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Art and Baseball, Like and Unlike

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American Book Review, Volume 40, Number 5, July/August 2019, pp. 12-13 (Review)

Published by American Book Review

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efforts at writing and reading. In the third and final part of the book, we could re-describe the easy-to-dismiss category of "reading" (dismissible *because* ordinary) with a gloss, namely, that what Moi proffers is nothing short of a manifesto for ordinary language philosophy.

As a project, then, Moi's book of assembled essays provides a refractive approach to "the ordinary." We are invited, chapter by chapter, and by way of a startling range of references (G. E. M. Anscombe, Simone de Beauvoir, James Conant, Cora Diamond, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sigmund Freud, Henrik Ibsen, Søren Kierkegaard, and down the line to Slavoj Žižek) to explore what we mean (or want to mean) by the ordinary. Still, for all of her accomplished excurses, Moi would seem to resist casting her achievement this way, since OLP "agrees that there can be no approach to the ordinary, for the very word 'approach' implies that one takes up an external position in relation to one's 'object.' We are always *in* the ordinary." And so, we are always "in ordinary language"; there is no specialized or technical language that is, say, extraordinary, since "the extraordinary is at home in the ordinary." Can we claim, then, that Moi does provide (in the spirit of the Stoics, of Wittgenstein, of Pierre Hadot's spiritual exercises, and indeed, of Cavell's autobiographical exercises) something of a *reminder* that all this is the case, and therefore, her collection allows someone coming to OLP "from the outside" — that is, from any other view or mode or theory — to make a go of appreciating the stakes of the ordinary? A long question that one hopes rings in the affirmative.

As the title — *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* — stirred us to recognize a "revolution" at hand, or perhaps more troublingly, one that happened long ago and we missed, Moi's steady company with the ordinary provides a heuristic for the variety of subjects, texts, problems, and methods she selects for critical engagement. Like Wittgenstein, Moi does not provide a "theory" of the ordinary so much as a series of sessions on what it looks like to read with attention — to reply constantly, endlessly to the question "Why this?," and thereafter to attest with one's reply, discursively and discerningly. Given its commitments (especially as emphasized in the previous paragraph), Moi's project would appear to be (necessarily) an ordinary investigation, and yet, in part because it is so rare, Moi's is no ordinary investigation. In its exceptionality (a trait we are told should belong to our understanding of the everyday), her work provides a satisfying immersion in what it means to take the ordinary seriously. While literary theory in its academic variants may have been (for so long) pleased and rewarded by making reading out to be a privileged art — and at that, arcane, esoteric, and otherwise recondite — we can glimpse that its effort to distance itself from the lives of its readers has ended in disaster; we call this moment the present. If ordinary language philosophy is a revolution, let it be a restoration.

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Serious Larks: The Philosophy of Ted Cohen
Ted Cohen
Daniel Herwitz, ed.
University of Chicago Press
www.press.uchicago.edu
240 Pages; Print, $22.50

What justifies collecting a sampling of someone's writings — some essays, a poem, a memoir, a short story, a couple of lectures — particularly when those writings can appear to share nothing but their author? And even if a thread runs through them, what makes collecting them in a book worth more than that single, carefully crafted essay or poem or memoir? That's the sort of question Ted Cohen would raise. He didn't raise it with his own work collected here, so far as we know. This is a posthumous, celebratory volume, edited by a former student and published by the press of his alma mater where he taught philosophy for many decades. But had he raised the question about this motley collection, one can almost glean his response from the book itself. We can't know, he would say, whether or not such a collection hangs together before we take it up; and its worth depends, at a minimum, on what thread we find running through it.

Serious Larks is a collection that not only brings out the singular thinker behind it but the human behind or beside or beneath the thinker. I knew Ted, but not this well. His intellectual interests were notorious and, not coincidentally, the same as his interests in general: wordplay, metaphor, jokes, baseball (chiefly as a fan), photography, movies, television, ceramics (as an admirer), music (as both performer and listener) — creative things humans do. A first pass at what these interests have in common is to say that they're fun (detractors would say "non-serious") topics in or around aesthetics that don't trail much theorizing behind them, at least not when Cohen first addressed them. (And as he proudly acknowledges, Cohen is no theorizer.) But there's something else going on in this collection of interests. Their very ordinariness hints at an overlooked facet of our everyday activity, something akin to aesthetic judgment — call it "weighing the worth of things" — that we occupy ourselves with and have a better sense of than we realize. So a central question for Cohen is, why are we interested in these common, ordinary things and activities, and why do we continue to overlook that interest?

Part of Cohen's effort, in addressing that question, is to get us to recognize the way we do, off-handedly, rank or weigh the worth of things. One way he does this is by posing the well-framed question. For example, apropos the familiar attempt to debunk metaphors and jokes as noncognitive,

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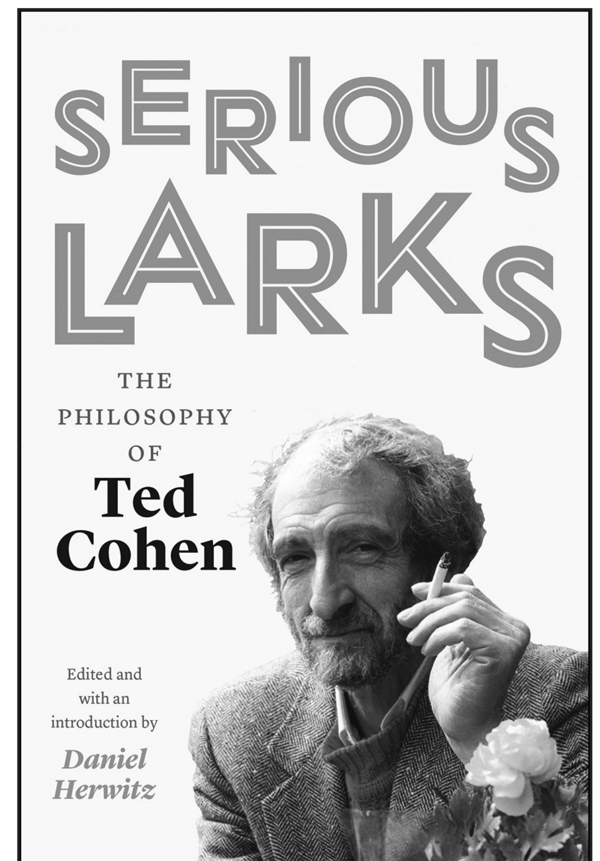
he asks: "Is knowledge the only, or even the most important, concern? Is its formal semantics all that matters in the use of language, or the only correct and proper subject? Is a joke less important than a theorem even if it's a good joke and a trivial theorem?" If you sense that the only possible answer to that last question is "No," you may find yourself wondering with Cohen how ordinary things like jokes and metaphors escaped philosophical notice for so long. To cultivate a concern for ordinary things and activities will involve cultivating a concern for the particular. In aesthetics, concern for the particular *is* the point, is why individual works and performances exist. In wondering about our use of metaphors or telling of jokes, the "particular" that Cohen finds philosophically relevant is the particular circumstance in which we use it or tell it: you understand me (what my metaphor says) if



you see what I must be saying, given that I can't be saying or wanting to say here and now what my words literally say. (Cohen demonstrates that metaphors needn't be literally false.) Concern for the particular is also an anti-theorizing move. One lesson of Cohen's essay on photography ("What's Special about Photography?") is that there isn't a peculiar metaphysical fact about photographs that informs or determines how we read each and every one. For example, it is neither a merely contingent fact nor always a relevant fact that the people and locale in a photograph were once *there*, present together on that day.

Similarly, Cohen's technique for inviting us to rethink a popular art like photography is to note that the things said to disparage it are either not true about it or not incompatible with its being art. It's foolish to dismiss photography for being "mechanical" or "automatic" or "nostalgic"

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when these are, in fact, already present in other arts (consider the mechanicality of how a piano produces pitch) or not really present in photography (taking a photograph is “automatic” only in the sense of its capacity for “gross depiction”) or fully compatible with its being art (a photograph can support nostalgia even as it moves us in other ways, including the way art does).

In each instance of Cohen considering the virtues of some ordinary activity or popular interest, his aim is not to endorse, let alone excuse, unexamined ways of appreciating it *or* depreciating it. Cohen’s approach is in line with something his mentor Stanley Cavell wrote about ordinary language philosophy, whose procedures Cavell adapted from those of *his* mentor J. L. Austin. Philosophical thinking that appeals to the ordinary “is as distrustful of, as stricken by, the actual ordinary as philosophy chronically has been” since Plato – i.e., distrustful of “the ordinary as it stands; it seeks a further ordinary, one latent with the one at hand.”

As an illustration of recognizing some further, latent ordinary, consider a question Cohen addresses in the volume’s central and longest essay “Objects of Appreciation”: “What counts as something happening?” The immediate context is one in which Cohen imagines a friend complaining that in baseball nothing happens. Here’s part of Cohen’s response: “When this friend goes for a drive in the country, a stroll in the woods, a hike in the hills, nothing much happens, nor does much happen, as a matter of fact, when he visits an art museum. Is he bored then?”

That question is meant less rhetorically than as a provocation: it should lead us as readers to wonder, not about what’s on the gallery wall or who’s on the mound, but what we’re doing in their presence and in response to them. It also sets up the implicit claim, intriguing on its face, that watching baseball bears (or can bear) an uncanny resemblance to looking at a painting or a sculpture or an installation. What follows from that? A pretty clear implication is that we probably haven’t examined the kind of interest we have in *either* activity, not in its totality and variety — nor can we say, consequently, what anoints these things with the power to engross us and shape our days.

What does Cohen find when he examines these varied interests we have in the high and low arts, in team sports and the rules that govern them, in jokes and metaphors? It’s not to disparage Cohen’s method — more like to highlight it — to say that we’re often left with only a thoughtful suggestion or a “highly tentative conclusion.” But at least three ideas seem worth taking to the bank. The first is that our enjoyment of art (high and low), like our enjoyment of metaphors, jokes, and fandom, is tied not to what the most discriminating taste or demand for universal assent discovers, but to the small shock of realizing something we share, here and now, with others:

> I have found it necessary to think of a work of art as an object that holds a special place for a community of people. What makes the people a *community*, in this case, is not a shared belief, nor a commitment to any jointly held project, but a shared *feeling*. They are like the community of people who find a joke funny. No one can *prove* that a joke is funny (or that it is not), but there is a kind of “agreement” between those who respond to the joke.

That such impractical but nonetheless cultivated activities like looking at art, listening to music, watching a game or a TV series, telling a joke — and, usually, talking afterwards about what we saw or heard, or repeating the joke — are communal activities, things we *can* share, should strike us,

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in Cohen’s eyes, with delight and wonder: “This sharing is a marvel, I think, a stunning revelation of a shared humanity. No one is right or correct; we are just all *together*.”

This idea is tied to a second, “ancillary” thought that Cohen often returns to and calls “a favorite of mine”: “A work of art is like a person, and our relationship to such an object is like our relationship to people. Not just any people, but those people who are special in our lives.” (Though Cohen doesn’t say so, the thought appears in Cavell’s early essay “Music Discomposed.”) What we find when we get past talking about the Beautiful in art and distinguishing high from low, is that we care about this object or that activity (or that team) as if it were a friend. And as Cohen observes in “Caring: The Lesson of the Fan”: “It seems that caring about something is a (logical) precondition of caring for that thing. If you didn’t care about the flowers or the puppies, then you wouldn’t — all things being equal — care for them.” Like moral caring, this caring about created objects and skilled activities is freely given, without the promise of some benefit accruing to us. Cohen notes how the logic of this caring is similar to that of Kant’s categorical imperative. (No matter that Cohen says of himself, in this essay on fandom, “I am no fan of Kant’s moral philosophy.”) The important difference is that here “nothing is enjoined. There is no constraint.”

The pure exercise of freedom in our caring as fans or appreciators mirrors the freedom inherent in the practice of these creative activities themselves. And that’s pretty much Cohen’s working definition of art: “Art is the one thing we do precisely because we don’t have to do it. Of course we do *have to do it*.... It is precisely, exactly because we could do without art that art is the one thing we really cannot do without.”

But there isn’t unmitigated cheerfulness in Cohen’s observations. A third thread running through *Serious Larks* is that these activities that create or reveal community can also reveal its absence, despite one’s best efforts and through no one’s fault. Where we connect with others is not written into our constitution. (The first essay collected here, on Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* [1959], argues that Cary Grant’s version of this realization — that “no one can tell him how to be an American” — is what enables him in the end to cast off the Professor’s official guidance and save Eve. That no one can tell us what joins us to our fellow citizens is the subversive idea that makes us unruly Americans American.) If I tell a joke, I might succeed in making you laugh, but someone else who gets the joke as well as you do might not laugh, and a third might repress a laugh, finding the joke offensive. What explains the differences in reaction? Nothing but the fact of our differences. We each have our way of weighing the worth of things; we can’t commune with everyone. You might find the zenith of this realization in Cohen’s poignantly funny, Pushcart Prize-winning essay “There Are No Ties at First Base.” Cohen, “a pure fan” of the Chicago White Sox and “a genuine authority” on the rules of baseball, spots a flat-out contradiction in the rule book, writes to the Official Playing Rules Committee, and is rebuffed unreasonably. The essay ends: “What good is it to know the rules if no one believes you? And what if they believe you but just don’t care?” — what can you do when you discover that those whom you thought were in communion with you aren’t? You might be provoked to cynicism. If I look to Cohen’s book one more time, I think I can glean his advice: Try a different joke.

William Day is Professor of Philosophy at Le Moyne College (Syracuse, New York). He is contributing co-editor (with Victor J. Krebs) of a volume on Wittgenstein’s aspect-seeing remarks, Seeing Wittgenstein Anew *(2010), and has published numerous articles and book chapters on Wittgenstein, Cavell, and topics in aesthetics (improvisation, music, film).*

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