

## 23. Other Minds and a Mind of One's Own: An Essay on Poetry and Philosophy

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Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of any art.

STANLEY CAVELL, *The World Viewed*

In an early round of the famous competition between poetry and philosophy, reason claims the upper hand against emotion. Though Plato achieves nothing like absolute victory for philosophy in this regard, Stanley Cavell rightly discerns that the stakes in this contest are high: nothing less than the soul.<sup>1</sup> Not long after Plato, however, Aristotle ably defends poetry as an art that intends to work beneficially upon the passions to bring about positive results in both the soul and the commonwealth. Later, as Christian culture begins to supersede Hellenistic and Roman alternatives, St. Paul's resonant prioritizing of charity over eloquence (both human and angelic) starts to carry the day.<sup>2</sup> Early in the third century, Tertulian asks, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" and memorably crystalizes the distinction St. Paul suggests by contrasting light with darkness, Christ with Belial, and idols with the temple of God.<sup>3</sup>

In the following century, both Augustine and Jerome recount soul-searching ordeals over irreconcilable differences between paganism and Christianity. Augustine confesses his shame at shedding tears over Dido's suicide in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and he repents his early preference for the lofty rhetoric of Cicero over the lowly style of the

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1. See Lawrence F. Rhu, "Competing for the Soul: On Cavell's Shakespeare," *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* eds. Eldridge and Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 136-51, 242-4.

2. 1 Cor 13:1.

3. 2 Cor 6:14-16

Gospels.<sup>4</sup> Later in the fourth century, Jerome produces a much finer Latin translation than Augustine found in the *Vetus Latina*; yet, he still experiences acute ambivalence between the claims of the two cultures he stands in the way of inheriting. Biblical prophecy strikes him as harsh and uncouth compared with Roman oratory; but a nightmare brings him before the divine tribunal for an angelic flogging and censure for being more a Ciceronian than a Christian. Then the Judge adds this reminder from Matthew 6:21: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”<sup>5</sup>

Such recollections of earlier tensions between poetry and philosophy, in the first cases, and between eloquence and religion, in the second, run on parallel tracks toward a distant horizon. We can hear the classical reconciliation of kindred concerns in hexameters by Lucretius and in a popular tune by Mary Poppins. The Roman advocates smearing the rim of the cup with honey for the child to consume bitter but curative wormwood. The charismatic caregiver recommends a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. Both, it is worth noting, are themselves speaking poetically, or figuratively, in terms that serve well to commend poetry itself, which sweetens the pill and makes truth easier to swallow. In the middle distance between Lucretius and Mary Poppins, we can hear Shakespeare and Torquato Tasso, among others, invoking the same principle, ultimately from the same Roman source.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, when King Leontes expresses wonder at the lifelike statue of his allegedly deceased wife, Hermione, his tragicomic agon inspires him to make this paradoxical claim: “[T]his affliction has a taste as sweet / As any cordial comfort” (5.3.76-7).<sup>6</sup> The sculptor Giulio Romano’s achievement of verisimilitude awakens the ache of Leontes’ grief over the loss of Hermione because her statue seems no merely accurate reproduction of her image; rather, it seems to be Hermione herself. And so, astonishingly, it turns out to be. Likewise, at the beginning of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso begs the heavenly muse’s pardon for embroidering hard facts in order to communicate saving truths to readers otherwise inclined to ignore challenges that history (and reality) pose. He appeals to the same Lucretian precedent as Shakespeare

4. Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 1.13; 3.5.

5. Jerome, *Letter 22.30 (to Eustochium)*. Cited in Petrarca, “On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others” in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* eds. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1948), 47-133, 113. See also Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 1-4.

6. William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008). All Shakespeare quotes come from this edition.

in the passage above: “When we smear the medicine cup’s rim with honey to fool a feverish child, you know that he drinks the bitter juice and thus recovers health. Just so the world rushes in wherever flattering poetry brims with her sweetest blandishments, and truth, disguised in fluent verse, seduces and persuades the most averse.”<sup>7</sup>

Cavell’s audacity as a thinker shines through his discernment of the truth of Cartesian skepticism *avant le lettre* in the allegedly intellectual, though genuinely tragic, agons of Othello and Leontes in Shakespeare. Their claims of their spouses’ infidelities are mere allegations and, ultimately, cover-ups insofar as they “interpret a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack” and willfully misconstrue limits of the human condition as though they were shortcomings of mental acuity.<sup>8</sup> For example, when Othello commands Iago, “[B]e sure you prove my love a whore” (3.3.364), even if he had the patience to wait a few centuries for DNA testing, the forthcoming certainty would not satisfy his misplaced quest for proof either way it turned out. Ironically, Cavell’s perception of what such willfulness anticipates may invite the sort of label Iago attributes to “the blood and baseness of our nature” when he says that they overrule reason and make us jump to “preposterous conclusions” (1.3.324-5). Cavell, however, would argue that fashionable skepticism does not overrule reason so much as it inhibits our honesty and courage to acknowledge what we cannot simply fail to know. In fact, skepticism often uses reason in the process of repressing valid intuitions when we shirk the responsibility of owning them. “Preposterous,” in its root sense, may be loosely construed as “premature” or “ass-backwards.” Inasmuch as Shakespeare’s play appeared in the first decade of the seventeenth century and Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* was published over three decades later, Cavell’s claim that Shakespeare anticipates Descartes may strike the positivist historian as jumping to conclusions. Yet, Cavell thus discovered ways of exploring the early modern epistemological crisis that give it a human face, first through Shakespeare but soon enough through film, whose creation he happily declared “was as if made for philosophy, meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression.”<sup>9</sup>

7. My rendition of Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, ed. Lanfranco Caretti (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), Canto 1.3.

8. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.

9. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1996), xii, in a passage that echoes the book’s epigraph.

In my experience and in Cavell's philosophy, the soul's journey is not merely linear; to borrow a phrase from Cavell, it includes "dimensions of the self," which is what Cavell calls youth or the stage of life when we are students, when he identifies them as addressees of the moral perfectionism he perceives in Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. The psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, whom Cavell summons in discussing his own "identity crisis" and discovery of his "life's work," calls this way of thinking about the self *and* the soul "epigenesis."<sup>10</sup> (Luther and Gandhi, two of Erikson's great subjects, were, of course, *religious* leaders.) The onwardness of the self or soul is not only a progress toward death. The "end" of the road may also signify its purpose, or *telos*, which one can find and renew on each step of the way toward the inevitable last gasp. Moreover, skepticism—and particularly the philosophical problem of other minds—which Cavell discerns in the greatest literary works of the English Renaissance, Shakespeare's tragedies, leads him increasingly to Romanticism in his "quest for the ordinary" in both language and experience. For they are not mutually exclusive, especially where (and when) meaning is concerned.

In the final paragraphs of "Knowing and Acknowledging," Cavell connects "the source of our gratitude for poetry" to "the philosophical problem of other minds." The metaphysical plight he identifies could as well be characterized as *the otherness of our own minds*, inasmuch as Cavell is poignantly describing an individual's sense of his, or her, or their own "unknownness" and "inexpressiveness."<sup>11</sup> But whether we

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10. See Erik Erikson, "Monsters and Felicities: Vernacular Transformations of the Five-Foot Shelf" in *Inheriting Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming), where I discuss the presence of these aspects of Erikson's thought in Cavell.

11. In certain ways, this essay is a continuation of "Monsters and Felicities, Ibid, which I conclude by citing the following passage from Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* updated edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238-66, 265-6: "A natural fact underlying the philosophical problem of privacy is that the individual will take *certain* among his experiences to represent his *own* mind—certain particular sins or shames or surprises of joy—and then take his mind (his self) to be unknown so far as *those* experiences are unknown. (This is an inveterate tendency in adolescence, and in other troubles. But it is inherent at any time.) There is a natural problem of *making* such experiences known, not merely because behavior as a whole may seem irrelevant (or too dumb, or gross) at such times, but because one hasn't forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts. (Someone would have to *have* these feelings to know what I feel.) Here is our source of gratitude to poetry. And this sense of unknownness is a competitor of the sense of childish fear as an explanation of our idea, and need, of God.—And why should the mind be less dense and empty and mazed and pocked and clotted—and why less whole—than the world is? At least we can say in the case of some mental phenomena, when you have twisted and covered your expressions far or long enough, or haven't yet found the words which give the phenomenon expression, I may know better than you how it is with you. I may respond even to the fact of your separateness from me (not to mention mine from you) more immediately than you.

"To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgment of it.—I know your pain the way you do."

take that problem either way, personally or interpersonally, accomplished poets echo the connection Cavell is making in that essay between poetry and confounding feelings of separateness from others. For such poets not only link childhood problems of hearing and pronunciation to difficulties of understanding that dramatize the otherness of inexperienced young minds. They also find that such ordeals may foreshadow vocations in their chosen art. Misunderstanding, or being misunderstood, in this way, memorably impresses potential poets; and they may later work out, or work through, such experiences in their literary efforts. For them, memories of this kind ultimately heighten the stakes of poetic meaning.

John Hollander, for example, supposes that “the child in the American joke who innocently deforms Psalm 23’s penultimate verse, assuring her adult listeners that ‘Surely good Mrs. Murphy will follow me all the days of my life,’” may later realize that she was onto something deeper: “*something* more profoundly right about the line, the psalm, and poetry in general than any of her correctly parroting schoolmates.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever that unnamed entity may be, Li-Young Lee reveals aspects of it in “Persimmons,” where he shares how the fruits of his efforts to learn how to pronounce certain pairs of English words—like “persimmons” and “precision,” “fight” and “fright,” and “wren” and “yarn”—resonate pertinently with his deep love for his father. Lee’s first language was Mandarin Chinese, and “Persimmons” recounts his struggles, on the frontier of mutual intelligibility, with the phonetics of American English. There he finds something deeper than Mrs. Walker, his sixth-grade teacher in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, may have dared to hope when she corrected his pronunciation. The stirrings of a poetic vocation may arise from moments of confusion like these, if only in retrospect.<sup>13</sup>

The experiences and claims of such poets remind me of translators wrestling with sacred texts like the story of Elijah on Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19. Elijah famously perceives Yahweh *not* in the wind, earthquake, and fire, which are so much to the taste of the prophets of Ba’al, the storm god, whom Yahweh has recently put to shame on Mount Carmel. Those boisterous natural phenomena tell Elijah nothing of the divine. After all that commotion has finally ceased on Mount Horeb, howe-

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12. John Hollander, *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 294.

13. Li-Young Lee, *Rose* (Brockport, NY: BOA, 1986).

ver, Elijah hears “a still small voice.” At least the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version render what reaches Elijah’s ears there in that way. Though the RSV updates many things, like the “Thees” and “Thous” of the KJV, it sticks with our cultural memory of such resonant phrasing. Yet, just as a psychoanalyst or a Romantic poet privileges childhood experiences as foundations of the heart’s deepest understanding, learned biblical interpreters nowadays insist on both literary and historical context as well as linguistic knowledge to render and assess the terms of Elijah’s experience. In that process, one such scholar, James Kugel, comes up with a new translation of the familiar old phrase above to express the paradoxical Hebrew wording in question. He suggests “the sound of the thinnest silence” as a more accurate translation than “a still small voice” because it conveys the oxymoron in the Hebrew original’s phrasing. Thus, he breaks with the traditional English rendering to observe the literary, historical, and linguistic criteria of his scholarly profession.<sup>14</sup>

This gesture rhymes with Robert Frost’s concern about poets who, in making choices they deem necessary in writing their poems, let sound predominate to the exclusion of other essential considerations. If hearing becomes the only sense that matters, it may trivialize common sense and undermine intelligibility. Frost concedes that sound in poetry is “the gold in the ore,” and he promptly takes pains to make plain poetry’s multiplicity of sounds among its many other different resources. But he then returns to the staples of most kinds of writing—thought, context, meaning, and subject matter—until he arrives back at poetry as “one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience.”<sup>15</sup>

A pertinent analogue to Frost’s progress, from the importance of sound to the importance of having something sound to say, appears in Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet* when Bernardo Soares, an assistant bookkeeper in the city of Lisbon and that volume’s heteronymous author, puts himself in the shoes of Cesário Verde, a

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14. James Kugel, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 167. Given what gets in our ears nowadays—earworms, as they are called—one has to wonder whether an echo of “The Sounds of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel is not perceptible in Kugel’s phrasing.

15. Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” in *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), v-viii, v.

beloved nineteenth-century Portuguese poet and *flâneur*.<sup>16</sup> Soares imagines himself on the streets of Lisbon slipping “into an era prior to the one [he] is living in,” and remarks, “I enjoy feeling I’m a contemporary of Cesário Verde, and that in me I have, not verses like his, but the identical substance of the verses that were his.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Soares virtually contends that he could satisfactorily paraphrase “O Sentimento dum Occidental” (“The Feeling of a Westerner”), the most immediately pertinent poem of Cesário’s in this context. In other words (and my point here is entirely about *other words*), Soares could convey the subject matter of that poem, its raw material, so to speak, but not in Cesário’s style. Soares confidently claims an intimacy of thought and feeling with Cesário, a spiritual kinship. Though he could not write comparable verses, he gets it: the sentiment expressed by the poem. In this regard, Cavell’s comments about “The Heresy of Paraphrase” and the debate it stirred between Cleanth Brooks and Yvor Winters, might save us from “fits of philosophy” and “demands for absoluteness” as we “talk past one another” in straining to distinguish between the “substance” and “the verses” here in question.<sup>18</sup> As much as anything pertaining directly to their argument about poetry and paraphrase, Cavell’s manner of writing—his colloquial tone and idiomatic precision—helps him persuade the reader that, in their exchange, literary criticism is in danger of projecting words beyond the boundaries of relevant usage or meaning.

Here we glimpse a contemporary version of the ancient argument between poetry and philosophy, or rhetoric and philosophy, since so much of the modern poetics of style derives from classical textbooks of speech, writing, and literary taste, like *De Elocutione* (falsely attributed to Demetrius Phalereus).<sup>19</sup> Of course, “modern,” does not mean modernist; rather, it characterizes the period that includes the cultural movement customarily described as the Renaissance, which historians call the early mo-

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16. Pessoa created distinctive selves, poets with their own recognizable styles and concerns. He called them heteronyms, not pseudonyms, to emphasize their separateness from their creator and what (ironically, perhaps) we may call their integrity as individuals. In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1991), José Saramago wrote a whole book about one of them, whose limitations themselves inspire this novelist to expand upon Reis’s behavior in a variety of contexts: Lisbon as a refuge for aristocratic expats during the Spanish Civil War, Reis’s affair with the maid who makes up his room in the hotel where he lives, his desperate pilgrimage to the shrine at Fátima.

17. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 13.

18. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 74-82.

19. Philip Rollinson and Richard Geckle, *A Guide to Classical Rhetoric* (Signal Mountain, TN: Summertown Texts, 1998), 49-52.

dern period because of its technological advances (like the compass, gunpowder, and the printing press) and European encounters with previously unknown people as faraway as “the round earth’s four imagined corners,” in John Donne’s memorable phrase.

Nowadays anthologies of English literature often include appendices on literary terminology which serve as useful reminders of what poets once derived from classical elements of style: rhetorical figures of speech and thought in Greek and Latin that became features of literary style worth appropriating for composition in the contemporary speech of ordinary European languages. Imitation of these “schemes and tropes” was thus intended to demonstrate vernacular accomplishments of early modern poets and their inheritors both in Romance languages and in English. For various reasons, however, many such figures increasingly seem merely ornamental, rather than organic, qualities of modern languages.<sup>20</sup> Cavell admits his own struggle with such distinctions in his early encounters with Emerson’s prose when he acknowledges his “inability for a long time to hear the sense of Emerson’s sentences within, rather than despite, what seemed to [him] their detachable ornaments.”<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the history of any art—like poetry or film, for example—makes enduring impressions upon its later practitioners, who uniformly share the human lack of the divine omnipotence to create *ex nihilo*. This sense of the past regularly demonstrates that “Custom is our nature.”<sup>22</sup> Or, as Billy Collins claims in his moving tribute to “the bicycling poet of San Francisco,” Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “the trouble with poetry is that it creates more poetry,” which may seem to suggest some falling off in what comes later, or too late, due to its inevitably derivative nature.

Yet, by stealing an image from Ferlinghetti in praising his poetry collection, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, Collins seems not merely to confess but to embrace that very fault as his own in this particular poem, “The Trouble with Poetry”—until he

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20. See Brian Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), *passim*.

21. Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1. Cavell is describing his arrival at a view of Emerson akin to that of Frost, who describes how Emerson “pretty near [made] him an antivocabularian” and cites Emerson’s praise of Montaigne to summarize his feelings about Emerson’s writing: “Cut these sentences and they bleed.” “On Emerson,” *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, eds. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Collier Books, 1968), 111-18, 112-13.

22. Cavell cites this *pensée* from Pascal in Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 111.



adds that Ferlinghetti's "little amusement park of a book" served as his constant companion "up and down the treacherous halls of high school." He thus subordinates all the fuss about literary influence as a matter of style to the power of poetry to protect us—like a magic lance or shield or wingéd horse in a romance—in the face of imminent dangers in everyday settings. A collection of poems thus became a teenager's *vade mecum*, even his *enchiridion*, during perilous moments of his passage from youth into early adulthood. Implicitly Collins's acknowledgment of his debt to Ferlinghetti, like Frost's play on the word "sound" above (as both a noun and an adjective), serves as a reminder of something beyond literary style. There is a world elsewhere, a world within, which otherwise may go unacknowledged and unexpressed in cases of what philosophy calls the problem of other minds. Despite his literary theft (and the trouble with poetry which inspires it), Collins, like Ferlinghetti, offers us such a place, a sort of secular catacomb, and the prospect of finding companionship there.<sup>23</sup>

In risking to write the way he wrote, Cavell refused to relinquish his discernment of an unavoidable literariness in philosophical writing and demonstrated his unwillingness to banish poetry from his cities of words. He ultimately came to admire and inherit the thinking and writing of Emerson and Thoreau, who both occupy an unusual place on the boundary between literature and philosophy. Both of them perfectly fit Frost's observation about the former, Emerson, whose name, Frost accurately observes, "has gone [around the world] as a poetic philosopher or as a philosophical poet, [his] favorite kind of both."<sup>24</sup> Besides favoring occasionally poetic prose, Cavell also insisted upon the recalcitrance of American Transcendentalism as a way of thinking. It resists the frequent reductiveness of pragmatism's quest for *solutions* to human problems and its proneness to simply change the subject when due consideration of certain existential predicaments requires both patiently abiding questions that may arise and a willingness to return another day for a further try in situations where progress seems, at the moment, impossible.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Billy Collins, *The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 2007). Note the parallel claim about film that Cavell must rescue from neglect due to its obviousness: "a movie comes from other movies." *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, expanded edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 7.

24. "On Emerson," 112.

25. See Cavell, "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?", in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 215-23, *passim*.

In turning to Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell also turned to film, which he found “as if meant for philosophy.”<sup>26</sup> Though his interest in the problem of other minds and his attunement to a person’s experience in such metaphysical straits served him especially well in *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, he had suspected something like that genre must exist in conversation with remarriage comedy long before he was writing the chapters in that later book. In *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cavell had already raised the question of “adjacent genres” and made pertinent reference not only to *Adam’s Rib* but also to *North by Northwest*.<sup>27</sup> His discernment of the former’s adjacency to melodrama and the latter’s to romantic comedy suggests thematic overlaps between such films and invites further comparisons.

As mentioned above, the metaphysical plight Cavell identifies as the problem of other minds could as well be characterized as *the otherness of our own minds*, inasmuch as Cavell is poignantly describing an individual’s sense of his, or her, or their own “unknownness” and “inexpressiveness.” Moreover, the question of pronouns in this regard is a pertinent contemporary development insofar as it signals a crisis of confinement, or coercion, that we feel as individuals preemptively stuck in a slot by dictates of law and convention, the nomenclature of the state we’re in, both politically and interpersonally. Traditional grammar labels such words *possessive pronouns*. Yet, they seem to function as adjectives that modify whatever nouns they are applied to; and adjectives describe attributes, not essences. They qualify. They do not identify.<sup>28</sup> In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell summons an episode from *Adam’s Rib* (1950), a remarriage comedy in which Adam Bonner (Spencer Tracy) pretends to cry. He uses this episode to suggest that “an unknown woman” may plausibly reside within *his* (Tracy’s) ostensibly masculine character.<sup>29</sup>

Walt Whitman, like Cavell, experiences such constraint empathetically, and he defies a basic principle of logic in his famous response to a question that he himself begs: *Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself. / (I am large, I*

26. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1996), xii, in a passage that echoes the book’s epigraph.

27. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 33-4.

28. Of course, such adjectival pronouns also raise questions about ownership as an accurate characterization of our relation to our selves or anybody else’s.

29. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 185.

*contain multitudes*).<sup>30</sup> Cavell specifically claims that the irony of human identity is a central theme in the movies he calls melodramas of the unknown woman; and, in his essay about *Now, Voyager* (1942), which takes its title from a poem of Whitman's, Cavell feels moved to speak in the voice of Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) and to impersonate *them* in the process.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the provocation of Cavell's assumption of this woman's dual identity as both character and actor—a performance of what nowadays we might term his gender fluidity as a writer—Cavell's essay on *North by Northwest* (1958) and *Hamlet* offers another film in a different genre (the romantic thriller) as a meditation on human identity. The mistaken identification of that film's protagonist, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), as George Kaplan, a fictional agent in a ploy cooked up at the United States Intelligence Agency, raises fundamental questions about naming and being. As one of the agents around the conference table at headquarters in Washington, D. C., puts it, "How could he be George Kaplan when George Kaplan doesn't even exist?" This dilemma of non-existence, the virtual annihilation of the self, ironically conveys *in extremis* the plight of unknownness and inexpressiveness; and it figures memorably in a later exchange when Thornhill meets Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) in the dining car on the Twentieth Century Limited and Eve has just noticed the initials that appear on the matchbook Thornhill produces to light her cigarette.

THORNHILL: My trademark—ROT.

EVE: Roger O. Thornhill. What does the O stand for?

THORNHILL: Nothing

Besides echoing Hamlet's famous line, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.67, as the movie's title and various other moments throughout the

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30. Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, section 51, in *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1959), 85.

31. Fernando Pessoa loved Whitman and Emerson, among other American writers (for example, he translated *The Scarlet Letter* into Portuguese). No modern writer better illustrates the sense of the self that Whitman asserts, for Pessoa created distinctive selves, poets with their own recognizable styles and concerns. He called them heteronyms, not pseudonyms, to emphasize their separateness from their creator. In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1991), José Saramago wrote a whole book about one of them, whose limitations themselves inspire this novelist to expand upon Reis's behavior in a variety of contexts: Lisbon as a refuge for aristocratic expats during the Spanish Civil War, Reis's affair with the maid who makes up his room in the hotel where he lives, his desperate pilgrimage to the shrine at Fátima.

film echo other phrases and aspects of *Hamlet*),<sup>32</sup> this exchange suggests that the self may be nothing more than a cipher, constituted, at most, by circumstances that momentarily inform it. The self will change or, perhaps, vanish when conditions change. Roger Thornhill is indeed George Kaplan, who doesn't even exist, since he now wears a target on his back that Eve's associates have mistakenly put there. In such a predicament the self's dissolution could have its advantages.<sup>33</sup>

There is poetry in the palpable threat of self-loss or, rather, in the felicitous expression of that threat; and we know that better than Thornhill when we read Cavell's nuanced interpretation of his dilemma. For example, his pun about Eve's holding the key to Thornhill's birth transforms the berth in the compartment they share, from New York to Chicago, into a resonant sign of the stakes in their first meeting: a sign not only of imminent death, but of resurrection as well.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, when Cavell first asserts thematic relations between Ibsen's *A Doll House* and the Hollywood films he explores, he specifically discerns not only the risks Nora runs in "her acceptance of her unprotected identity." As he proceeds, Cavell also becomes as plain and direct as one could ever wish about the poetry that informs these works: "Ibsen, and these films, declare that our lives are poems."<sup>35</sup> Harkening to such poetry assists Nora in nothing less than "becoming a human being," and Cavell's reading of Ibsen may thus begin to awaken us to the presence of such poetry in our own experience. In this regard it had a somewhat kindred effect on Toril Moi's chapter on this play, which she presents under the title "First and Foremost a Human Being" in her book on Ibsen.<sup>36</sup>

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32. Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*.

33. In the opening of "Tabacaria" ("The Tobacco Shop"), Álvaro de Campos, another of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, expresses this sense of the self with a totalizing dash of Whitman's expansiveness thrown into the mix: "I'm nothing. / I'll always be nothing. / I can't want to be something. / But I have in me all the dreams of the world." Fernando Pessoa, *Forever Someone Else: Selected Poems* translated by Richard Zenith, 3rd Edition (Porto, Portugal: Assírio & Alvim, 2013), 178.

34. Cavell carefully insists that this play on words is not his but rather a response to Hitchcock's clear visual pun: Eve "incorporates the mother, perhaps the mother he never had, protecting him from the police by hiding him in the bellying container that shows she holds the key to his berth. (This wasn't necessary: the fact that she subsequently hides him from the porter sufficiently well in the washroom proves that.)" "*North by Northwest*," in *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1984), 152-72, 161.

35. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 23-4.

36. Toril Moi, "Becoming a Human Being," in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 223-47. Moi previously acknowledges her significant debt to Cavell, "*What Is a Woman?*" *And Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), *passim*.

*What was Nora before she leaves? Or who?* you may ask and, pointedly, claim that this poetry business not only sounds highbrow but also exclusionary if it denies Nora her prior humanity. Her husband, Torvald, however, performs that task of belittlement and deprivation by infantilizing and dehumanizing Nora. He treats her like a child and reduces her to the status of a pet with animal nicknames, which sound like terms of endearment but can be taken as threatening suggestions of her true condition in their marriage. In his anxious conformity, Torvald, of course, *recites* his own dark poetry, which contains nothing fresh or original; and its meaning is dawning in Nora's mind. But it was crafted by Ibsen; and his words—that is, the words of the play as a whole—have various senses, which are not always audible to everybody on stage, least of all to Torvald. For example, when he observes that Nora has “changed” (into her street clothes)—an action that brings home her intention, then and there, to leave her husband and children—we can hear Torvald's remark ironically as well as literally. Besides her attire, Nora herself has changed, in a spiritual sense. She has come to the realization that, if she remains in the house she shares with Torvald and her children, she is putting her humanity in further and greater jeopardy than if she leaves in an effort to acquire the education she needs “to become a human being.”<sup>37</sup> The language in Nora's world and in the Hollywood movies that Cavell interprets does not sound poetic in any traditional, or high, literary sense; it sounds domestic and ordinary. But, if you listen up, it is poetry, and you will hear that our lives are poems.<sup>38</sup>

The multiple senses of words and the larger units they compose, like sentences and poems and plays, can bring us to a region of interpretation that, historically, includes the idea of scripture and the four senses of allegory, as they were formulated by medieval exegetes. Cavell invokes this notion prominently in the title and text of his “little book” on Thoreau, *The Senses of Walden*; but allegorical interpretation, in its basic form as construing one thing in terms of another, also helps Cavell express his understanding of the relation between Othello and Desdemona in *Othello*, which he considers “a failed comedy of remarriage.”<sup>39</sup> Simply put, Cavell views their relation

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37. In his essay on Ibsen in *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 247-64, Cavell writes of Nora's “duty to herself,” her discovery “that she has allowed herself not to have a self, or to claim a self, at all,” and her “claiming her right to exist.”

38. “Bensinger, the poet” (Ernest Truex), in *His Girl Friday* (1940), hasn't a clue about such uses of language; and you don't need an Ivy League degree to see that. Your laughter will tell you.

39. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 142.

as an *allegory* of the collapse of skepticism with respect to the external world into skepticism with respect to other minds. This capacious insight into the overall philosophical drama that he discerns in Shakespearean tragedy enables Cavell to bring *The Claim of Reason* to a close and to write five more essays about Shakespeare's tragedies and tragicomedies.<sup>40</sup>

Any remotely complete list of significant literary turns (and terms) in Cavell's thinking and writing cannot omit his deployment of Northrup Frye's idea of the Green World in Shakespearean comedy and romance, which is structurally fundamental to Cavell's readings of Hollywood comedies of remarriage. The mention of romance, in turn, can remind us how Cavell uses that genre's typically episodic structuring of the stories it tells to describe the associative quality of his own thinking. He characterizes himself, in the manner of Thoreau, as a surveyor of the buffer zone between poetry and philosophy "forever trying to make out the geography of surprising adjacencies, inner and outer, spots of thought and of feeling whose comprehension exactly lies in their adjacencies, in what lies before and after them" As his thinking advances along these lines, Cavell weaves the words of John Hollander into a text of his own;<sup>41</sup> and he discovers that the quest, which is the very essence of romance, is the form that his inquiries tend to take: "This fantasy of surveying is a late version... of a quest myth, in which the goal of the quest is an understanding of the origin of the quest, is a version of the dream that dispatches you."<sup>42</sup>

That final pronoun, in turn, reveals the increasingly explicit autobiographical trend in Cavell's thinking from his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?* to his last, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*, and raises this pertinent question: How can we tell the dreamer from the dream? Cavell's deployment of the word "exactly" above

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40. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 451-2; *Disowning Knowledge*, 6. Here it is worth recalling the etymology of the word "allegory." The first syllable comes from a Greek adjective for "other" and the second and third syllables come from a Greek verb meaning "to speak." The latter word in Greek derives from *agora*, the place for public speaking in ancient Athens, suggestively putting into play the tension between public and private, or esoteric, meanings.

41. Of course, the word "text" itself derives from the same root as "textile" and inspires many authors of romance to come up with metaphors about the challenges of spinning multiple yarns into the fabric of their compositions. E. g., Ludovico Ariosto in *Orlando Furioso* 13.81: "It seems I need many strands to finish the great tapestry I'm making." See Lawrence F. Rhu, *The Genesis of Tasso's Narrative Theory: Translations of the Early Poetics and a Comparative Study of Their Significance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 41-2.

42. Cavell, "A Reply to John Hollander," in *Themes Out of School*, 141-44, 143. Cavell's title, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1988) prominently displays this sense of his own way of thinking.

should reassure us of the precision of his perception, just as his acknowledgment of the constant effort required to achieve such perspicuity should remind us of his candor. Both acknowledgment and discernment, moreover, can help us respond to that question with another: Does the distinction between the dreamer and the dream hold? Or does it, rather, help us better appreciate Cavell's increasing reluctance to separate autobiography from philosophy? Or, as he puts it in "Thinking of Emerson," moods from objects? "This very evanescence of the world proves its existence to me; it is what vanishes from me... [T]his is not realism exactly, but it is not solipsism either."<sup>43</sup>

Medieval exegesis codified the fourfold reading of scripture into the senses of allegory: literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical.<sup>44</sup> Discernment of Thoreau's intention to write a scripture (or its modern equivalent, in the reduced circumstances that characterize the present age) persuades Cavell to read *Walden* as a text that abounds in a multiplicity of senses by no means confined to the traditional four and their specific categories. Moreover, understanding Thoreau's intention to write such a text reveals his claim to prophecy or divine inspiration to authorize his voice, even though he must touch his own lips in asserting his right to speak, a claim that Cavell calls arrogation of voice.<sup>45</sup> Dante made such claims for his *Divine Comedy* as a learned poet securely embedded within a shared Christian culture where his readership would recognize his intentions; and he used Psalm 114:1-3 as a proof-text to elaborate upon those claims in a letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala.<sup>46</sup> Since the laity were mainly illiterate during the middle ages and the clergy, whose official language was Latin, exercised a monopoly on the authority to interpret scripture, Dante's daring assertiveness on behalf of his poem in the vernacular stands out in bold relief. But Luther's subsequent challenge to the Church of Rome's authority, with his assertion of the priesthood of all believers and his translation of the Bible into German, made

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43. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 10-19, 13. The essay's title itself, "Thinking of Emerson," straddles the distinction between subject and object, as though it is impossible to say where Cavell's thinking ends and Emerson's begins, and vice versa. Grammatically, the title intentionally blurs the difference between a subjective and an objective genitive, or moods and objects inasmuch as moods are generally construed as subjective.

44. Sometimes these "senses" are called "levels," but the latter term suggests hierarchical ranking, as though one or another sense is higher or lower than others, so I avoid the term "levels" in this regard.

45. See Cavell, *The Senses of "Walden": An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 29: "He puts his hand upon his own mouth." See also Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), vi and 10.

46. Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 202-6.

literacy an imperative for protestant culture and further transformed both the role of the writer and the readership of books, which circulated ever more widely due to the invention of the printing press.

Such 17<sup>th</sup>-century narratives as *Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim's Progress* enjoyed wide popularity among New Englanders as rewritings of the sacred text; they served as third testaments and fifth gospels.<sup>47</sup> The vatic aspirations in Milton's summons of the heavenly muse represent that protestant author as a channel of prophetic revelations, communicated mysteriously through the Bible.<sup>48</sup> In a lower register, the dream of Christian, the pilgrim, performs a similar function among the daughters of the March family in Concord during the Civil War in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Such ambitions linger in nineteenth-century writers even as their sense of secular individualism increasingly separates them from biblical religion. Thoreau's desire to conduct some business with the Celestial Empire allegorizes his spiritual quest in terms of Yankee mercantilism and the China sea trade, but his transcendental mission remains legible as a pilgrim's *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, despite the economic considerations that animate the culture he must both resist and accommodate.<sup>49</sup> Though he may sound more like a Weberian exegete satirizing the spirit of capitalism than a pious Augustinian, he experiences his residence on earth with this conviction: "Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being."<sup>50</sup> When he saunters in Concord, he identifies—metaphysically, if you will—with pilgrims to the Holy Land: "saunterers in the good sense," as he puts it, to distinguish those headed *à la Sainte Terre* from "mere idlers and vagabonds."<sup>51</sup>

In my youth, though hardly like Thoreau, I travelled a good deal in Concord. For five years, I attended Middlesex School, on Lowell Road, three miles west of "the rude

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47. See Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories: Studies in the Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1985) *passim*.

48. I touch upon some of these passages in "After the Middle Ages: Prophetic Authority and Human Fallibility in Renaissance Epic," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of Literary Tradition*, ed. James Kugel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 163-84, 244-6.

49. See John Freccero, "Pilgrim in a Gyre," *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 70-92, 70: "St. Bonaventure was the medieval theorist who worked out the metaphor of the *itinerarium mentis* in great detail, but it remained for Dante to write the work which gave the metaphor substance and made great poetry from a figure of speech."

50. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd edn., ed. William Rossi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 90.

51. Thoreau, "Walking," *Thoreau: The Major Essays*, ed. Jeffrey L. Duncan (E. P. Dutton & Company, 1972), 194-226, 194. See William deBuys, *The Walk* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2007), 8-9.



bridged that arched the flood” in that legendary town in Massachusetts. Of course, it was more than a century after the heyday of Transcendentalism, and the town was more akin to the place Robert Lowell describes in “Concord,” a sonnet that begins “Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search / Of a tradition,” and features “The ruined bridge and Walden’s fished out perch.”<sup>52</sup> Though Concord was 2,500 miles from Tucson, Arizona, where I grew up, my parents and I almost accidentally reached the decision that I would attend that particular school. My older brother, Roger, was a handful who worried my parents sick, so they began singing the praises of going away to school, like Eric, the boy next door, who had gone off to Loomis in Windsor, Connecticut. Having grown up in central Ohio and western Pennsylvania respectively, neither my mother nor my father knew much about New England schools; but Eric’s recent departure gave them a place to begin this phase of their anxious effort to address a family crisis. Meal after meal at our dinner table, my mother’s encomia of such institutions and her exhortations about the benefits of such an education fell on Roger’s deaf ears while I, with no apparent stake in the matter, was unconsciously absorbing her message.

My mother’s passion about education came from her family circumstances and the extra effort they required of her to attend college. On my father’s side there were physicians with medical degrees from Western Reserve: his grandfather, Auguste Rhu, who had abandoned hopes of a career as a concert pianist to become a surgeon; and his father, Hermann, Sr., who joined Auguste’s practice in the house where my father grew up in Marion, Ohio, and initially followed a similar path. His mother, Lucy White Rhu from Buffalo, New York, graduated from Vassar and wrote poetry.<sup>53</sup> On my mother’s side, however, neither of her parents went to college, or even to high school in the case of her father, Lawrence Ford.

His large family from Dundee, Scotland, had arrived on our shores in 1888, when he was eight-years-old, and four years later a shortfall in family finances forced him, as the oldest son, to drop out of school in Pittsburgh after the eighth grade. Ultimately, he became a Baptist minister when he was thirty-years-old, mainly due to

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52. Robert Lowell, *Lord Weary’s Castle and The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (New York: Meridian Books, 1961), 27.

53. There is not much evidence for this claim, but, in one of Eric Carle’s menagerie books under “P,” these verses by Lucy W. Rhu appear: *Consider the Penguin / He’s smart as can be - / Dressed in his dinner clothes permanently. / You never can tell / When you see him about, / If he’s just coming in / Or just going out!*

the interest he'd stirred by an invited talk he gave at a church in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, about various jobs he'd held up till then: gopher at the Pittsburgh Stock Exchange, scoreboard keeper at Forbes Field during the heyday of the Flying Dutchman (Honus Wagner), private eye, etc. Soon he received another invitation for a much longer stay among the Baptists. So, by the time I was getting to know him, people were referring to him as Dr. Ford with enough persistence to have broken his strong resistance to that unearned honorific. His name had also acquired a middle initial, "B," which by then stood for "Browning," though it derived from "Brownie," his nickname as a boy due to his densely freckled body's susceptibility to a deep tan.

The year after she graduated from high school, my mother worked fulltime to save money for her college tuition and expenses; yet, she still had to overcome further resistance to receive her father's permission, first, to apply to Denison University in Granville, Ohio, and, then, to matriculate. There Ruth met Hermann, Jr., who had taken no "gap year," so, he was a year younger than this new freshman classmate. Yet, even if that current idiom accurately applies in part to her experience, she did not *take* that gap year. Necessity required it, though it served her well. Ruth worked that year for the president of a bank who was a member of her father's congregation at the First Baptist Church on Franklin Street in Vandergrift, not far from the Presbyterian Church where the poet Li-Young Lee's father was the preacher a decade or so after my grandfather had retired and moved to Tucson.<sup>54</sup> The secretarial skills Ruth acquired at the bank enabled her to work for the president of Denison as an undergraduate. She also became the only "coed" to major in Economics, which, of course, is not to be confused with Home Economics. She always stressed the shortness of funds that initially put higher education out of her reach, but, though it went unsaid, her being a young woman counted against her. Her brother William, who was ten years her senior, had graduated from college and medical school by the time Ruth started her freshman year at Denison.

Recently, I chanced upon a diary my father briefly kept as a freshman there. On Monday January 1, 1933, he writes, "I leave tonight for Granville. I certainly will be glad to see Ruth again. I certainly have missed her company during vacation." On Tuesday he elaborates on this theme: "Saw Ruth today. She certainly looked well and

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54. Li-Young Lee, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (Brockport, NY: BOA, 2013).

is better looking than ever if that is possible. I only hope she was as glad to see me as I was to see her. She acted as if she was and she also mentioned the fact that she was glad to see me again.” We need to look no further than these sentences for the problem of other minds as it relates to the heart’s affections and whatever poetry we may discover there to write or read or live. Between “the fact” and acting “as if” (that is, between reality and theatricality), shadows of doubt may fall, no matter how many times “certainly” qualifies our observations in this regard. In fact, the number of times we use “certainly” may be a tell that conveys our uncertainty, as theorists of the unconscious observe. But poets seek words for shades of meaning to voice nuances of feeling and observation that, despite our separateness and isolation, may reassure and inspire us with the prospect of bridging the gap between ourselves and another or others, even if only on paper.<sup>55</sup>

When I first read those sentences in my father’s diary, my wife and daughter and I were visiting my sister, Lucy, and her husband, Win, in Walnut Creek, California. We were all just back from the Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco, one of the predetermined stops on the unofficial *Vertigo* tour we planned for our visit. We went there, of course, to see a central prop in that suspenseful Hitchcock thriller, the portrait of Carlotta, which was, unfortunately, in the shop or out on loan, and nowhere to be found. Only a slightly lighter rectangle in an otherwise blank section of wall indicated where the painting was usually on display. At first that blankness seemed an aniconic anticlimax to our quest for something a little closer to the real thing. But then it seemed a still small voice reminding me that the movie itself had not used the original but only a reproduction of it. Besides, the original was only an oil painting of a woman who is now long dead; it was not the woman herself. What real thing were we seeking?

In reading *Vertigo* (1958), Cavell explicitly uses the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea as an aid to interpretation, which variously serves him elsewhere in pivotal readings of other plays and films as well: *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Othello*, for example.<sup>56</sup> In the first three of those

55. See Fred Dings, “Paper Bridge,” in *After the Solstice* (Alexandria, VA: Orchises Press, 1993), 38.

56. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 84-7. See Lawrence F. Rhu, “A Skeptic’s Reprieve: Cavell on Comedy in Shakespeare and the Movies,” in *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020) 170-187, especially 180f.

works (i.e., the comedies and the romance or tragicomedy), the generosity of Venus survives from Ovid's tale and overcomes most odds against immediate happiness in such a lover's passion when cold stone turns to warm flesh. In the tragedy, which Cavell calls a failed comedy of remarriage, Othello's skeptical gaze petrifies the woman into an alabaster beauty before he himself finishes the job with his bare hands and turns her into a corpse, reversing the Ovidian metamorphosis. Further casualties soon transform the stage and marriage bed into an unbearable sight.

Fortunately, however, tragedy was not the last word or the ultimate genre for Shakespeare. Tragicomedies like *The Winter's Tale* offered him exit strategies, and he found ways out of such apocalyptic finales of death and destruction as bring *King Lear* to a conclusion or haunt *Othello* as a possibility almost from the play's beginning. Wonder, rather than pity and fear, defines the dominant mood of key turning points in such tragicomedies as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. In the last act of Shakespeare's penultimate play, *The Winter's Tale*, when King Leontes allegedly beholds Giulio Romano's statue of his supposedly deceased wife, Hermione, his astonishment prompts this question about reality and artistic representation: *What fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?* (5.3.78-9). Without putting too fine a point on it, we can observe that the caesura in the second line arrives immediately after words that virtually define "caesura," which is a technical term from classical prosody. It derives from the Latin verb meaning "to cut," and it means a cutting of the breath mid-verse, a pause, like the sound of the thinnest silence. Even Shakespeare's allegedly "small Latin" provided him with such knowledge.

Shakespeare's philosophical range and theological consciousness also remains fully operational as he begins to turn from tragedy to tragicomedy. Inspired by Horace's Cleopatra ode as much as by history, Shakespeare had recently portrayed the death of that Egyptian queen and notorious epicurean (in a derogatory sense), as a triumphant hero of stoic transcendence in the last act of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Moreover, she not only preserves her dignity in dying by her own hand; she also earns the praise of Octavius Caesar, who celebrates her beauty thereafter in terms that resonate with ultimate concerns of Reformation Christianity about grace and works: *she looks like sleep / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace* (5.2.336-8). Just a few years later, in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare boldly echoes

Lucretius's argument for using poetry to make Hellenistic philosophy more palatable in a dramatic finale presided over by the aptly named Paulina. He thus transforms Leontes's agon at the crossroads of guilt and redemption into an epicurean transcendence of human anguish and an aesthetic transformation of human loss and mortality during three hours traffic on the stage: "For this affliction has a taste as sweet / As any cordial comfort" (5.3.76-7).

Given the death of Leontes' eight-year-old son, Mamillius, sixteen years earlier (as well as Leontes' murderous imprisonment of Hermione and abandonment of their infant daughter, Perdita), the happy reunion of such a ruined family is a remote possibility in the world as we usually find it. It requires wonder and astonishment even to entertain the prospect of its temporary accomplishment. Yet, indoors at Blackfriars, where Shakespeare's tragicomedies were mainly performed, as in the dark at movie houses, where the hyperbolic extremes of melodrama were once mainly screened, audiences may quietly release their hidden screams despite themselves and find some comfort. The heart may be a lonely hunter, yet, even in the worst of circumstances, it doesn't necessarily give up the hunt entirely: *The art of our necessities is strange*.<sup>57</sup> The wonder of Shakespearean romance is a mode of recovery, even for adults, who sometimes hope against hope and despair of despair in order to proceed. If Cavell's is a philosophy for grown-ups, it still finds its voice, without embarrassment, in the extremes of melodrama and tragicomedy.

My mother's youthful fervor for education remained palpable to me in her parenting when I was a boy. Without forced arguments and excessive efforts at persuasion, it reached me compellingly and reminds me now of critical moments in my early years as a teacher when my classes were composed of 'tweens and teens. Sometimes my "gut reactions" to certain of their "behavioral problems" seemed to spring out of nowhere, yet they would succeed in communicating my seriousness with surprising efficacy. Later, I learned to "professionalize" such responses because they could have exhausted me in the long run; but, in the meantime, they were a gift from my young students whose provocations reacquainted me with realities of my own heart and its deepest values. Yet, I was not directly the target of my mother's dinnertime endorsements of the advantages of going away to school, just their collateral beneficiary. For

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57. Shakespeare, *King Lear* (conflated text), 3.2.68.

I was doing fine at Doolen Junior High School in Tucson, when my older brother, Roger's, brushes with various authorities were prompting my parents to consider desperate measures. Though I preferred to hang out at the park and play sports during the summer, my mother still succeeded in urging me to pursue certain educationally beneficial activities, like reading for two hours a day during the summer and trying out for the Arizona Boys Chorus, that I would otherwise not have chosen as my pastimes. Thus, one day during dinner, amid another serving of fulsome praise of private schools such as neither she nor my father had ever attended, I was moved to ask, apparently out of the blue, "What about me? Why don't you want me to go to one of those schools?"

Of course, my question should have come as no great surprise, though it did. And soon thereafter my mother learned that the Admissions Director from a Massachusetts school had come to Tucson to recruit applicants. Though none of us had ever heard of Middlesex, she said, "Those schools are probably all pretty much the same," and urged me to meet him. The Director, a charmingly ironic man, seasoned his pitch with self-effacing open-mindedness and then gave all would-be applicants a preliminary test that resulted in the school's offering me a scholarship. By then, metaphorically speaking, the train had left the station, and I was on it. Almost a year later, however, I actually departed from El Paso on a very real train that took me to Chicago, where Eric's parent picked me up and drove me the rest of the way to Concord via Waterbury.

Those rides, by car and train in September 1958, and later by Greyhound bus, strike me as preludes to a beginner's experiences of anxiety about origins and destinations, which often comes with travel and changes of residence. Where do I come from? Where am I going? Where is home? Yet, who doesn't wonder about such things, even if they stay home? And who doesn't begin wondering much earlier than their early teens? Maybe that is what Nora means about becoming a human being: it gets you thinking. Your humanity involves giving wonder and worry their due whenever they arrive and time allows, or when we simply must. In Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts, Gauguin's triptych invites us to commune with his expression of this interrogative mood in distant Tahiti. In Lisbon, Bernardo Soares is one of the alternate selves, or heteronyms, of Fernando Pessoa, whose multiple personalities define so

much of today's literary sense of place there on the estuary of the Tejo. He writes of disquiet (*desassossego*) in ways that correspond to moods of anxiety that pervade so much of mid-twentieth-century existentialist writing in vogue during my youth.<sup>58</sup> Yet, Soares emphasizes his deep attachment to Lisbon, if not his rootedness there. So, my own experience of uprootedness, which took me faraway to a fancy school, may seem disproportionately remarkable to me. It was, no doubt, in many ways a privilege; yet, it may also have become an event that I factor into ordinary human experiences of homesickness and separation from one's family with too much emphasis. But what would be the right degree of emphasis?

Augustine writes of human restlessness in ways that Walker Percy found compatible with existential homelessness as well as traditional interpretations of *our* exile from the garden of Eden; and Percy arguably wrote the finest novel ever about New Orleans as a distinctive place with a particular culture—at least until John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* came along, thanks to Dr. Percy's help in rescuing the manuscript of that novel from oblivion after its author's death by his own hand.<sup>59</sup> Both of those novels, however, are composed, in counterpoint: they memorably play local color off against philosophy and theology to create specific worlds within worlds more generally accessible from outside. Toole's protagonist, Ignatius Reilly, summons "theology and geometry" when he reaches for detachment and perspective; Binx Bolling, the moviegoer who narrates his own story in Percy's novel, employs categories, like repetition and rotation from Kierkegaard, and others, like certification and the search, which he comes up with on his own.

For *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help*, Percy takes his epigraph from the opening of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, apparently unaware that it derives from the first paragraph of Emerson's "Experience," which begins with this question: "Where do we find ourselves?" and reveals the raw bewilderment of a father's grief over the loss of his five-year-old son, Waldo for Waldo, if you will. This crossroads of literary influence and inheritance becomes complicated when we learn that Percy belatedly regretted the omission of a second epigraph from Augustine, which he added

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58. See Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (New York: Other Press, 2016).

59. "Forward to *A Confederacy of Dunces*," *Sign-Posts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 224-6.

to the paperback edition of his book: “God, give us the power to know ourselves.”<sup>60</sup> Further complications arise when we read what Percy’s biographer, Jay Tolson, makes of Percy’s declining an invitation to deliver the 1987 Phi Beta Kappa Address at Harvard Commencement, the sesquicentennial of Emerson’s “American Scholar.” In *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, Tolson construes that incident as evidence of Percy’s pervasive anti-Emersonianism and a defining characteristic of his world view.<sup>61</sup> Yet, in a letter to William Alfred, one of the Harvard professors eager to bring Percy to campus as a graduation speaker, Percy himself acknowledges that he simply does not know much about Emerson and, as a writer in his seventies with various projects underway, he simply has other priorities.

By the time I graduated from Middlesex, my father had sought to provoke me once or twice by calling me “Camus”; and, in a long-distance phone call from Concord, I had apologized to him for deciding to go to Harvard. Perhaps his teasing warrants deeper analysis, but it plainly reminds me of how ready I was to read *The Moviegoer* when it first appeared in 1961 and how much I enjoyed Percy’s earlier essays, like “The Man on the Train,” when I later encountered them. Camus and Sartre, as well as continental philosophy and fiction more generally, informed Percy’s otherwise careful detailing of the world way down yonder and the people of New Orleans. As for my apology, my father simply laughed and said, “If that’s the worst thing you ever do, you’ll probably turn out OK.” Of course, he should not have the last word on my conduct since 1963 when I was eighteen-years-old, but the funny thing is he was right in a way: Harvard was bad enough, though it did not bring out only the worst in me.

At Middlesex boarding students had limited access to the use of a phone, and such cross-country calls were (comparatively) expensive. So, mine were also infrequent, and they almost always began with, or promptly included, this question: “What time is it there?” as though time was as profound a concern as place and the distance it put between me and my family back home in Tucson. On first looking into *The Moviegoer*, however, I began to hear an intimate voice from afar, and it wasn’t merely, or necessarily, Binx Bolling, the first-person narrator, who alone spoke to me.

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60. Walker Percy, *Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1985), 293.

61. I detail “further complications” in Tolson’s account in “Where do we find ourselves? Emerson, Percy, and Ford as Unlikely Soulmates,” *Anglo Saxonica* Ser. III, 12 (Lisbon: University of Lisbon Center for English Studies, 2016), 203-19.



Rather, as I began to sort out the story's various registers in description and dialogue and self-disclosure, it sounded more like what Percy elsewhere calls news from across the sea, whose message is not so much timely as time-altering.<sup>62</sup> Thus, many years later in researching documentary evidence of the friendship between Percy and Robert Coles, I was gratefully brought up short by this statement in a letter from Percy to Coles about the latter's citation of a passage of Cavell in *Walker Percy: An American Search*: "A happy confirmation: your quote from Cavell's book on *Ontology of Film*. It exactly expresses *The Moviegoer's* implied ontology. (I'm glad Cavell wrote it after *The Moviegoer*.)"<sup>63</sup> In his citation Coles trims that passage of Cavell's virtuoso survey of relevant perspectives among modern philosophers, which summons the names of Hume and Kant and Locke and positions them in relation to Hegel and Marx and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as contextual evidence for this claim about our experience of film:

What we wish to see in this way is the world itself—that is to say, everything... To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is the way we establish our connection with the world: by viewing it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen; viewing a movie makes this condition automatic, takes the responsibility for it out of our hands. Hence movies seem more natural than reality. Not because they are escapes into fantasy, but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities.<sup>64</sup>

I came to know Coles during my senior year at Harvard when I took Erik Erikson's course on the Human Life Cycle in the fall of 1966 and Coles was my section leader. It was, to say the least, a turbulent time in our country and in universities across the land. "The Avoidance of Love," Cavell's essay on *King Lear*, unforgettably registers

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62. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 139-49.

63. Emphasis Percy's. This letter of December 7, 1978, along with numerous others from Percy to Coles, is in the Robert Coles Collection at Michigan State University. I am grateful to David Cooper for making them available to me and to Robert Coles for unfettered access to his papers at MSU and in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill).

64. Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 156-7.

his contemporary response to the American tragedy then underway in Southeast Asia and here at home. The first of its two parts was written in the summer of 1966, and the second in the summer of 1967. Twenty years later at the time of its republication in *Disowning Knowledge*, Cavell acknowledges that his essay “bears the scars of our period in Vietnam; its strange part 2 is not in control of its asides and orations and love letters of nightmare.”<sup>65</sup>

A few years later, Coles made his own remarkable contribution to the public conversation about the war in Vietnam. During the summer of 1970, he hosted Father Daniel Berrigan for a week at his home in Concord, Massachusetts, while the Jesuit priest was a fugitive from the FBI for his involvement in the destruction of selective service files in federal offices in Catonsville, Maryland. In March and April of 1971, their tape-recorded conversations first appeared in three successive issues of the *New York Review of Books* as “A Dialogue Underground” and then were published as a book called *The Geography of Faith*.<sup>66</sup> During the previous decade, Coles had been active down south in the Civil Rights Movement, mainly as a reporter and researcher. His medical specialty as a psychiatrist sometimes involved him in court proceedings where the authority of such expertise gave him some influence on the treatment of activists in jail and on trial. His research focused on how individuals and families respond to political crises, and it constituted part of his own response to the struggle for civil rights in the South. But his role as a participant observer did not preclude taking sides. He did not want the detachment and objectivity prized by social science to immunize him against the moral and political passions aroused by social crises.

On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving 1966, Coles held our section meeting in his small office behind Claverly Hall on Mount Auburn St. because he anticipated that most students may have already headed home for the holiday by then. Among those few who came to class that Wednesday, the conversation turned to the anti-war prstudent demonstration against the war that had detained Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, during his visit to Harvard just over two weeks earlier. Protesters blocked his departure, first, in Quincy House; then, on Mill Street behind Lowell House, they forced a confrontation with him. Coles must have sensed how upset I was

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65. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, x.

66. Robert Coles and Daniel Berrigan, SJ, *The Geography of Faith: Underground Conversations on Religious, Political and Social Change* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971).

about the news of that event, or perhaps he had already discerned how generally troubled and on edge I was overall in those days. Though we had not spoken personally before that small group meeting in his office, he phoned me out of the blue on the Friday after Thanksgiving and asked me how I was doing. He was upset too, as it turned out, though it took me a long time to fully realize the truth of that fact, which he was quite willing to share from the beginning of our conversations. I had encountered nothing at Harvard before like his candor and his political passion, and nothing like his kindness either, in the way he reached out to me that day. Gradually our friendship blossomed out of that call and became an inspiration for me thereafter. Thus, when Cavell discusses the need for an alternative response to the criticism of his colleagues “who were so fiercely contemptuous of the behavior of our distressed students” in 1969, I count my lucky stars, as my grandmother would put it, that I met Coles in that hour of my distress over two years earlier.

In the summer of 1968, I began working for him as a research assistant after my first year in the MAT Program at Harvard when I taught junior high school in Newton, Massachusetts. During my second year in that program, I returned to campus to finish my required courses, but I also taught two sections in William Alfred’s humanities course on drama in the Program on General Education and continued working for Coles. First, I compiled the notes for his biography of Erikson, and then I gathered uncollected writings by and about both Walker Percy and Simone Weil, each of whom would subsequently become the subject of one of Coles’ books. When I started working for him, he had written a profile of Erikson for *The New Yorker* which he was in the process of turning into a book that Little, Brown would publish in 1970; and he would soon do the same with Percy, though publication in *The New Yorker* and then in another book from Little, Brown, *Walker Percy: An American Search*, was delayed almost six years, until late 1978.

Though he failed to convince the magazine’s editor William Shawn to publish such a piece about Simone Weil, Coles took particular pride in another *New Yorker* profile of his that appeared between those of Erikson and Percy. As a “southern writer,” in Shawn’s phrase to Coles when he first broached the idea of a Percy profile, Percy was already something of an anomaly for that magazine in the ‘70s, but Coles was astonished at the alacrity with which an editor called him at home about accepting his pro-

file of Dolores Garcia, an octogenarian with whom he became acquainted in Cordoba, New Mexico, during the early 70s after he moved his family to Albuquerque. She possessed a compelling voice as a moral witness, but she was a “marginal” American in most of the statistical categories that command attention: income, ethnicity, gender, and age, for example. Despite his wife’s urging, Coles had resisted submitting the piece to *The New Yorker*. Given that magazine’s urbane sense of itself and its readership, he doubted that a profile of such a woman would receive a sympathetic reading there. So, his wife, Jane, submitted it for him herself; and within a matter of days, Renata Adler from *The New Yorker* was on the phone saying, “Mr. Shawn loves it.”

In a way it’s as though Cavell’s rival in exchanges about ordinary language philosophy, Benson Mates, had agreed to consult the land lady and abandoned the notion that one would have to poll an infinite number of speakers to satisfactorily answer questions about what *we* say in a given context. Of course, Coles had already spent many years consulting persons in many walks of life to understand what they felt about racial differences and making a living and raising a family, among other ordinary but nonetheless critical concerns. He wasn’t *polling* anyone. He was patiently listening to hear what they meant and what they had it at heart to say. But Coles got lucky with *Una Anciana*, his profile of Dolores Garcia, whose title highlighted her philosophical wisdom. As a cub reporter fresh out of the University of Michigan and long before he had achieved his legendary status at *The New Yorker*, William Shawn had interned at the *Optic*, Las Vegas, New Mexico’s daily newspaper. Still, in case there is any doubt about the gist of this profile, Coles lets its readers hear from Dolores’s husband, Domingo, who has the last word: “She is not just an old woman, you know. She wears old age like a bunch of fresh-cut flowers. She is old, advanced in years, *vieja*, but in Spanish we have another word for her, a word that tells you she has grown with all those years. I think that is something one ought to hope for and pray for and work for all during life: to grow, to become not only older but a bigger person. She is old all right, *vieja*, but I will dare say this in front of her: she is *una anciana*; with that I declare my respect and have to hurry back to the barn.”<sup>67</sup>

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67. Robert Coles, “*Una Anciana*,” in *The Old Ones of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press, 1973), 116-36, 36. Alex Harris, who took the photographs in this book, later collaborated with William deBuys to create its worthy successor, *River of Traps: A Village Life* (Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico University Press, 1990). Both deBuys and Harris moved to northern New Mexico in the early 1970s to work as research assistants for Robert Coles.

In becoming friends with Coles when and where I did, I got lucky too. Among other encouraging words I received from him were comments on poems I occasionally sent him; and, since I wrote very few and shared even fewer, his encouragement was unique in my experience for many years. Like Cavell, Coles was in an on-going struggle over ordinary language as opposed to “special brands of meaning” that presented themselves authoritatively in the vocabulary of his profession.<sup>68</sup> He also had a knack for friendship that managed to cross considerable distances of various kinds: regional and generational, social and political, to name only four. During the summer of 1968 he shared with me a letter he’d recently received from Walker Percy which contained this remark, “I never expected to find a Harvard psychiatrist plowing the same field I plow—very confusing.” This expression of surprise sustains the mood of their earlier exchange when Percy remarks about a *New Republic* review Coles had sent him: “Your letter and Bernanos article throw an entirely new light on Coles... yours is the first good word I’ve seen on the Englished *Mouchette*. I said a good word for it (yes, something about those same damp villages and rainy woods) and then saw it chopped up by reviews.”<sup>69</sup>

Percy’s surprise at discovering a kindred spirit in Coles especially moved me. It reminded me of something I learned from Coles soon after I first read *The Diary of a Country Priest* by George Bernanos at his suggestion during the fall of 1966. Simone Weil, an activist French intellectual as readily identifiable with left-wing politics as Bernanos was with the far right, had written him a letter expressing both her admiration of that 1936 novel and her gratitude for *Les Grands Cimetières sous la Lune*, his 1938 book about the horrors he had recently witnessed on Majorca during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>70</sup> Weil felt solidarity with Bernanos’ outraged response to the brutality that ideologues of whatever stripe may invoke abstract principles to justify, and she wrote to acknowledge the deeper similarity she sensed in their feelings of disenchantment with their respective political causes. Such false alternatives gave the appearance—and merely the appearance—of differences between them.<sup>71</sup> For Coles,

68. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 11. For one example among many, see Robert Coles, “A Fashionable Kind of Slander,” in *Farewell to the South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 285-93.

69. Walker Percy to Robert Coles, 5/18/68 and 7/3/67.

70. Translated into English by Pamela Morris as *A Diary of My Times* (London: Boriswood, 1938).

71. Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987), 65-73.

both Weil and Bernanos stood out as compelling examples of moral behavior, as distinguished from moral theory, priorities that Coles himself acted upon from the outset of our budding friendship.

In December 1966, Coles gave a lecture in Erikson's course about Lawrence Jefferson, a fourteen-year-old boy who had desegregated a high school in Atlanta in 1961 together with a handful of other freshmen. In June 1967, when *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* was published, it included Coles' compelling account of that boy's experience as "John Washington, Pioneer Youth."<sup>72</sup> Under the title, "The Doctor Listened," Percy favorably reviewed Coles' new book in the Sunday *New York Times* Book Review, and Coles wrote him a letter expressing both gratitude for Percy's appreciation of his work and admiration of Percy's fiction and essays. Thus began their correspondence and friendship, which lasted until Percy's death in May 1990.

In December 1966, when Coles emerged from Divinity Hall after his lecture about Lawrence Jefferson, he invited me to drive down to New Haven with him later in the week. He needed to visit with C. Vann Woodward, the estimable historian of the South, and the drive would give us a further chance to talk in the car on the way to and fro. While he took care of business at Yale, I could visit a friend, if I knew someone there, or I could find something to do on my own, if I didn't. Frankly, I had no idea who he was talking about, but my suspicion of names like that—fancy, formal, pretentious—was irrepressible. "What do you call him? C?" were the first words out of my mouth in response to Coles' kind invitation. When he laughed, I told him I had a friend I'd be pleased to visit at Yale and quickly accepted his invitation.

A few days later, James Kugel, my classmate from Middlesex, and I had lunch together in New Haven and read a few poems, as we used to do during our Concord schooldays. The first time I'd visited him there was almost exactly three years earlier, November 22, 1963. That Friday morning, I'd turned in a paper on Hamlet's third soliloquy to David Kalstone (who would give it a C+ and say it showed improvement from my previous efforts). By the time I arrived, the Kennedy assassination had cancelled the Harvard-Yale football game, which had brought me to New Haven that day.

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72. Coles, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 97-121.

In the meantime, during those three years since Kennedy's death (1963-1966), activism against the Vietnam War had superseded the Civil Rights movement for priority in the political consciousness of most college students I knew; and, by the spring of 1968, assassins would create two more martyrs in those causes, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. Though I only learned this fact decades later, Coles wrote the last speech RFK delivered, with its stirring description of "ripples of hope," before he was gunned down on June 5 at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles and died the next day.

Jim Kugel and I had started a Poetry Club at Middlesex, though, as I recall, we read more prose than poetry: T. S. Eliot, who fits the bill, comes readily to mind, but so do Proust and Faulkner, who do not. That day in New Haven we read Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane. With regard to Crane, I've recently been delighted to note words and phrases from his poems that crop up in my own, like "spindrift" and "visionary company"; and, in Jim's writing, Crane's phrase, "obscure as that heaven of the Jews," has a moment of prominence.<sup>73</sup> I credit Allan "Ozzie" Osborne, our English teacher during junior year, for my love of Crane, which proceeded naturally from a simple question I asked him about the epigraph to *Streetcar Named Desire*, a stanza from Crane's "The Broken Tower." It broached a topic that Ozzie addressed with such prompt and infectious enthusiasm that I was instantly eager for more and soon hooked on Crane. With regard to Stevens, Jim introduced me that day to "A Postcard from the Volcano," which thrilled me then and continues to do so now, from its opening sense of forlorn abandonment to its gorgeous celebration of what little remains:

A dirty house in a gutted world,  
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,  
Smear'd with the opulent gold of the sun.<sup>74</sup>

It is fair to say about Stevens what Frost says about Emerson: He is a philosophical poet and a poetic philosopher, my favorite kind of both. Moreover, his resistance to religiosity—whether early, in the youthful sonnet that inspired George Santayana to

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<sup>73</sup>. *The Great Poems of the Bible: A Reader's Companion with New Translations* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 193.

<sup>74</sup>. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 159.

respond literally in kind, with a sonnet in defense of religion; or later (and famously), in “Sunday Morning”—offers bracing companionship in an increasingly secular culture. Cavell, who writes very little about modern poetry, feels a strong affinity for Stevens and writes about him appreciatively, even defensively, as though he were a kindred spirit in need of some apologia, given philosophy’s treatment of him on a particular occasion. I hear the same empathy that Cavell demonstrates for Nora’s “unprotected identity” in the fellow-feeling he shows when considering the rejection of Stevens’ invited and then disinvited prose piece, which was turned down by the *Journal of Metaphysics* after he’d been led to expect publication there. Cavell hears Stevens’ all-but-obsessive plea for the connection between poetry and philosophy, or imagination and reason, as if it were his own.<sup>75</sup>

Whatever that connection may be at any given moment from one word to the next, Cavell’s central concern with the problem of other minds enabled him to understand our gratitude for poetry. Moreover, he discovered and exposed a literariness in Wittgenstein’s philosophy and then in Emerson’s and in Thoreau’s that made him confident that he could write about whatever he chose, like Shakespeare and film, and still be doing philosophy.<sup>76</sup> These perceptions moved me to write about those subjects through the lens of Cavell’s writing and, ultimately, when retirement gave me more time, to return to writing poetry. I may not have resumed that pursuit so promptly and gladly if Stanley Cavell had not advocated and demonstrated such a compelling, indeed redemptive, expressiveness on page after page of his prose.

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75. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 184-5. See Stanley Cavell, “Reflections on Wallace Stevens at Mount Holyoke” in *Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke, 1942-1944*, ed. Christopher Benfey and Karen Remmler (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 61-88.

76. Cavell, “The Wittgensteinian Event” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 192-212, 211-2.