5. Cavell and the Art of Revolution

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Cavell traced his own philosophical beginnings to his encounter, while a graduate student at Harvard in 1955, with J. L. Austin and to his reading, a few years later, of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.[1] The heart of his inheritance from these two thinkers is an account of language, at odds with then dominant positivism-influenced accounts, on which the referential function of language is subordinate to speakers' feel for what can be meaningfully done with words. In the 1960s, Cavell drew on this legacy in giving an appealing and distinctive interpretation of *aesthetic modernism* that would become one of his philosophical signatures. He argued that the departures from established artistic forms that were modernism's hallmark should be seen as efforts "not to break but to keep faith with tradition."[2] This was not a perverse willingness to count rule-breaking as rule-following. Given the view that understanding draws on our sense for coherent expression and action, it appears that individual procedures' significance may differ in different contexts. So, we can allow not only that artists may encounter crises, in which previously helpful procedures come to obstruct what they most want to express, but also that a decisive break in procedure may enable new expressive freedom and so may be recognizable as the tradition's smoothest and most natural continuation.

Although Cavell was once a virtuoso jazz musician who was accepted at Julliard and intended to devote his life to music, at the time of this Bard presentation he had gone decades without doing much sustained writing on music. But an essay he

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1. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. N. Bauer, A. Crary, and S. Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 101-8; Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 97-114; Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 44-72; Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
2. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 206; Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 73-96.

wrote in 1967, "Music Discomposed,"[3] anticipates in key respects his later claim that, for Beethoven, "the [French] political revolution required, as the condition for its musical expression, a revolutionary turn within the art of music."[4] In "Music Discomposed," as elsewhere, Cavell used the term "revolution" to describe conspicuous divergences in artistic traditions animated by a constant spirit. He glossed modernism in the arts as the awareness of "continuous revolution," and he maintained that "modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art."[5] This last suggestion about how older artistic traditions look forward to modernism lays the groundwork for an observation Cavell made in 1967 that partly prepares for his claims about Beethoven at Bard. In a brief passage of the early essay, Cavell situates Beethoven in modernism's pre-history, by representing some of the composer's later works as exercises in musical revolution.[6]

When Cavell returns to these ideas over thirty years later, his focus is newly on the question of whether Beethoven's flouting of tradition can be understood as a historically-specific political gesture — as a "revolution in response to a revolution."[7] Cavell proceeds by arguing that the modern concept "revolution," which was originally a category for particular kinds of political events, is pertinent for "thinking about revolution in the arts."[8] He turns to the account of political revolutions that Hannah Arendt gives in her 1963 book *On Revolution*, underlining Arendt's view that preoccupation with the American, French, and Russian revolutions has led political theorists to erroneously assign violence a necessary role within revolutionary action. Arendt takes this error to be consequential because it tempts theorists to "identify a revolution exclusively with liberation and to neglect the equally essential aim of establishing a realm, or constitution, of freedom."[9] Cavell highlights the stress, in Arendt's account of political revolutions, on how to segue to and perpetuate a new order of freedom because he wants to register the parallel with the accent, in his own account of revolutions in art, on the establishment of a new and continuous aesthetic

3. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 180-212.
4. Cavell, *Here and There*, 275.
5. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 189.
6. Ibid., 201-202.
7. Cavell, *Here and There*, 273.
8. Ibid., 270.
9. Ibid.

practice. His aim is in this way to bring out the plausibility of aligning political revolutions with artistic ones.

This leads Cavell to the work of prominent musicologists who hold that in Beethoven revolutions of the latter sort need to be understood as responses to a revolution of the former sort. For instance, Carl Dahlhaus declares that the heroic style of Beethoven's Third Symphony, "Eroica," "cries out to be backdated to 1789"; Reinhold Brinkmann insists that, at the end of its first movement, "Eroica" aims for "the orchestra as an allegory of the Revolution"; Maynard Solomon thinks the Ninth Symphony may be "taken as an emblem of the idealism of Beethoven's youth, when he was enflamed by what he called the 'fever of the Revolution'"; and, in a more ominous spirit, Theodor Adorno tells us that "if we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie — not the echo of its slogans, the need to realize them, the cry for that totality to which reason and freedom are to have their warrant — we understand Beethoven no better than does the listener who cannot follow his pieces' purely musical content."[10] All of these critical claims presuppose, controversially, that "it is sensible to attribute meaning to music." This presupposition is one that Cavell himself makes as far back as his earliest work on aesthetics, specifically in representing the procedures characteristic of music and the other arts as expressive resources, and at Bard he considers the kind of defence it admits.

His comments reflect his belief that a sense for coherent modes of expression and action is anterior to the grasp of the referential dimension of speech. In light of this view, it makes sense to say, to cite a phrase of Walter Benjamin's Cavell admires, "that the spoken word is only afflicted with meaning."[11] It also makes sense to say that we are capable of a kind of understanding without referential meaning. According to Cavell, this is the domain of music. He depicts music as allowing "the achieving of understanding without meaning; that is, without the articulation of individual acts of reference on which intelligibility is classically thought to depend."[12] And he takes this possibility for music to be the key to its power in the realm of politics. Music has political muscle because it invites the "reclamation of experience,"[13] throwing each of us

10. Ibid., 274-275.
11. Ibid., 275.
12. Ibid., 276.
13. Ibid., 260.

back on, and obliging us to negotiate, the sense of what matters that is there in all we say and think. Music can thus be credited with celebrating the fact that we "can intend [our] lives at all"; that our "actions are coherent and effective at all";[14] and that resistance is possible to political systems that threaten to strip us of our individuality and reduce us to a condition of mere conformity. That it is what is at stake, for Cavell, in claiming that the emergence of music as a mature art is revolutionary.

This is not a merely abstract, transhistorical point. For Cavell, the glory and potency of the arts lies in their ability to "show, or remind us, or expand our horizons so that we see, or remember, or learn what truly matter to us,"[15] and his characteristic term for the human proclivity to live cut off from our own sense of these things is "scepticism." In his presentation at Bard, he notes that the works of Shakespeare's that he regards as addressing such scepticism with unique critical force and insight[16] were written in the first decade of the seventeenth century; that opera, which he likewise credits with clear-sightedly taking scepticism as a central critical problematic,[17] originates at this time; and that scepticism receives a central if uncritical expression a generation later in Descartes' *Meditations*, becoming thereafter a leitmotif of modern philosophy.[18] At Bard, Cavell also aligns himself with first generation Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Benjamin, opening himself to being interpreted as claiming that, like them, he takes the creeping hegemony of instrumental reason, characteristic of European modernity, and traceable to the growth of capitalism, to be a primary driver of conspicuous modern forms of sceptical self-alienation. And, in one aside he represents his own talk of scepticism as resonant with Marx's talk of commodification.[19] Cavell underlines these historical themes in his closing words, telling us that "the development of music, coinciding roughly with the rise of modern philosophy, as, say, in Descartes and Locke, is in itself more revolutionary than any subsequent change within it or within any political event of which it could be said to form part."[20]

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14. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 198.
15. Cavell, *Here and There*, 277.
16. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 2nd expanded ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
17. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
18. Cavell, *Here and There,* 276.
19. Ibid., 277.
20. Ibid., 278.

The right way to honour these critical insights is to take them, not as of scholarly interest only, but as bearing on how we live now. The modern social trends that Cavell identifies as propelling sceptical self-estrangement are largely understandable as caught up with or expressing capitalist logics. These trends are partly constitutive of many of the most grievous injustices of our time, and, with their expansionist imperatives, they are hurtling us toward planetary environmental cataclysm. Uncritical consumers of contemporary political discourse may allow themselves to be lulled into thinking that capitalism itself has the resources to stave off ecocide and that some combination of improved strategies for internalizing (or capitalizing) nature, techno-fixes, and dematerialization processes will ultimately come to the rescue. But, insofar as we retain the capacity for judgment, each of us can find grounds for suspecting that such insouciance is unwarranted. It is available to each of us not only to register ways in which differences between market values and intrinsic values matter to us, but also ways in which institutions that reduce the latter to the former destroy things of importance that we care about. Beyond all thought of pessimism or optimism about the terrible injustices that may be intensified and the menacing political configurations that may emerge in this age of undeniable global ecological crisis, if we are to get in view our circumstances and to have a chance of contributing to a more benign future — or even just a chance of living meaningfully in resistance to pernicious futures — each of us needs, if not through the experience of music then through some other form of experience, what Cavell describes as the revolutionary achievement of a self-relation that, in enabling us to think for ourselves, makes us capable of thinking revolution.