

# **The Performance of Reading**

**An Essay in the Philosophy of  
Literature**

PETER KIVY

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Kivy, Peter.

The performance of reading: an essay in the philosophy of literature / Peter Kivy.  
p. cm. – (New directions in aesthetics; 3)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-4692-0 (hardback: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-4692-3 (hardback: alk. paper)

1. Oral interpretation. 2. Silent reading. 3. Readers' theater. I Title.

II Series.

PN4145.K58 2006

808.5'5—dc22

200600179

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Cartoon on page x by Dave Coverly. Copyright © 2005 Creators Syndicate, Inc.  
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Set in 10.5 on 12.5 pt ITC Galliard

by The Running Head Limited, Cambridge

Printed and bound in Singapore

by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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*To Ed Spiegel*

*For Verdi, pool, and other things of almost equal importance*





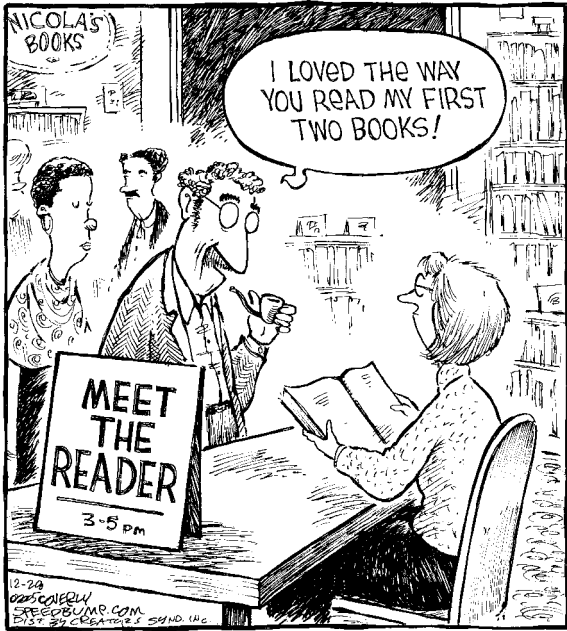
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Are not thought and speech the same, with this exception,  
that what is called thought is the unuttered conversation of  
the soul with herself?

Plato, *Sophist*, trans. B. Jowett



# Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter Kivy  
New York City  
October 2005





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

## 1 Introduction

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

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

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

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