9. From Shakespeare's Birthplace to Thoreau's Cabin: Exploring Collections, Museums, and Literature with Stanley Cavell

DAVID RUDRUM

1. Introduction

Most of the writings collected in *Here and There* will be encountered by most of its readers for the first time. Though the vast majority of them have seen the light of day before, they were, as Cavell saw it, "worth rescuing either from oblivion or from the evanescence or specialization of their original locations of publication."[1]

One obvious exception to this rule is the chapter that forms the main focus of this paper: "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting." This appeared, in a slightly different version and without its subtitle, as the final chapter of *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (2005), where it was in turn anthologized as a somewhat expanded version of an essay Cavell originally wrote for an exhibition catalogue some years previously, in 1998.

This essay did not need rescuing. It was in plain sight, and not hidden by it. Moreover, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* was the final collection of essays Cavell published in his lifetime, separated from his tragically unfinished plans for *Here and There* only by the intervening autobiographical departure of his *Little Did I Know* (2010). He described the purpose of *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* thus: "this collection is to give an idea of the span of things I have been thinking

1. Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 291.

about over the seven years since I retired from regular teaching"; he specifically said of the purpose of its final chapter — "The World as Things" — that it "marks in further ways distances I take from the space of the classroom, a tendency that over a lifetime of teaching and writing has been meant to portray my understanding of the responsibilities of that space."[2]

To state the case plainly: Cavell revisited "The World as Things" not just once but twice; he returned to it over a period of some twenty years; it was republished even though there was no obvious need to do so; and the editors of *Here and There* regard it as "crucial to the present volume as a reflection on thought as a process of collecting."[3] This ought to be enough to single it out as worthy of careful and close reading. As we have seen, Cavell designated *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* as a "collection," and he chose to end that collection with these thoughts on collecting:

> Why do we put things together as we do? Why do we put ourselves together with just these things to make a world? What choices have we said farewell to? To put things together differently, so that they quicken the heart, would demand their recollecting.[4]

These words, verbatim, are left unchanged as the final words of the republished version in *Here and There*.[5] One is reminded of the Wittgensteinian revolution in philosophy that Cavell postulated in this essay and elsewhere: the revolution in which philosophy effects fundamental and revolutionary change precisely by leaving everything exactly as it is. And yet "The World as Things" is not just recollected, it is re-collected. Placed in a new collection, it takes on resonances and nuances that indicate how Cavell's "themes out of school" can be taken even further from the classroom — and perhaps beyond the kinds of gallery spaces for which he originally wrote this essay — than he had realised when republishing it back in 2005. That is the contention of this paper, and it will stake its claims by paying particular attention to literary collections, literary museums, literary spaces.

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2. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 6.
3. Cavell, *Here and There,* 4.
4. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 280.
5. Cavell, "The World as Things," in *Here and There*, 33-71.

2. Virginia Woolf on Carlyle's Plumbing

Towards the start of his essay on collecting, Cavell quotes Walter Benjamin approvingly, and ruminates for a while on his remark that "Living means leaving traces."[6] Collectors cannot but leave their traces on the "medals, coins, stamps, books, skeletons, jewels, jewel boxes, locks, clocks, armor, vases, sarcophagi, inscriptions, paintings, curiosities" and so on that they collect.[7] Towards the end of the essay, he reflects on whether the human propensity for collecting things might be related to our mortality: "Does the passion for collecting have something to say about such matters as coming to an end?"[8] Collecting, then, seems to involve accumulating the traces of a life lived, yet is simultaneously somehow no less expressive of the fact of death.

To help us understand that this is not a paradox, let us turn to an intriguing observation of Virginia Woolf's:

> London, happily, is becoming full of great men's houses, bought for the nation and preserved entire with the chairs they sat on and the cups they drank from, their umbrellas and their chests of drawers. And it is no frivolous curiosity that sends us to Dickens's house and Johnson's house and Carlyle's house and Keats's house. We know them from their houses — it would seem to be a fact that writers stamp themselves upon their possessions more indelibly than other people. Of artistic taste they may have none; but they seem always to possess a much rarer and more interesting gift — a faculty for housing themselves appropriately, for making the table, the chair, the curtain, the carpet into their own image.[9]

The many hundreds of writer's house museums around the world — from Shakespeare's birthplace to Thoreau's cabin — ought to furnish us with enough evidence to take seriously Woolf's assertion that writers leave the traces of their lives

6. See Cavell, "The World as Things," 42.
7. Ibid., 34.
8. Ibid., 67.
9. Virginia Woolf, "Great Men's Houses," in *The London Scene* (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 23.

on the objects they owned. One visitor to the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth, seeing Charlotte's bridal bonnet and the couch on which Emily died, marvelled that: "They touched this, wore that, wrote here in a house redolent with ghosts."[10] (The visitor in question was Sylvia Plath).

Given the cues he takes from Benjamin, it is perhaps surprising that Cavell does not dwell longer on the "aura" surrounding unique objects such as these. Or perhaps the connection is obvious enough that it goes without saying. Instead, he follows up Benjamin's observation that if to live a life means to leave behind traces, then the literary upshot of this view of life finds its natural expression in the emergence of "the detective story," as pioneered by Poe, "which investigated these traces."[11] And when it comes to investigating the traces of literary artifacts, there can be few clearer examples of such detective work than Woolf's on the occasion of her visit to Carlyle's house, from which I quote here at length:

> Take the Carlyles, for instance. One hour spent in 5 Cheyne Row will tell us more about them than we can learn from all the biographies. Go down into the kitchen. There, in two seconds, one is made acquainted with a fact that escaped the attention of Froude, and yet was of incalculable importance – they had no water laid on. Every drop that the Carlyles used — and they were Scots, fanatical in their cleanliness — had to be pumped by hand from a well in the kitchen. There is the well at this moment and the pump and the stone trough into which the cold water trickled. And here, too, is the wide and wasteful old grate upon which all kettles had to be boiled if they wanted a hot bath; and here is the cracked yellow tin bath, so deep and so narrow, which had to be filled with the cans of hot water that the maid first pumped and then boiled and then carried up three flights of stairs from the basement.
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> The high old house without water, without electric light, without gas fires, full of books and coal smoke and four-poster beds and mahogany

10. Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Karen. V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 588-89. Quoted by Nicola J. Watson in *The Author's Effects: On Writer's House Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 75. I am indebted throughout this paper to Watson's extraordinary work, which is likely to dominate discussions of writers' house museums for the foreseeable future.
11. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,* trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 168-69, as quoted by Cavell in "The World as Things," 42.

> cupboards, where two of the most nervous and exacting people of their time lived, year in year out, was served by one unfortunate maid.[12]

Having made such observations, Woolf proceeds, like Dupin or Holmes, to making her deductions. "The voice of the house — and all houses have voices – is the voice of pumping and scrubbing."[13] The noise of the maid drawing the water and clattering the pails would have made it hard for Carlyle to concentrate — "Up in the attic under a skylight Carlyle groaned, as he wrestled with his history"[14] — and disturbed the rest of the sickly Mrs Carlyle, in turn disturbing Carlyle's work further. "Thus number 5 Cheyne Row is not so much a dwelling place as a battlefield — the scene of labour, effort and perpetual struggle."[15] The traces left by this struggle, she concludes, can be found in the writings of Carlyle:

> It is impossible not to believe that half their quarrels might have been spared and their lives immeasurably sweetened if only number 5 Cheyne Row had possessed, as the house agents put it, bath, h. and c., gas fires in the bedrooms, all modern conveniences and indoor sanitation. But then, we reflect, as we cross the worn threshold, Carlyle with hot water laid on would not have been Carlyle.[16]

In summary: according to Woolf, it was Carlyle's plumbing, or more accurately the lack thereof, that moulded his philosophy of history as the sum of the deeds of great men, who are all the greater for their persistent striving to rise above their battles with the challenges that everyday life throws in their way. "Such is the effect of a pump in the basement and a yellow tin bath up three pairs of stairs."[17]

Woolf is in fine satirical form here. According to Carlyle's philosophy, "the soul of the whole world's history" is "at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" and of their achievements;[18] according to Woolf's, history consists of

12. Woolf, "Great Men's Houses," 23-24.
13. Ibid., 24.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 25.
16. Ibid., 26.
17. Ibid., 25.
18. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. David R. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 21.

the unspoken achievements of countless women whose names have been forgotten and who never had a room of their own — women like the Carlyles' maids, many of whom lasted just a matter of days in the job. What could come of her visit to his house (which, incidentally, her father helped to save for posterity) if not just such an intellectual ribbing? But what is Woolf satirising here? Is it just Carlyle's ideas, or might the target of her mockery extend to Benjamin's argument — surely no less outlandish than Woolf's — that detective fiction was engendered by Victorian-era domestic interiors? And where does Cavell stand in all this?

Cavell frequently praised thinkers who broke from the default tone of seriousness into which philosophy is typically straitjacketed: he approved of Austin's stories and Wittgenstein's jokes. So I cannot imagine he would object to Woolf's piece of philosophical satire. Moreover, *pace* Benjamin, Cavell's Poe was not just the inventor of detective fiction. For Cavell, Poe is simultaneously the philosophical champion of "the perverse," the short-circuiting of reason and the making of wrong connections.[19] So Cavell suggests that tracing the life of the self from the traces it leaves on objects is a diverting fiction:

> The idea that the evidence of life produced by each of us is of the order of traces, conveys a picture according to which no concatenation of these impressions ever reaches to the origin of these signs of life, call it a self.[20]

Detective stories came about not to show that lives can be traced from the traces on objects, but to ward off the knowledge that they can't.

As for Woolf, she seems to have been conflicted on this point. Her mixed feelings were expressed after her visit to the Brontë Parsonage:

> The museum is certainly rather a pallid and inanimate collection of objects [...]. Here are many autograph letters, pencil drawings, and other documents. But the most touching case — so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze —

19. Cavell's discussions of Poe have not been paid the scholarly attention they deserve. For more on this, see my "What Did Cavell Want of Poe?", in *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 122-33.
20. Cavell, "The World as Things," 43.

> is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and her thin muslin dress have outlived her.[21]

Nicola J. Watson glosses this passage as evidencing:

> a struggle between conceiving Brontë as a writer and Brontë as a woman. The writing seems dead, "pallid" and "inanimate," reduced to mere "objects." By contrast, shoes and dress have "outlived" the writer, remaining uncomfortably vivid and able to bring the dead woman to uneasy and imperfect life.[22]

So for Woolf, objects and the traces left upon them do indeed seem to carry on a certain life after death — but *not* the life of the mind.

Granted, looking at Kafka's cutlery is unlikely to grant us much insight into the mind that gave us "Metamorphosis" and *The Trial*.[23] But why, then, do we exhibit collections of writers' artefacts at all? Why do millions of people around the world flock to see them? The common analogy is with secular pilgrimage, and it is noteworthy that Woolf, like many others, refers to Brontë's belongings as "relics."[24] This conveys a sense of unthinking worship rather than philosophical or literary detective work. And that in turn takes us to a certain story by Henry James about a great writer's birthplace — a story that attracted Cavell's attention in his later work.

3. Henry James on Shakespeare's Birthplace

In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* and indeed in other later writings, Cavell wrote about one of Henry James's less critically acclaimed tales, "The Birthplace,"

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21. Woolf, "Haworth, November 1904," *The Guardian*, 21 December 1904. Again, I am indebted to Watson for bringing this quotation to my attention, *The Author's Effects*, 85.
22. Watson, *The Author's Effects*, 86.
23. The example is from Katerina Kroucheva and Barbara Schaff, eds., *Kafkas Gabel: Überlegungen zum Ausstellen von Literatur* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014).
24. The analogy is a commonplace, and is clearly explored in Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

which he calls "a satirical fable about the search for the biographical facts of the Supreme Author (unmistakably identified, or deified, as Shakespeare)."[25] Morris Gedge takes on a job conducting tourists around Shakespeare's birthplace, and fights with his conscience and his wife Isabel over the ethics of purveying curatorial speculation and conjecture as biographical fact. For though the visiting public "love to think He was born there,"[26] Gedge becomes so disillusioned with his work that he becomes convinced that no trace of the sacred author remains to be found in his birthplace: "I'll be hanged if He's *here*!," he exclaims.[27]

James's tale is replete with the vocabulary of pilgrimage: Morris Gedge becomes "the priest of the idol," and the birthplace is a "sacred spot," a "temple," a "shrine" with "relics" and "pilgrims" and "worshippers," the "Holy of Holies," the "Mecca of the English-speaking race."[28] Indeed, Cavell notes that "while it deals in some parody of a banal religiosity, the smile gets wiped off its face."[29] But a pilgrimage can entail two subtly but importantly different purposes: its destination can be a sacred place, but it can also be to view a collection of objects (typically relics). James's story brings the two together: it is a "sacred spot" that houses a collection of "relics." Since our discussion involves collections rather than places, this paper will try to tease the implications of the two apart — though this may not, ultimately, be possible.

An easily-overlooked narrative arc in the story concerns the significance of the museum's collection. At the start of the story, an initially unconvinced Isabel Gedge is drawn to the job partly because the idea of working with the collection of objects on display is attractive to her: "she saw herself waving a nicely-gloved hand over a collection of remarkable objects and saying to a compact crowd of gaping awe-struck persons: 'And now, please, *this* way'."[30] The reality of the job is that if these persons are awestruck at all, they are likelier to be awestruck by the place and the objects in it than by the works of the Supreme Author. "It isn't about Him — nothing's about

25. Cavell, "Foreword," in *Philosophical Shakespeares,* ed. John J. Joughin (London: Routledge, 2000), xii.
26. Henry James, "The Birthplace," in *The Jolly Corner and Other Tales, 1903-1910,* ed. N. H. Reeve (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 26.
27. Ibid., 31.
28. Ibid., 23, 5, 4, 5, 16, 10, 17, 17, and 5.
29. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 63.
30. James, "The Birthplace," 5.

Him," a disillusioned Gedge exclaims in despair.[31] "None of Them care tuppence about Him. The only thing They care about is this empty shell — or rather, for it isn't empty, the extraneous preposterous stuffing of it."[32]

Cavell assigns huge significance to this story. He says: "it strikes me as the most fruitful understanding of the idea of the death of the author that I am aware of,"[33] outstripping the "obvious warhorses" of Barthes and Foucault,[34] and anticipating their substantial debt to Nietzsche's writings on the death of God. Moreover, Cavell goes so far as to say that this story models his understanding of "the task of criticism" as derived

> from Kant's portrayal of the universality and necessity of aesthetic judgment, namely as grounded in its demand for agreement with its response to its object as one of pleasure without a concept. Criticism accordingly becomes a work of determining, as it were after the fact, the grounds of (the concepts shaping) pleasure and value in the working of the object. In this light criticism becomes a conduct of gratitude, one could say, a specification and test of tribute, a test in which I am inherently exposed to rebuke.[35]

No doubt all this will come across as placing a greater burden upon the shoulders of a single short story than it could reasonably be expected to bear — the familiar charge of "over-reading" that has dogged Cavell's work since forever.[36] So let us unpack some of the issues involved.

Cavell finds, in the attitudes of the main characters in James's tale, a range of possibilities for criticism, or, as he puts it, of "coming to terms with our relation to the work that art does, and hence, according to the way I read James, in our knowledge of the existence of others."[37] Of these, he describes that of Gedge's wife Isabel as the most "primitive position,"[38] because it is grounded in a concern with and for

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31. Ibid., 18.
32. Ibid., 18.
33. Cavell, "Foreword," xii.
34. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 66.
35. Ibid., 67.
36. Speaking for the defence, see Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Zizek and Cavell* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
37. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 64.
38. Ibid., 65.

empirical facts, and assumes that our appreciation of Shakespeare's works can be grounded simply in factual knowledge about their origins. She reminds her husband of the importance of facts in the following conversation:

> "For there are the facts."
>
> "Yes — there are the facts."
>
> "I mean the principal ones. They're all that the people—the people who come — want."
>
> "Yes — they must be all they want."
>
> "So that they're all that those who've been in charge have needed to know."
>
> "Ah," he said as if it were a question of honour, "we must know everything."
>
> She cheerfully acceded: she had the merit, he felt, of keeping the case within bounds. "Everything. But about him personally," she added, "there isn't, is there? so very very much."
>
> "More, I believe, than there used to be. They've made discoveries."
>
> It was a grand thought. "Perhaps we shall make some!"[39]

And the Gedges do indeed make some important discoveries that inform our appreciation of Shakespeare — leaving it open for the moment whether "Shakespeare" means the man, his works, or both — though those discoveries are not of the kind they envisage here at the outset.

Isabel Gedge's view strikes Cavell as "primitive" because our sense of appreciation or "wonder over this man is not to do with the small number of facts about his life we have to work with. No set of facts could themselves alleviate our ignorance."[40] As he puts it in another essay in the same volume, empirical facts cannot address, let alone account for, "the wonder that just these orders of words can have been found, that these things can be said at all. (The issue [...] of Shakespeare's identity serves to blunt this wonder, namely that *anyone* can have

39. James, "The Birthplace," 7-8.
40. Cavell, "Foreword," xiii.

been responsible for these texts, in however imperfect states)."[41] But why would empirically-grounded criticism blunt this sense of wonder? Do biographical facts make texts less wondrous? How?

Facts, *qua* facts, command a universal assent that mere opinions do not. It follows that, on Cavell's view of what criticism is, fact-based criticism is oxymoronic. The claims we advance in criticism are grounded in subjective opinions, even as they aim for, or seek, or aspire to (or, to put it in Kantianese, "posit") the kind of universal assent afforded to facts. A young American tourist in James's text opines: "'The play's the thing'. Let the author alone."[42] Interesting, his opinion strikes Cavell as "the most civilized, combining interest with torment."[43]

It might come as a surprise that this position strikes Cavell as "civilized" — a term that few would use in matters of literary criticism today without embarrassment. In some of his earlier discussions of the nature of criticism, he claimed the very opposite. Taking issue with the New Critics' dismissal of authorial intention, he argued: "What counts is what is *there*, says the philosopher who distrusts appeals to intention. Yes, but everything that is there is something a man has *done*."[44] So, for the Cavell who wrote "A Matter of Meaning It," the author is a central figure who cannot be overlooked in our acts of criticism, where "criticism" means grounding our shared relationship to the work of art, and the pleasures and values we find in our appreciation of it: "In art, our interest in intention, given the fact that we are confronted by someone's work, is to locate ourselves in its shift of events. In all cases, the need is for coming to terms, for taking up the import of a human gesture."[45] What, then, would be so very "civilized" about a young American tourist's disregard for the human being behind such gestures — in this case, for Shakespeare?

James's story insinuates that most of the facts surrounding Shakespeare's birthplace are not facts at all — they are, as with so many saints' shrines, legends. And

41. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 36.
42. James, "The Birthplace," 34.
43. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.
44. Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 236.
45. Ibid., 236.

the power of the legends trumps the status of the facts. Visitors to the birthplace want:

> "to see where He had His dinner and where He had His tea [...] They want to see where He hung up His hat and where He kept His boots and where His mother boiled her pot."
>
> "But if you don't show them —?"
>
> "They show *me*. It's in all their little books."
>
> "You mean," the husband asked, "that you've only to hold your tongue?"
>
> "I try to," said Gedge.[46]

No wonder that Gedge prefers "the company of people to whom he hadn't to talk, as he phrased it, rot."[47] His choice of silence is one that Cavell likens to that of John Cage.[48] But his wife makes a different choice, and, *pace* Cavell, it is not grounded in simple empiricism. She *knows* that most of the "facts" about Shakespeare purveyed in his birthplace are not facts. She holds the collection of objects there in high regard, though she knows they are of dubious provenance. Nevertheless, as befits such a Shakespearean tale, she prefers to avoid or forego this knowledge, and clings to the cherished legends as if they were indeed factual. This earns her the contempt of her husband. He scoffs:

> "You're no more than one of Them."
>
> "If it's being no more than one of Them to love it," she answered, "then I certainly am. And I'm not ashamed of my company."
>
> "To love *what*?" said Morris Gedge.
>
> "To love to think He was born there."[49]

Thanks to this moment of marital disharmony, we can place the different critical approaches set out in this tale into sharper comparison.

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46. James, "The Birthplace," 32.
47. Ibid., 35.
48. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.
49. James, "The Birthplace," 26.

Isabel Gedge, then, seems to undergo something of a conversion experience in her critical views: her initial preference for "the facts" turns out to be a preference for the authority that goes along with them. Deprived of their facticity, she would rather embrace the authority of (once again, let's put it in broadest Kantianese) a *sensus communis* she knows to be grounded on falsehood than to be deprived of all critical authority. It is almost as if a Thomas Gradgrind were to fall back on the support of a Stanley Fish (I said *almost*).

Is this to adopt a stance that Emerson would write off as mere conformity? Not quite: conformity is usually unthinking conformity, whereas Isabel's is self-aware, and consciously chosen as the lesser of two evils. Is it, perhaps, an act of bad faith? Perhaps, but only if you believe that the truth about Shakespeare necessarily trumps the myth of Shakespeare as constructed in our culture. Cavell himself confessed: "Of course I too share the temptation to idolatry of Shakespeare"[50] — so surely the custodian of the museum and its collection at Shakespeare's birthplace can be forgiven for yielding to it, and not, or not just, out of a self-interested desire to preserve her position there. It is a choice to place loyalty to a culture's cherished image of itself over loyalty to facts, or, more accurately, to the *absence* of facts. This, too, could be construed as an act of criticism as civility.

For the young American tourist, the absence of facts yields a freedom from facts — an opportunity rather than a threat. As Cavell puts it:

> When he says "The play's the thing" the tone of enjoyment I get from it brings into view the theory that the thing of art is its invitation to and provision of play, an oasis of freedom within human life, and the cost of letting the artist alone is to let him or her indeed escape us like a thief in the night (rather, perhaps, than coming to us like a thief in the night).[51]

The American tourist uses a slightly different metaphor:

> "[…] people pretend to catch Him like a flown canary, over whom you can close your hand, and put Him back in the cage. He won't *go* back; he

50. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare,* updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30.
51. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.

> won't *come* back. He's not" — the young man laughed — "such a fool! It makes Him the happiest of all great men."[52]

What both these images share is the sense of the artist as escapologist — as refusing to be contained, confined, or pinned down. It is a widely held critical view, once elevated to an article of faith by those poststructuralist warhorses Cavell mentions. For them, as seemingly for James' American tourist, it involved a rejection of the voice of cultural authority, and a wholesale distrust of any *sensus communis* built out of it. In this sense, the position is perhaps not as "civilized" as Cavell implies.

What I am trying to bring to light here is a basic ambiguity in these two models of criticism that Cavell finds in James's "The Birthplace" — an ambiguity bordering on an incompatibility. On the one hand, Cavell argues that claims of criticism aim at universality and find their grounding in the assent of others; on the other hand, invoking "the Nietzschean moment,"[53] Cavell argues for a model of criticism that resembles Emersonian self-reliance in its rejection of conformity to the *sensus communis aestheticus*. Critical interpretations, then, would appear simultaneously to posit unanimous acceptance *and* comprehensive rejection.

James's story hints at this impasse in the contrasting attitudes with which both the aforementioned characters regard the tale's setting — Shakespeare's birthplace — both of which seem ultimately flawed, even reprehensible. The young American tourist, when asked "what's the use [...] of our coming here?," can answer only: "Why, the place is charming in itself."[54] So, the corollary of letting the author alone as a critical methodology is an indifferent disregard to the significance with which the "sacred spot" has been invested — an indifference perhaps more philistine than "civilized." Isabel asks herself the same question: "If it was all in the air [...] that He *had* been born in the Birthroom, where was the value of the sixpences they took? where the equivalent they had engaged to supply?"[55] Her answer is to brush away any such doubts by regurgitating legend as fact. She maintains to all comers that Shakespeare was born:

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52. James, "The Birthplace," 31.
53. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.
54. James, "The Birthplace," 32.
55. Ibid., 24.

> "just about *here*"; and she must tap the place with her foot. "Altered? Oh dear, no — save in a few trifling particulars; you see the place — and isn't that just the charm of it? — quite as *He* saw it. Very poor and homely, no doubt; but that's just what's so wonderful."[56]

It is precisely the answer that those instilled with literary culture and good middleclass taste want to hear, and is perfectly civilized, except insofar as it is not true, which means that Isabel's answer is knowingly dishonest. Tellingly, Morris Gedge admonishes his wife by saying "We mustn't, love, tell too many lies."[57] No such reprimand can be given to the young American tourist: since the claims his form of criticism make are not grounded in fact, they cannot be lies. But that does not imply he has the upper hand morally: things are not so clear cut. Morris's admonishment is telling not because it draws a categorical distinction between criticism and lying, but because it *fails* to do so. Note that Isabel is urged not to tell "too many" lies: how many is too many? Too many for what? There is a world of difference between not telling *too many* lies and "Thou shalt not lie."

Here we come to the crux of the matter. If Isabel is wrong to appeal to bogus kinds of cultural authority in bolstering the claims her criticism makes, then wouldn't the task of the philosopher be to show her her errors and to point her towards more valid grounds and arguments, rather than to simply renounce all grounds and authorities? The role of the Athenian gadfly, after all, is to sting the members of the *polis* into truth, or at least into a new self-awareness, rather than into ungrounded new opinions.

How might we go about a form of criticism that sought to combine these two flawed positions? What is so fascinating about "The Birthplace" is that Morris Gedge, our (anti-)hero, does just that. When the American tourists try to pin him down on whether the chamber known as the Birthroom really was the place Shakespeare was actually born in, he responds: "I don't say it wasn't — but I don't say it *was*."[58] He takes to visiting the Birthroom alone, at midnight, after the tourists have left and the

56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 32.

museum is deserted, and it seems that James is being only half-ironic in observing that Gedge hopes to meet Shakespeare's ghost there:

> The Holy of Holies of the Birthplace was the low, the sublime Chamber of Birth, sublime because, as the Americans usually said — unlike the natives they mostly found words—it was so pathetic; and pathetic because it was — well, really nothing else in the world that one could name, number or measure. It was as empty as a shell of which the kernel has withered, and contained neither busts nor prints nor early copies; it contained only the Fact — *the* Fact itself — which, as he stood sentient there at midnight, our friend, holding his breath, allowed to sink into him. He *had* to take it as the place where the spirit would most walk and where He would therefore be most to be met, with possibilities of recognition and reciprocity.[59]

The irony becomes rather more pronounced when Morris discusses this routine of his with Isabel:

> "In the Birthroom there, when I look in late, I often put out my light. That makes it better."
>
> "Makes what — ?"
>
> "Everything."
>
> "What is it then you see in the dark?"
>
> "Nothing!" said Morris Gedge.
>
> "And what's the pleasure of that?"
>
> "Well, what the American ladies say. It's so fascinating!"[60]

Perhaps Morris is beholding, as Wallace Stevens put it, "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."[61] Or, vaulting from "everything" to "nothing" in a mere breath, perhaps he might say, with Wittgenstein, "It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either. The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something

59. Ibid., 17.
60. Ibid., 19-20.
61. Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 9-10.

about which nothing could be said."[62] That is an importantly different criticism, yielding claims different from Isabel's (and might help clarify why Morris thinks she should not tell *too many* lies, as opposed to not lying — lies that inflate the something into serving better than the nothing), *and* it is a different claim from that of the young American tourist, against whom Morris's actions demonstrate that we "*cannot* leave the author alone."[63]

Opting for solitude, darkness, and nothingness might not seem like a best case for acts of criticism. But Gedge's critical stance has much to recommend itself. For one thing, he confronts the knowledge that Isabel avoids: he meets head-on the strong possibility that the kind of criticism he peddles — biographically-based, site-specific, author-centric — is grounded on claims that are groundless. For another, he pays what is due to the reverence in which the birthplace is held: he does not dismiss it out of hand, as the young American tourist would, but nor does he buy into its mythology. The hype surrounding it can be set to one side, but it cannot be altogether disregarded.

I promised, in this paper, to discuss the role of collections and things in the context of literary museums, yet have now spent some pages discussing fictional representations of such a museum, and focussing more on what they might suggest about the nature of criticism than considering the nature and status of the things collected in them. So, as a practical illustration of the matter at hand, I turn now to another American writer who visited Shakespeare's birthplace in the nineteenth century. Let us consider Washington Irving, and his observations on Shakespeare's chair.

The indefatigable detective work of Nicola J. Watson has tracked down no less than five chairs exhibited in Stratford-upon-Avon as Shakespeare's chair. All were bogus: "not one of these chairs is thought to be older than the 1630s."[64] One was sold to Princess Czartoyska of Poland in the 1790s, and is now on display at the Polish National Museum in Krakow. No wonder Irving found it hard to credit the authenticity of Shakespeare's chair when he visited years later, in 1815.

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62. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §304.
63. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 66.
64. Watson, *The Author's Effects,* 101.

> The most favourite object of curiosity, however, is Shakespeare's chair. It stands in the chimney nook of a small gloomy chamber. [...] In this chair it is the custom of every one that visits the house to sit: whether this be done with the hope of imbibing any of the inspiration of the bard I am at a loss to say, I merely mention the fact; and mine hostess privately assured me, that, though built of solid oak, such was the fervent zeal of devotees, that the chair had to be new bottomed at least once in three years. It is worthy of notice also in the history of this extraordinary chair, that it partakes something of the nature of the Santa Casa of Loretto, or the flying chair of the Arabian enchanter; for though sold some years since to a northern princess, yet, strange to tell, it has found its way back to the old chimney corner.[65]

Irving knows what Morris knows: that the chair is utterly bogus. But he also appreciates what Morris appreciates: that this fact makes Shakespeare's chair more remarkable, not less. Irving is palpably amused at "the fervent zeal of devotees," but he finds this zeal worthy of comment and consideration. If the chair were really Shakespeare's, how much could it really reveal about our relationship to the man and his work? By contrast, the fact that the chair is treated as a relic when even the tour guide admits that the part the tourists sit on is a recent replacement reveals much more about our relationship to the man and his work. Gedge himself, bowing to the weight of this force, reinvents himself as just such a tour guide, and succeeds all the more not in spite of but because of his knowledge that the museum and its collection are inauthentic.

In "The World as Things," Cavell mentions philosophers who claim "to understand the self [...] as some kind of collection of things, as though such a collection is less metaphysically driven on the face of it than the simple and continued self that Hume famously denies."[66] That is not so far from the way that Isabel and her many visitors — or for that matter Virginia Woolf, if we take her at her word — regard the collections in literary museums: the idea is to reconstruct, in some kind of

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65. Washington Irving, *"Stratford-upon-Avon": from "The Sketchbook of Washington Irving with Notes and Original Illustrations,* ed. Richard Savage and William Salt Brassington (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Quiney Press, 1920), 34-35. As quoted in Watson, *The Author's Effects,* 101.
66. Cavell, "The World as Things," 44.

detective work, an image of the writer's self from their belongings. At the same time, though, he also observes: "We have in effect said that every collection requires an idea."[67] This seems to position our interaction with these collections as an act of criticism — a matter for discussion, awaiting uptake and acceptance. It is this possibility that Irving and Morris seem to me to endorse.

To draw this section to a close, consider the following remark by one of the warhorses whose ancestry Cavell traces back to the young American tourist in "The Birthplace":

> If I discover that Shakespeare was not born in the house that we visit today, this is a modification which, obviously, will not alter the functioning of the author's name. But if we proved that Shakespeare did not write those sonnets which pass for his, that would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author's name functions.[68]

To a literary critic in the vein of Foucault's associate Roland Barthes, it would indeed seem obvious that the former discovery would change nothing, while the latter would change much. But, to a curator or perhaps a collector, discoveries like the former would surely be just as important. This in turn makes Foucault's distinction seem a bit too neat and tidy. To say that critics needn't worry about the kinds of discoveries that curators worry about (or conversely) is apt to come across as a pragmatist in the vein of, say, Richard Rorty. Certainly, there are differences between a curator's job and a critic's, but most of us, surely, are capable of entering critical claims and conversations that, on a case-by-case basis, entertain the possibilities suggested by both kinds of discoveries — which need not entail granting them equal weight, but rather, as with Gedge and Irving, involves reflecting on the relation in which we stand (as a culture; as individuals) to the place given (by us as individuals; by us as a culture) to the work of the artist in question.

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67. Ibid., 36.
68. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1991), 106.

4. Thoreau's Cabin; Theseus's Ship; Trigger's Broom

Alert readers of the previous section will no doubt have scoffed at the idea of the Gedges' predecessors replacing the seat of Shakespeare's chair every three years or so. How could the visitor sit on Shakespeare's chair if its seat has been replaced? A previous claimant — the chair endorsed by Garrick as Shakespeare's, which ended up in Poland — was regularly plundered of its struts, spindles, and so on by eager souvenir hunters as the cult of Shakespeare blossomed in the late eighteenth century.[69] They were replaced, to be plundered anew; what was plundered were, of course, parts of Shakespeare's chair, in the same way the replaced seat was part of Shakespeare's chair.

Aficionados of the much-loved British sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* will recognise this situation as "Trigger's broom." Trigger — the Schlemiel of the show, whose every scene involves a joke at his expense — is a roadsweeper who works for the local council. In a legendary episode first aired on Christmas Day 1996, Trigger is proudly sporting a medal awarded to him for saving the council money: he has looked after his broom so well that over the past twenty years he has never had to buy a new broom. On questioning, he reveals the secret of his success: he has replaced the head seventeen times and the handle fourteen times. Another character asks, not unreasonably: "How the hell can it be the same bloody broom then?"[70] Is Trigger's broom Trigger's broom in the same way that Shakespeare's chair is Shakespeare's chair?

Philosophers tend to refer to Trigger's Broom as the Ship of Theseus, after Plutarch's version of the same conundrum. If Theseus's ship is repaired to the point where all the planks and timbers have been replaced, is it still Theseus's ship? Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Hume all ventured their answers to this question. I want to consider it with reference to a slightly different feat of woodwork: Thoreau's cabin.

In *Walden,* Thoreau recounts that the boards with which he made his cabin were purchased, for $4.25, from the shanty of an Irish railway worker named James Collins; the bricks were similarly second-hand; sand from the lakeshore mixed with

69. See Watson, *The Author's Effects*, 97.
70. "Heroes and Villains," dir. Tony Dow, first aired 25 December 1996.

water from the pond gave the bulk of the mortar and plaster; trees from the wood provided much of the rest of the timber; nails and other hardware were purchased separately, the total expenditure amounting to $28.12 — a piece of arithmetic that seems to have impressed Stanley Cavell.[71]

After Thoreau moved out of his cabin, he gave it to Emerson in 1847, who sold it to his gardener. The gardener in turn sold it to two farmers, who moved it to the other side of Concord, where they used it as a granary. In 1868, they dismantled it, cannibalising its roof for an outbuilding, and using the rest of the lumber for scrap.[72]

So, at the time Cavell first published *The Senses of Walden* in 1972, there was no cabin standing at Walden pond. The replica of Thoreau's cabin, conveniently situated near to the car park, first opened to pilgrims in 1985. Prior to that, the site of pilgrimage was just a patch of ground, where the archaeologist Roland Wells Robbins had pinpointed the location of the cabin in 1945, not quite in the exact place we'd been led to believe by Bronson Alcott in 1872.

Robbins went on to develop and manufacture a mass-produced, commercially available, flat pack, self-assembly replica of Thoreau's cabin in the 1960s, and sold it under the strapline: "If it is your wish to live deliberately and make a place in your life to house your dreams, your privacy, or your own personal lifestyle [...] then the Thoreau-Walden cabin is your happy answer."[73] This venture provided the source of the replica cabin that stands today in the Thoreau lyceum. Readers that scoffed at the idea of replacing the seat of Shakespeare's chair might stop laughing when they hear that similar kits can be bought off the internet right now, for less than a thousand dollars. What could be further removed from Thoreau's *Walden* than identical, production-line-manufactured flatpack kits? So what makes one of these constructions a "Thoreau-Walden cabin"? Is it the same thing that makes the broom Trigger's and the chair Shakespeare's?

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71. Thoreau's account of building his house crops up in the unlikeliest of places throughout Cavell's work, as in his discussion of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), when he is reminded of Thoreau's balance sheet of twenty eight dollars twelve and a half cents by Clark Gable's Peter Warne turning down a fabulous reward for saving Claudette Colbert's Ellie, demanding instead the thirty nine dollars and sixty cents he spent on gasoline.

72. For this information, and in the two paragraphs that follow, I am indebted, as throughout this paper, to the remarkable work of Watson in *The Author's Effects* (see 175-76).

73. Brochure quoted in Donald Linebaugh, "Walden Pond and Beyond," in *The Reconstructed Past: Reconstruction and the Public Interpretation of Archaeology and History*, ed. John H. Jameson (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 23.

If there is a difference, then perhaps Cavell can help us pinpoint it. In *Senses of Walden*, he equates Thoreau's labour in building his cabin with the labour of writing his book. "Building a house and [...] writing and reading [...] are allegories and measures of each other," he argues, conflating them to the point that "the building of his habitation (which is to say, the writing of his book) is his present experiment."[74] And indeed, *Walden* itself furnishes us with several metaphors that connect the act of building with the act of writing (Cavell is surely right to argue that Heidegger would approve of this). So we might say that Thoreau's cabin is Thoreau's cabin in the same way as Thoreau's *Walden* is Thoreau's *Walden*: he put it together himself, from the materials he found ready to hand. We think of it as something he made, not as something he owned. Is the cabin, then, part of the collected works of Thoreau? We should not rule this suggestion out too quickly.

Shakespeare's birthplace is a museum that houses a collection of the author's (putative) possessions; Thoreau's cabin is *itself* a collection of the author's (putative) possessions, and not just because he clung to so very few possessions. That is, the itemised list of the cabin's component parts in *Walden* reveals that the cabin is itself a collection: a collection of Collins's boards, Walden's boughs, Thoreau's graft, and so forth. Perhaps this is ironic: in "The World as Things," Cavell calls Thoreau "the philosopher of non-collection,"[75] and surely there are many extracts from *Walden* to back him up:

> I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust.[76]

Yet the irony dissipates somewhat when we read in "The World as Things" of "collections [that] are no longer readable as the work of individuals"[77] — and Thoreau's cabin is just such a collection.

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74. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden,* expanded ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 62 and 10.
75. Cavell, "The World as Things," 68.
76. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.
77. Cavell, "The World as Things," 60.

Thoreau's cabin was always more than Thoreau's cabin: it belonged in some measure to others before him, and to others after him too. In this respect, Thoreau's cabin is like Shakespeare's plays: parts of them come from Plutarch and Ovid, or from Holinshed and Chaucer, and parts of them went on to become the building blocks of other writers' plays, films, operas, graphic novels, and so forth. The idea of the text as a "tissue of quotations" is familiar enough, thanks to that warhorse Roland Barthes, but even he might have baulked at the idea of regarding Thoreau's cabin as part of the tissue of Thoreau's collected works.

Hobbes famously asked: if the discarded timbers from Theseus's ship could be gathered together and reassembled, then set alongside the repaired ship, which one would be Theseus's? To which perhaps the commonsense answer is: whichever ship Theseus is on. But if I assemble one of Robbins's Thoreau-Walden cabins, is it Thoreau's cabin — or is it mine? Or is it my copy of Thoreau's cabin? If I buy and read a copy of Thoreau's *Walden*, is it Thoreau's *Walden*, or mine — or is it my copy of Thoreau's *Walden*? These are different questions, and imply different forms of collective ownership. But they are not just playing with words: Shakespeare's chair or Shakespeare's birthplace could not be owned in either of these ways. There is, a Wittgensteinian might say, a grammar of collection here. These questions are a different way of putting the questions with which Cavell ends "The World as Things":

> Why do we put things together as we do? Why do we put ourselves together with just these things to make a world? What choices have we said farewell to? To put things differently, so that they quicken the heart, would demand their recollecting.[78]

In turn, these questions are a different way of putting, or expanding, the question Thoreau asks in *Walden*: "Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?"[79] If Thoreau is the philosopher of non-collection, it is in order to be a philosopher of recollection.

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78. Cavell, "The World as Things," 70.
79. Thoreau, *Walden*, 203.

Most of the theorists whose work on the concept of collection Cavell cites in "The World as Things" regard the act of collecting as removing objects from circulation. But the purpose of assembling a *Collected Works* is to put those works *into* circulation — the same idea as that behind Robbins's mass-produced flatpack cabin. Let us pursue this idea: if the cabin can be detached from its site on Walden Pond and sold *en masse*, or reconstructed near the car park, that differentiates it categorically from the woods in which Thoreau built it, to which we stand in a different relation. So how, for instance, is our relationship to the reconstructed cabin near the car park different from our relationship to Walden Pond?

In what is perhaps the most provocative questioning in *Senses of Walden*, Cavell asks: "Does it matter whether I read, say, *Walden,* or go, say to Walden?"[80] His answer to the latter part of the question seems to be in the negative. "Going to Walden, for example, will not necessarily help you out, for there is no reason to think you will go there and live any differently from the way you are going on now"; "this is fair warning to those of his readers who will be attracted to his life that they will not find it at his Walden, but must work out their own."[81] Would assembling my own copy of his cabin count as doing this? Probably not, or not by itself. Nevertheless, at the end of the book, Cavell asks another pair of questions:

> Does the writer of *Walden* really believe that [...] for example, one could find one's Walden behind a bank counter, or driving a taxi, or guiding a trip hammer, or selling insurance, or teaching school? Granted that one is unlikely to find one's own Walden by roaming around the vicinity of Concord, Massachusetts, isn't it dishonest to suggest that it may be found in any place very different from that?[82]

And Cavell suggests that Thoreau is asking the same questions. As if to underscore the point, Morris Gedge's reaction to the news that he will be leaving his position "in charge of the grey town-library of Blackport-on-Dwindle, all granite, fog and female

80. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 49.
81. Ibid., 70 and 45.
82. Ibid., 110-11.

fiction"[83] in order to take charge of the eponymous Birthplace makes it sound as if he will be decamping to a place very like Thoreau's Walden:

> He felt as if a window had opened into a great green woodland, a woodland that had a name all glorious, immortal, that was peopled with vivid figures, each of them renowned, and that gave out a murmur, deep as the sound of the sea, which was the rustle in forest shade of all the poetry, the beauty, the colour of life.[84]

What attracts Gedge is the idea of a place, not the idea of a collection. "The Birthplace" is replete with the language of pilgrimage; Cavell writes in *Senses of Walden* that "sometimes forget what a land of pilgrims means."[85] This means that we need to recollect it.

Thoreau's cabin was a collection; assembling my own copy of it recollects it. Reading my own copy of Thoreau's *Collected Works* does that too. As it happens, my copy is called *The Portable Thoreau*; his cabin turned out to be portable too. But Walden Pond stays put, neither portable nor collected, and neither Thoreau's nor mine.

5. Seamus Heaney on Wordsworth's Ice-Skates

For Nicola J. Watson, writers' belongings are:

> the material equivalent of the simultaneous irreducibility and incompleteness of the biographical anecdote. [...] All such items-cum-anecdotes thus ultimately function as metonymic stand-ins for the author's presence. They serve as short-circuits between writer and present reader; or rather, they serve as short-circuits between the reader's life and the writer's life. [...] [T]he "natural" discourse of a writer's house museum is overwhelmingly biographical, and with it, realistic. The presumption is that the act of writing

83. James, "The Birthplace," 4.
84. Ibid., 5.
85. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 52.

> can be delimited by describing the site of writing as a density of physical objects. […] But there is and always has been something that threatens to be inconveniently over-material about a writer's house, meaning that the house may not adequately account for writing.[86]

This was certainly Cavell's experience: in "The World as Things," he complains that despite being surrounded by Freud's vast collections of around two thousand ancient statuettes, "It is not easy, in the staid atmosphere of the so-called Freud Museum in London, formed from his residence in London, to imagine what it could be like alone with Freud in his apartment of study and treatment rooms."[87]

From Cavell's disappointment in the Freud Museum, it is just a step to Morris Gedge's attempt to conjure up the spirit of Shakespeare: by visiting his Birthroom alone, after dark, when the museum is empty. Tellingly, Cavell's image of being "alone with Freud in his apartment" — surely a fantasy that itself calls for interpretation — seems starkly opposed to the "civilized" young American's critical slogan "Let the author alone"; it bears out Cavell's suggestion that we *cannot* do so. But the point is the vocabulary that Cavell uses: he describes the experience as a (failed) effort "to imagine what it could be like." Here, he puts his finger on what is so special about collections of writers' belongings — though it is an insight that is buried so deep in "The World as Things" that much of the rest of the discussion obscures it.

Cavell sums up the first subsection of "The World as Things" by observing: "We have in effect said that every collection requires an idea." But the idea by itself is not enough: "This seems to presage the fact, testified to by so many writers on collecting, that collections carry narratives with them, ones presumably telling the point of the gathering, the source and adventure of it."[88] As Watson puts it, the narratives associated with collections of writers' belongings are typically short,

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86. Watson, *The Author's Effects*, 122 and 129.
87. Cavell, "The World as Things," 54. As I have observed, it is not easy to prize apart what is special about a collection of a writer's belongings from what is special about the places they knew. Though unmoved by the collection at the Freud Museum, Cavell *does* seem to have been moved by the power of place: lecturing in the house in Vienna that was Wittgenstein's foray into architecture, his opening remark was "It is wonderful to be here – here in this house that Wittgenstein designed, and in this city that fashioned Wittgenstein." Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 181. Interestingly, all his remarks about pilgrimages to Walden refer to the place: who knows what he would have written had the replica cabin there been built before he wrote *The Senses of Walden*?
88. Cavell, "The World as Things," 36.

fragmentary anecdotes, and their significance lies not, or not typically, in the narrative of how the collection was compiled or assembled, but in the conduit they seem to open up to the absent presence of the writer. Because the writer's *oeuvre* does not "belong" to the collector, and is better thought of as the collective property of the reading public, the significance of a collection of a writer's possessions is constructed by readers (critics of a sort) as much as by curators/collectors. The significance of Freud's collection of statuettes is precisely that it was Freud's. For example: lacking expertise in ancient statuettes, few visitors would ordinarily assume that their own interpretations of a museum's collection of ancient statuettes could outweigh the narrative of the museum curator's interpretation. But readers of Freud have, thanks to their readings of Freud, earned the interpretative right to interpret his collection of ancient statuettes in light of their interpretations of Freud (and conversely), and to use their imaginations in this process: knowledge of a writer seemingly gives us a curator's interpretative privileges in writer's house museums. Perhaps this accounts for the way that, as Woolf put it, "writers stamp themselves upon their possessions more indelibly than other people."[89]

In sum: when Cavell writes that "the idea of a self as a collection requiring a narrative locates the idea that what holds a collection together, specifically perhaps in the aspect of its exhibition, is a narrative of some kind,"[90] he envisages a narrative constructed by the collector or curator. It is a different kind of narrative, or a different experience of narrative, from the experience of a writer's house museum. Here, the significance of the narrative is more visibly, more explicitly constructed by the visitor/reader than by the collector/curator.

A poem of Seamus Heaney's sets out what must surely be a best case for our relationship with collections of authors' artefacts. Contemplating Wordsworth's ice-skates as exhibited for posterity, what inspires Heaney's poem is:

> Not the bootless runners lying toppled
> In dust in a display case,
> Their bindings perished,

89. Woolf, "Great Men's Houses," 23.
90. Cavell, "The World as Things," 46.

> But the reel of them on frozen Windermere
> As he flashed from the clutch of earth along its curve
> And left it scored.[91]

This passage starts out in the kind of detective work Virginia Woolf undertook, seeking out traces of the author from things they once owned, but then combines it with an interpretative act — that is to say, an act of criticism. It imagines Wordsworth's ice-skating as an allegory of writing. The skates scoring the blank white surface of Windermere in a dance (or "reel") that breaks free of it is as clear an image of Wordsworth writing his poetry as Thoreau's hoeing his beans or building his house is of his writing *Walden*. So, Heaney offers us a critical interpretation of Wordsworth, based on a thing Wordsworth owned, and invites us to share it. Thus, Heaney's poem illustrates the "connection between the concept of collecting and that of thinking" discussed in "The World as Things."[92]

Crucially, between the detective work and the critical work lies an imaginative and interpretative leap. The idea is that the experience of seeing a writer's things will inspire an act of imagination which is simultaneously an act of interpretation. Or, in Cavell's words, "to imagine what it could be like," where voicing that act of imagining yields a form of insight or appreciation — a claim of criticism. As Cavell's experience in the Freud Museum demonstrates, we can never be sure whether the fire will catch. Wordsworth's ice-skates, or Shakespeare's chair, or Carlyle's plumbing, might leave us cold. But if they do, then is that because the curators did not frame them in a convincing narrative, or is it because our imaginations are not equal to the task? If it is through our knowledge of Wordsworth's works that we lay claim to the right to interpret his ice-skates, do we not thereby arrogate to ourselves the responsibility if our interpretative powers fall short of Heaney's, and are not up to the task?

Cavell does not explore this issue in much depth. Indeed, the humble visitor or tourist is largely left out of the discussion in "The World as Things." In the twenty years or so that passed between the essay's first publication and its final appearance

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91. Seamus Heaney, "Wordsworth's Skates," in *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 22.
92. Cavell, "The World as Things," 62.

in *Here and There*, this has come to seem like an oversight. Visitors and tourists have become central to the debate: few curators or museologists today would write at such length with such scant mention of the visitor experience. Indeed, Cavell's essay was first published around the time when Nicholas Serota was suggesting that the role of the art gallery was as much to offer visitors an experience as to offer them an interpretation of the collection, and when Julian Spalding was calling for a new "poetic museum" that would "draw out the profounder, more elusive meanings inherent in so many artefacts from our past" through novel, innovative forms of visitor engagement.[93] Once pioneering voices, the overriding importance they attached to how visitors experience museum sites, spaces, and collections has become an orthodoxy. Thus, rereading "The World as Things" upon its republication in *Here and There* in 2022, those with a background in museum studies might find it dated.

Nevertheless, through discussing what is distinctive about writer's house museums and collections of writers' belongings, I hope to have shown that Cavell's thought has much to contribute to these debates. Cavell is seldom thought of as a philosopher of site-specificity — not counting the occasional trip to the Green World of farms in Connecticut — but his writings on Thoreau contemplate the importance of place (and our relation to it) while contemplating our relation to Thoreau's text. Moreover, his discussion of Henry James's "The Birthplace" casts museum visitors as critics, to the extent that their interpretations of the site and collection model the very act of aesthetic criticism itself. The way visitors interpret museums is therefore paramount after all; and that these acts of criticism take their different interpretative paths from different ways of regarding the museum is vital to them. So, in re-collecting "The World as Things," and placing it in new frames of reference, we are prompted to recollect the breadth and insight of Cavell's work — for philosophy, for literature, and for spaces beyond the classroom.

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93. See Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996) and Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2002), 9.