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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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Aesthetic Education and Embodiment: Notes Toward a Cavellian Approach

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ABSTRACT. The talk outlines an alternative to the humanistic conception of aesthetic education inspired by the work of Stanley Cavell. Taking the form of philosophical therapy for entrenched Cartesian biases, this form of aesthetic education is understood as one possible option for constructing an aesthetic education based on embodied ontologies of human existence.

1. Introduction: The Philosophical Problem of Aesthetic Education

What we seem headed for is an idea that what can comprehensibly be said is what is found to be worth saying. (Cavell, 1979, p. 94).

My focus in this talk is the philosophical problem of aesthetic education (or the problem of aesthetic education for short). The most straightforward way of formulating this problem is this. On what conception of education can we take the encounter with artworks to be central to (or even decisive for) how the goals of such an education may be achieved?¹⁶⁴

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¹⁶⁴ I intend this formulation in a non-vacuous sense: one could propose that that only meaningful kind of education *is per se* one over the course of which students become interested in artworks, in which case we would be (vacuously) proposing a conception of aesthetic education in the sense intended. So, to be precise, one might need to add that the conception of education in question cannot itself have artistic engagement as its main goal. *Art in aesthetic education (perhaps paradoxically) must function as means to a different end.* (A way of dealing with this paradox would be to insist that art is the *right kind* of end in itself, i.e., the right means for *liberal* education, with "right kind" needing a definition other than in aesthetic terms to avoid circularity. As I briefly indicate below, in Schiller, for instance, engagement with art serves a political end.)

It is important to formulate the question in this abstract way because the term "aesthetic education" seems to be used in two distinct ways - practical and theoretical. On the one hand the term can be used simply to refer to the teaching of art-appreciation, and indeed this practical sense is its common use. By contrast, in a more philosophical sense aimed at in my definition, the term "aesthetic education" is meant to capture an idea of education for which the aesthetic experience is in some manner the key to achieving the goals of (liberal) education in general. A discussion of aesthetic education in the practical sense might provide powerful examples of critical discussion of artworks, while remaining vague, abstract, or indirect about the goals such engagement is meant to accomplish. On the other hand, the idea of aesthetic education in the theoretical or philosophical mode must focus on articulating what it is precisely that an encounter with artworks accomplishes for students, and how indeed the essence of such encounters fits the description of the goals of the proposed conception of education. By contrast with the practical idea of aesthetic education, a philosophical conception need not, at least in principle, concern itself with pedagogy or methodology at all.¹⁶⁵

It is obvious that a proper articulation of a philosophical conception of aesthetic education is quite an ambitious enterprise requiring at least three things each of which are difficult in themselves: an articulation of a philosophy of education¹⁶⁶, a full-blown philosophy of art, and an argument about how the two are connected or in some manner made for each other. It is precisely such an ambitious undertaking that is accomplished by the first formulation of a conception of aesthetic education in the Western context (from now on I will drop the cumbersome "philosophical theory of"), namely Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

¹⁶⁵ Most approaches mix the theoretical and the practical without quite dealing with this as a problem. The reason for this is that the distinction is much messier than it appears at first glance, as both the practical and theoretical approaches call on each other to some degree. Any seemingly purely practical recommendation for engaging with artworks will be operating with more general if perhaps not clearly articulated assumptions about what the ultimate usefulness of such an engagement will amount to in educational terms. On the other hand, no purely philosophical idea of aesthetic education can prove to be quite persuasive without at least gesturing towards some possible implementation. It is all fine to argue about the wonderful things art may do for us, but such arguments remain a bit abstract unless they fail to provide some indication as to how someone may be brought to such engagement who is not inclined to do so. While in this way it is true to say that the "what" and the "how" of aesthetic education are mutually dependent, the distinction between practical and theoretical in this context remains essential. I return to this problem below.

¹⁶⁶ It is notoriously difficult if not impossible to define the idea of liberal education in an uncontroversial way in the modern context, although I will propose an atypical way to do so in the conclusion to this article. For a historical survey, see, (Kimball, 2010).

While I will not be engaging in this article with the details of Schiller's conception, it is essential to provide the bare outlines to see how this idea of aesthetic education has been central to something called the humanistic idea (or ideal) of liberal education. The core of the humanistic idea of liberal education in turn is a concept of *inner transformation*, and its articulation is usually contextualized by a narrative about modern life. (This is already true about Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, as well as the other standard example of aesthetic education namely Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*.) According to this concept of transformation (or transformative learning) it is the mission of liberal education to provide learners with experiences that enable them to feel complete or whole *qua* human beings. The importance of providing such experiences is justified by the way modernity has imposed a division of labor and by consequence a division and "antagonism of faculties and functions" on human beings, which Schiller acknowledges at the same time as "the great instrument of civilization".¹⁶⁷ This fragmentation of the human psyche, due to external causes beyond the control of any individual or institution, is in turn claimed to have resulted in a kind of dehumanization characterizing everyday life, associated in turn with the danger of individuals undergoing stunted and one-sided development, and thereby failing to achieve their full potential as human beings.¹⁶⁸ The mission of liberal education is then to provide us with the means for re-humanizing ourselves: liberal learning supplies occasions whereby human beings can re-experience their full humanity, discovering and recovering their true potential for self-knowledge, change and fulfillment. Because works of art reconcile two fundamental aspects of human nature, the sensual and the intellectual sides, they are the best means (!) towards "educating" us about *what it would be like* to live a life that attempts to reconcile artificially severed aspects of our original nature, and to try to live up to what it means to be a human being in a higher (or more original) sense. Works of art, properly experienced, inspire us to look for further ways in which to integrate our capacities by means of providing us in and through the aesthetic experiencing of such works with working models, so to speak

¹⁶⁷ Schiller, 1982, p. 41.

¹⁶⁸ For Schiller this distorted or stunted condition may be described as a form of "barbarism" or as a form of "savagery": the first one represents an excess of intellect over the senses, while the latter a kind of loss of intellectual control over our desires. Schiller expresses this with a coloring of sentimentality: "Man can be at odds with himself in two ways: either as savage, when feeling predominates over principle; or as barbarian, when principle destroys feeling." (Schiller, 1982, p. 21).

of such experiences.

The most well-known problems with what I am calling the humanistic model pertain to humanism itself, i.e., its philosophical background and its implications. Humanism (or the philosophical outlook called liberal humanism) has undergone severe and in many ways' legitimate criticism over the last couple of decades at least on three grounds, all principally ideological. The first of these is a bias for constructing human identity based on Western values and the Western cultural tradition, as well for adherence to an associated conception of a canon. The second complaint is related to the first, with an emphasis on humanist universalism and rationalism failing to account for different ways of constructing and reflecting identity (by reference to racial and gender-based diversity, as well as physical disability), and the relevance of such experiences for understanding and valuing the human in less biased terms. The third major criticism stems from environmental philosophy, i.e., for the failure of humanism to *provide models for relating to nature that are based on other ideals than those of domination*.¹⁶⁹ *The net result of this intellectual climate together with the identification of aesthetic education as a philosophy of humanistic education has been to reject humanism, and together with it the possibility of aesthetic education altogether.* However, as I hope it is obvious from the formal definition of the idea of aesthetic education suggested above, this is by no means a matter of logical necessity. All the idea of aesthetic education requires is that there should be an ideal of liberal education operating in the background (the humanistic or a different one), and some argument as to why it is an engagement with artworks or an aesthetic encounter that is the best means towards achieving its proposed ends. That the philosophical essence of works of art is their capacity to present sense and intellect as reconciled is further one view of art, namely the Kantian one, and one should at least ask the question whether a different conception of the value of art (for understanding the human) could not naturally give rise to a different conception of aesthetic education.

The main goal of this article is to offer some ideas about how indeed such a different conception of art can be deployed for this purpose. The starting point for making this case for an alternative form of aesthetic education is provided by a further observation about the humanistic conception of art, namely that the ideological problems listed above in fact rest on

¹⁶⁹ *Nota bene*, all of these are legitimate charges with a vengeance against Schiller's *Letters*, give or take a willingness to forgive some of them based on contextual considerations.

deeper, ontological foundations, namely a form of Cartesian dualism or idealism shared by all humanistic conceptions. This is quite easily demonstratable in the case of Schiller, for whom art's very existence is a kind of evidence for the ultimate ascendancy of mind over matter, so to speak. It is of course much more difficult to demonstrate such a thesis about humanism in general, and I will not attempt it here. In fact, it is sufficient for my purposes to adopt the charge of idealism as a hypothesis, as it permits the reformulation of the main goal of this talk as follows: how can philosophies of art resting on non-dualistic assumptions about human nature give rise to a conception of aesthetic education?¹⁷⁰

Now, in fact there is a long and colorful tradition of anti-Cartesian (non-dualistic) philosophy in Western thought, and it is further striking that virtually all thinkers who can be identified as in some sense belonging to this tradition unanimously agree on the significance of art for confirming the truth of the embodied ontology of human existence.¹⁷¹ At the same time, it is perhaps no exaggeration that for most of these thinkers the significance of art does not go beyond serving as evidence for the confirmation of their philosophical views, rather than becoming an instrument of argument.¹⁷² What is further true is that virtually none of the thinkers we can identify as belonging to this tradition show any serious or explicit interest in education, or at least not in the kind of education that can take institutional form - and it would be particularly difficult to find thinkers of this persuasion for whom the educational context provides an essential link between their philosophical views about human existence and about art. The context of education, at best, while often held to be important, is mostly incidental in these accounts.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ At this point the concern with humanism may seem superfluous, but I hope it will gradually become clear as the argument proceeds why it isn't.

¹⁷¹ The tradition begins with Diderot and Herder, continues with Feuerbach and Marxism, and then branches interestingly into pragmatist, hermeneutic, existentialist, post-modernist, structuralist, post-humanist, critical-theory, psychoanalytical and ecological strands with lately even cognitive science coming to emphasize both embodiment and the significance of artistic production as a confirmation and expression of the embodied condition of human existence (a good summary of the latter state of affairs is (Crippen and Schulkin, 2020)). The specific art-historical tradition is also tied to modernism and the haptic/tactile conception of art. While Cavell's work incorporates many of these strands, it is surprising how little they each take notice of each other as representing a cultural shift in human self-perception. I predict that this is where it is headed, and liberal education has mission to take a leading role in piloting this shift.

¹⁷² This is even true about Merleau-Ponty's writings about modern painting in general and Cézanne in particular, even though his brand of existential phenomenology is perhaps the most thorough and powerful representative of what I am calling embodied ontology.

¹⁷³ One of the most powerful recent representatives of this tradition is Paul Crowther, who has also written importantly about liberal education. For the latter, see (Crowther, 2003).

All of these are large claims, and much more space would be needed to argue them properly than is available in this context. I am asking for the reader no more than to accept it as a hypothesis worth pondering. The point is that to build something like a theory of aesthetic education based on anti-Cartesian ontology we need a conception of art where artworks do not merely serve as evidence for or illustration philosophical views, but perform as participants in a philosophical dialogue that is available for the ordinary person seeking education in an ordinary context. Moreover, we need a conception of embodied ontology that is articulable in relatively simple terms in a way that is available for conversation. The closest we have to such a conception of art may be found in a relatively recent field of inquiry called film-philosophy whose spiritual instigator is Stanley Cavell. It is to his thoughts about aesthetic education that I now turn.

2. The Cavellian model

2.1 General remarks

The main claim of this section is that we can see such a model of aesthetic education emerging from Stanley Cavell's philosophy. This might seem paradoxical for Cavell is a notoriously difficult author, and therefore a reference to his work could appear to defeat the criteria of simplicity introduced above. However, I think that the insights to be gathered for educational purposes from a study of Cavell's works basically fall into three separable categories.

The first such insight is simply that *the right kind of conversations* about *the right kinds of works of art* conducted in the *right kind of educational setting* will result in an increased awareness on behalf of the participants of the falseness of Cartesian ontology, and of the difficulty of extracting ourselves from its hold on us. I try to say a bit more about the potentially profound transformational effects of such an insight in what follows.

The second set of insights concern organization and methodology. Cavell's works in fact give us both a tremendous amount of guidance as to what kinds of works of art (particularly film) can serve the purposes of such transformational conversations, as well as quite a substantial amount of methodological discussion about what kinds of questions (mostly concerned with the direct close reading of films and texts) can serve the purposes of these conversations. This "methodology" I would like to call medium-based philosophical criticism.

Thirdly (and this is perhaps the difficult part), Cavell's work is a profound study of the transcendental conditions (in the Kantian sense) for how and why the study of works of art (film in particular) can have the kind of effects just referred to. This is the aspect of Cavell's work that is most important for my purposes here to show the *possibility* of a type of aesthetic education based on embodied ontology. However, it is the nature of such transcendental arguments that they in fact serve a theoretical (or philosophical) purpose that is quite independent from the practice they seek to justify: once absorbed, such arguments assure us that a certain kind of practice works, but whether it does or not is independent of those arguments.¹⁷⁴ It is in this sense that I suggest Cavell's philosophy meets the criterion of simplicity or availability: the experience of the embodied ontology of artworks and human beings is indirect: it takes place in the context and as a result of the type of conversation I mentioned above.

2.2 Cavellian Transcendental Arguments for the Possibility of Aesthetic Education

If most of the arguments to be presented in this section are minimally inspired by, if not wholly due to Cavell, there is one aspect that I feel is new and Cavell should not be made to take responsibility for. This is the emphasis on the ontological significance of the classroom as a temporally and spatially limited meeting point of adult subjects (as well as experts and non-experts) for the purposes of having conversations of cognitive and potentially transformative value. The key idea here that part of what is made meaningful in the educational experience is the fact of convening physically together for this purpose - a successful meeting of the college classroom will in fact be transcendently determined (and underwritten) by as well as expressive of the embodied ontology of being human. In the ideal situation (and I am essentially arguing that it is to create such an ideal situation that works of art are indispensable) whatever meaningful happens during such a meeting will amount to an (indirect) expression of the fact of being physically i.e., bodily together in this educational context, and the *meaning* and *significance* of this fact for the nature of human community and self-knowledge.¹⁷⁵ The

¹⁷⁴ The best account of transcendental arguments in this generis sense may be found in Taylor, 1995.

¹⁷⁵ The best scholarly account of Cavell's philosophy along these lines is (Mullhall, 1994).

conversations had in such a context will amount to an indirect expression of our embodied ontology as human beings, and it is in terms of this "content" that they will achieve their transformative effect.¹⁷⁶

To see what kinds of arguments we may extract for this position from Cavell, it is worth noting first of all that a classroom (it is worth emphasizing again that we are talking about a college classroom, whose context is essentially created by fully responsible adult subjects joining that context of their free will) whose aim is to create meaningful conversation is readily described as having an aesthetic character even without any invocation of philosophy, Cavellian or otherwise: works of art are after all characterized by a coincidence of fact and value: reading a work of art consists precisely in recognizing and giving expression to meaningfulness of detail, where such meaningfulness is a condition for recognizing a part-whole or aspect relation altogether: nothing is strictly speaking an element of the work unless it contributes to its significance in some manner.¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, the kind of conversation ideally to be had in a class-room context must demonstrate precisely such a character. Most of Cavell's arguments in the first part of *The Claim of Reason* are in fact directed at showing that ordinary language has an intrinsically or naturally normative dimension, and it is basically only a false Cartesian ontology, i.e., a skeptically inflected way of thinking about language that makes us believe otherwise. Once we examine more closely how we use criteria in the everyday context, we will be, as Cavell writes "heading towards a view where what can be ordinarily said is what is found to be worth saying"¹⁷⁸. What these types of Cavellian insights enable us to do in turn is precisely to recognize the normal classroom environment as a natural candidate for a context that operates to the effect of re-normalizing, or re-naturalizing human verbal exchange based on nothing more than ordinary language and ordinary insight. It is this kind of

¹⁷⁶ An immediate objection to this idea could be that it rejects the possibility of online learning altogether. Once again, there is no space to argue against this objection in detail apart from mentioning that online presence very much involves an awareness of bodily existence - arguably even in a more enhanced manner. I nevertheless believe that the objection holds, although for different reasons. Not only are physical meetings requisite in my view for properly cathartic education to take place, ideally the artwork also needs to be materially present.

¹⁷⁷ It seems important to acknowledge that this is skirting a very difficult issue in philosophical aesthetics, or perhaps several different issues (part-whole relation; the ontology of works of art and how they differ from everyday objects, etc.). However, I am merely pointing out the intuitively obvious parallel between a well-functioning conversational class-room context and an object of aesthetic appreciation. The precise nature of this analogy is immaterial.

¹⁷⁸ It is worth noting that Cavell argues for the aesthetic character of ordinary language in a different way on the pages of *Must We Mean What We Say*.

recognition of the naturally normative character of ordinary speech (freed from skeptical inflection) what creates the possibility of the kind of conversations Cavell calls philosophical, which are described in what is probably the most well-known passage from *The Claim of Reason*:

In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me.

This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education. In the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau ..., we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy. In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups. It is as though it must seek perspective upon a natural fact which is all but inevitably misinterpreted - that at an early point in a life the normal body reaches its full strength and height. ... And for grownups this is not natural growth, but change. Conversion is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth.¹⁷⁹

That the transcendental condition for the possibility of these types of conversations is a defeat and inverting of Cartesian ontology is recognized very early on in Cavell's works.¹⁸⁰ However, it is the parallels between the *intentionality* of human speech, and the *intentionality* of works of art worked out in Cavell's later writings that provide the true transcendental grounds for the possibility of aesthetic education in the sense implied by the formal parallel or analogy between works of art and the class-room situation. For Cavell, engaging with a work of art is not a formal matter in the sense of having as its end-goal a kind of epiphany of speechless and purely sensual experience. Rather, it is the gradual discovery of how works of art intend their meaning; as he famously expresses it at one point: the central problem of aesthetics is how we can come to treat works of art as persons. Treating persons as persons on the other hand precisely consists in getting rid of our notions of Cartesian ontology, which essentially means "reading" the other

¹⁷⁹ Cavell, 1979, p. 125.

¹⁸⁰ Cf., the title essay of Cavell, 2002, besides being implied in the mysterious reference to the body in the quote above.

rather than inferring (or being skeptical about) an interior event determining "outer" events whether speech or gesture. As Cavell remarks at the conclusion of *Knowing and Acknowledging*: "I know your pain the way you do."¹⁸¹ *The Claim of Reason* is a sustained exploration of this issue, and it is for good reason that it has the structure it has with its seemingly endless procession of examples: Cavell's main insight here is that no amount of general philosophical explanation can bring us to recognize how the way we normally go about identifying intention is misguided. Given the depth to which this is part of our mental make-up and culture, we need an infinite amount of "training" based on specific contexts to attain some kind of transformation of our perception. However, within the bounds of this effort Cavell's later work increasingly comes to the realization that works of art (again: film in particular) play a special role. Perhaps the best example for this in Cavell's essay in *Must We Mean What We Say, A Matter of Meaning It*, and the extended discussion there of an interpretation of Fellini's *La Strada*: As Cavell explains, identifying the intention of *La Strada* as proposing a new version of the Philomel myth is fundamentally independent of the question of whether Fellini consciously had the myth in mind in the course of making the film. Yet, at the same time, it would be equally false to talk about the intentionality of the work of art as somehow independent of the intention of its author. Cavell's point is precisely that the latter is what gets us into false (Cartesian) ontology and a false, causal theory of the relationship of the inner and the outer.¹⁸² What needs recognition or acknowledgement is that our natural or normal way of understanding intentionality must be freed up from false assumptions about causality: our access to such intentionality is precisely through interpretation rather than external "philosophical" assumptions about how it is meant to work. All this means of course, that even though our experiencing of the meaning of the work will be one based on how intention really operates in natural way, it will nevertheless remain indirect: *by engaging with works of art (so far: films) in the right kind of way in conversation we will be living our embodied ontology both vis a vis these works and vis a vis each other in a way that is not normally available to us in everyday existence thoroughly permeated by Cartesian assumptions.*

The words "everyday" and the "ordinary" are keywords as they are also essential to appreciating the value of such experiences in terms of reorienting deeply ingrained humanistic

¹⁸¹ Cavell, 2002, p. 266.

¹⁸² Cf p. 226 passim.

assumptions about the relationship of the everyday and the condition of true insight, or, in other words, between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

On the humanist account, the class-room situation is fundamentally paradoxical, particularly in its role as figuring as the locus of aesthetic education. Following the venerable principle of "*non scholae sed vitae discimus*" the humanist, if I may generalize for the sake of brevity, identifies the classroom as simultaneously both a place secluded from everyday existence for the purposes of rigor and focus, and at the same time the place with the potential for transformative ecstasy. This is of course in itself pedagogically valuable. However, instead of resolving the paradox by some means, humanism insists on it: the ideal experience associated with this context is something a great humanist educator, Jacob Klein calls *metastrophic* (invoking Plato's turning of the soul):

I have said before that within the confines of our horizon there is the expected as well as the unexpected, the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar. We do, however, experience a kind of question which, as it were, tends to smash the bounds that limit us. We do occasionally stop altogether and face the familiar as if for the first time—anything: a person, a street, the sky, a fly. The overwhelming impression on such occasions is the strangeness of the thing we contemplate. This state of mind requires detachment, and I am not at all certain to what extent we can contrive its presence. We suddenly do not feel at home in this world of ours. We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We re-reflect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophe* or *periagoge*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown anymore, on the contrary, we convert the known into an unknown. We wonder. And we burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so?¹⁸³

Works of art enable this because in the words of yet another humanist, Clive Bell,

...a good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life into ecstasy,"¹⁸⁴

Turning now to Cavell early work we may recognize several instances of his applying his

¹⁸³ Klein, 1960, p. 162.

¹⁸⁴ Bell, 1913, p. 13.

admittedly idiosyncratic version of the method of ordinary language philosophy *to dissolve or resolve similar paradoxes*. Examples include metaphor (whether a metaphor can be paraphrased or not), whether atonal music is altogether without tonality, and whether ordinary language claims obey a kind of logic or not. In each of these instances of resolution the method turns out to have implications for how we can understand the principle of ordinary-language-philosophizing as aesthetic. Although the humanistic paradox of in-school/out-of-school I have just described does not straightforwardly involve a misuse of language in this way, I do think it bears an analogy to it, and the analogy moreover is a Cavellian one. Cavell's later philosophy precisely generalizes this method of resolving paradoxes relying on ordinary language laid out in his early work to develop his notion of moral perfectionism which does involve a kind of overcoming of the paradoxical dialectic of the ordinary and the extraordinary that I suggested characterizes the humanist construal of the pedagogical situation. If I may put it in such a way, for the humanist the ordinary and the extraordinary are involved in a kind of dialectic which never really gets resolved: we are either in one realm or the other, but the two never coexist. By contrast, inspired by Emerson, the later Cavell comes to construe the ordinary itself as a place of ecstasy, and moral development as a never-ending re-finding of this experience (he sometimes calls this in relation to the re-marriage comedies, a re-finding of innocence).

This is one of the fundamental aspects in which Cavell's perfectionist moral philosophy is deeply rooted in his philosophy of ordinary language. One can already catch a glimpse here of the rich Cavellian connections between a non-skeptically infected use of ordinary language (I also want to use the phrase, "re-naturalized" use of language) and the way works of art offer themselves to us to be read: the ontological mode in which works of art present themselves to us as meaningful involves a (fictional) collapsing of fact and value: interpreting works of art involves a naturally operative assumption about the connection between meaning and meaningfulness (in the process of criticism interpretative insights are per se indistinguishable from judgements of aesthetic value).

This is of course an all too concise presentation of how Cavell's conception of intentionality is dependent on an inverting (in fact: a righting of) Cartesian ontology, and the connections between his philosophy of language and art with perfectionist moral views. Regarding ordinary speech, this righting of its normal use in the context of the enabled meaningfulness of the classroom amounts to "putting our soul back into our bodies" to use the

oft quoted Wittgensteinian phrase (one of Cavell's favorites). On the other hand, the enabling of this experience is directly connected to the intentionality of works of art, and how they are "read" for their meaning.¹⁸⁵

3. Aesthetic Education as Therapy for Cartesianism

I began this talk by insisting on the necessity of separating the practical and theoretical conceptions of aesthetic education. I further pointed out that a theoretical idea of aesthetic education requires the prior articulation of a full-blown philosophy of education. The argument as it has proceeded so far fulfilled this goal only partially: I argued that a certain approach to art and the idea of the classroom have an intrinsic affinity, and that artworks can make us aware of the hold on us of a dualistic Cartesian ontology. However, I have yet to explain how inducing an enhanced perception of the embodied aspect of human ontology amounts to a form of (liberal) education.¹⁸⁶ True, an awareness of embodied ontology should straightforwardly undermine ecological and gender biases, and an awareness of the close ties between humanism and Cartesian dualism should also generate healthy skepticism about the authority of tradition based literary canons.¹⁸⁷ However, this is merely negative: a positive conceptual articulation of the non-humanistic idea of education implicit in the Cavellian model is still lacking in my account.

To move closer to that goal we need to address a further problem with humanism that has so far been omitted. On closer look, the main problem with the humanistic model pertains not so much to ideological matters (that too) but formalism. It is a well-worn complaint already

¹⁸⁵ To invoke a source other than Cavell, the type of reading at issue here is what Edward Snow calls "associative" in contrast to "contextual" reading in (Snow, 1997).

¹⁸⁶ In other words, I suggested a process as the correct one for articulating a conception of aesthetic education and then reversed it: I should have first pinned down an idea of education and then provided an argument to the effect that art is the best means towards the desired ends. This is a further indication that the strict separation of theory and practice whose possibility was implicitly assumed by my initial distinction is itself questionably based on Cartesian prejudices. Cavell's method of philosophical criticism (relying on how art creates meaning by making aspects of its medium meaningful in terms of defining genres) is particularistic: we read works of art precisely for the way they "think" about how their individuality is determined by aesthetic principles: we typically find them to be self-reflexive in this respect; they articulate their meaning in terms of self-knowledge. Cavell himself never quite states this view, but it is nevertheless implicit in virtually all his analyses of individual works. A nice statement in more abstract terms is found in the opening paragraph of his essay on Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

¹⁸⁷ I am not suggesting they should be rejected - that simply undermines their availability for questioning, and is nothing less than silly (or tragic, depending on how one looks at it).

about Schiller's account of aesthetic education that concrete artworks, let alone critical analyses of such, play virtually no significant role in his arguments. This anti-critical bias becomes a standard feature of humanistic accounts of aesthetic education (i.e., its philosophical form). This is partly due to a form of Kantianism most saliently present in Schiller, and then gradually assuming subliminal form. Artworks on the Kantian account provide occasions for experiencing true community by creating a context for sharing our private judgements, but this possibility arises at the cost of those judgements not being *about* anything, apart from some very general conception of beauty. Of course, Kant himself points out that artworks offer unique opportunities for cultivating our knowledge about human matters, and hence provide one of the most important means towards educating our "humanity".¹⁸⁸ However, such learning is not part of the *aesthetic* experience, and hence cannot come into play in *aesthetic* education. (The technical term for the underlying view of art is non-cognitivism.) Some would even insist that formalism is not a problem *per se*, it is just the way things are: the word "aesthetic" is virtually synonymous with form anyway. However, this way of picturing things should at least motivate the need for an account of aesthetic education where it *does* matter for the purposes of education what the artwork is about. On the other hand, ceding a certain cogency to the insistence that the aesthetic is about form should also fill us with a measure of salutary respect for the potential difficulty of articulating an account of *aesthetic* engagement as implying engagement with *meaning* or content. The question to ask is: what are the criteria for when we can call an engagement with meaning *aesthetic* engagement?¹⁸⁹

Whatever those criteria may prove to be in general, the Cavellian model of aesthetic

¹⁸⁸ See Katn, 1952, pp. 226-7.

¹⁸⁹ A similar question frames one of the most interesting XXth century accounts of aesthetics by Andrew Harrison, namely the question "What is pictorial thought?" (Harrison, 1987) An account of pictorial meaning as different from linguistic meaning would be one way to articulate how an experience of meaning can be aesthetic in some sense. A related problem is that of pictorial vs linguistic *expression* (of meaning). For this, see Parsons and Blocker, 1993, p. 18.:

To give an account of what expression is ... seems to require more than an explanation of what our concepts already are. ... We may have to explain, for example, how language works to express ideas and how the visual arts are similar to or different from language in this regard.

as well as footnoted reference in the same work to Goodman's *Languages of Art* and Langer's *Form and Feeling* as classics engaging this problem.

Hermeneutics, pragmatism, and semiotics could be obvious candidates for providing an aesthetics of content, but I don't think any of them quite work in this context. Hermeneutics is too abstract (hence fails to meet the criterion of simplicity), and the Gadamerian version has often been accused of humanistic bias. Pragmatism and semiotics both cede too much to Cartesianism.

education outlined in the previous section is clearly based on engaging with the content of works of art, rather than their form. However, the question remains: what makes this engagement *aesthetic*? The short answer I would like to give to this question is that aesthetic education in the Cavellian form is a kind of philosophical therapy. However, it is not quite what Cavell himself would have in mind in using this term (which would be Wittgensteinian in its accent).

To understand the difference, we need to evoke a further characteristic of humanism and its influence on contemporary ideas about education in general and aesthetic education in particular. For it is important to make clear that the ideological critique of humanism has been profoundly ineffectual in at least two further senses. First of all, it has resulted in very little change to the practice of liberal education as a form of higher education, which continues more or less unchanged as organized on the basis of humanistic principles.¹⁹⁰ In this context the overall bias against humanism has in effect resulted in a profound weakening of the substance of liberal education, and an equal weakening of the possibility of offering effective apologies for its necessity, particularly as it pertains to the humanities. Because it is no longer customary, adequate, or even salutary to appeal to humanistic ideals, the last lines of defense of liberal education as an education pursued for its own sake have collapsed in the face of neo-liberal and corporate assault. As ideological critics of humanism are typically themselves potential enthusiasts of liberal education (ideological critique itself being a form of intellectual enterprise), it is not an exaggeration to say that ideological critique has also been an epic failure - it has achieved exactly the opposite of what it intended, and worse, which is bad enough. However, it has also failed in a further and even more damaging sense.

As I would further like to argue, the actual ideological situation is as follows. Ideological critique, on the rise from at least the 60's in the West, has actually succeeded in creating a kind of amnesia about the meaning of the term "humanism" as a loose way of referring to the tradition-based set of liberal values the average cultivated person has regarded as a readily

¹⁹⁰ This is not difficult to argue simply by reference to the fact that colleges and universities around the world accept the division of labor imposed by specialization, with liberal education relegated to the margins and entrusted with the mission of imposing some kind of unity on this chaos at best, and at worst some show of how colleges are still dedicated to transmitting a unified vision of things, and a "culture" of sorts, although the word "culture" has more or less been exorcised as part and parcel of the humanistic bias. What replaces it is a more or less empty and tautological insistence on "critical thinking".

(even folkloristically) available secular philosophical guide to life to be obtained by engaging with liberal education.¹⁹¹ Humanism provided the vernacular of high culture right up to the mid-sixties. At the same time ideological critique has failed to undermine either the system itself or the fact that Western middle-class values (insofar as we can still speak of a middle class under the conditions of late capitalism) are humanistic values. As a result these values, or whatever is left of them (basically a quite reductive and crude version) have retreated to the unconscious and have become assumptions about *the way things are*, basically inaccessible to reasoned discourse.¹⁹² On the one hand, the truly valuable aspects of humanism, such as a respect for wisdom and the complexity of human existence, as well as its forms of cultural expression have more or less disappeared, or have assumed a much more segregated form wherein they are no longer recognizable as belonging to a coherent (and nameable) world picture. On the other hand, the cruder assumptions of secular humanism have become subliminal assumptions about the very make-up of the world endowed with a kind of fatalistic aura of unchangeability. Because these values are hegemonical in the West (in a quite precisely Gramscian sense), students come to higher education with these gut reactions entrenched and initially resistant to either refining or proper critique. Again, ideological critique has been a dismal failure: instead of undermining the hegemony of ideological assumptions it has served to strengthen them, while also causing a general amnesia as to what they are.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ For a recent, powerful and sympathetic restatement of this view coming from an unlikely source, see (Scruton, 2009).

¹⁹² On a classical Marxist view, things have always been like this, but I am hoping to offer something other than the classical Marxist view.

¹⁹³ It is common to meet with in complaints about students being relativists, or narcissistic - attitudes that the digital age has allegedly only served to exacerbate. According to the view advanced here about the fate of humanism this is exactly the opposite of the truth: the effect of the retreat of humanistic assumptions to a kind of subliminal level has in fact been to make young people rigidly moralistic and in fact intolerant of discussing issues about how values come about and how they may be criticized and changed. This is not a form of relativism, however, but more like a kind of hypnotic conditioning: it reflects a deep-seated bias for scientific reasoning and a suspiciousness towards discourse whose claims are not empirically verifiable. All this is coupled with a kind of moralistic demand as to how education must proceed without disturbing or questioning this frame of values. To hold that values are subjective is in fact to acknowledge that the abstract notion of value is in fact a kind of universal. At the same time, it is also to believe that it is inaccessible to rational discourse. And there is even a further paradoxical consequence deriving from the assumption that aesthetic education is basically identical with humanistic liberal education. If we hold this together with what has just been described as a retreat of humanistic values to the subliminal level, it follows that aesthetic education in its humanistic form in fact continues to be the ruling paradigm of liberal education, except that the latter is pursued without almost no aspiration to involve artworks in the process. To state the paradox in all its starkness: liberal education at most colleges and universities today is a form of aesthetic education without artworks.

This is not a negative view of the possibilities of education. On the contrary such a view of things offers unique possibilities for reinventing liberal learning in atypical ways. It is precisely the fact that deeply embedded Cartesian assumptions make content-based engagement with art difficult which create the potential for true revelation when we are successful in making it happen. In accordance with the nature of good therapy the aesthetic transformation in question should feel less critical than transformational: at its best it will amount not so much to a radical deconstruction of humanism than its *Aufhebung* in the Hegelian sense. The therapeutic experience, even when we are talking about psychotherapy, is almost by definition a form of aesthetic experience: it involves a fusion of the emotional and the cognitive in a single act of perceptual awareness. Bringing subconsciously operating crippling assumptions to consciousness and opening them to the possibility of criticism and change is precisely what therapy is all about: in this way philosophical therapy is no different from psychotherapy. The transformation effected by aesthetic education understood as therapy for Cartesian biases should be instrumental in preserving those of the humanistic values that are worth preserving, transforming those that are worth transforming, and finally making us more respectful towards the human in us, in others, and towards little understood non-human forms of agency emerging from the natural (and the technological) world.

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