

Me, Myself and Us: Autobiography and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell

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With the publication of Stanley Cavell's autobiography, it has become possible to think about the role of autobiography in Cavell's work as a whole. Some readers regard this book as recording Cavell's achievement of his challenge to philosophy, as contained in the closing question of *The Claim of Reason*: Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?¹ This question clearly resonates with the question of autobiography. And yet when we look at the work where Cavell begins to insist on the issue of autobiography and the first person pronoun, the first connections he draws are not from philosophy to literature but rather from the philosopher's writing to philosophical method or, indeed we might say, to the authority of philosophy.

Cavell's interest in the relation of autobiography to philosophy begins with his attending to the philosopher's use of "We." He returns to this theme emphatically in *A Pitch of Philosophy*.² This first person plural is not normally a part of any known form of autobiography, and its relation to literature seems to me to be as puzzling as its relation to philosophy. I will address the issue of the "I" and the "We", and then turn to some indications of what a more comprehensive reading of *Little Did I Know*³ might look like.

My overall claim is this: whatever impulses to autobiography may animate Cavell's work, one of the most central impulses is methodological: it has to do with

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 496.

2. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3-4.

3. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

the “I” and the “We”. He does not explore the intricacies and the evasions of the “I” solely for its own sake: he is always also exploring the relation of the “I” and the “We”, of the philosopher’s ability to claim accord based on nothing more than the self-critical understanding of his or her own representativeness.

I. Autobiography as Philosophical Confession

The first pages of *Little Did I Know* point back to this issue of the “We” in Wittgenstein’s philosophical remarks and more widely in “ordinary language philosophy.” Speaking of the appeal to “what ordinarily say on a given occasion,” Cavell suggests that this is a way that philosophy “takes on” autobiography or demonstrates a need for “an abstraction of autobiography.”⁴ Cavell thus authorizes us to look more closely at his persistent investigation of the element of personal presence — of the pronouns “I” or “We” — in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*. The emphasis on the first person pronouns (and thus also on the relationship of “I” and “We”) leads us to the second chapter of *Must We Mean What We Say?* and centrally to *The Claim of Reason* and to *Little Did I Know*.

However, it must also be said that the “we” contained in Cavell’s account of a Wittgensteinian reminder *cannot* be considered simply and primarily as an autobiographical element in Wittgenstein’s work. My autobiography may prompt you to remember a piece of your own past. But the story line of this particular autobiography remains mine. On the other hand, when I offer you a reminder of *what we say*, I do not thereby *do* the remembering for you. I am not merely reporting or evoking a memory but inviting you to recollect the *same* circumstances and the same actions. Cavell’s view is rather that such a writer is philosophizing only when he or she writes so as to allow the reader to find herself in the words.⁵ I offer you words that invite you to see yourself in them, to share in them. Wittgenstein says, “We feel as if we had to

4. Cavell, *Little*, 6.

5. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribner’s, 1969; updated edn., Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 28. The passages I discuss from this book are largely drawn from Chapter Nine, entitled “Knowing and Acknowledging” (238-66). This is one of Cavell’s most important early essays, and it is indispensable for understanding Cavell’s philosophical method and its relationship his literary investigations. The chapter is closely linked to the following chapter on *King Lear*, “The Avoidance of Love.”

repair a torn spider's web with our fingers".⁶ He is thinking of the sense, in doing philosophy, that we need to get beyond the mere, rough everyday use of words like "sentences", "words" and "signs" in order to pose the problems that arise within such everyday uses. And in such moments of bewilderment we find that we lack the abilities to solve the rarified problem that we have constructed. We may learn to hear such remarks as a kind of confession that our sense of inability is something we imposed on the situation. But then such a confession doesn't *sound like* much of a confession or an autobiography.

We need therefore to remember that, as Cavell explicitly says, what the author of the *Investigations* confesses has little to do with the actual biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein. We are invited, in Cavell's words, to find ourselves *being confessed* in Wittgenstein's own utterances. The representativeness of the "I" is confirmed in the reader's response to the invitation implicit in Wittgenstein's acknowledgement of what he wishes to say. Roughly speaking, when Cavell speaks of confession in Wittgenstein he is isolating *the need to acknowledge a temptation* — one that emerges within philosophizing. Above all, for Wittgenstein philosophizing draws us in to rigidity in our assertions, a rigidity sometimes characterized as metaphysical and sometimes as sheerly dogmatic.

To repeat, it is acknowledging this drive to assertion that constitutes the substance of what Cavell calls confession in Wittgenstein. If this element of confession and acknowledgement is to become the theme of some sort of autobiography, it will be within the aegis of a transformed sense of autobiographical writing.

Attending to the unity, or rather to the community, of the "We" in a philosophical claim, and of how the "I" becomes merged in the "We", has led to a certain amount of neglect of the question of how the reader of such modes of writing gets addressed. For Cavell is often very clear that there is no guarantee that the goal of unity will be achieved: it is just as likely, perhaps more likely, that the claim to philosophical unity will be rejected or indeed disavowed. Beyond the various awkward efforts to deal with the sheer facts of human difference, there are aspects of philosophical writing which are downright distasteful. Even when our writing successfully invites a reader's participation, such writing also *implicates* the reader. A reader may feel

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §106.

forced to deny this implication (perhaps as a way of avoiding it) and to decline the accompanying invitation. And as in actual social life when we invite someone to join us and they decline, we may well become embarrassed. And the embarrassment goes along with and perhaps in large part is constituted by self-consciousness.

The “I” encumbered by self-consciousness is a topic of Cavell’s that radiates out to modernist art and reaches back to Emerson and Descartes. Attention to the autobiographical may seem like a peculiar way to overcome self-consciousness. But it is of the essence of Cavell’s work that acknowledging a condition is not intended to overcome it so much as it is supposed to show us how to live with it, that is how we follow its unfolding and its sense of inevitable progress and discovery. Autobiographical attention does not defeat the more pernicious effects of self-consciousness — e.g., its paralysis. It shows us a way of outlasting these effects and using to the fullest the life within the details of a life.

II. Autobiography, Acknowledgment and Method

It is evidently hard for many readers to absorb the centrality of Cavell’s method. And this turns out to mean it is hard for them to acknowledge the pivotal philosophical and human role of acknowledgement, as Cavell actually depicts it. This difficulty will come to stand in the way of understanding at least one major aspect of the philosophical role of autobiography in Cavell’s work. To put it crudely — but not more crudely than I have heard it put — Cavell does not first set out to achieve a philosophically observant and self-reflective individuality only to then express that individuality. The expressions of his autobiography are not exhibitions of his inner performance as a philosophical sensibility. They would be better seen as experiments in one of the oldest problems that Cavell sets for himself as a philosopher and as a writer: the relation of an “I” which claims to speak for us — and *to us* — and the “We” who find or fail to find that we are spoken for.

I want to underscore the significance of method by examining, primarily, the opening pages of “Knowing and Acknowledging.” These passages, which extend their influence throughout this essay and into his latest work, are surely among the most detailed and comprehensive accounts of method that he provides. It is here that Cav-

ell first takes his most explicit steps past the more canonical accomplishments of Austin's teaching. The essay arrives climactically at the theme of the "I" and the "you", as befits an essay on the relation of my mind to other minds, of me to you. But the essay begins with an extensive investigation of how I come to speak for us, and of how I come to accommodate the one I cannot speak for. "The one I cannot speak for" is not named explicitly in this essay. But nonetheless it is a way of characterizing the skeptic's ghostly presence among those who are in accord about what we say. Such a figure emerges starkly in the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason* and somewhat more subliminally in the second part of "Knowing and Acknowledging." I will return to this theme of "the one I cannot speak for" as one of the two most nihilistic outcomes — or risks — of Cavell's project.

Before these specific risks emerge, we must understand what develops when the risks Cavell runs are more immediately revealing and remunerative. What emerges throughout *Must We Mean What We Say?* and especially in the chapter "Knowing and Acknowledging"⁷ is that skepticism enacts a crisis in the very methods that are meant to respond to it. And that crisis overtakes the "I" which speaks and performs the methods of ordinary language philosophy, and it turns out to be a crisis in the "I" which the methods are aimed at recovering. I begin with a sketch of the methodological progression:

1) The "I" of the philosopher of the ordinary appeals to *what we say* in order to reach out to a community of "We", a community that expresses itself as we.

2) The "I" is overtaken by a crisis of method within the "We," a crisis which inserts the turbulent "I" back to what Cavell at least once calls "home," a place where the "I" and its utterances are not fated to distress each other.⁸

3) The "I" learns to acknowledge the other speakers, the object of the desired knowledge.

4) The "I" returns to itself enriched by experience and method, and capable of a "We" which is no longer to be presumed necessary but may now emerge as genuinely possible.

The crisis is first made more acute and then resolved with an increase of philosophical perspective and (potentially) human responsiveness. There is in fact a

7. Cavell, *Must We?*, 238-66.

8. *Ibid.*, 43.

state of mind which is preliminary to these steps. Cavell is quite explicit about this state, but it has not generally received much attention. Without this step, or without achieving something like this perspective, the procedure will go astray from the beginning. Cavell makes explicit that the appeal to what we ordinarily say requires not merely some direct linguistic response to a given situation but a reliance on yourself as possessor of language, or in short, as a speaker. But there is a catch to this reliance, to what we might think of as a first sketch of the method or work of self-reliance. Cavell puts it like this:

The way you must rely upon yourself as a source of what is said, demands that you grant full title to others as sources of that data — not out of politeness but because the nature of the claim that you make for yourself is repudiated without that acknowledgment.⁹

In another words, in order to so much as to engage in “the appeal to what we say” we must have already learned to grant the rights of other speakers to the same appeal. To be a speaker with the right to such appeals — that is, to have the power of speech — you must be able to grant the separate existence of the others within the “We” you are appealing to. It is I assume no accident — though it is also not self-explanatory — that Cavell’s first use of the word “acknowledgement” in this essay is precisely part of his characterization of this method of appealing to “what we say.”

More exactly, “acknowledgement” occurs in a characterization of how a particular speaker becomes able to use this method appropriately. What ends with acknowledgement as a category for the assessment of human responsiveness begins with a philosopher’s effort to understand himself as responding to one’s own utterances and to those others’ responses to a situation. Again there is the balance of my responses between self and other, and there is therefore the possibility of an imbalance, or words running out of control.¹⁰ Whatever the starting point, and whatever the outcome, it has become evident that the self — the “I” — must undergo some changes before it is ready for the changes that are brought about by the methods of ordinary language.

9. Cavell, *Must We?*, 239.

The method of appealing to what we say thus sets preconditions in the state of the “I” who performs this appeal. Most explicitly, Cavell invites us to repudiate the stance of *expertise* when we reflect on the data we have obtained. When I discover and give voice to what “We” say, I have obtained knowledge through a certain kind of privileged access. But it is crucial to the appeals that this knowledge is not the privilege of an expert, singled out by that knowledge from other speakers and knowers.

Like citizenship, with which Cavell will find systematic analogies,¹¹ it is a privilege open to all who claim it. The expert and the skeptic both enter the issue of the ordinary by way of knowledge and of language. Expertise naturally expresses itself in forms of words that are oddly placed in relation to ordinary speech, often as a kind of jargon. The skeptic claims that he is a kind of negative expert, an expert in the negative, and so the secondary claim is that the skeptic’s words have an equal right to be technical, eccentric or merely odd-sounding.

Part of what is unique to Cavell’s diagnosis is that he makes explicit that the putative expert and the would-be skeptic meet at a certain eccentric stance towards language. The skeptic assumes the right to use words that are forced, out of the ordinary, beyond the familiar sounds of ordinary speech. But Cavell denies the philosopher searching for “what we say” the solace of claiming expert knowledge of what we say. The philosopher’s “I” must be open to repudiation by the skeptic’s disruption of the “We.”

What has happened almost unnoticed is that Cavell has shifted the emphasis of the skeptic’s position *against* knowledge (whether expertise or ordinary knowledge) into a position *about* language. The kind of knowledge that denies or undermines knowledge is shown to be part our endowment as speakers. What knowledge can do to itself is both a property and an analogue of what human speech can do to itself.

Having used the appeals to the ordinary to note an odd positioning of the skeptic’s words, Cavell now emphasizes that the symptomatic use of words are precisely forced outside this ordinary use. And this forcing is now to be understood as itself intrinsic to the skeptical vision of doubt. What begins as a method for overcoming this crisis in knowledge ends up showing us what the crisis means within our

11. See Cavell, *Claim*, 22-27.

speech. We are *constituted* by this crisis. The “I” we start from must be willing to grant rights to other speakers, which in this case means that it must be willing to dissipate itself in an obstinate resistance to anything like a “we.”

This move by Cavell is underscored in his discussion of the skeptic’s concessions — concessions about the ‘forcedness’ of his remarks: “I know (that a coffee cup is on the counter, or that the tomato is not made of plastic). But I know it “for all practical purposes.” These concessions, Cavell says “may themselves seem forced, or seem empty; but to show this you would have to show that a master of English, who knows everything that you know, has no real use for them.”¹²

We note again that the sharing out of knowledge (which includes the knowledge of our stance towards the world) is precisely correlated to our understanding that an utterance has a use in the world — a serious use we might say. Cavell here begins an intellectual trajectory away from language as a mere symbolic expression of statements to something more like what Austin means by an illocutionary act. A concession of oddness is not merely an intellectual act of conceding, which happens to sound odd or empty. The concession can now be seen as beyond an act of oddness: it is an empty gesture, and act of emptiness. It is not a declaration that our efforts to know the world will come to nothing. The skeptic glimpses that we have already emptied our words, in order not to know that the gesture of our words does nothing, and was already emptied out when we began to make it.

Cavell continues:

An essential step in showing [that these utterances have no serious use] would be to convince the skeptic — that is, the skeptic in yourself — that you know what he takes his words to say. (Not exactly what he takes them to mean, as though they had for him some special or technical meaning.) [...] [I]n the philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language understanding from inside is methodologically fundamental.¹³

Again, I must understand — the “I” in me must understand — that the oddness or emptiness of the words does not come from some kind of technicality or other spe-

12. Cavell, *Must We?*, 239.

13. Cavell, *Must We?*, 239.

cialness. The skeptic does not win (or seem to win) by his feats of technical knowledge, but neither is he defeated by our knowledge of the technicality of his words.

Here “technicality” is the form an expression takes of its own kind of specialized knowledge: such knowledge is the result of my treating the knowledge of my words and my world as a special access to the world, an access granted to me because of my special epistemological position within the world.

Cavell has thus shown us that what begins as a crisis of knowledge is revealed to be equally a crisis of language. Specifically, it is a crisis of the power of the “I” — of me — to speak for us. Or rather, what is in question is whether I am able to say what we say, hence whether I can say “We” at all. For the method depends on the fact (which is nothing more than a fact) that the speakers speak for one another — in one another’s voice, in accord. What looks like “us” — a group potentially visible and audible to an outsider — must be able to become a “We”, a first person plural subject. The outsider is either absorbed into the “we” or the outsider is no longer a mere by-stander or a mere subject of observation: he must claim the right to speak *against* the “we” — against us — to become the specific form of outsider that we call an antagonist.

III. From the Methodical to the Destructive

The stakes of skepticism in Cavell’s initial vision of the struggle are already high. But the stakes get higher still. The skeptic — the skeptic in us — is not done with us yet. Within the interwoven double themes of “Knowing and Acknowledging”, certainly in the monumental enterprise of *The Claim of Reason*, and finally in the lucid tales of *Little Did I Know*, the scope and power of skepticism continue to grow and continues to reflect and enact what the nature of uses of language can do to themselves.

Midway through “Knowing and Acknowledging”, Cavell writes:

My object here is not to answer the questions, “What or who is the skeptic? What is the power of his position?”; it is an attempt to show why these questions are worth asking.¹⁴

14. Cavell, *Must We?*, 242.

At this stage of his work, Cavell's focus is shifting from skepticism about the external world, with its putative coffee cups, goldfinches and lumps of wax, to skepticism about other human beings and how we know what they are feeling and what they really are. It is in the effort to know others that we most often find ourselves reaching for the word "indirectly." If I do not know that I see the "back half" of the coffee cup, and therefore think that I do not *literally see* the coffee cup (in unobscured conditions) — even if this is what I come to think, I am not likely to say that I see the coffee cup *indirectly* as a way of hedging my bets. It is rather that I know the cup is there, if you like, for practical purposes. I know enough to bring you some coffee in the cup or to be to be careful not to spill it.

With regard to skepticism about other minds, we feel the need to record a contrast (as Cavell comes to put it) between my position in relation to your pain and yours. However unsatisfying it may be to note this difference between us as differences in our *positions*, it remains an obvious way to record what feels like a certain kind of fact: "I can only know your pain from your words and behavior — i.e., indirectly — but I know my pain directly." Now we are in a position to say that Cavell depicts the skeptic's world of other humans as inflected away from us. But he also depicts those others, those who are "apparently present" to us as actually hidden behind or within their bodies. In such cases, we have the sense that a more direct path exists or could exist. In the case of other feelings, this often comes to the sense that if only you did not have to *express* your feelings then the path to my understanding of you would be straighter, or more direct.

It is not difficult — though among academic philosophers it is also not very common — to explore the kind of life we might live in the midst of such indirection and supposition about others. It is for the most part, Cavell declares explicitly, the life we are actually living. It is what he calls "living our skepticism."¹⁵ Despite what some have written, this phrase does not describe a life that accepts "finitude" and the fact that there are boundaries to what we can know of others. That is, the phrase is taken to refer to a conscious acceptance of the limits of our awareness and of the fact that our finite experience is a source of inescapable hindrances to our lives with others.

15. Cavell, *Claim*, 437-40.

In the phrase “living our skepticism,” Cavell is rather trying to characterize a kind of life that *avoids* having to discover what our human boundaries come to. It is easier to think of ourselves as accepting something indefinitely finite about our relations to other than to have to face how utterly definite our limitations towards others turn out to be in a given case.

Cavell sums this up in the idea that criteria are disappointing, and here this means that we are for the most part disappointed by our relations with people.¹⁶ What is to be accepted, if ultimately transformed, is first of all this disappointment. I am not speaking primarily about a disappointment in the quality or intensity of those relationships but rather a disappointment with what we might call their directness. I am not saying that these issues are easy to keep separate. But at least initially, to understand the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*, we must be able to focus on the dependency of our relatedness on others on their expressiveness (by way of criteria) and our acceptance of those expressions. We must learn to recognize our disappointment in criteria.¹⁷

In Cavell’s account, we do not move directly to some wholesale acceptance of our “finitude”, presumably in some wholesale opposition to “infinite.” A major problem with that sense of how we are to accept finitude is that it tends to make the rejection of transcendence itself too absolute. It neglects the fact that our longings for the incorrigible, the perfected and the immortal must be dealt in domestic and daily contexts, or else our rejection of “infinite” will partially share the longing that it is trying to reject. And when these longings are disappointed, it is not just our criteria but the world itself which will seem to be insufficient and its existence unjustified.

There are at least two perspectives on skepticism by which we can track our withdrawal from the world and the world’s withdrawal from us: there is a skepticism whose disappointment is a modification of a more fundamental drive to destructiveness. And there is a skepticism which is a kind of medium of indifference: if you cannot tell the difference between the existence or non-existence (the presence or absence) of a coffee cup or an envelope or a migraine, then there is a sense in which, at least epistemologically you do not at bottom care if the object exists. And while that is

16. Cavell, *Little*, 440.

17. *Ibid.*

not immediately a wish to deny the existence of the object in question, it is certainly compatible with such a wish.

IV. Autobiography and the Trauma of Knowing

Near the beginning of *Little Did I Know*, Cavell brings together the destructive consequences of the denial of knowledge (a kind of prototype of skepticism) and the eventually destructive consequences of the deferral or dispersal of knowledge. This is a further step in the problematic of knowledge and doubt. It suggests that the step outside the circle of philosophical belief and denial — for instance a step into literature or autobiography — will be as dangerous as the effort to confine your issues to the realm of the academic

if I had wished to construct an autobiography in which to disperse the bulk of the terrible things I know about myself, and the shameful things I have seen in others, I would have tried writing novels in which to disguise them.¹⁸

If this passage implicitly relates philosophy to autobiography, at the same time it also overtly dissociates the form of philosophical autobiography that he intends to be writing from certain kinds of novels. The issue is not about narratives of fact versus narrative of fiction: either form of narrative is capable of hiding the truth by dispersing it. Moreover, Cavell is only rarely inclined to praise the truth of art and literature by praising the products of their imaginative freedom over the unyielding abstractions of philosophy. For Cavell the imagination is just much an agent of self-deception as a vehicle for self-knowledge. Autobiography becomes philosophical at least in part as a counter movement to human evasiveness. That is, autobiography is not just the story of someone's life but a kind of written concentration of that life.

In *Little Did I Know*, Cavell's ability to concentrate the details of a scene of his life emerges from a kind of writing and allows for a kind of self-knowledge. It is a mode of knowing that he calls "undispersed" as if the enemy of self-knowledge was

18. Cavell, *Little*, 5.

not merely self-deception or self-evasion, but a kind of self-dissipation. If I am sufficiently disconnected from anything like the center of myself or spread out across the surfaces of my world, then my efforts at self-consciousness will not have enough connection with each other even to begin the work of self-knowledge. One of the principal tasks of *Little Did I Know* is therefore to dramatize the interplay between self-knowledge and the disguises of the self. If a primary goal is to achieve an undispersed knowledge, the reader must acknowledge both his identifications with the writer's story and his varying distances from that story.

The reader may imitate the author in his self-recovery but this is an outcome that cannot be readily predicted. The writer's life will strike us as singular, but it must be understood in its representative ordinariness. At the same time, we must grasp this life as the site within which the legacy of knowledge is also to be grasped. The ordinary conditions of such knowledge are discovered in its very limitations.

In an early scene in *Little Did I Know*, a traumatic limit of knowledge and the wish to know is revealed at a moment when the boy's power of knowledge is directly attacked by his father. At the beginning of the passage Cavell writes this, with regard to the "date of revelation of paternal hatred":

Some wish to delay it is understandable; to postpone it indefinitely has, I can see become dangerous, its silence blocking something irreplaceably valuable. But why does it always fall to me to be the one asked to understand? It took me a long time to get to that question, one that I would hate to have bequeathed uncontested to the young that I care for.¹⁹

The scene is the one where the boy has been transported to a new and strange neighborhood in Atlanta, and he discovers, within a decorative glass container, a kind of candy (which Cavell refers to as "wafers"²⁰). He says, "I didn't know we had these here". His father moves towards him from the "semi dark" at the other end of the sofa

19. Cavell, *Little*, 16.

20. William Day reminds us that the standard name for such candies is "non-pareils." He obtained Cavell's agreement that this was a deliberate choice on Cavell's part. There is no room here to join Day's suggestions about the "wafer" invoking the sacrament, and Cavell invoking his Romantic sense of reading as redemptive has requiring its own sense of sacramental, of mingling the inner and outer "substances" of what is to be understood. See, Day, Andrew Taylor and James Loxley, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

and, grabbing the candy and the lid from the boy, says “And you still don’t know it.”²¹ The rage of this denial is far from any skeptical thought. His goal is not to create *doubt* in the boy’s mind. Cavell is certainly willing to suggest connections between the moods of skepticism and the frame of mind that would deny the possibility of knowledge and of a basic form of human relation to the world. But that is not the same as a scene of the origin of doubt and the struggle against doubt.

Since Cavell delayed releasing this story and its knowledge for so long, we can read him as in a sense preparing us for its release. We should not skip over any steps in our reception of this traumatic moment. Cavell’s knowledge (itself uttered quite casually — he says “aimlessly”) is attacked in such a way as to make clear his father’s wish to obliterate the very idea that his son might have known of or the presence of this candy, this form of pleasure.²² This is a frame of mind sufficiently destructive of human relations to the world or to other people that it would render skepticism superfluous. This mood eradicates the one who would know, and hence eradicates any knowledge that might attach to such a creature. Compared to the moment when he realizes that “my father wished I did not exist,”²³ the possibility of thinking though skepticism could easily come as a kind of relief.

What are we, as readers, to make of this passage? This question seems especially relevant since it was precisely for the sake of his readers and listeners that Cavell was delaying his dangerous revelation. I cannot give anything like a complete answer to the question of the nature of this danger.

Nevertheless, repeatedly in Cavell’s work, in his own voice and in the voice of others, the fact of being singled out becomes the dominant fact of a philosophical thought or a dramatic hero. “But surely another person cannot have THIS pain!”²⁴ This passage is discussed by Cavell in *The Claim of Reason*,²⁵ where he connects the sense of singularity with what he calls the “passive” recital of skepticism. The fundamental question of this mode of doubt is not “Do I know?” but rather “Am I known?” From these discussions there radiate connections between Wittgenstein and *Coriolanus*, to go no further.

21. Cavell, *Little*, 17-18.

22. *Ibid.*, 18.

23. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

24. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §253.

25. Cavell, *Claim*, 444.

However we are to read such scenes, we must somehow include the terrible and elated sense of being the one who is singled out. And whatever danger lurked in the scene that he delayed to tell us, it is surely in part the danger that a story of being singled out will go a long way to singling out the listener, that is to say, the reader.

At every turn the issue is raised again: the writer's words offer community but they do not overcome the threat of separateness. The separateness we are left alone with is found in Cavell's work's work from the beginning. If acknowledgement is an appropriate response to separateness, it is not meant to defeat it. Philosophy and some literary fields of expression can be thought of as attempting to liberate us from a primitive and perhaps mythical state of voicelessness. We labor under a sense of our incapacity for expression, hence an incapacity to mitigate our separateness.

Cavell's autobiography combats philosophy's tendency to exile itself from the more human and mundane voices that surround us. Imagining the poet's words as used without the conditions that define them, the philosopher tends to perceive the words as empty and to experience language as returning to chaos. In such conditions, the human voice is heard as voicing only its own incomprehensibility.

The root of the promise of philosophy is also the root of its danger. That philosophy will help recover the eventual community that we have currently lost provides no assurance that I will, in any given situation, be able to invoke what we say. Philosophy fears the other side of its own success. At the very least this is the lesson we are meant to absorb.

The method of appealing to what we say must internalize from the beginning the possibility of failure. The voice that is to be evoked is only contingently evoked, whether by the "I" that appeals to what we say or whether by the "I" that releases the intelligibility of the events that have led to just this story. The task of the writer is to let the actions speak for themselves. My task as a reader is to discover whether I am up to discerning — and to surviving — the sense and the nonsense in these acts and these utterances.