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Abstract Title:

The Literal Truth: Cavell on Literality in Philosophy and Literature

Abstract

Sometime after finishing *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell*, I realized that I had paid insufficient attention to the skeptic's idea of the ordinary as being merely a version of the literal. Moreover the connection between these two strikes me as dovetailing with the tendency of theories of the literary to claim that the "opposition" between figurative and literal is central to the question of language. An examination of the literal seemed in order, not least because Cavell noted this tendency of literary theories already in the 1980s.

As far as skepticism is concerned, literal language plays a function early in the argument that is meant to undermine our knowledge of the world. Sceptics need what they think of as the literal in order to enter the claim they begin with, a claim made in what Cavell calls a non-claim context: "I am holding a piece of paper in my hand"; "this is a tomato", "there is a glass on your desk". The literality of such sentences is meant to do the work of the voice, or more exactly to make up for the condition of being voiced. If being voiced means that someone offers a claim at just a particular moment in a particular situation, literal language is supposed to supply relief from such stringent conditions upon the voice. One says such things because they are literally true.

In addition to figuring in this pivotal step in his diagnosis of skepticism, literality is also at work in two other important moments of Cavell's early writings; and I take this repeated appearance of the idea to justify the more extended attention I want to give to literality. For the literal turns up already in Cavell's influential article "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," as he treats Brooks and Winter's assessment of the paraphrasability of metaphors. And the literal turns up already in his essay on Beckett, also from the early collection *Must We Mean What We Say?* In short literality finds itself in the central issue of Cavell's discussion of whether skepticism can be said or meant; in his positioning himself in the context of literary criticism in mid-twentieth-century America; and in his relationship to the modernism of Beckett.

For Cavell the interest and power of metaphor stems from the same roots as what gives the literal assertion its force. Plainness is no more a given of literal language than elaborateness is a given of all metaphors. They are both achievements of language, and not to be numbered among its givens.

Cavell's attempt to locate the weight of the literal is first expressed in his essay on Beckett and in *The Senses of Walden*, in which something I will call "hidden literality" becomes a major theme of his approach to Beckett and Thoreau. In this phase of his work, Cavell does not focus on the ways in which the literal can find itself involved in multiple figurations. Nor is it a question of the figurative covering over or dazzling the literal. It is rather a sense of a literal truth emerging within the more common direction in which we take our words. In *Endgame* Clov says: "We do what we can." And Hamm replies, "But we shouldn't." Hamm unveils the literal sense of the words as hidden within the "normal" use of "we are doing what we can" to imply that we are straining all our abilities towards the goal in question, or indeed we may say that we are "doing our best." Clov's response echoes and inverts this knowledge: "Nobody ever lived as crooked as we."

The sense that our lives and our directions are bent, not straight, not upright, emerges with the force of a Nietzschean vision of us as crippled—also, I take it, a word not intended as a metaphor. Uncovering such moments is a step towards Cavell's central method, at once philosophical and literary, and it suggests that we are overlooking not so much the obvious as the ordinary and its habitual sway.