

4. A Willingness for Crisis: Cavell and Kuhn

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In one of the excerpts from memory composing his autobiography, Stanley Cavell recalls attending “an informal but extended discussion among professional philosophers” with Thomas Kuhn, then his colleague at Berkeley. It was the first such meeting the two friends had sat through together, and Cavell describes the vivid impression left on the historian of science: “As we left the scene Kuhn pressed his fingers to his forehead as if it ached. ‘I wouldn’t have believed it. You people don’t behave like academics in any other field. You treat each other as if you are all mad.’”¹ The perception, Cavell notes, “seemed right [...] but normal enough, and because normal, suddenly revelatory.”² Kuhn’s response clearly anticipates topics and arguments that would come to inform *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³ Articulated within the terms of those arguments, the exasperating scene becomes one of philosophical discussion in the absence of a paradigm, unable to take place upon an assumed common ground.

The argument of this essay is that Cavell’s understanding of philosophy is informed throughout by an aversive dialogue with Kuhn’s account of scientific development and creativity and its signature ideas about paradigms, normal science, progress, and crisis. This aversiveness helps to explain some of the difficulties encountered when attempting to situate Cavell’s work in relation to paradigms. Mindful of the mutual influence between Cavell and Kuhn, Toril Moi notes that “*The Structure of*

1. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 354. Later in his narrative Cavell returns to the scene of Kuhn’s “astonishment at the angry and wide variation of value philosophers place on one another’s work.” *Ibid.*, 500. Elsewhere, the same text notes “the civilised violence in philosophical exchange, familiarly alarming to visitors to the subject.”

2. *Ibid.*, 319.

3. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Scientific Revolutions is deeply Wittgensteinian, not to say Cavellian in spirit and argumentation.”⁴ This connection lends support to Moi’s suggestion that “Kuhn’s notions of paradigms and paradigm shifts provide the best framework for understanding” the relationship between Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy and poststructuralist theory.⁵ As Moi argues in an illuminating analysis of the different understanding of “concepts” within ordinary language philosophy and poststructuralism, the relationship between the two may be understood as an incommensurability between divergent paradigms. The salient difficulty when it comes to Cavell and paradigms, then, is that paradigmatic poststructuralist theoretical orthodoxies about “language, meaning, and interpretation,” for a time so pervasive within the humanities as to be disciplinary second nature to many literary critics, are radically at odds with Cavell’s work and so muted his reception.⁶ It is therefore “no coincidence” for Moi “that almost all the books on Cavell that have appeared since 1989 have been written by philosophers and not by literary critics.”⁷

Writing ten years after Moi’s article, Marshall Cohen struck a slightly different note about Cavell’s reception by philosophers. Cavell’s work, in Cohen’s view, “will be fruitful and multiply only when philosophers engage it critically, find it useful, and perhaps develop it further. For the most part, this has not happened.”⁸ The implication is that Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy has been no more paradigmatic for analytic philosophers than for literary theorists. My purpose in juxtaposing these two accounts is to indicate a sense of difficulty when it comes to understanding Cavell’s work in relation to Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm. As Moi argues, “Attempts to squeeze ordinary language philosophy into the poststructuralist paradigm will always fail.”⁹ My contention is that there are also reasons to hesitate before attempting to squeeze

4. Toril Moi, “They practice their trades in different worlds’: Concepts in Poststructuralism and Ordinary Language Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 805.

5. *Ibid.*, 804.

6. *Ibid.*, 802. Moi’s ground-breaking analysis identifies the relationship between the two movements not as one of straightforward opposition but as a more complex case of closeness and distance. *Ibid.*, 804.

7. *Ibid.*, 802.

8. Marshall Cohen, “Must We Mean What We Say? On the Life and Thought of Stanley Cavell,” in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 58. Cohen’s remarks build upon but ultimately depart from Cavell’s own reflections on the reception of his work. “Some friends of mine feel that too much of the writing about my work comes from the sense [...] that if it were just explained a little more clearly, its readership would suddenly become fruitful and multiply.” Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 514.

9. Moi, “They practice their trades in different worlds’,” 803.

Cavell's ordinary language philosophy into, as it were, the "paradigm" paradigm, and that these reasons capture a core element of Kuhn's influence upon Cavell. Cavell's reception and transfiguration of Kuhnian ideas is therefore the directional emphasis of this essay, as distinct from scholarship detailing the impact of Cavell's Wittgenstein on Kuhn.¹⁰ The reception pertains to Cavell's understanding of philosophy, placing this essay on a somewhat different path to scholarship on Cavell and Kuhn focusing on topics of artistic modernism.¹¹

Readers of *Structure* will recall that an enterprise without a paradigm may be characterised, variously, as dabbling in pre-professional, solitary meanderings, as riven by competing schools, or as undergoing an extraordinary, revolutionary time of crisis, when disagreements over disciplinary fundamentals as to method and goal become newly salient. When Kuhn and Cavell joined the philosophy department at Berkeley in 1956, they brought rumours of disciplinary crisis, of revolutionary work in gestation at odds with a residual logical positivism. Cavell characterises the Berkeley ambience at the time as "still, almost freshly, bearing the mark of Moritz Schlick's visit there for a semester in the mid-1930s."¹² In this disciplinary context, Kuhn and Cavell arrived with

enthusiastic news that, singly and jointly — grating to some, young and old — served to loosen the hold, for a fair number of graduate students, of restrictive doctrines of language and of science, of, let's say, verificationism in both realms; or, put otherwise, served to demonstrate modes of intellectual serious-

10. Vasso Kindi has argued that the influence between the two thinkers is less unidirectional than had been commonly understood, since Kuhn influenced Cavell as much as *vice versa*. Specifically, Kindi argues that Kuhn's account of revolutionary innovation helped to shape Cavell's understanding of novelty within the context of artistic modernism and that this understanding, further, raises questions of essentialism in Cavell's work. Whilst Kindi's focus is on parallels between Kuhn's and Cavell's respective ideas about tradition and novelty in science and art, my principal topic is rather Kuhn's impact upon Cavell's understanding of philosophy. (Related essentialist gestures also appear on this terrain, since Cavell receives *Structure* as an occasion to think through *differences* between philosophy, art, and science, and in particular to articulate philosophy's irreducibility to science, eventuating in a particular understanding of philosophical autonomy.) See Vasso Kindi, "Novelty and Revolution in Art and Science: The Connection between Kuhn and Cavell," *Perspectives on Science* 18, no. 3 (2010): 284-310.

11. In addition to Kindi's article just cited and to essays by Mohan and Uçan in this issue of *Conversations*, see Caroline A. Jones, "The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (2000): 488-528.

12. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 352. Schlick was Mills Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy at Berkeley for the academic year 1931-32. For an analysis of his role in "the subtle transformation of American philosophy in the early 1930s," see Sander Verhaegh, "The American Reception of Logical Positivism: First Encounters (1929-1932)," *Hopos* 10, no. 1 (2020): 106.

ness and fruitfulness that were not intimidated by, nor I think unheeding of, positivism's threats of meaninglessness and lack of rigor.¹³

The positivist doctrines Cavell describes here had aspired to deliver professional philosophy from precisely the type of dissensus observed by Kuhn. For the positivist sensibility, the persistence of schools and seemingly interminable debates over fundamentals within philosophy was symptomatic of a lack of progress, which was exactly what a scientific philosophy promised to secure. Schlick understood logical positivism as providing methods whose "resolute application" would inaugurate, to cite the title of his 1931 essay, "The Turning Point in Philosophy": "Two thousand years of experience seem to teach that efforts to put an end to the chaos of systems and to change the fate of philosophy can no longer be taken seriously. [...] I am convinced [however] that we now find ourselves at an altogether decisive turning point in philosophy, and that we are objectively justified in considering that an end has come to the fruitless conflict of systems."¹⁴

A positivist image of science as the exemplary model of disciplinary consensus and progress is of course a principal topic of *Structure*. Kuhn's answer to the *explanandum* of scientific progress was the ability of scientific practitioners during periods of "normal science" to subdue what would otherwise prove to be halting debates over fundamentals regarding method, goals, and ontology.¹⁵ Such considerations are postponed in favour of unfolding the working paradigm, until the assumptions of normal science informing that paradigm become unignorably problematic in the face of anomalies that normal science itself has functioned to define. This is the point at whi-

13. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 353. It is noteworthy that the news is pictured as "grating to some, young and old," as something other therefore than the onset of a homogeneous generational shift.

14. Quoted in Pinto de Oliveira, "Kuhn and Logical Positivism: on the Image of Science and the Image of Philosophy," in *Interpreting Kuhn*, ed. K. Brad Wray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 69.

15. Kuhn's point of course was not that scientists possessed firmer agreement about fundamentals than their counterparts in the humanities. Cavell's recounting of his friend's perplexity at the normal madness of philosophical conversation is of a piece with (and perhaps shaped by) Kuhn's account in *Structure* of the development of his signature concept at Stanford University's Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioural Sciences in 1958-59. "I was struck by the number and extent of the overt disagreements between social scientists about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods. Both history and acquaintance made me doubt that practitioners of the natural sciences possess firmer or more permanent answers to such questions than their colleagues in social science. Yet, somehow, the practice of astronomy, physics, chemistry, or biology normally fails to evoke the controversies over fundamentals that today often seems endemic among, say, psychologists or sociologists." Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, ix-x.

ch, on Kuhn's account, the puzzle solving characterising paradigm-led normal science gives way to an extraordinary, revolutionary period of crisis during which self-reflexive questions (determining what count as interesting puzzles and relevant solutions) come to the fore.

Cavell's conviction as to the revolutionary nature of ordinary language philosophy never dimmed. There are nonetheless considerations against understanding its development at his hands as the fashioning of a new paradigm. The foremost of these is that Cavell resists the philosophical equivalent of paradigm-led normal science. Returning to the anecdote with which this essay began, recall that what Cavell found "revelatory" was not so much his friend's impression of alarming philosophical dissensus, but rather an intuition that such disagreement might be "normal" to philosophy. A contrast emerges here with Kuhn's account of normal science, according to which science progresses within the apparent consensus of a paradigm through an ability for a time to bracket the tumult of disciplinary self-questioning. Kuhn's characterisation of normal science informs and helps to articulate a strand of Cavell's work whereby self-reflexive questioning is considered as normal to philosophy, rather than as needing to be overcome before philosophy can make a start or as needing to be postponed in order for philosophy to progress.¹⁶

The strand is prominent in the foreword to Cavell's first book of essays (certainly a tumult of disciplinary self-questioning) which bears the impress of the two friends' conversations quite comprehensively, taking up such recognisably Kuhnian topics as textbooks, professionalisation, popularisation and incommensurability as these pertain to differences between philosophy, science, and art.¹⁷ It can be found in Cavell's refusal of the distinction between philosophy and metaphilosophy:

16. As Cavell writes in his introduction to *This New Yet Unapproachable America* ("Work in Progress: An Introductory Report"): "On learning from the invitation by the Department of English at the University of Chicago to deliver the Carpenter Lectures not only that they did not expect to hear a completed book of lectures but instead that they hoped to respond to work in progress, I found myself wondering more consecutively than ever before what philosophical work is, and what constitutes its progress." Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 1-28, 1. Finding oneself wondering is of course Cavell's Thoreauvian phrase for finding oneself *by* wondering, hence Cavell can begin his lecture series just because he has become self-critical about what beginning would imply. On this logic, his report will forever be introductory, just as Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* will never be conclusive.

17. Cavell, "Foreword: An Audience for Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), xxxi-xlii. Elements of Cavell's grammatical analysis of philosophical "audience" (as a way of mapping the general contours of philosophy) parallel Kuhn's com-

The remarks I make *about* philosophy (for example, about certain of its differences from other subjects) are, where accurate and useful, nothing more or less than philosophical remarks [...] I would regard this fact — that *philosophy is one of its own normal topics*, as in turn defining for the subject, for what I wish philosophy to do [emphasis added]. But someone who thinks philosophy is a form of science may not accept that definition, because his picture is of a difference between, say, speaking about physics and doing physics.¹⁸

The wish to hold philosophy and metaphilosophy together reflects a companion wish to hold philosophy and science somewhat apart — even as this move draws support from Kuhn’s argument fuzzing up the distinction between the two disciplines (since his notion of a paradigm articulates how ways of “speaking about” physics are not separate from ways of “doing” physics). Metaphilosophical questions, rather than needing to be dimmed so that philosophy can get going, are presented as a normal part of that getting going and as usefully at issue. What this entails is that Cavell stages philosophy (specifically his philosophical writing) as taking upon itself questions that the possession of a paradigm would function to answer as it were automatically and in advance. Within science, as Cavell contends in the context of a contrast between the different grammars of audience in philosophy, art and science, “standards of performance are institutionalised.”¹⁹ The closing sentence of the foreword turns to the performance of philosophy: “There is the audience of philosophy; but there also, while it lasts, is its performance.”²⁰ The formulation implicates the duration of the performance with a related question as to the continued existence, the autonomy, of philosophy. One shape philosophical autonomy assumes in Cavell’s work involves a contrast with paradigm-led normal science, whereby standards of performance, rather than “institutionalised,” are at stake in the performance itself. The moral is captured in Cavell’s autobiography, in a very different context, as the intuition that “no one,

ments about science and audience found in “Comment on the Relations of Science and Art,” in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 340-351.

18. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxxii.

19. *Ibid.*, xli. The formulation suggests that Cavell’s topic is as much the professionalisation of philosophy (as facilitated by scientism) as scientism itself.

20. *Ibid.*, xlii.

and no institution, unless you allow it to, can tell you what you are meant to do, nor whether you are doing it.”²¹

One reason crisis becomes thematic for Cavell is that, in a contrast with Kuhn's pattern of scientific development according to which periods of crisis are exceptional, viewing fundamental self-criticism as normal to philosophy leaves it open to crisis. In Cavell's 1965 essay “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” philosophical crisis is presented in straightforwardly Kuhnian terms as intermittent: “What I have written, and I suppose the way I have written, grows from a sense that philosophy is in one of its periodic crises of method.”²² Heightening this crisis is the Kuhnian thought that “method dictates to content,” as might be seen in the way that “an intellectual commitment to analytical philosophy trains concern away from the wider, traditional problems of human culture which may have brought one to philosophy in the first place.”²³ Feeling unable to eschew either the method or the extracurricular concern, Cavell's hope is “to discover further freedoms or possibilities within the method one finds closest to oneself.”²⁴ Denying a distinction between philosophy and metaphilosophy, thereby making philosophy one of its own normal topics, is one way Cavell relates his analytic methods to the humanities. This can be seen in “The Division of Talent,” written twenty years after “Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy.” Recounting his experiences at the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in 1984, Cavell considers these as symptomatic of broader controversies within the field of literary studies at the time as to the role of theory.

Such a field, I said to myself, seems to have a crisis on its hands. (The willingness for crisis may be to its credit or for its promise. It is definitive of the humanistic professions, as opposed to the scientific, to be at any time subject to the charge, or the confession, that they are in crisis — and also to be always capable of denying that charge — as if a *question* of crisis is itself normal to the humanities, when they differentiate from the sciences. [I am of course thinking here of

21. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 247.

22. Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 74.

23. *Ibid.*, 74.

24. *Ibid.*, 74.

Thomas Kuhn's picture of scientific crises, or "revolutions," as *breaking in upon* a science's normal periods of progress.] This wants understanding. [...])²⁵

Where "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" considered crises as periodic or extraordinary moments of disciplinary development, the later essay draws a wider circle. A question of crisis is now cast as "normal" to and constitutive of philosophy when it is understood as one of the humanities. Hence, as Cavell puts the matter in his autobiography, "philosophy's self-criticism must remain perpetual, not a thing for isolated crises."²⁶ The very denial by a humanistic discipline that it is in crisis takes the form of accepting the appearance of crisis (in the form of sustained self-criticism) as in a sense normal.

There is more to be said of how Kuhnian problematics inform responsiveness to crisis in "The Division of Talent."²⁷ The essay takes up the question of the relationship of Cavell's thought to the philosophy and deconstructive criticism of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. The immediate issue is not whether Cavell and his European counterparts agree or disagree but rather one of finding ground upon which agreement and disagreement might be discerned. For Cavell, "our philosophical-literary culture as it stands" is unable to provide such support, leading to a "present incommensurability," "amounting even, as for me it is seeming to do, to an intellectual crisis."²⁸ The strand of Cavell's writing I am emphasising whereby his philosophy, unlike paradigm-led normal science, is one of its own normal topics, informs the comparisons and contrasts the es-

25. Cavell, "The Division of Talent," *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (1985): 522. Cavell presented the paper "Hamlet's Burden of Proof" at the ASA in the session "Confronting Critical Cruxes."

26. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 500.

27. Four decades earlier in his career and at least one world away from the contexts and occasions of "The Division of Talent," in a co-authored article with Alexander Sesonske, Cavell and Sesonske made comparable reconciliatory use of the Marxist concept of the division of labour, as a way of resolving philosophical disagreement by arraying philosophies in terms of the *academic* division of labour. "The differences [between emotivists and cognitivists], thus, are those which must occur in any complex and extended enterprise; no small group of workers can hope to fully encompass the enormous area to be questioned. But a *division of labor* need be no more *divisive* here than in any other scientific project. This paper is intended as a contribution to a view which realizes that the pragmatist and the positivist can be, and, constructively interpreted, already *are*, mutually supportive." Cavell and Alexander Sesonske, "Logical Empiricism and Pragmatism in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (1948): 17. The passage somewhat evokes and anticipates Clark Kerr's notion of the multiversity as developed in his 1963 Godkin Lectures at Harvard, not to mention its critique by the radical student movement in the 1960s (in response to which Cavell struck a similarly mediating role, "keeping open what lines of communication I could among and between students and professors"). Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 506.

28. Cavell, "The Division of Talent," 532 and 527.

say explores between his work and philosophical and literary deconstruction. His unsettled relationship to the paradigm of analytic philosophy is of course no less at issue here. Philosophy that does not get going (on the model of Kuhnian normal science) after guiding metaphilosophical fundamentals have been established and learned as paradigmatic, but instead pursues metaphilosophical questions along the way, understandably finds itself preoccupied with beginnings. If this “commitment to account philosophically for one’s intellectual origination” provides a sense of “kinship” between Cavell’s writing and that of Derrida and de Man, “I daresay it is the commitment that causes most bafflement about my writing and most offense taken from it among my colleagues in the profession of philosophy.”²⁹

An exchange between de Man and the philosopher Raymond Geuss forms an important node in “The Division of Talent” and provides a surprising connection to Kuhn. Cavell focuses in particular on Geuss’ critique of de Man’s deconstructive reading of Hegel. For Geuss, the reading is wilful, imposing deconstructive dynamics upon Hegel’s text rather than demonstrating their necessity and drawing them out through immanent criticism. The conciliatory response provided by de Man gives Cavell pause for thought. For de Man:

Geuss’ stance [...] is to shelter the canonical reading of what Hegel actually thought and proclaimed from readings which allow themselves [...] to tamper with the canon. Such an attitude, I hasten to add, is not only legitimate but admirable [...]. The commentator should persist as long as possible in the canonical reading and should begin to swerve away from it only when he encounters difficulties which the methodological and substantial assertions of the system are no longer able to master.³⁰

The critical approach de Man outlines here and the moment it envisages for deconstructive criticism is remarkably analogous to Kuhn’s pattern of scientific development, whereby normal science “shelters” a paradigm from criticism until anomalies are unearthed which, as Kuhn puts it, even the “reiterated onslaught” of normal sci-

29. Cavell, “The Division of Talent,” 526.

30. *Ibid.*

ence is unable to assimilate.³¹ Cavell's characterisation of his own philosophical and critical momentum as more aversive than paradigmatic in its progress is therefore now in opposition both to Kuhnian normal science and to de Man's apportioning of the normal and the revolutionary within criticism.³²

If "The Division of Talent" asks urgent questions about incommensurability between and within disciplines, it also outlines some answers, and I will continue with the topic of incommensurability before taking up related questions about professionalisation and esotericism. Cavell's concern in his reading of Wittgenstein to emphasise the depth of convention in human life helped to define Kuhnian worries over incommensurability.³³ There is, however, a faith in Cavell's philosophy that incommensurability need not have the last word, entirely in keeping with Kuhn's insistence that incommensurability need not entail the irrationality or impossibility of conversation between divergent paradigms.³⁴ Several of the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* develop the notion of "terms of criticism," in part to articulate a Kuhnian problematic whereby exchanges between different philosophical schools past and present will not take place on a common ground of commensurability, since each school will characterise rivals in local terms internal to its own philosophy. Such incommensurability is depicted as not in principle insurmountable, however, as can be seen in Cavell's characterisation in "Knowing and Acknowledging" of the clash between "traditional" philosophy and its "critic" in the figure of the ordinary language philosopher: "What this critic wants or needs, is possession of data and descriptions and diagnoses so clear and common that apart from them neither agreement nor disagreement would be possible — not as if the problem is for opposed positions to be reconciled, but for the halves of the mind to go back together."³⁵ The stakes might appear to have been raised here (however much they have shifted). Nonetheless, a faith is placed in descriptions and diagnoses as commonly shared rather than as hopelessly relative to isolated paradigms; and if the aspiration to locate or invite such commonality is not without "anguish," it also has its successes or "satisfactions."³⁶

31. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 5.

32. Cavell, "The Division of Talent," 526-27.

33. See Cavell's mention of Kuhnian paradigms as involving differences in "natural reactions" rather than in "conventions." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 121.

34. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 198-204.

35. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 241.

36. *Ibid.*, 241.

Cavell's refusal in "Knowing and Acknowledging" to give up on the descriptive availability of the experiential content underlying competing intradisciplinary philosophical positions extends to a hope (or fantasy) in "The Division of Talent" of interdisciplinary conversation and commensurability. The suggestion is that there is a guiding "teaching" or experience underlying each discipline that should in principle be communicable across disciplinary boundaries.³⁷ My point here is that the disanalogies between Cavell's philosophical writing and Kuhnian normal science, whereby metaphilosophical questions are ever present rather than preparatory, informs the way his writing models this hoped for commensurability by foregrounding and making overt fundamental questions about methods and goals that, within a Kuhnian paradigm, would remain tacit among a community of practitioners.

Both the promise and the risk of this approach are especially clear when understood in relation to *Structure*. For Kuhn, a research community's possession of a paradigm, understood in its sociological sense as a "disciplinary matrix," allows its members to enjoy what he terms a "relative fulness of [...] professional communication."³⁸ In the absence of a shared paradigm, professional communication "is inevitably only partial."³⁹ Since Cavell's philosophy is not normally separate from metaphilosophy and does not find itself (or present itself as) settling in a paradigm, it follows on this logic that his work will not be guaranteed a paradigmatic fullness of professional communication; hence his perception that this aspect of his writing might baffle his analytic colleagues. Making philosophy one of its own normal topics enabled Cavell's exploration of "the limitations of the English tradition of philosophizing." Nonetheless, that tradition's "glory [made possible I suppose by its limitations] is that within it philosophy is still performable, realizable, in conversation, in mutuality."⁴⁰ If this fact about the Anglo-American tradition was in Cavell's view "definitive" for his work, he nonetheless felt himself somewhat "excluded" from the tradition's "mutuality." Although the analytic paradigm is valuable for Cavell's philosophy, then, it is as it were "valuable beyond measure," in the absence of the immediate relevance of commensurability.⁴¹

37. "I want to know what you think it is essential to know in order to do what you do." Cavell, "The Division of Talent," 532.

38. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 182.

39. *Ibid.*, 198.

40. James Conant, "Interview with Stanley Cavell," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 71. Cavell's parentheses.

41. *Ibid.*, 71.

For Kuhn, the relative fullness of communication characteristic of a normal-scientific paradigm formed a condition of professional progress.⁴² Such tacit understanding came at the cost of rendering scientific practice esoteric: unintelligible or closed to a non-specialist audience. Where Cavell's aversiveness forfeits the relatively full communication that characterises a professional group's possession of a paradigm, his transfigurations invite new and unpredictable constellations of friends and strangers into conversation with his work.⁴³ The invitation trades paradigmatic fullness of communication for an understanding of philosophy as in a sense non-esoteric.⁴⁴ Recalling his transformational encounter with J. L. Austin and ordinary language philosophy, Cavell emphasised the openness of Austin's methods:

This was no longer the provision of a great result or paradigm of philosophical thought such as Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions, building on Frege's invention of the quantifier, which we were then to apply with endless unoriginality to a thousand identical situations. The questions raised here are to be decided by us, here and now. No one knows more about what mistakes and accidents are, or heedlessness or lack of thought, than we do, whatever we think we do or do not know. It is a frightening, exhilarating prospect.⁴⁵

The non-esoteric character of Austin's procedures is explicitly contrasted with the philosophical equivalent of paradigm-led normal science, in the form of the exemplar provided by Russell's theory of definite descriptions

Having referred throughout to "Kuhnian themes" in Cavell's work, I should say a little more about thematisation itself. As Cavell observed, "given the deep variations in our training and experience, the inspiration Kuhn and I might take from each other underwent sometimes radical changes in finding a place to exist, in however revised a shape, in the other's sensibility."⁴⁶ Since Cavell and Kuhn are both notably heterodox figures, this amounts to significantly more than an adjustment for discipli-

42. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 24.

43. As Kuhn noted, "Art is an intrinsically other-directed enterprise in ways and to an extent which science is not." Cavell's philosophy here is closer to art than to normal science. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension*, 344.

44. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xlii, 239-40.

45. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," *The Yale Review* 76, no. 3 (1987): 316.

46. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 355.

nary differences. What is distinctive about Cavell's reception and transfiguration of Kuhnian ideas is that, although they help to configure and to sustain elements of what Cavell might prefer not to describe as his "methodology," these ideas are pursued at a thematic as well as a technical level.

A headline controversy in the wake of *Structure*, the question of whether Kuhn's Kantianism cedes scientific objectivity and realism, provides an instructive example here.⁴⁷ The Wittgensteinian and anthropological account of necessity developed by Cavell in his doctoral dissertation played a significant role in shoring up Kuhn's position, and in this sense Cavell's influence on Kuhn is a technical one within analytic philosophy.⁴⁸ Readers looking to discern Kuhnian shapes in Cavell's work, however, need to look beyond a professionally circumscribed, uniform field of philosophical problems, solutions, and argumentation, or rather consider that and how these elements are re-framed. Cavell's remarks in *The Claim of Reason* about wishing to understand philosophy not as a set of given problems but as an engagement with texts might be read as distancing his work from the philosophical equivalent of the puzzle solving Kuhn associated with normal science. The deeper connection to Kuhn, however, is precisely the emphasis placed by Cavell on texts and the way this chimes with a seminal aspect of Kuhn's own procedures.⁴⁹ Any attempt to defend or to question the robustness of Kuhn's realism, of course, is unlikely to find immediate use for Cavell's textual reframing of philosophical controversies concerning realism, in an early essay on Emerson: "What the ground of the fixated conflict between solipsism and realism should give way to — or between subjectivity and objectivity, or the private and the public, or inner and

47. I emphasise Kantian epistemology rather than historicism (which might seem the more obvious of Kuhn's threats to realism) mindful of the significance of Cavell's transcendental interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* for *Structure*; not of course that this iteration of Kantianism lacks a historicist dimension, hence Kuhn's self-description: "I am a Kantian with moveable categories." Aristidis Baltas et al., "A Discussion with Thomas S. Kuhn," (1997) reprinted in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure: Philosophical Essays, 1970-1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, ed. James Conant and John Haugeland (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 264.

48. Without denying their obvious importance, Joel Isaac cautions against overstating the depth of impact of Wittgensteinian ideas on *Structure*. If those ideas were vivid for Kuhn, this is partly because they spoke to guiding elements of his thought that were already well formulated and drawn from other intellectual contexts. See Joel Isaac, "Kuhn's Education: Wittgenstein, Pedagogy, and the Road to *Structure*," in *Modern Intellectual History*, 9, 1 (2012): 89-107.

49. "I have wished to understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts. This means to me that the contribution of a philosopher — anyway of a creative thinker — to the subject of philosophy is not to be understood as a contribution to, or of, a set of *given* problems, although both historians and non-historians of the subject are given to suppose otherwise." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3-4. Kuhn's epiphany about Aristotle's laws of motion (that they were to be understood as belonging to a coherent over-

outer — is the task of onwardness.”⁵⁰ The pertinence of Kuhn to this Emersonian horizon is nonetheless quite real, in that both Kuhn and Cavell alike privilege creative process over static results in their respective accounts of science and philosophy.

A suggestive contrast can be made between Cavell and Richard Rorty, another American philosopher greatly influenced by Kuhn’s reopening of a historicist perspective for philosophy. Rorty recalled that after reading *Structure* he “began to think of analytic philosophy as one way of doing philosophy among others, rather than as the discovery of how to set philosophy on the secure path of a science.”⁵¹ His observation that disciplines are obliged to turn to a certain kind of writing and to philosophy in revolutionary periods of crisis is in some ways consonant with the extra-paradigmatic work that writing comes to assume for Cavell.⁵² The overlaps between the two philosophers, however, obscure significant divergences of sensibility.⁵³ Rorty’s critique of *The Claim of Reason* suggested that its reframing of philosophical problems remained needlessly entangled in those problems. If Cavell regarded ordinary language philosophy as revolutionary, in Rorty’s view the revolution stalled in *The Claim of Reason*, since Cavell broke free of philosophical tradition but had yet to leave behind — to continue the Kuhnian analogy — normal science style puzzle solving.⁵⁴ The critique addresses a familiar dimension of Cavell’s reception of Kuhnian ideas, namely his portrait of revolutionary change as entered into reluctantly, out of a preservationist concern expressive of a commitment to continuity and tradition. The relationship between philosophy and its history is of course a further question borne by

all perspective rather than as mistaken physics) arose precisely from “an alternative way of reading the texts with which I had been struggling.” Kuhn, *The Essential Tension*, xi. Cavell’s textualisation of philosophical problems resembles Kuhn’s interest in texts in that the meanings of the philosophical tradition are to be recovered and reframed hermeneutically, in contrast and in response to the positivist dismissals of the tradition as absent of meaning and full of nonsense (uninteresting nonsense at that).

50. Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson,” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.

51. Richard Rorty, “Thomas Kuhn, Rocks, and the Law of Physics,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 178.

52. “Normality, in this sense, is accepting without question the stage-setting in the language which gives demonstration (scientific or ostensive) its legitimacy. Revolutionary scientists need to write, as normal scientists do not. Revolutionary politicians need to write, as parliamentary politicians do not. Dialectical philosophers like Derrida need to write, as Kantian [systematic] philosophers do not.” Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 106.

53. For a sustained comparative analysis of Cavell and Rorty, see Áine Mahon, *The Ironist and the Romantic: Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

54. Rorty praises the writerly fourth part of *The Claim of Reason* but is impatient with the first part’s close engagement with traditional or professional philosophical debates concerning epistemology.

Cavell's writing rather than answered by a paradigm. On Kuhn's account, the possession of a paradigm resolves and stabilises the relationship of an enterprise to its own past such that it is no longer at issue. To the extent that past scientific practice is deemed as anything other than a history of error, for example, and to the extent that it is kept in mind at all, it is codified in scientific textbooks as so many anticipations of the present paradigm. In the absence of a paradigm the philosophical tradition remains at issue in Cavell's work. The argument is that since philosophy does not without distortion relate to its past in the way a paradigm would allow, it is not best understood on the paradigm model. It is not so much then that the revolution, or "onwardness," is stalled, but that it is a "task," in part because unlike normal science, philosophy "has to manage its continuity with itself."⁵⁵

In a philosophical remark about philosophy, Cavell notes "the familiar fact that philosophers seem perpetually to be going back over something, something that most sane people would feel had already been discussed to death. A more familiar formulation is to say that philosophy does not progress. That depends on who is doing the measuring."⁵⁶ Cavell's writing aspires "to motivate both gestures of progress, both states of mind, going back and going on."⁵⁷ If this can be seen in the way *The Claim of Reason* returns to and reinterprets philosophical problems rather than leaving them behind, or in his "perpetually probing and returning to portions or slips of a work" by Wittgenstein or Thoreau or Emerson, it is also of a piece with Cavell's broader characterisation of disciplinary change (and of how philosophy in particular suffers change).⁵⁸ We can return here to the way Kuhn and Cavell brought "enthusi-

Richard Rorty, "Cavell on Skepticism," *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 176-90. In truth Rorty's work as represented for example in his four volumes of *Philosophical Papers* is no less entangled than Cavell's in this respect, and arguably it is much closer in style or form to the paradigm of professional philosophy (making it more incendiary than baffling).

55. Cavell, "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press, 1984), 200. Cavell's introductory remarks respond to Rorty's essay review of *The Claim of Reason*. See also Cavell's description of many of his "commitments and turns" in philosophy: "concerning terms of criticism and the role of esotericism in (modern?) philosophy, and the nature of philosophical importance [... and] concerning the necessity of, or willingness for, philosophical vulnerability of unguardedness, put it as the limits in saying why what you say is interesting (like explaining why what you have said is credible, or funny). Unguardedness here, accordingly, means that there is no defence of a philosophical teaching apart from continuing with it." Cavell, "The Division of Talent," 536.

56. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Reflections on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 15.

57. *Ibid.*, 15.

58. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 474.

astic news” to Berkeley concerning what Cavell describes elsewhere as a “methodical easing” of logical positivism.⁵⁹ Cavell characterises the revolutionary aspects of their work as “not unheeding” of logical positivism and its terms of criticism. In this sense the shift away from positivism is pictured in appropriately non-positivist terms since philosophical innovation here does not involve dispensing with the philosophical past (on the model of normal science).

The movement away from positivism, then, emerges in Cavell’s account as another instance of philosophy managing its continuity with itself, and this work of mediation involves another dimension of his resistance to giving the last word to incommensurability. In his intellectual history of the development of the human sciences at Harvard, Joel Isaac identifies the unhelpful grip on the intellectual-historical imagination of a broad-brush distinction between positivist and post-positivist philosophy. Such imprecision tends to withhold “a basis for discussion across the barricade,” whereas a more fruitful perspective would allow for “a middle ground of conflict, adjustment and conceptual change,” whereby “all exchanges between rival traditions need not be zero-sum games.”⁶⁰ Cavell tends to present the work of loosening positivism’s hold on the philosophical imagination in a way that preserves such a middle ground — or at least its idea.⁶¹ His work stages itself as a “quarrel” with positivist and subsequent modes of analytic philosophy, and therefore as at once a turning toward and a turning away.⁶² It might be felt of course that his oscillation between broad subject contours and personal inflections (“defining for the subject, for what I wish philosophy to do”), his aspiration to speak for philosophy as such, entails another sort of monolithic imagination. Those contours, however, provide discursive space sufficiently broad to encompass plural derivations of philosophical conviction, dialogue, and contestation.

Cavell’s purposive sketch of *Structure* in *The Claim of Reason* frames revolutionary science, or rather the revolutionary scientist, as motivated in a sense by continuity, which is to say by commitment to a broader idea of the science in question. On

59. *Ibid.*, 458.

60. Joel Isaac, *Working Knowledge: Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 237.

61. More generally, Cavell’s philosophy stages itself, variously, as mediating between competing philosophical positions, different generations, and opposing political persuasions.

62. Cavell, “Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy,” 32.

this recounting, it is not so much that the fruitfulness of normal science withers and more that it stops seeming like science at all:

This is how, in my illiteracy, I read Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: that only a master of a science can accept a revolutionary change as a natural extension of that science; and that he accepts it, or proposes it, in order to maintain touch with the idea of that science, with its internal canons of comprehensibility and comprehensiveness, as if against the vision that, under altered circumstances, the normal progress of explanation and exception no longer seems to him to be science. And then what he does may not seem scientific to the old master.⁶³

The passage is conspicuous for the way that normal science, which *Structure* identifies as constitutively communal, is individualised in the figure of the "old master," with her ability to perceive or to effect revolutionary change as continuity. The contention that significant disciplinary change aims to preserve a subject's broader "idea" is hardly uncontroversial. Not least, the putative idea might be intramundane, a discursive notion not prior to revolutionary schools but more a story such schools might tell to make themselves feel at home. What I mean to emphasise here is that the preservativist impulse underwrites (perhaps more than it counterbalances) significant disciplinary radicalism. If disciplinary innovation is motivated by and responds to a sense of "the inner loss [that] threatens every discipline," this becomes radicalised and thematised in the case of philosophy, "the discipline whose very existence, and importance, are to be held at risk."⁶⁴

This essay has considered Cavell's work in the light of Kuhnian ideas that Cavell himself played a role in helping to develop. I have not meant to imply that Kuhnian contexts exhaust the significance of the strands of Cavell's work I have taken up, since these strands are densely interwoven with, for example, modernist predicaments and romantic themes. Education is a major topic of *Walden* and other romantic texts, for instance, because "the quest for one's own question, and for what it takes

63. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 121.

64. Cavell, "Observations on Art and Science," *Daedalus* 115, no. 3 (1986): 174.

to pose it, are entered into together. One is not the preparation for the other, the madness and the method are the same. (There is no metaphilosophy.) I gather this is not true of science, even definitively not true.”⁶⁵ My argument is that Kuhnian ideas played a formative and structuring role in Cavell’s work. In highlighting reasons why Cavell’s philosophy is more aversive than paradigmatic, my purpose has not been to celebrate or circumscribe Cavell’s work as somehow uniquely singular, for two reasons. First, Kuhn provided a vocabulary of sorts within which Cavell articulated the costs and risks of philosophy taking place without as well as within a paradigm: the uncertainties as to voice and reach, the exposure resulting from the absence of a settled and preparatory curriculum.⁶⁶ Secondly, nothing in this essay is meant to deny the obvious fact that the influence of Cavell’s work has been remarkably plural and pervasive. One way of figuring this reception in the light of the foregoing analysis is that Cavell’s disinclination to settle within a paradigm, his contention that nothing goes without saying, provides at its most effective a sense of openness and an invitation.⁶⁷

65. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 201.

66. Cavell does not suppose that “the technical is the only way, or the chief way, or a sure way, in which philosophy may be lost,” nor that “the technical is the only, or the main, discourse within which one can imprison oneself, or perhaps comfort oneself.” Cavell, “Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy,” 200. My comments about exposure refer to Cavell’s methodological unguardedness and his occasional asides about the cost of “conducting my continuing education in public.” Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press, 1988), x.

67. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor Richard King, who encouraged my interest in Cavell. I would also like to thank Rachel Malkin and my co-editor, Brad Tabas, for their perceptive comments on earlier drafts of this essay.