4. "Hello, Stranger": Acknowledgment and Self-Knowledge

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> This is that which forces thee to confess thy Meanness, Lowness, & Imbecility. This is that which makes thee unequall in every Strife, unable to stand a moment in behalf of thy Self & inward Character, or so much as to expostulate or parly with those Antagonist-Appearances, those Species, Masks, Specters Fantomes, which carry all before them & make what ravage they please. This is that which, in Company, molds and twines thee after any manner; forces thee to speak where thou shouldst be silent, be silent where thou shouldst speak; makes thee to have whatever sort of countenance is commanded; to smile, pitty, applaud, as is prescrib'd; & to be in short whatever the Company around thee is. For, should I not do thus; what would they think of me? what would they say? [...] What is all this Stooping & Slavery? and whence but from that Wretched Opinion & δὀγμα still remaining, that another's Praise & Commendation is my Good?
>
> SHAFTESBURY, *Askêmata*, Vol. II, 6

It is not easy, and perhaps not even desirable, to define "perfectionism"—but it can be safely assumed that its very idea presupposes that there is (in a certain manner of speaking), alongside the current self, a *virtual* self, standing for an improved version of

it.[1] That virtual self is somehow *in view* by the current self. In Emerson's evocative words, this virtual, better self is the unattained but attainable self.[2] This posited dualism raises a few pressing questions pertaining to the relationship between the two. For instance, what is it to know the demands promoted/expressed? by the unattained self? How is it *present* in one's mind?[3] How to account for the difficulty inherent in satisfying the exigencies of the unattained self, often manifested in the very human tendency to ignore its voice? I would like to suggest that Stanley Cavell's understanding of knowledge about other minds, especially in Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*,[4] makes available a way of comprehending the uneasy relationship between the attained and the unattained selves, thus shedding light on perfectionism. This study will be predominantly conducted by looking at how these matters are refracted in a passage from *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the 4th volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.[5]

1.

Cavell, in his magisterial *The Claim of Reason*, gives original analyses of the traditional forms of skepticism, namely the one pertaining to our knowledge of the external world as well as the one pertaining to our knowledge of others. What is remarkable about his characterizations is how he brings the skeptical arguments home—how, that is, he manages to describe these forms of skepticism as having a bearing upon the human condition, in opposition to the way they are often conceived in traditional philosophical discussions, namely as theoretical problems the relevance of which

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1. Cavell resists giving the concept a definition, as he says in his "Introduction" to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990).
2. The expression appears in his essay "History" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (The Modern Library, 2000), 115.
3. I will steer clear in what follows of any ontological and metaphysical debates about the constitution of the self, attained or unattained. If I am right that any interesting notion of perfectionism implies the notion of an "other" self representing the better self that one strives to be, then the important question is about the relation between the two, not the ontological question. In this, I am following Cavell, who shows a complete lack of interest in the ontological question. It is obvious enough that many of us, in our good and not so good moments, aspire to be a better version of ourselves. We are somehow "aware" of the demands that this better version of ourselves sets on us. I see this as a plain phenomenological fact that does not imply, per se, the presence of a "Self" the ontology of which would need to be clarified in order to accept its "existence".
4. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979).
5. Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, tr. J. Sturrock (Viking, 2004).

does not extend beyond the seminar room. On the contrary, Cavell takes the gap between mind and world to be a *practical* problem instead of a theoretical one.[6] To use a vernacular turn of phrase, Cavell, in *The Claim of Reason*, makes skepticism "real"—he understands it as constitutive of the human condition, establishing him as a chronicler of that condition. This amounts to taking the ordinary seriously, since the basic features of human nature—such as our relationship with skepticism about the external world—belong to what Cavell means by "ordinary." This explains why Cavell examines how skepticism emerges in works of fiction.[7]

Marcel Proust was not of course an academic philosopher. But philosophical themes pervade his work.[8] His novel *In Search of Lost Time* is not mentioned in Cavell's list of perfectionist works,[9] yet the book certainly made an impression on him[10] and its main story line is a perfectionist one. In the course of the novel, the reader witnesses the growth of the protagonist from an aspiring writer, a Kierkegaardian *flâneur*, to one who has found his voice as a novelist, one who is profoundly convinced of having something meaningful and important to say. That journey forms the main thread of the book. If one takes philosophy, in a Cavellian spirit, to be about the education of grownups,[11] then Proust's novel is distinctly philosophical. In this sense, he is also a chronicler of the human condition.

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6. Cavell writes: "I remarked that traditional philosophy, so far as this enters the Anglo-American academic tradition, fails to take this gap seriously as a real, a practical problem" (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 109). Just before this he talks about the "*practical* difficulty of pegging the mind to the world" (Cavell underlines).

7. He elaborates this link between skepticism, literature, and the ordinary in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. After finding the theoretical approach to skepticism to end in a cul-de-sac, Cavell writes that he was led "in the fourth part of my book [*The Claim of Reason*], to particular territories customarily associated with literature—especially to aspects of Shakespearean and certain romantic texts—in which I seemed to find comic and tragic and lyric obsessions with the ordinary that were the equivalent of something (not everything) philosophy knows as skepticism" (35).

8. Many books and papers discuss the relationship between Proust and philosophy. As an example amongst many others, there is the recent *Proust's In Search of Lost Time: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Katherine Elkins (Oxford University Press, 2022).

9. I am referring to the list Cavell gives in his Introduction to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 5.

10. A passage from *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2010) is relevant here. Cavell recognizes Proust as having something philosophical to say when he writes, "I am not willing just to say that Shakespeare, Racine, Dickens, George Eliot, Ibsen, Proust, Kafka and so on evidently know intuitively what philosophy responds to conceptually. These writers also evidently respond conceptually" (306). This contribution is evidence for that claim concerning Proust. It is also interesting to note that Proust has read Emerson, something noticed by Cavell in the same book (533), and that Racine's tragedy *Phèdre* plays an important role in the narrator's journey to discover himself in *In Search of Lost Time*. Racine is one of the authors quoted by Cavell as responding conceptually to philosophical concerns.

11. See for instance the classic passage at the end of Part One of *The Claim of Reason*, where he says amongst other things: "In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups" (125).

I will focus on Proust's description of a character's predicament in the fourth volume of the novel, *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Proust was a master at depicting the psychology and inner lives of the individuals inhabiting the world of his books (which was, to all intents and purposes, Proust's world). Just as Cavell makes the issue of our knowledge of others "real" in his writings, Proust makes his character's psychology "real" for his readers.[12] This is where Cavell's depiction of skepticism converges with Proust and perfectionism: I will argue that the terms in which Cavell frames the skeptical debate about knowing others can be used to reach a clearer understanding of the struggle presenting itself when one is confronted with one's idea of the better self that one strives, in one's best moments, to become. Accordingly, the first step is to delineate the Cavellian analysis of skepticism about other minds, in which he introduces new concepts to illuminate it that have become familiar to readers of his work. To this I now turn.

2.

Cavell's portrayal of skepticism about our knowledge of others reaches an unprecedented depth and sophistication in the formidable Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*.[13] He there deepens, in relation to skepticism about the other, the key notions of *acknowledgment* and *avoidance* that he already introduced in earlier work.[14] To explain these notions, it is helpful to begin with his analysis of skepticism about our knowledge of the external world. Such skepticism typically centers around our claim to know a *best* case of knowledge, for instance an envelope seen in the best possible perceptual conditions (Cavell's own example, borrowed from G. E. Moore). If a compelling argument can be made to the effect that we cannot know with certainty that

12. In this sense, and despite appearances to the contrary due to the length of the novel, the environments he depicts, and his undeserved reputation for writing "difficult" and high-flown prose, I believe that Proust is a writer of the ordinary, at least as this notion is understood by Cavell.

13. Cavell's analysis of skepticism about our knowledge of others is very complex (especially in *The Claim of Reason*), so I will have, in the present context, to say just enough about it in order to analyze, with the framework thus provided, the passage from Proust that forms the core of this paper.

14. These notions make their appearances in the essays "The Avoidance of Love" and "Knowing and Acknowledging," both written in 1966 and published in 1969 (in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* [Cambridge University Press, 1969]). However, in *The Claim of Reason*, they are part and parcel of his lengthy and comprehensive analysis of skepticism about the other, which is why the focus will be on these notions as they appear in this book.

this is, for example, an envelope, then perhaps the skeptic is entitled to claim that we don't know anything. Such examples are carefully designed to qualify as *best* cases: the circumstances are described as being perceptually ideal.[15] Skeptical scenarios require the conceivability of a best case: it allows the skeptical argument to take off, namely the elaboration of what Cavell calls a "recital".

Applied to our putative knowledge of other minds, what would be a best case, if by "knowing the other's mind" we mean "being certain about what goes on in the other's mind"? Cavell doubts the conceivability of such a best case. If it is presupposed that there is, on the one side, the subjective occurrences residing inside the other's mind, and, on the other side, the person seeking to know what is going on inside that mind (which is by hypothesis private, contained, hence inaccessible), then the very idea of a best case collapses: the one who wishes to know is necessarily always in the dark because the other's mind always remains completely opaque. For this reason, we are unable to make sense of the idea (essential to construe a best case) of "getting closer," of attaining a "privileged standpoint" from which one can better "observe" the subjective goings-on that one seeks to reach, to be acquainted with. One only always gets more and more behavior, more words, more circumstances, more responses—more, that is, unreliable, distorted outward "signs" of what is really happening "inside". Under this picture of the mind, according to Cavell, no sense can be made of a best case. Therefore, under these presuppositions, there is no philosophical argument available to buttress skepticism about other minds since such an argument needs a "recital" based on a best case and none is forthcoming. But, surprisingly perhaps, none is needed—for Cavell, skepticism about our knowledge of other minds is not a discovery of philosophy: it is rather common sense, a basic datum of the human condition. This ordinary skepticism needs no best case, no philosophy, no recital. We simply *cannot* reach inside the other's mind, and everyone knows that—our ordinary conceptions of the mind and knowledge are such that knowledge of the other so understood will always be out of the question.[16]

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15. G. E. Moore's envelope is described by Cavell as a best case of knowledge in *The Claim of Reason*, for instance on 158. He also mentions Descartes's piece of wax, as well as the piece of paper that he holds while sitting by the fire, as examples of best cases of the sort typically described by philosophers.

16. That is how I understand the following passage from Part Four: "I already know everything skepticism concludes, that my ignorance of the existence of others is not the fate of my natural condition as a human knower, but my way of inhabiting that condition [that is, we assume—but this assumption is

In order to construe a philosophically meaningful skeptical recital about our knowledge of others, Cavell changes the terms of the discussion, making it revolve around *acknowledgment* instead of knowledge. Acknowledgment, as it were, is beyond knowledge.[17] It is a different mode of relating to an other. Let's posit that *acknowledging* someone means taking for granted that the person is endowed with humanity and treating that person accordingly. The key point for our purposes is that acknowledging, in contrast to knowing, involves *expressing* oneself, it has to do with one's *attitude* towards the other. It is not a mere matter of receiving outward signals from the other and then attempting to make sense of these signals, as it is construed in traditional skepticism about knowing other minds.

The notion of *avoidance* makes its entrance when Cavell considers the conceivability of a best case of acknowledging the other. Cavell argues that such a case can be imagined, contrary to a best case of knowing the other's mind. If we assume that Cavell is right about the conceivability of a best case of acknowledgment, the natural question that comes next is: what does its *failure* entail? Well, if Cavell is right, the consequences are dramatic to the point of this skepticism to be, in a sense, impossible. If this case fails—if, in his words, "this other fails me, if I cannot believe, or feel I cannot know, what this other shows and says to me"[18]—then, Cavell thinks, nothing means anything to that person anymore, because that person is now unable to acknowledge as such, having staked the possibility of acknowledgment on that infinite love.[19] Since there is no more acknowledging, then there is no more meaning

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not a necessary feature of the human condition—a conception of the mind that does not allow knowledge, we internalized this model that makes it impossible for us to know]; that I cannot close my eyes to my doubts of others and to their doubts and denials of me, that my relations with others are restricted, that I cannot trust them blindly [this is the condition we inhabit, destined to be opaque to each other]" (432, comments in square brackets mine). Andrew Norris, in his important and masterful *Becoming Who We Are*, puts it this way, talking about the skeptic's so-called "discovery" that we cannot know the other's mind: "But who would have ever thought that I could *read* her mind or that I was *so* infallible? The fact that I cannot and am not is not a *discovery* of the skeptic's, but one of the most obvious features of ordinary life" (90).

17. See Cavell's "Knowing and Acknowledging", 275. In *The Claim of Reason*, he glosses that insight thus: "acknowledgment 'goes beyond' knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession" (428). We see clearly here that acknowledgment is a function of the "knowing" subject: it has to do with the "knower" expressing, recognizing, doing something, possessing. Acknowledgment turns the tables around when it comes to relating to the other—it's more about the knower than it is about the known.

18. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 430.

19. The following is how I understand 429–32 from *The Claim of Reason*. A "generalized" form of this skepticism (in which we all refrain from avoiding the best case of acknowledgment and find that it fails) would lead to a "vanishing of the human" (468).

something, no more expressing oneself, no more relationship with others. Under this form of the skeptical recital, the very denial of someone (that is, a refusal to acknowledge) cannot occur, because if one said "I deny you," one would not be communicating anything under this hypothesis. As can be seen, nothing makes sense. In fact, the "I" disappears. It truly is a tragedy—or would be, if we allowed ourselves to be exposed to a best case and to risk everything. But we don't.

We don't because we *avoid* best cases of acknowledgment. For Cavell, a failure of acknowledgment is a matter of the person *avoiding* interacting with the other, which means avoiding revealing oneself to the other.[20] Now, we have just seen how the hypothetical failure of a best case of acknowledgment would lead to a vanishing of the self and of meaning. For that reason, it is perhaps natural to *avoid* risking everything, that is, to avoid a best case of acknowledgment, out of fear that it might fail. Systematically avoiding best cases of acknowledgment amounts, in effect, to a refusal to *completely* open oneself up to *an* other, as such. Indeed, acknowledging implies a certain level of one 'opening up' to the other since it involves being on the receiving end of the other's utterances and taking them as meaningful ones—this very taking is by itself an opening up in the sense of being receptive to the other's utterances, hence to the other's manifestations of their soul. But if Cavell is right, one always *partially* retreats (closes) and theatricalizes oneself, and this amounts to a refusal to completely open up to the other, despite the opening that is also there and required for successful communication.[21] Cavell often writes as if this is the default human condition—we don't, as a culture, perhaps as a civilization, fully open ourselves up to the other. There is a perpetual breakdown of communication, a failure to genuinely connect with the other, which amounts to a failure of society. Following Norris,[22] it is helpful to understand avoidance in terms of eluding commitment—seen in this way, this "normalized" avoidance amounts to a generalized holding back from fully committing to one another. We all remain opaque to each other—and perhaps even to oneself, as will be shown by Proust's Princesse Sherbatoff.

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20. Cavell writes: "A 'failure to acknowledge' is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness" ("Knowing and Acknowledging", 264).
21. The theme of theatricality will be important later in the paper when the case of the Princesse Sherbatoff is examined.
22. See Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 91.

3.

In the 4th volume of Proust's novel, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the reader is introduced to the inner life of the Princesse Sherbatoff. She is an expatriate aristocrat from Russia, a friend of Madame Verdurin and a member of her *salon* where the Parisian cultural and aristocratic *élite* meets. The Princesse is an outsider, at least outwardly—she speaks very good French but with a noticeable accent and she has different manners from those adopted by "common people". In the first passage that we will study, Proust reveals how the Princesse is an outsider in a deeper sense. The context of the quote is the following: due to factors out of her control, she has only three friends, but she makes it sound as if this was by choice. Here is the passage:

> Before strangers—among whom must always be counted that stranger to whom we lie the most because it is by them that it would be most painful to be despised: ourselves—the Princesse Sherbatoff took care to represent her only three friendships [...] as the only ones [...] which a free choice had caused her to elect in preference to any other, and to which a certain liking for solitude and simplicity had led her to confine herself. "I see *no one* else," she would say, stressing the inflexible character of what had the appearance more of a self-imposed rule than a necessity to be endured.[23]

The Princesse displays a false representation of herself to others, in order to save face, to present a favorable image of herself in public. There is a discrepancy between what or who she is, and what she shows to others. Simply put, she does not reveal *herself* to others. This theme is constant in *In Search of Lost Time*, and Proust works it as well as Nietzsche, Emerson, and the French Moralists do. But Proust underlines an important dimension of this phenomenon in the passage, namely the presentation of a distorted image of oneself *to* oneself. The Princesse reveals to *herself*—to what Proust calls the "Stranger"[24]—an adulterated image of herself. The aim in what fol-

23. Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 271.
24. For ease of exposition and to emphasize the internal dualism between attained and unattained selves implicit in the passage, I will capitalize the expression "Stranger". This is not to be interpreted as a commitment to an ontologically robust notion of another "Self" within ourselves. It is a way of speaking that need not, and should not, be reified.

lows will be to examine the dynamic in play here, namely the relationship between the self-conscious Princesse and the Stranger within herself.

Let's begin by considering this relationship under the light of Cavell's notion of avoidance introduced earlier. Lying can definitely be counted among the ways we have to avoid the other in a Cavellian sense, that is, among the ways we have to restrict our openness to others. A liar is concealing something within herself. The Princesse lies to the Stranger within her (and not only to the other people), thereby attempting to making it (the Stranger) believe that the number of her friends is nothing to worry about because it is her choice.

What, exactly, is she avoiding by playing this elaborate mise-en-scène for which she is herself a spectator? When the Princesse avoids the Stranger, the objective is to shun the Stranger's *voice*, what it *says*. We are allowed, I think, to presume that in the present context the voice of the Stranger says, "You should have more friends, don't fool yourself into thinking that all is good in your life, because it is not." The Princesse can hear the voice because she is not completely vain. I will entertain here the idea that the Stranger's voice is the Princesse's representation, or version, of a "better" self, one that she seeks approval from because she would like to *be* that person, that is, a person who approves of one's own actions and status, a person who lives and behaves according to higher standards. Yet she lies to that better self, to that Stranger—something explicitly mentioned by Proust in the passage quoted. She also knows that she is lying. More generally, she *knows* that her life is disappointing—yet she does not *acknowledge* it. In other words, she fails to recognize what she knows, she fails to do something about it, she closes herself off to it.[25]

The situation, then, is this. The Princesse is aware of the existence of her unattained self (the Stranger), and she lies to "it". The Princesse's voice attempts to shun the contempt of the Stranger. It is the voice of weakness speaking to the better self and attempting to sap its strength. In Cavellian terms, it is the voice of avoidance. Let us not forget that what is avoided is not just *any* other: it is a very special other, one that lives inside the Princesse. It is an other for which she has a *privileged access*. That other is fully *available* to her, it has at least the potential to be

25. The appropriateness of the use of the word "recognize" in this context is telling: it underlines the dynamics of acknowledgment, in which everything there is to know is known, but not "taken in". To recognize can be seen as appropriating what one knows, that is, to acknowledge it.

completely *transparent* to her. She *knows*, as we have seen, what the Stranger *says*, and this knowledge is *certain*—not derivative or distorted. It is first-person knowledge, self-knowledge, and in this sense a *best case* of knowledge. She knows this, and she does not, because she cannot, avoid knowing this. It's always there. What she avoids is *acknowledging that knowledge*. So it would be correct to say that *she avoids acknowledging what she knows best*—herself. While this avoidance of the best does not result in skepticism, it has the *form* of a skeptical recital that satisfies Cavell's requirement of a best case, parallel to his best case of knowledge of the external world represented by the envelope and the best case of acknowledgment represented by an infinite love. This instance of *avoidance of the best* is why the Princesse's predicament can be properly qualified as *tragic*—it's a failure to be in touch with a part of her that she knows best (in comparison with her knowledge of the world, or of others, both of which are necessarily mediated). It leads to a fragmented self. To make matters worse, this unacknowledgment pertains to her *best* self, her Emersonian unattained self. To grasp the tragic aspect of the Princesse's situation, it suffices to recall the considerations of the previous section, where we saw how a failure to acknowledge the best case results in a situation where one's words fail to be endowed with meaning, leaving one without a voice. In the situation described by Proust, it appears that the Princesse's words fail to reach herself—she is not true to herself in such a way that her life is theatricalized, not only for the benefit of her external audience, but from her own perspective as well. When she tries to make it sound that having only three friends is a matter of choice, it is false. But in fact it is more than false, because she says something without *meaning it*—that's the crucial point here and the very notion of "theatricality" is a clue letting us see the link between lack of acknowledgment and lack of meaning (actors do not mean what they say, it is not them speaking, it is their character). Indeed, when she utters "I see *no one* else", her words are fake and she does not mean them: it's not her, strictly speaking, who utters this—it's her mask, or her "Specter" as Shaftesbury might put it.[26] She says these words like an actress playing a role. Worse, she says this to herself—therefore, she fails to make sense to herself.

26. The topic of meaning something will be further developed in the next sections.

4.

The second passage I would like to consider gives us a glimpse of the unadulterated mind of the Princesse when she allows the Stranger to take over, even if it is only for a brief amount of time. Proust writes:

> Were someone's name to be mentioned, or someone introduced to her, the Princesse was forced to feign a great indifference so as to keep up the fiction of her horror of society. Nonetheless [...] a few newcomers succeeded in meeting her, and her euphoria at meeting one of them was such that she forgot the fable of her voluntary isolation and lavished attention on this new arrival.[27]

The first sentence of this extract emphasizes once more how destructive for the self is the dynamic of avoidance: her "great indifference" ("*froideur*" in the original French text, literally "coldness") underlines how the Princesse "freezes" her mind and behavior and stops "being" when confronted with others. She has to "keep up the fiction of her horror of society" in order to save face both in relation to the image that she projects to others and, more importantly, in relation to herself, to her Stranger. Another lie, another attempt to escape the voice of the Stranger—for the great indifference that she feigns is a show not only for others, who, she believes, will deduce from it that she is too "good", too "aristocratic", to mingle with them, but is also a show for herself, in that she hopes, thereby, to fool the Stranger, her inner voice telling her to be herself and to face her demons. It is easier to put up that frigid mask than to face herself and this is further confirmation that avoidance is the voice of weakness against the voice of perfectionism.

Like in a fairy tale, the Princesse is imprisoned into a beautiful castle of her own making (her constructed self-image built out of lies and illusions) where everything shines but is ultimately devoid of meaning and is inauthentic. Her inner life is a gilded cage as empty as the aristocratic world she navigates in.[28] That beautiful, lifeless castle constituting her self-consciousness protects her against the voice of

27. Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 273.
28. This is one of the main themes of *In Search of Lost Time*.

the Stranger. The Princesse avoids acknowledging her Stranger out of a fear of not being able to own up to it and perhaps also out of a fear of madness.

In point of fact, the second half of the passage shows how dropping the carefully conceived mask leads her to a state close to madness. When the Princesse, at times, "lets go" and acknowledges someone in the living world, she enters, Proust tells us, into a daze, a sort of trance, resulting in the Princesse giving herself completely to that person. The translation says that she "lavished attention" on that person but let us note that Proust wrote "*se dépensait follement*" in French (literally "spent herself madly")—characterizing her trance as a form of madness. That is, she breaks free from her painstakingly constructed image of herself and *connects*, not only with an other, but also with what I am tempted to call her "real" self, the *better* part of her. When it happens, when she is out of her carefully managed self, that condition is once again characterized as akin to a form of madness by Proust ("euphoria", "*ivresse*" in the French text), one way to be "out of oneself", but the irony here is that the Princesse, when "mad" like this, is herself in a full sense.[29] Such that being truly oneself, being true to oneself, seems to require that one goes mad.[30] In sum, in order to "grow up," the Princesse has to meet face to face with her Stranger and come to terms with it. Proust seems to suggest that doing this implies that she will have to flirt with madness, a dangerous proposition if any.

However, is it correct to say that the Princesse is required to go mad if and when she makes one with the Stranger? This would require a deeper investigation, and the next section will go some way towards shedding light on this, but for the moment let us point out that extricating herself from the voice of weakness and being true to what her Stranger requires from her would necessitate her to go off script in her life and appear unconventional in the eyes of others. In other words, she would

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29. This brings to mind Thoreau's remark in *Walden* (in *Walden and Other Writings* [The Modern Library, 1992], 127) "With thinking we may be besides ourselves in a sane sense", interpreted by Cavell in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* as "identifying thinking as a kind of *ecstasy*" (9, my emphasis).
30. We are far from Polonius's advice to his son, a passage mentioned by Cavell in "Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow" (in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* [The Belknap Press, 2005], 120). Indeed, when Polonius, in *Hamlet*, advises his son "to thine own self be true", this is to be understood in a very superficial manner, in the sense of staying true to what his son has been in the past, to what he believes is right without necessarily reflecting on it, and so forth. In contrast, here, if the Princesse is to be true to herself, she will have to undergo some serious changes in her life, a process of deep and serious reflection, in which she will have to go through a crisis and it will be painful, involving considerable changes in her life. Something similar is going on through Hamlet's mind during the play: will he go on pretending to be mad in the face of others (conceived here as a form of normality, of *theatricality*), or will he finally own up to his beliefs and convictions and, in a sense, *actually* go mad?

probably *appear* mad. Would she herself become mad?[31] To the extent that connecting with her Stranger would involve most likely a crisis of identity, it would not be surprising to witness a state of confusion on her part similar to at least a momentary lapse of reason.

To sum up, this passage from Proust's novel pertains to the Princesse's encounter with the Stranger, to what happens when she acknowledges it, instead of avoiding its voice. Can such an encounter go beyond a fleeting moment of the kind described by Proust? Can one appropriate the Stranger and remain sane, or is one bound to waver between bouts of euphoria and theatricality? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a definitive answer to these interrogations, I will in the following section attempt to pave the way towards a clearer understanding of them with the help of Cavell.

5.

I would like to examine a passage, occurring in the last pages of *The Claim of Reason*, where Cavell examines the role of self-consciousness in the constitution of the self. This might contribute to further our understanding of the relationship between the attained and unattained selves. Cavell writes:

> I find a new possibility for disappointment with knowledge, that my self-consciousness comes between my consciousness and my expression of it, so that my expressions are embarrassed, are no longer natural. But if my expressions are no longer natural they are no longer the foundation of certainty about my (inner) life, no longer criterial. And if no longer natural, then they are artificial, merely conventional. I theatricalize myself. The problem of the other now, the problem

31. The state here characterized as "madness" is not to be taken as involving a theory of madness or a judgment of value on the behavior of those who do not follow the norm. I am guided here by Proust's text, and I am fully aware that the very notion of "madness" is highly problematic. The main point here is that reconciling with the Stranger is likely to lead to a deviation from what is the norm, from what is accepted in society and from what others usually expect from the one who thus "deviates" from the norm. "Madness" here is understood as a form of reaction to Emerson's "conformity"—hence it is far from being a "bad" thing *as such*, although it can be a burden for the one thus characterized by others, or by oneself.

> in being known, is not that the other does not see me as human, but rather that the other (only) sees me, and always as a human something or other. So, consequently, do I take myself. My existence is proven, but at the price of not knowing what it is in itself. And the existence of others is proven, but at the price of their being spectators of my existence, not participants in it.[32]

The contrast in this quotation is that between a *natural* self associated with consciousness and an *artificial* or theatricalized one produced by self-consciousness. In this essay so far, guided by Proust's attribution to the Princesse of a Stranger within herself, I have called attention to an Emersonian distinction between a higher self standing for who one aims to become, and a lower one representing who one is. Cavell's contrast in this passage between natural and artificial appears at first sight different from the one drawn by Emerson—for how can "natural" be understood in terms of a higher self? However, I believe that Cavell in this passage draws the same distinction as I have been working with, and that it throws light on the notion of an unattained self. By "natural", he does not mean the self expressing its basic instincts, passions, and desires—he does not, that is, refer to an unadulterated self, one that would be without "culture", corresponding perhaps to a state of nature. "Natural", in this context, means what comes from the best part of ourselves, the authentic self that is not (or at any rate less) preoccupied with what others think—not concerned with the voice of avoidance endlessly generating artificiality. The challenge in being human, from this perspective, is that of becoming natural in the sense of forming a unity, of being one within ourselves—without the voice of avoidance nagging at us and bringing us down. Therefore, consciousness (naturalness), in the passage just cited, may be thought of as the Stranger, as what resides inside one in a genuine manner. This is the force of Socrates' "know thyself". When the natural self is allowed to express itself without too much interference from self-consciousness, what it expresses is truly meant, in comparison to the Princesse's "I see *no one* else", which was *not* meant as we saw in section 3.

These considerations underline the "plasticity" of the Stranger's voice. When, in section 3, I remarked that the Princesse *knows* her Stranger *transparently*, I was

32. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 477.

referring to her *current* version of the unattained self contained within her. But this knowledge likely *unfolds* over time—that is, the Princesse's conception of her unattained self is liable to change. "Knowing thyself" is the work of a lifetime. Ideally—hopefully—the voice of the Stranger evolves towards an always better ideal, an always better self that one strives to be.[33] In any case, its voice is modulated by life experiences and soul-searching or lack thereof.

The Cavellian analysis of self-consciousness provided in this passage also allows us to see how we can understand it as the negative force driving the phenomenon of avoidance. The Princesse's self-consciousness comes between her natural self—the one who wants to interact with living people—and her expression of that self, resulting in the refracted self who appears cold and distant to others. The reason she does not reveal her natural self to others is that her self-consciousness is the voice that says, "careful what you show to others". It's the voice of self-awareness and avoidance, the one driven by fear and anxiety, and it leads the Princesse to theatricalize herself.

Proust shows us how the Princesse has become an artificial version of herself and how this results in her being known as a "human something or other", as Cavell puts it—an aristocrat, a distant Princesse, an expatriate, a member of the Verdurin *salon*, instead of being known for who she really is. Cavell also suggests—through his use of the first person in the passage—the universality of Proust's description, namely that the Princesse's condition is *ours* as well. I am the Princesse Sherbatoff. We are the Princesse Sherbatoff. Indeed, aren't we all self-conscious like this, at some level sharing the same plight as the Princesse? Proust, like Shakespeare and other great writers and poets, makes manifest for us the human condition by presenting archetypes and larger-than-life characters who act as mirrors when we look at them.

6.

This analysis was an attempt to reach a clear view of the intercourse between Emerson's attained and unattained selves with the help of Proust and Cavell. I would like

33. Cavell says more about this dynamic of the relation between the attained and the unattained selves in the "Introduction" to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, especially 9–13.

to close this essay by concentrating briefly on the voice of the Stranger when it is acknowledged and welcomed, thereby allowed to express itself without interference from self-consciousness. In particular, is a *complete* acknowledgment of its voice desirable, or even possible? This is a key question of perfectionism, and I think the value of Proust's description of the Princesse Sherbatoff is how it brings it into focus when seen through considerations borrowed from Cavell. Right after the passage just quoted, Cavell considers this very question. He writes, referring to the apple of self-consciousness that we (and the Princesse) half-swallowed:

> Is being human exactly to be incapable either of swallowing it or spitting it out? Is the gasping of the human voice, say sobbing or laughing, the best proof of the human? or best picture, i.e., mask? To swallow once for all would be to live always within ordinary language-games, within the everyday; to spit once for all would be to exist apart from just that life, to live without. In particular, to live without the human voice (e.g., without appeal, without protest).[34]

Cavell examines here the respective consequences of completely *rejecting* self-consciousness and of completely *embracing* it. On the one hand, expunging all self-consciousness from the self would amount, Cavell tells us, to living without the human voice, to living apart from a community. I think he has in mind the notion that the resulting voice would not be readily understood by others, a theme explored in his early book *The Senses of Walden*.[35] Think here of a prophet, or of Socrates, or of Thoreau as understood by Cavell—such figures set themselves apart from their communities and deliver a message clashing with established conventions, resulting in a discourse whose meaning is hardly understandable by their community (be it the inhabitants of Athens, Jerusalem, or Concord). In this sense, their voices are not human. On the other hand, to embrace fully and completely the life of self-consciousness would result in a dissolved self, one vanished into normality—it's the death of the Stranger, a life spent wholly in what Emerson calls conformity. I don't know how common that condition is, but it surely corresponds to a defeat, to a giving up of the

34. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 477.
35. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded ed. (North Point Press, 1981).

human. If this is right, being human, as Cavell suggests in the passage, amounts to navigate between these two extremes.[36]

Proust's Princesse exemplifies the inherent instability of the human condition. She can't realistically reunite completely with her natural self because exceptionality can't be *expected*. She also cannot obliterate her natural, better self such that she would make one with her theatricalized version. Indeed, one hopes that the voice of the Stranger is there to stay, no matter how faint it can become. The tragedy of the Princesse's situation, and ours, is not merely that she avoids her best self, but that she, perhaps, cannot do otherwise.

36. Cavell further engages with the theme of the relationship of the unattained self with nonconformity in Chapter 1 of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, "Aversive Thinking", especially 36–37 and 56–61.