

*The Aesthetic Commonplace:
Wordsworth, Eliot, Wittgenstein
and the Language of Every Day*
by Nancy Yousef

Richard Eldridge

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Nancy Yousef has written a deeply felt book that is responsive to the plights of the academic disciplines of philosophy and literary studies as well to those of the general culture. In addition to being deeply felt, her writing is also closely attentive to details of wording, imagery, and argument in the texts she reads. “Depth of feeling” and “closeness of attention” are two of the master terms that characterize the kind of writing that she favors and finds in the works of Wordsworth, George Eliot, and Wittgenstein.

Stanley Cavell has characterized much of academic, professional philosophy as marked by a hatred and fear of the ordinary and by a scanting of attention to childhood and to feeling. It is not hard to see why philosophy and, more recently, literary studies have arrived at such a stance. Often enough it is both embarrassing and distracting to wallow in the grip of feeling, and giving vent to

being in its grip will call attention to oneself rather than to the topic. When writing software or replacing a head gasket, it will not help to attend to one’s own joys and sorrows. The professionalization of both philosophy and literary studies, increasingly modeled on the protocols of the sciences, has further encouraged and rewarded neutrality and emotional distance.

Building on certain strands in Romanticism and in ordinary language philosophy, Yousef argues that the cultivation of detachment and emotional neutrality also has important costs. She turns to Wordsworth, Eliot, and Wittgenstein as putting forward “three significant appeals to the commonplace as a vital but habitually neglected region for reflection on thinking, feeling, and communicating” (1). Noting a kind of “conceptual congruence,” she finds that these three figures share “a diagnostic critical impulse” in relation

to professional, neutral disciplinary habits of mind and a “commitment to the everyday [that] involves a reorientation of attention” away from those habits and toward openness to feeling (1, 78, 147).

The reason for turning to the commonplace is that it is “a region of common care and interest” that can be disclosed and even exist only through “painstaking attention, creative thinking and thoughtful use of language itself” (3). The suggestion is that absent this turn—for example, when dominated by professional protocols, or caught up distractedly in the busyness of life—we somehow fail to know or register what is interesting and worth caring about. The “emotionally charged earnestness and searching attentiveness” that Wordsworth, Eliot, and Wittgenstein embody in their writing can then serve as a form of attention into which we might enter imaginatively in order to overcome our distractedness and discover fit objects that can sustain care and interest.

This stance puts readers “under the pressure of an ethical demand” (in a phrase of James Conant’s) and subjects them to “the challenge of self-implication in reading,” as their own prior habits of attention and feeling are called into question (24–25, 20). It further risks falling into sentimentality in eschewing detachment and bringing feeling into the center of apt responsiveness. In doing so, it laments and attempts to correct “the loss of particularity to an overwhelming conceptual drive” (57). The compensation, however, for these

pressures, challenges, and risks is the prospect that the work of reading may once again, as Wordsworth put it, “make interesting” (“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”) some among the things of common life that we have forgotten or left unattended to. Through the right kind of readerly attention, “the opposition between the particular and the general is destabilized and transfigured,” as something of general significance manifests itself in a particular object of attentive feeling.

In both Wittgenstein and Eliot, this transfiguration is accomplished through “a polyphonic form that provokes successive rethinking of basic assumptions” (115). This polyphonic form is evident in the play of voices in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and related texts. In Eliot, it consists in the balance between the narrator’s philosophical theorizing, either in chapter headings or in inserted commentary, and “keenly observed scenes,” for example of mutual “disappointment and discord” between Dorothea and Casaubon, that hold our attention on particulars and challenge abstract generalizations (117). Here Yousef offers a particularly insightful reading of how Casaubon in Rome evades acknowledging and responding to Dorothea precisely by offering a generalization about the value of forgiveness and his commitment to it. “‘My dear Dorothea,’ he observes, ‘who with repentance is not satisfied, is not of heaven nor earth’—you do not think me to be worthy of that severe sentence” (118, citing *Middlemarch*). Here the particular tone is all; it embodies a

refusal of Dorothea's pain disguising itself as forgiveness. "Without anger, without overt disagreement, without open hostility, the other's need may nevertheless be repulsed, expectations unmet, wounds inflicted" (118).

Within this kind of attentive writing, words stand to thoughts as the body stands to the soul, as Wordsworth suggests in the "Essay on Epitaphs"; the former term does not name a mere husk or covering, but rather something that is animated by and visibly incarnates the second (138–39). Wittgenstein puts forward a similar thought in remarking in several places that "My attitude [*Einstellung*] towards him [another] is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* [*Meinung*] that he has a soul" (cited, 143). That another has a soul, or (perhaps better) is ensouled, is something that must be seen and responsively felt, from a particular stance or orientation (as the etymology of *Einstellung* suggests), not a matter of an opinion that is formed by collecting and assessing evidence. Yet this natural stance or orientation is something we can fall out of, when we find ourselves caught up in a conception of ourselves as at bottom detached, theoretical intelligences. Nothing is more human than to find oneself thus caught, however, especially in a modern world that produces alienation by undoing immediate immersion in shared practical routines in favor of long periods of training in one or another occupation, where an intensive and extensive division of labor frequently makes those thus trained opaque to one another.

In this situation, it is important to recover a sense of the embodied humanity of others (and one's own humanity) that may have been lost or forgotten, as human beings have fallen out of habitual responsiveness to one another. In Wordsworthian terms, the task is "to give to universal truths...whose interest and importance have caused them to be unattended to...a pathos and spirit which shall readmit them into the soul like revelations of the moment" (153, 154, citing the "Essay on Epitaphs"). This will require a use of language that is "earnestly meant" in embodying felt responsiveness to others in situations, but not flatly literal, not a picture, and not a simile. It must help readers themselves to accomplish an imaginative act that is simultaneously and undecomposably an act of feeling and seeing. To take the possibility of such uses of language seriously is to "credit passionate interest with the power of the real" (162).

Here Yousef is urging the importance of identification with authors, speakers, characters, or other loci of responsiveness in reading literature as passionate utterance. Soliciting this identification is something that ordinary language philosophy at its best has managed, in leading its readers in response to a carefully described case to hear for themselves, in their own ears, what it

makes sense to say when.¹ If we turn away from or fail to develop the appropriate skill of responsive attention, either through reading or in daily life, then we run the risk, in Stanley Cavell's terms, of coming to "live willing neither to know quite what we wish to say nor why others say what they say to us" (164, 173, citing Cavell), thus jointly as specters haunting our words and our worlds.

Yousef is well aware that in urging the importance of passionately responsive reading she is arguing against the grain of the dominant protocols in both philosophy and literary studies. It is worth thinking about what the audience for her argument and for her favored authors might be. Wordsworth addressed himself to his urban countrymen whom he regarded as suffering from "a craving for extraordinary interest" and a "degrading

thirst after outrageous stimulation" ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*") that he hoped his poetry might undo. George Eliot challenged "the egoism of every person" (93, citing *Middlemarch*) that had become more prominent, she thought, as a result of unavoidable secularization; the way forward was to recover routes of natural feeling. Wittgenstein set himself against the spirit "which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand" ("Foreword," *Philosophical Remarks*) that he took to promote distractedness, confusion, and egoism. Do we still need, and can we still profit from, these kind of "apt admonishments"? Yousef's wager is that the answer is "yes." I hope she wins.

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
reldrid8@utk.ed

¹ For an elegant account of the importance of imaginative identification in reading that builds on the inheritance of ordinary language philosophy, see Ted Cohen, *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Compare also Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).