analytical philosophy "the discipline most opposed to writing, and to life". At the same time, he turns to the continental tradition and tries to combine these two different intellectual traditions on the basis of his considerations. In this way, Cavell places himself at the intersection of various intellectual currents. His area of interest is also extremely wide and varied, including philosophy, literature, film, theater and music.

In my article I intend to focus on a few chosen aspects of Cavell's work that is still not recognized enough in academic studies, namely on the Cavell's use of philosophical concepts and chosen methods used by Cavell to analyze literary texts – the paraphrase method, the problem of the open work, the literalization of language method (in the context of Cavell's analysis of Beckett's *Endgame*), the problem of the ordinary connected with Cavell's version of the ordinary language philosophy (in the context of the chosen features of Wittgenstein's philosophy). In concluding part I also make some provisional remarks on Cavell's hermeneutics and also suggest that it could be fruitfully read in the context of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and his philosophy of the Other.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell, epistemological reading, philosophy of literature, philosophical literary criticism

Abstrakt

Stanley Cavell (1926–2018) jest jednym z tych filozofów, którzy świadomie wychodząc od założenia wzajemnego dopełniania się filozofii i literatury, rozwijają swą refleksję teoretyczną na przecięciu obu tych dziedzin, traktując ową refleksję jako formę pisarstwa. W opinii Cavella literatura w niczym nie ustępuje poznawczo filozofii w kategoriach wartości poznawczych. Cavell posuwa się nawet do zakwestionowania zasadności sztywnego, nieprzezwyciężalnego podziału na te dwie dziedziny, zaś własne pisarstwo określa mianem krytyki epistemicznej, będącej swego rodzaju krytyką literacką. Choć sam wywodzi się ze szkoły analitycznej, Cavell pozostaje niezwykle krytyczny wobec tej tradycji filozofowania, zarzucając jej, jak sam to ujmuje, „zapomnienie o ludzkim głosie”, utratę kontaktu z rzeczywistością, jak również wyalienowanie się z życia – ostatecznie nazywając filozofię analityczną „dyscypliną najbardziej obcą życiu i pisaniu”. Równocześnie sam zwraca się ku tradycji kontynentalnej, próbując połączyć te dwie odmienne tradycje intelektualne w ramach własnej refleksji filozoficznej. Tak oto Cavell sytuuje się na skrzyżowaniu rozmaitych obszarów i nurtów intelektualnych, zaś jego pole badawcze jest niezwykle szerokie i zróżnicowane – obejmuje filozofię, literaturę, film, teatr i muzykę. W niniejszym artykule zamierzam skupić się na kilku wybranych aspektach dzieła Cavella, nadal nie do końca rozpoznanych w ramach poświęconych mu studiów – takich jak użytek z pojęć filozoficznych oraz wybrane metody, wykorzystywane przez Cavella do interpretacji tekstów literackich, jak problem parafraz, metoda literalizacji języka (w kontekście Cavellovskiej analizy *Końcówki* Becketta), problem dzieła otwartego, zagadnienie zwyczajności związane z Cavellovską wersją filozofii języka potocznego (w kontekście wybranych cech filozofii Wittgensteina). Pod koniec tekstu kilka uwag poświęcam również hermeneutyce Cavella

i sugeruję kontekst, w jakim można ją powiązać z innymi nurtami filozofii, zwłaszcza z filozofią Innego, wypracowaną przez Emmanuela Levinasa.

Słowa kluczowe: Stanley Cavell, lektura epistemiczna, filozofia literatury, filozoficzna krytyka literacka

*Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?*¹

Stanley Cavell

Introduction

It is well beyond the scope of this article to present a more thorough outline of the methodological issues at play in Stanley Cavell's (1926–2018) hermeneutics, let alone an analysis of his writings or an even cursory discussion of his ideas. I will therefore limit myself to sketching out a brief outline of selected features of his philosophy and largely skip over the specific philosophical problems with which he grapples.

Choosing an appropriate methodological toolbox for the interpretation of Cavell's writings is far from a straightforward task. One would be hard-pressed to find another contemporary philosopher equally absorbed, if not infected, with literature; this preoccupation manifest itself even in his writing style, so distinct from what we would normally think of as typical philosophical discourse. Not only does Cavell continually navigate the borderlands between literature and philosophy (considering the two disciplines as adjacent), but he also explicitly investigates the presence and status of philosophical problems philosophical problems in literary (con)texts; he is avowedly interested in the scope and range of their mutual relationships and the mechanisms by which philosophical problems emerge within the fabric of a literary work (such as Shakespeare's or Beckett's). Cavell is keenly aware that the answer to these questions will vary depending on whether we take the perspective of a philosopher or a literary scholar.

In a monograph on Cavell, David Rudrum² aptly observes that in contrast to other authors working on the borderline between literature/criticism on the one hand and philosophy on the other, Cavell does

1 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 496.

2 David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), 4.

not couch his reflection in a technical jargon evocative of famous literary theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, or Bakhtin. Nor does he develop a method or theory of his own that could be accurately labeled as “Cavellism”. Although he does rely on certain textual strategies, they never determine his interpretation of the works to which he turns his attention. Cavell himself described his highly idiosyncratic “method” of literary analysis as “epistemological reading”, and his writing as “philosophical literary criticism”;³ on the margins of his book on Shakespeare, he openly confessed that, ultimately, he was not really sure who he was writing for: lovers of philosophy or fans of literature.⁴

Literature or philosophy

In his fundamental work, *The Claim of Reason*,⁵ which serves as a sort of intellectual background, methodological toolbox, and point of departure for his later thinking, Stanley Cavell writes:

Some say that philosophy is literature, some say it is science, some say it is ideology, some say it doesn't matter which of these, if any, it is.⁶

Elsewhere he writes:

My motivation, as far as I can remember, has been to write. In music, it was to write. When music fell apart for me, it's not exactly that I thought the writing I did was bad. I felt it wasn't anything I was saying, just something I had learned to do. The road that took me to philosophy was an attempt to discover a way to write that I could believe.⁷

There is no doubt that what we encounter in Cavell is a kind of philosophical and literary syncretism, or, to use a term coined by Zofia Zarębianka, *dispersed philosophy*, i.e. a form of writing in which philosophy itself, far from systematic in its ambitions, is equal to, permeates,

3 Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

4 *Ibidem*, 4.

5 Por. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 6.

6 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), vii.

7 Giovanna Borradori, “American Philosopher. An Apology for Skepticism”, in: *eadem*, *American Philosopher. Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 126.

and sometimes dominates over the literary layer of the text. Authors who write in this way infuse the literary matter of their text with philosophical meaning.⁸ What seems to be at stake here is a kind of philosophy as described by Richard Rorty:

Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is limited, as is any literary genre, nor by form or matter, but by tradition.⁹

In a similar vein, in one of his minor texts, entitled *The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself*,¹⁰ in which he analyzes the style of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell observes that none of the available philosophical theories of aesthetics allow for a sufficient, much less exhaustive, appreciation of the literary qualities of Wittgenstein's text; likewise, none allow to establish the mutual relationship that holds between its literary form and what Cavell refers to as a "philosophical work". Conversely, there exists no critical literary aesthetics that we can fall back on to fully express and articulate the philosophical value of Wittgenstein's work, let alone elucidate the symbiotic relationship that holds between the philosophical dimension of *Philosophical Investigations* (or, for that matter, Shakespeare's plays)¹¹ and the highly unconventional use they make of literary conventions. Why? Because, argues Cavell, Wittgenstein and Shakespeare create their very own aesthetics therefore both Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Shakespeare's dramas can be studied in terms of an "aesthetics of itself".¹² The literary value of a brilliant philosophical text, Cavell argues, is something universal, because

8 See a definition of "dispersed philosophy" in: Zofia Zarębianka, "Filozofia wobec literatury. Literatura wobec filozofii. Warianty wzajemnych odniesień. Rekonesans", *Filosophija* 34 (2016): 144.

9 Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: an Essay on Derrida", in: *idem, Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 92.

10 Stanley Cavell, "The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself", in: *The Literary Wittgenstein*, eds. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer (London–New York: Routledge, 2004).

11 Por. Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of literature*, 52.

12 „Cavell explains it as follows: „I describe what I am after as the *Investigations'* everyday aesthetics of itself to register at once that I know of no standing aesthetic theory that promises help in understanding the literariness of the *Investigations* (...) and to suggest the thought that no work will be powerful enough to yield this understanding of its philosophical aims aside from the *Investigations* itself". Cavell, "The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself", 21.

“the literary is essential to the power of philosophy, at some stage the philosophical becomes, or turns into, the literary”.¹³

Why, then, at the risk of oversimplification, is a work like Cavell's better described as philosophical rather than literary? Possible criteria might include language, style, and the method by which it formulates its problems.¹⁴ Let us have a brief look at some of the characteristic features of Cavell's writing style.¹⁵

Language, style, method

In Cavell's writings, one can identify several underlying assumptions about the fundamental goals of any linguistic *communication*: aside from its truth content (i.e. the broad and thus rather problematic criterion of interpretive validity), communication should be effective, that is, based on a range of persuasive techniques; above all, however, it should stimulate and inspire readers to perform their own *independent* text analysis. To achieve this end, Cavell frequently resorts to various ingenious methods, including literary devices, such as original, often ambiguous metaphors that always “give food for thought”, but may seem highly problematic in an analytical, academic text. Cavell also employs strictly philosophical methods from the toolkit of ordinary language philosophy, especially those borrowed from J.L. Austin, whose program Cavell alludes to in his formula: “what we should say when”.¹⁶

Thus, Cavell's language abounds in neologisms, linguistic and syntactic mannerisms, as well as unobvious metaphors and other typically literary stylistic and rhetorical devices, usually absent from the language

13 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary, Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 109. In “The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself” Cavell writes: “Part of my sense of the *Investigations* as a modernist work is that its portrait of the human is recognizable as one of the modern self, or, as we are given to say, the modern subject”. Cavell, “The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself Aesthetics of Itself”, 25.

14 Used in reference to fiction writers, the word “method” may seem rather out of place, but it may be warranted, if only for those whose prose is highly discursive in style, while still clearly identifiable as literature on account of its artistic value. Such authors would include, for instance, Marcel Proust and Robert Musil.

15 For more information on the methodology of research on the mutual relationships between literature and philosophy, see also: David Rudrum, “Introduction – Literature and Philosophy: The Contemporary Interface”, in: *Literature and Philosophy. A Guide to Contemporary Debates*, ed. David Rudrum (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

16 John Langshaw Austin, “A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 57 (1956–1957): 1–3.

of philosophical exposition, including rhetorical and stylistic devices that verge on the incomprehensible, no less because of Cavell's experimental, multilevel syntax.¹⁷ His writing is not so much a straightforward exposition as a linguistic experiment that often brings to mind the formal experiments of modernist prose rather than a traditional philosophical essay. Cavell's language is also highly subjective, often dominated by a confessional tone (it is by no means accidental that some of the texts he alludes to include St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Thoreau's intellectual autobiography, *Walden*¹⁸), drawing on his individual experience and reading.¹⁹

The literary vs the philosophical. The problem of the open work

If we accept that the structure of a literary work is open, dialogic, based on ambiguity and metaphor, and that it retains its essential indeterminacy before it takes a specific shape in our mind, which gives readers ample leeway for subjective interpretation, these qualities may also be tentatively applied to the literary-philosophical prose of Cavell himself. This holds especially true for those works in which he analyzes a literary text but, as if on purpose, leaves it up to the readers to decide on its interpretation. One of such Cavellian strategies is to merely propose, rather than impose, a reading; the goal is to inspire readers and open up a field of possibility, where they can come up with readings of their own. Cavell's interpretations can be said to sensitize readers to the interpretive potential of literature. However, Cavell's interpretive essays themselves exhibit the stylistic features of an open work. As proposed readings of literary questions or issues, they produce interpretive problems in their

17 A case in point is the opening sentence of the first chapter of *The Claim of Reason*, which takes up half a page. *Disowning Knowledge* can also be considered as an experiment in style and language.

18 See: Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*: 22. Cf. idem, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972).

19 In one of his autobiographical passages, Cavell writes in his characteristic style: (...) „So I philosophized as continuously as I could, incorporating literary texts when they would insist, and whatever of the literary came into my manner, without embarrassment (lines and images from Wordsworth, Yeats, Blake, Shakespeare, Dickens, Melville, Kafka, Conrad, Mann, Proust, and so forth had impressed me, say, become unforgettable for me, before philosophy had, or rather, before I was taught differences between literature and philosophy), and I periodically offered as a sort of overriding justification of my practices—or rather as a source of coherent tips to reading the results of such efforts—my readings of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* (...).” Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know. Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 460.

own right and thus potentially lend themselves to a similar analysis by readers²⁰.

To use a category proposed by Bakhtin, we can say that texts by Cavell the interpreter, as a reader of other authors, have a dialogic²¹ or open structure. We are dealing with a literary text and its reading at the same time, a reading that is ambiguous and open enough to warrant an interpretation of its own, a meta-text, as defined by Bakhtin, which involves the mutual interaction of distinct voices.²²

In this context, we might recall the distinction between “objectivizing language” and “poeticizing language”, introduced by Hans Blumenberg in *Speech Situation and Immanent Poetics*.²³ Poeticizing language is characterized by unstable syntax and shifting meanings, allowing for the previously mentioned “opening up” of interpretation. No wonder, then, that Cavell, who often opts for this particular interpretive strategy, puts his readers to test after test. He is often precariously poised on the verge of, and sometimes slides right into, incomprehensibility, the flip side of his interpretive suggestiveness. However, exegetic clarity or complete transparency are never his goal: he often circles around his subject as if to illuminate it from a variety of angles, drawing readers deeper and deeper into his complex narratives. Never does he outline the problem

20 Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). In this sense, an analysis of Cavell’s writings as open texts would overlap with the problem of the legitimacy of their interpretations. Thus, the initial problem becomes significantly more complex: an open work under analysis is interpreted within the horizon of another open work, that of the interpreter. See fn. 24.

21 When speaking of dialogism, I am referring to Bakhtin’s idea of the dialogism in literature. Cf. dialogue in Dostoyevski in Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

22 Cavell’s theory of voice, here understood also as the author’s attempt to look for his own truth in an analyzed text by giving it its own voice back, is a way of knowing, not only in the sense of textual interpretation, but also in the sense of self-knowing, i.e. Cavell’s attempt to hear the voice of Cavell the interpreter, as he analyzes a given work of literature or philosophy. A good case in point is his interpretation of Beckett’s *Endgame*: in this text, Cavell interweaves his analysis of the play with a discussion of the philosophical problems that are of interest to him personally. As a result, the text and the meta-text continually interpenetrate each other. See also: Timothy Gould, *Hearing things* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 53–84, which contains an extensive discussion of Cavell’s category of voice in the whole spectrum of its meanings.

23 See: Hans Blumenberg, “Speech Situation and Immanent Poetics (1966)”, in: *idem, History, Metaphors, Fables* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

at hand in a straightforward manner; Cavell always thinks along with his writers.²⁴

Selected features of Cavell's interpretive strategies. The paraphrase method

All this, however, does not mean that there are no elements that could be reliably identified as part of a typical Cavellian interpretive strategy. To the contrary. Firstly, Cavell makes a distinction between research *intuition* and research *hypothesis*, and understands his own reflections as an instance of the former.²⁵ He does not usually develop a single interpretive intuition around the analyzed work, but rather tests out (“testing” is one of his favorite words²⁶) a variety of intuitions at the same time, searching for an appropriate tone and a voice best suited to articulate them.²⁷

While a hypothesis requires some kind of *proof* or *evidence* in the strict sense of the word, an intuition calls not for proof but for a kind of *understanding*, informed by an intuitive insight into the meaning of the text at hand.²⁸ Thus, for instance, Cavell's hypothesis that Shakespeare anticipates skepticism is not really a research hypothesis, but an interpretive intuition. It is not a hypothesis because there is not, and cannot be, any incontrovertible evidence to clearly demonstrate that Shakespeare indeed (strictly speaking) “analyzes” a model of that or another cognitive attitude (e.g. skepticism) in his plays.²⁹

As an example of interpretive intuition, Cavell proposes an analogy between the skeptical reasoning of Descartes' *First Meditation* and the narcissism of the quintessential Shakespearean skeptic, Othello.³⁰ This also serves as a good example of Cavell's paraphrase method, discussed in greater depth elsewhere, which allows him to create what one of his scholars referred to as the “models of skepticism”,³¹ exemplified by

24 Por. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*: 1–15.

25 Cf. Magdalena Filipczuk, “Epistemological Reading: Stanley Cavell's Method of Reading Literature”, *Estetyka i Krytyka The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 43/4 (2016): 65–83.

26 *Ibidem*, e.g.: p. 4, p. 179.

27 The specific, vaguely musical rhythm of Cavell's syntax is pointed out, for instance, by Gould in *Hearing Words*, 58–67. Cf. Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, viii.

28 Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 4.

29 *Ibidem*, 5.

30 *Ibidem*, 125–143.

31 Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and The Claim of Literature*, 57.

Shakespeare's tragedy.³² In Cavell's interpretation, Othello, for instance, is a personification of Cartesian skepticism, while Desdemona plays a role analogous to that of the Cartesian God.³³

At this juncture, we may ask ourselves about the status of this labyrinthine method and its reliance on analogical reasoning. How far can we reasonably go in welding together ideas as remote and distinct as, on the one hand, a strictly epistemological hypothesis, formulated by a philosopher (in this case, Descartes) to support an argument, and, on the other, a poetic, by no means obvious, version of skepticism that Cavell interprets out of a Shakespearean tragedy? It seems that the ontologies of these two worlds, i.e. the real world, which is the focus of ontology and metaphysics in the Cartesian experiment on the one hand, and the depicted world of a poetic work on the other, are completely incommensurable.³⁴ To what extent, if any at all, can we then apply Cartesian methodological skepticism as an interpretive key to one of Shakespeare's multifaceted literary metaphors?³⁵

The dilemma is not resolved by Cavell's own admission that he is engaged in "philosophical literary criticism", since, speaking in Kantian terms, doubts can arise as to the very conditions of possibility of such "philosophical literary criticism" in the first place. The meta-level on which Cavell moves thus sends us off to yet another meta-meta-level, always shrinking from any final act or exhaustive understanding of the work at hand.

Cavell is fully aware of the difficulties inherent in his interpretive program. In anticipation of such objections to his method, and, in particular, in order to refute the charge that he treats "philosophizing" literature as a certain form of philosophical "illustrationism", he writes:

32 Cf. Michał Filipczuk, „Szekspir a sceptycyzm. Otello w interpretacji Stanleya Cavella”, *IDEA – Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych* 29/1 (2017): 240–263. Othello is but one of such "literary models of skepticism". The others are *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *The Winter's Tale*, which are also extensively analyzed by Cavell in *Disowning Knowledge*.

33 *Ibidem*. Cf. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 125–135.

34 As noted by G.L. Bruns, "What Othello and Descartes have in common is that, in order to overcome, or destroy, their doubt (...) they are willing to give up (in Othello's case, kill) the world, call it the other, or the body, or the human". Gerald L. Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare", *Critical Inquiry* 16/3 (1990): 614.

35 The problem discussed here is not put to rest by Cavell's argument that "the tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of" (Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 6), which suggests a certain parallelism, an analogy between two spheres: the tragic sphere and reality as conceived of by the skeptic. The postulate that such analogy obtains is not a satisfactory solution, since the analogy as such is problematic and its legitimacy may be questioned.

The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean text, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance.³⁶

Elsewhere, he observes that:

(...) the burden of my story in spinning the interplay of philosophy with literature is not that of applying philosophy to literature, where so-called literary works would become kinds of illustrations of matters already independently known. It would better express my refrain to say that I take the works I am drawn to read out in public (beginning with those I have listed of Shakespeare) as studies of matters your philosophy has (...) intellectualized as skepticism, whether in Descartes's or Hume's or Kant's pictures of that inescapably, essentially, human possibility.³⁷

Toward the ordinary. The literalization of language

An important role in Cavell's methodology is played by a "turn to the ordinary", for which he is heavily indebted to Austin.³⁸ The postulate is part of the anti-philosophical, anti-metaphysical program of late Wittgenstein, who argues that traditional philosophy is based on a fundamental error: that of separating words from the meanings they have in colloquial language. Colloquial language is their proper domain. As such, words have no meaning other than the meaning we assign to them in everyday language, and any attempt to endow them with such exotic meanings, says Wittgenstein, results precisely in what philosophers have engaged in for centuries, i.e. philosophically sanctioned nonsense.³⁹

36 Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 1.

37 *Ibidem*, 179.

38 Cf. Cavell, *In quest of the Ordinary*, 3–15.

39 Cf. the famous remark about the "the bruises which the understanding has suffered by bumping its head against the limits of language" (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, Blackwell Publishers 1986, 23). However, the above statement should be qualified with two remarks by Wittgenstein himself: "The fundamental fact here is that we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, and that then when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. *That we are therefore as it were entangled in our own rules*" (PI, par. 125) Elsewhere Wittgenstein says: „When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation" (*Ibid.*, par. 500). It is not some fictitious meanings as such which are

To demystify such nonsense, including philosophical statements, such as those of “metaphysical” discourse, would be to bring language back to itself, as Wittgenstein puts it, i.e. to play “language games” consistent with our linguistic practice.⁴⁰

A Wittgenstein scholar observes:

In the later work, philosophical utterances “sublime the logic of our language” not because they gesture outward toward some ineffable but metaphysically significant realm beyond the ordinary. Rather, they are an effect of language’s failure to do so, to hint at anything truly metaphysical, truly beyond ordinary language games.⁴¹

This strategy closely corresponds to Cavell’s “turn to the ordinary”. Cavell himself acknowledges its affinities with late Wittgenstein and views it as the goal of liberating language from its pseudo-meanings, which seem to be especially the domain of metaphysics.⁴² In a text devoted to Beckett, Cavell writes:

The sort of method I try to use consistently in reading the play [Beckett’s *Endgame*], [is] one in which I am asking of a line either: What are the most ordinary circumstances under which such a line would be uttered? Or: What do words literally say.⁴³

This is where a certain difficulty arises, however. How does the postulate of “bringing language back to itself” square with the actual practice of various authors, not just philosophers, but also fiction writers? It seems that what literature does, after all, is this: it successfully processes and transposes everyday language into the realm of “deeper meaning” and, at the same time, breaks the conventions of preexisting language games

the root of nonsense in our language games – the meaning should not be treated as something essential or substantial. The root of nonsense is rather our improper use of the rules of language, our, as Wittgenstein puts it, „entangling” in them, misusing them in some or other way.

40 This is how we should understand the famous comment made by Wittgenstein: “What we do is lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*Philosophical Investigations*, par 116). Quoted after: Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 6.

41 James Noggle, “The Wittgensteinian Sublime”, *New Literary History* 27/4 (1996): 609.

42 Cavell, *The Pitch of Philosophy*: 6–7.

43 Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*”, in: *idem, Must We Mean What We Say. A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 121.

in such a way as to allow its own sublime language to refer and point to something beyond itself.

It is only if this condition is met, if the language of literature is specific and “non-ordinary”, that critics can claim that they have uncovered an occult, metaphorical meaning of a work, hidden beyond a facade of unambiguous, non-problematic meanings, i.e. that they have managed to decipher its “deeper” or “metaphorical sense”.⁴⁴

In his analyses of various works of literature, Cavell declares that, whenever possible, utterances must be interpreted using the methods of philosophy that studies how words are used in their natural element, i.e. colloquial language (as in the philosophical program proposed by J.L. Austin⁴⁵). The problem with this argument is that a method that applies the reductionist approach of colloquial language philosophy to some (albeit not all) literary texts, especially as sophisticated as those by Shakespeare, Emerson or, indeed, Cavell, necessarily poses certain difficulties and seems to be rather limited in application.

The minimalism of contemporary literature, such as Beckett's, no doubt warrants this approach to a greater extent.⁴⁶ In his analysis of Beckett's *Endgame*, Cavell attempts to defuse the tension between “the ordinary” and “the literary”, observing that what Beckett intends to do in this play is de-metaphorize the metaphors built into the very fabric of language, a strategy he refers to as a “literalization of meaning”.⁴⁷ The strategy is essentially anti-literary in its attempt to cut right through to the literal meanings of the language, which, according to Cavell, Beckett believes to represent the very residue of meanings as such.⁴⁸ This sheds a new light on Cavell's “turn to the ordinary”, which Simon Critchley describes as follows:

44 Cf. Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and The Claim*, 86.

45 Cavell argues: “How we “lead words back” to their everyday use may be said to be done by following Austin's apparently innocuous directive to ask ourselves what we say when (that is, in varying contexts)”. Cavell, *The Pitch of Philosophy*: 7. In the context of defining “ordinary language philosophy” Cavell writes: “There the problem is also raised of determining the data from which philosophy proceeds and to which it appeals, and specifically the issue is one of placing the words and experiences with which philosophers have always begun in alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words. This is all that ‘ordinary’ in the phrase ‘ordinary language philosophy’ means (...)”. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 42.

46 Cavell's interpretation of Beckett's *Endgame* is seen by some as the most clearly philosophical analysis of a contemporary work of literature (see: Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim*, 85–99).

47 Cavell, „*Ending the Waiting Game*”, 122.

48 *Ibidem*, 122–124.

The ordinary is the object of a quest, a task, something to be achieved and not an available fact (...) On Cavell's reading, Beckett is not telling us that the universe is meaningless, rather meaningfulness is a task, an achievement, the achievement of the ordinary or the everyday.⁴⁹

The key word here seems to be "achievement". The problem is that literalization, an attempt to de-metaphorize meaning, is tantamount to reductionism, which is fundamentally opposed to how everyday language "works", as the pragmatists would say. To reach down to a postulated primary, fundamental meaning would be to describe not actual language as it is used in communication, but a certain methodological postulate; it would not be a point of departure, but a point of arrival, achieved by an author after a long and arduous journey during which language has been gradually, analytically "purified"⁵⁰.

The same is true of Cavell: his concept of "the ordinary" is also no more than a postulate. As pointed out by Critchley, "the ordinary" is not an actual fact but a goal.⁵¹ At the same time, paradoxically, it opens up a space of possible reflection.⁵²

Cavell interprets the message of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in a similar vein when he observes:

Not, however, as if to this end we had to hunt out new facts, it is much more essential for our investigation that we want to learn nothing new from it. We want to understand something that is already open to view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand.⁵³

49 Simon Critchley, *Know Happiness – On Beckett*, 178–179. Quoted after: Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and The Claim*, 88.

50 Cf. Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim*, 99–98.

51 Por. Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 125–130.

52 Cavell writes: „Because the philosophy in question is one whose originality is partly a function of its stress on the idea of the ordinary or everyday, especially its way of allowing philosophy's return to what it calls the everyday to show that what we accept as the order of the ordinary is a scene of obscurity, self-imposed as well as otherimposed, fraudulent, you might say metaphysical (the thing Emerson calls conformity and Nietzsche calls philistinism), it links its vision with aspects of the portraits Kierkegaard and Marx and Heidegger and Walter Benjamin make of what Mill calls our mutual intimidation, what Proust, we might say, shows to be our mutual incorporation”. Cavell, „Introductory Note to Literary Wittgenstein”, in: *The Aesthetics of Itself*: 19.

53 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 89: 65. Quoted after: Cavell, “The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself”, 23.

On this view, philosophy would no longer be a way of discovering new truths, especially metaphysical truths, which, as Wittgenstein showed, do not exist. To the contrary, it would be a never-ending, inexhaustible quest to describe and understand the world.

The world in question, however, is not the world of philosophical fictions. Nor is it identical with the world unproblematically given to us in daily experience. Rather, it is a world given as a task, a riddle with no final solution, an inexhaustible source of mutually incompatible interpretations, bringing to mind Wittgenstein's metaphor of his own *Philosophical Investigations* as a "collection of field notes".⁵⁴ In his work, Wittgenstein does not aspire to any final conclusions, heuristic syntheses; he does not even propose to step beyond what is empirically given. In this context, Cavell quotes Wittgenstein's another well-known dictum:

Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is as it were hidden is of no interest to us.⁵⁵

Conclusions

An advantage of Cavell's thinking is that even though it may often be elusive and difficult to put in discursive terms, it opens up a horizon that transcends the simplistic dichotomy of philosophy and literature, showing that the relationship is complex and ridden with problems. In addition, the text as such, be it philosophical or literary, is the ultimate object of Cavell's hermeneutic manipulations. As observed by Gerald Bruns, Cavell's is a variety of Romantic hermeneutics, whose final goal is not so much to understand a text as to understand the Other *as* the Other. What is particularly Romantic in a hermeneutic program of this kind is the allegorical nature of its overarching desire to understand and capture the Other more fully even than one understands oneself, which can be achieved only by abandoning the standard definition of objectivity.⁵⁶

An ultimate point of reference for Cavell, one that goes beyond pure understanding, is sensitivity to the other person, prefigured by the Other of Levinas, as invoked by Bruns and Cavell himself.⁵⁷ The primary task that Cavell sets before his own philosophy, it seems, is to overcome the

54 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3.

55 Cavell, *The Pitch of Philosophy*, 5.

56 Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare": 621.

57 Cf. e.g.: Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 12.

difficulties on which we stumble in our attempts to transcend ourselves in our cognitions.

It is in this sense that the entire philosophical oeuvre of this American author, including his literary interpretations, expresses an attempt to step beyond the solipsistic “Self”. An apt metaphor for our imprisonment in the “ego” is the entrapment of our intellect in skepticism, as analyzed by Cavell,⁵⁸ the great believer in the humanist tradition.

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58 Cf. Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary*, 80–102.

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