

A Scarred Tympanum

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[...] nothing of human interest should be ruled out as beneath philosophical interest [...]

CAVELL, *Little Did I Know*

Who beside myself could give me the authority to speak for us?

CAVELL, *A Pitch of Philosophy*

Philosophy is no stranger to autobiography. Yet, despite the fact that we know, thanks to Augustine and Descartes, to Rousseau and Nietzsche, that autobiography can be philosophically useful, the grounds for autobiography's philosophical significance still evade us. Good detectives that we are, we rummage for clues, for biographical facts that may throw light on this or the other philosophical conundrum, when we have known all along that life told is more philosophically eloquent than life lived. In all of our attempts to recount our lives — to a loved one, to a therapist, to ourselves — there are incidents that seem almost naturally to take precedent over others. Memory, in this sense, works inconsistently, perhaps prejudicially; its retrospective light illuminating some events, which subsequently become important to us, whilst leaving others in the dark. The term that Freud might have used to describe this phenomenon is *Nachträglichkeit*, an untranslatable word announcing memory's deferred action, the fact that some incidents only gain significance retrospectively. *Nachträglichkeit* in its widest possible sense thus describes the fact that whilst life is lived forwards, it can only be understood backwards. This is also true for Stanley Cavell's autobiographical writings, in which one childhood event in particular emerges as philosophically decisive.

One day, when he had not yet turned seven, Cavell was “hit by a car as [he] ran headlong into [their] most uneventful street to retrieve a ball.”¹ Revisiting this event again in *Little Did I Know*, he elaborates: “I had been struck and knocked unconscious by an automobile as I ran out into the street, just up and across the street from my old house and Atlanta Avenue.”² He fleshes the memory out further: “I seem to have the sensation as well as an image of running down the Jacobs’s driveway into the street, without a glance in any direction but straight ahead, along with an image that I associate with the impression of a car bearing down on me as I was picking up the ball I had chased into the street.”³ This accident left Cavell with “a scarred tympanum.”⁴ He writes:

Given that this consequence of the accident was fundamentally to affect the course of my life, it is hard to believe that I did not become aware of it until sometime after I returned to school, and indeed not until a while after we moved to the north side and I began to undergo excruciating treatments designed, so far as I was told, to keep the misshapen ear canal from narrowing further than it already had done.⁵

Although the account of this accident, the events at the hospital that followed and the subsequent painful treatment of his ear are fragmentary, and take up only a couple of pages in *A Pitch of Philosophy* and *Little Did I Know*, their significance cannot be overstated. If “nothing of human interest should be ruled out as beneath philosophical interest,” it will come as no surprise that the aftershock of being hit by a car on that most uneventful street should also be felt in Cavell’s philosophical work.⁶

Tinnitus, a ringing, buzzing or humming in the ears in the apparent absence of any external sound — a possible symptom of the “endless series of ear infections” that Cavell suffered after his accident — haunts the philosopher’s writing.⁷ In *The Claim of*

1. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 25.

2. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 27.

3. *Ibid.*, 27-28.

4. Cavell, *Pitch*, 30.

5. Cavell, *Little*, 33.

6. *Ibid.*, 250.

7. Cavell, *Pitch*, 25.

Reason, when discussing the inability of criteria to assure us that the other truly is in pain, Cavell details what may be thought of as typical behaviour accompanying “a ringing in the ears,” such as “frown[ing] or open[ing] the mouth very wide so as to move the ears around” or “press[ing] your palms against them for a moment” or “shake[ing] the head vigorously once or twice and then listen.”⁸ People, he adds, “who haven’t had the experience probably won’t understand what you’re doing”; the implication is that the author understands it, that he is familiar with the gesture, that he has perhaps employed this method on the odd occasion himself.⁹

We seem to have arrived at a clean and clear intersection of autobiography and philosophy. The story of his scarred tympanum is, however, not merely drawn on for anecdotal flourishes. Instead it colors the way he views the issues at the heart of his philosophical project. In point of fact, the aural motif also surfaces in a preceding passage in *The Claim of Reason*, in which Cavell compares the Austinian question of whether or not there is a goldfinch in the garden, and the skeptical impulse to go and puncture it, with the question of whether or not a singer is in tune:

I have no idea whether this bit of academic sadism would be making sure it’s real “in the same way” as I might have made sure it’s a goldfinch (unless someone wishes to insist that this is making sure it is a goldfinch, while another might wish to insist that only God could really do that (as only a composer can make sure that the tonic is well established (though who is it who makes sure that the singing is on pitch, the singer or the sung to?).¹⁰

In this wonderful sequence of parentheses within parentheses, the question of whether an other (I or God) can know that the goldfinch exists (or perhaps even that the goldfinch is in pain) is presented as similar or identical in philosophical force and significance as the question of whether the singer knows her own pitch better than the listener wincing at its flatness or sharpness (if this were the case there would be no more singing out of tune, I suppose; ears can lie). A couple of pages later the auricular motif returns not to illustrate but to allegorize skepticism. Again a phanto-

8. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2nd edn., 80.

9. *Ibid.*, 80.

10. *Ibid.*, 58.

matic noise plagues the writer, a noise that is concomitant with his inability to confirm that there is indeed a goldfinch in the garden:

There is this humming in the air; or a noise at midnight in the basement — there it is again. Shall I say: “I don’t by any means always know...”, and let it go at that? But there aren’t just hummings in the air; it is imperative that I find out whether there happens to be one in the air now or whether it is only in my ears. Certainly I may not be able to learn the answer in this case, to convince myself one way or the other. But it won’t help my condition to say that sometimes I just don’t know. I am left with the question; it stays in me, until it decays in my memory or I overlay it, perhaps symbolize it, with something else.¹¹

Here we find the problem of skepticism distilled clearly and devastatingly, like poison to be poured into ears.

The institution of philosophy, as it is traditionally understood, is perhaps uncertain what to do with these passages. The prose may seem a touch too purple, the voice too idiosyncratic, the examples too elliptic to be pertinent to philosophical investigation. The explanation suggesting itself immediately, namely that the aural tint of these passages is a rhetorical gesture or an ephemeral residue of the musical life that preceded his philosophical career, seems within reason. It is also reasonable to remind ourselves that for a writer for whom style has always been an intrinsic part of philosophical investigation, there is no such thing as philosophically unimportant stylistic or figurative choices. The persistence of these aural tropes and of a fascination with the ear as an organ throughout Cavell’s oeuvre — his autobiographical work, his philosophical essays, as well as his literary criticism — alone should be enough to convince us. Thus we cannot help but notice that in his meditation on the ethical demands of theater, the audience’s skeptical tendency to treat Othello’s behavior merely as acting is understood in terms of an acoustic interference: “an excuse, whistling in the dark.”¹² We are similarly struck by a memory, related in *Little Did I Know*, of hearing “a faint low hum as if produced by the ground” nobody else could hear and its

11. Cavell, *Claim*, 60.

12. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 101.

subsequent incorporation, six decades later, into the reading of the Overture of *The Marriage of Figaro* “as expressing the hum of the world, specifically the restlessness of the people of the world.”¹³

Cavell’s projection of the skeptical impulse — our restless inability to acknowledge our separateness and our denial to acknowledge others — to the ear culminates in his definition of skepticism as “the denial of the need to listen” and as “the refusal of the ear.”¹⁴ The skeptical problem has been transposed, and is here presented as both a distortion of our auditory sense and a denial of the way we ordinarily listen. Skepticism is thus not only made out as a confusion of the soul, but as a confusion of our ears. As these passages suggest, Cavell’s penchant for aural, musical or auricular themes is not an indulgence, but communicates on a deeper level with a set of questions — skepticism, separateness, and acknowledgment — that are at the heart of his philosophy. The answer as to why skepticism is here transposed to the ear will also provide an insight into why, for Cavell, autobiography is philosophically significant.

In Cavell’s writing, the role of autobiography, and in particular the stories surrounding his scarred tympanum, belie the idea of autobiography as a minor, solely auxiliary, genre to his principal philosophical preoccupation. The story of Cavell’s scarred tympanum is not ancillary but essential to his philosophy. Prosaically speaking, without the accident Cavell may have not become a philosopher. Both *A Pitch of Philosophy* and *Little Did I Know* in fact relate the story of how his scarred tympanum twice thwarted his intentions to join the war effort, first in 1943 and then a year later in 1944, thus propelling him initially towards a life of music and then to one of philosophy.¹⁵ However, Cavell’s scarred tympanum not only merits our attention because, closing some of life’s doors and opening others, it set him on the path of philosophy. It should command our attention because “a philosopher’s or writer’s autobiography [...] tells the writer’s story of the life out of which he came to be a (his kind of) writer.”¹⁶ Put differently, Cavell’s autobiographical writings, and in particular the story of his scarred tympanum, tell not only of the how but also of the why of his phi-

13. Cavell, *Little*, 99, 100.

14. Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre and Kuhn* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 133.

15. Cavell, *Little*, 166-8. Cavell, *Pitch*, 32.

16. Cavell, *Little*, 5-6.

losophy. The autobiographical story of his scarred tympanum is, I would like to suggest, the primal scene of his philosophy.

Although as a line of inquiry it is not without merit, I am not making the case here for the philosophical importance of Cavell's life *an sich*. Distinguishing between lived and told experience, between life and what calls for its recounting, between events and their *nachträglich* interpretation is crucial. Being first and foremost a reader, I am interested in what the literariness of Cavell's writing can tell us about his philosophical project. What is, philosophically speaking, interesting to me is how the terms which frame the autobiographical account of his turn to philosophy echo the figurative themes that surface repeatedly in his description and diagnosis of skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* and *Disowning Knowledge*. What intrigues me, in other words, is how on closer inspection the resonances between the auricular narrative strands in his autobiographical and philosophical work demonstrate that the events related to his scarred tympanum are philosophically formative and foundational.

The aural tropes interspersed throughout Cavell's work are, I maintain, not separate instances of a stylistic and thematic extravagance. Despite their fragmentary or elliptical nature the au(ral)tobiographical narratives — including the story of his scarred tympanum, his mother's perfect pitch (and his lack of it), his life of music and then of philosophy — have to be understood, if not as an easily fathomable whole, then as significantly linked and mutually inflecting meditations on what he wants of philosophy. By drawing links between the story of his damaged left ear; his reading of the ear-poisoning in Hamlet's dumb-show and how it relates to Janet Adelman's work on the role of mothers in Shakespearean tragedy; his account of his mother's perfect pitch; and the story of how he turned from music via psychoanalysis to philosophy, I am suggesting that the tale of the "scarred tympanum" and other related auricular narrative strands are not merely philosophically significant but in fact philosophically exegetic. In fact, as I will go on to argue, the resonances between his Shakespeare criticism and his autobiographical writings, between his diagnosis of the skeptic's plight and the story of how he became a philosopher, allow us to locate his philosophical catalyst. Paying heed to the echoes between these different au(ral)tobiographical narratives will thus help us fathom what Cavell wants of philosophy and why autobiography must be a part of it and why any philosophy worth doing must be an abstraction of autobiography.

Mother

The element linking the autobiographical story of Cavell's scarred tympanum to his philosophical work, indeed to his philosophical vocation, is to be found in his Shakespeare criticism. At the end of "Hamlet's Burden of Truth," Cavell turns with considerable interest to the strange detail of the ear-poisoning in Hamlet's dumb-show. "Anon come in [a Player as] another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears and leaves him. The queen returns, finds the king dead, makes passionate action."¹⁷ This is the first time we hear about the supposed method of King Hamlet's murder. Standing on uncertain ground, Hamlet is, it seems, not content with testing his mother and Claudius alone; with the inclusion of the ear-poisoning he is also testing the ghost. The dumb-show has widely been read as marking a moment of crisis in *Hamlet*, furthermore one inextricable from the skepto-tragic mechanism of the play. What precipitates this moment of crisis is not the doubted veracity of the ghost's assertions, however. Rather, the strange detail of the ear-poisoning points to a different anxiety at the root of Hamlet's skepticism — one having to do with neither the Ghost nor with Claudius, but instead with his mother.

Cavell proposes that we look at the dumb-show as Hamlet's "invention" or "fantasy," more specifically "a fantasy that deciphers into the memory of a primal scene, a scene of parental intercourse."¹⁸ In support of this hypothesis Cavell identifies in the dumb-show the two reversals key to Freud's interpretation of the Wolf Man's case in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: first turning one thing into its opposite and second reversing passive into active. Changing "one thing into its opposite," the dumb-show, he argues, replaces Gertrude with Claudius.¹⁹ This reversal does not point to Hamlet's conviction that his mother took part in the murder, but rather that "Hamlet feels her power as annihilating of his own," indeed that his father was annihilated by this power before him.²⁰ In Cavell's reading, the dumb-show qua primal scene thus re-enacts not merely his father's murder (or Gertrude's involvement therein) but in reproducing pa-

17. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.128.4-7.

18. Cavell, *Disowning*, 182-3.

19. *Ibid.*, 184.

20. Cavell, *Disowning*, 185.

rental intercourse — “one finds a man collapsing not upon her pouring something into him but upon her having poured something into her (the reversal of passive into active)” — the devastating power of women over men.²¹

Although it is not mentioned, Joel Fineman’s work on the early modern associations between the ear and female sexuality resonates in Cavell’s reading of the pouring of poison into King Hamlet’s ear.²² Neither in Shakespeare nor in Cavell, however, is the feminized ear merely passive. Just as the ears of Shakespeare’s female characters are often portrayed as active, even voracious, the ear is both agent and receptacle of the contamination.²³ In Cavell’s conception of the dumb-show as primal scene and, in particular, in his interpretation of the ear-poisoning, Gertrude’s sexuality emerges as the contaminant corroding first Hamlet the elder and then, potentially, his son. Here, as in Cavell’s descriptions of a skeptical confusion of the ears in *The Claim of Reason* or in the Introduction of *Disowning Knowledge*, the question of skepticism is transposed to the ear. Yet whilst in *The Claim of Reason* the skeptical tendency is manifested as an auditory interference — as an unwillingness to hear or as a precarious attunement — here the ear channels anxieties about the skeptic’s maternal origin, which are at the heart of the skeptical impulse.

Janet Adelman’s work on the role mothers play in Shakespearean tragedy is an important influence on both “Hamlet’s Burden of Truth” and Cavell’s understanding of the essential correlation between tragedy and skepticism.²⁴ In *Suffocating Mothers*, Adelman argues that from Hamlet onward a certain view of female, and in particular maternal, sexuality and tragedy are concomitant. In these plays maternal sexuality is

21. *Ibid.*, 185.

22. Joel Fineman, “Shakespeare’s Ear,” *Representations* 28 (1989): 10. Looking at The “Rainbow” Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, attributed to Isaac Oliver (c. 1600), Fineman notes that among the eyes, mouths and ears adorning the Queen’s dress there is an “exceptionally pornographic ear” formed by two creases in Elizabeth’s dress precisely over her genitals (10). Here Fineman is playing on the associations between aural and the sexual organs prevalent in early modern conceptions of the feminised, passive ear — as epitomised, for example, in the belief, propagated by folklore as well as theological discourse, that at the Annunciation the Virgin Mary conceived Jesus through the ear. See Wes Folkerth, *The Sound of Shakespeare* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 47.

23. Folkerth for instance notes that Cleopatra “implores a messenger to thrust his words into her ears, suggestively instructing him to ‘Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears, / That long time have been barren’.” (107).

24. Adelman is mentioned at three important junctures in *Disowning Knowledge*: in the crucial passage of the Hamlet essay just discussed, in Cavell’s reading of Coriolanus and his second, less well known, comment on King Lear in Emerson’s *Transcendental Etudes*.

perceived as “the initial premise of tragedy, the fall that brings death into the world.”²⁵ The fantasy by which Shakespeare’s tragic heroes project anxieties about mortality and subjectivity onto women’s bodies is, according to Adelman, rooted in early modern conceptions of pregnancy and nursing where the mother was thought to hold tyrannous sway over the child’s life and death. Associations between womb and tomb were strong in the period. Women were not only believed to be able to suffocate their child in their womb if they so wished, but birth itself was understood “as the fetus’s response to the inadequate supply of air or food in the womb.”²⁶ According to this view the mother’s body is, for the child, a source of both pleasure and peril: longed for and feared in equal measure. Cavell’s image of Hamlet as “resisting birth, holding back from existence,” or wishing to “remai[n] in his mother’s womb, as if always buried alive, or caught in the passage out” echoes Adelman’s account.²⁷

Just as *Suffocating Mothers* resonates throughout Cavell’s reading of Shakespeare, Adelman’s work is deeply indebted to his interpretation of the skeptical problem. In Adelman’s work, the selfhood that Hamlet constructs in response to the perceived maternal threat, for example, bears a striking resemblance to Cavell’s definition of skepticism.²⁸ Like the skeptic, Hamlet withdraws from the world, retreating “into what he imagines as an inviolable core of selfhood that cannot be played

25. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17.

26. *Ibid.*, 6. After birth the mother’s life-giving and life-taking abilities were not thought to grow any weaker; mother’s milk was deemed unsafe for consumption for up to a month after birth. Even though wet-nurses, to whom children were routinely sent, often had “contaminated or insufficient milk,” malnutrition meant the nursing period often lasted for up to two or three years (4). After experiencing “a prolonged period of infantile dependency, during which they were subject to pleasures and dangers especially associated with nursing and the maternal body,” children would then be subjected to a sudden weaning process “routinely by the application of wormwood or another bitter-tasting substance to the nipple - and abrupt separation from the nurse - mother he or she might have known for two or more years” (5). This prolonged dependency and traumatic separation, Adelman suggests in her book, would have had devastating consequences for the infant’s sense of self and attachment. Adelman’s work on early-modern conceptions of nursing are thus also felt in Cavell’s reading of the scene in *The Winter’s Tale*, in which Mamillius’ whisperings into Hermione’s ear are seen as precipitating Leontes’ skeptical spiral. Cavell suggests that Leontes’ skepticism is stirred by his envy of the intimate relations between, on the one hand, Hermione and her unborn child and, on the other, Hermione and Mamillius, whose name is reminiscent of a nursing infant. See Cavell, *Disowning*, 196. This reading opens yet another set of intriguing parallels between Cavell’s and Winnicott’s works, particularly his ideas relating to “the nursing couple.”

27. Cavell, *Disowning*, 14.

28. Cavell is in fact one of the “four dear friends” or “gracious presences” that were in Adelman’s “head throughout the writing of [*Suffocating Mothers*].” See Adelman, *Suffocating*, x. The accidental meeting of akin minds and the ensuing catalysis of ideas is perhaps another instance of life’s sway over philosophy.

upon.”²⁹ Hamlet, like a true skeptic, constructs “an absolute barrier between inner and outer.”³⁰ Like the skeptic philosopher who eschews the ordinary in favor of metaphysics, Hamlet believes that only “magical thinking,” can overcome this barrier.³¹ The influence of Cavell’s thinking on Adelman becomes explicit in her reading of Leontes’ crisis of faith as “the loss of faith in the world outside the self: what Cavell calls ‘skepticism’s annihilation of the world’.”³²

Just as for Adelman a *nachträglich* discerned difficult relationship to the mother recurs in tragedy, for Cavell it is a symptom of skepticism. Yet, a clear distinction between adult projection and infant experience is not easily drawn. By “associating [the skeptics’] crisis of faith specifically with the mother’s body,” Adelman is not only calling on early modern conceptions of motherhood and infancy, but is also referencing contemporary psychoanalytic theories of early child development.³³ In this sense, the connection between skepticism and the mother’s body also rests upon “the insights of Winnicott,” for whom the individual’s ability to “hope that there is a live relationship between inner reality and external reality, between innate primary creativity and the world at large”;³⁴ in other words, the individual’s ability to resist the skeptical impulse is here envisioned as depending on whether their mother is able to respond to them appropriately during the months of infancy.³⁵

Adelman is neither merely drawing on Cavellian conceptions of skepticism, nor simply offering a psychoanalytic interpretation of Shakespearean tragedy. By interweaving early modern notions of and psychoanalytical insights into the mother-infant relationship her work seems to imply that the tragic hero’s fantasies of maternal origin are rooted in a psychoanalytic actuality and are thus also relevant for Cavell’s thinking about skepticism. In doing so, she crucially highlights where Winnicott’s notion of the detrimental effects of a prolonged misattunement between mother and infant are compatible with what fuels the skeptic’s hamartia, that is, his compulsion to “interpret a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack.”³⁶ When Adelman

29. Adelman, *Suffocating*, 29.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 359.

33. *Ibid.*

34. D. W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 90.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Cavell, *Disowning*, 11.

claims that “Cavell’s formulations” about skepticism are “congruent” with Winnicott’s understanding of the mother-infant relationship, she is thus also arguing for the psychoanalytical element of Cavell’s interpretation of skepticism.³⁷ In seeming support of Adelman’s reading, Cavell suggests elsewhere: “In my own limited experience with children, certainly they are having problems that eventually, we know, as they flower, will become philosophical issues.”³⁸

We find the clearest formulation of the link between Cavell’s interpretation of skepticism and the mother-infant relationship in the “Introduction” to *Disowning Knowledge*: “what philosophy registers as uncertainty in our knowledge of the existence of the world is a function of, say intellectualization of, the child’s sense of loss in separating from the mother’s body.”³⁹ Here the “denial by the mother,” to be read in Winnicott’s sense as the mother’s intended or unintended inability to respond to the child appropriately, is brought “in juxtaposition with the denial of the world,” in other words the skeptic’s rejection of the world.⁴⁰ The detour through Adelman, more precisely through her juxtaposition of Cavell and Winnicott, clarifies what is at stake with “the child’s sense of loss in separating from the mother’s body” described in *Disowning Knowledge*.⁴¹ At issue is not, as Adelman briefly suggests in her reading of Cavell, the son’s oedipal desire for his mother. Cavell’s reading of the dumb-show as the staging of a “double acceptance” — “acceptance of one’s mother as an independent sexual being whose life of desire survives the birth of a son and the death of a husband, a life that may present itself to her son as having been abandoned by her” and the “acceptance of one’s father as a dependent sexual being [...] which may present itself to his son as having to abandon him” — does not hinge on the child’s desire for the mother’s body, but rather on his loss of union with her body.⁴² At stake is his desire to affirm individuality and subjectivity as distinct from his mother.⁴³

37. Adelman, *Suffocating*, 359. Although it is impossible to ascertain whether Cavell also saw the connection to Winnicott that Adelman brings out, he briefly touches on Winnicott’s concept of a “holding environment” in connection with the importance of acknowledging children’s seemingly trivial anxieties. See Naoko Saito and Paul Standish, eds., *Stanley Cavell and The Education of Grownups* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 147.

38. Saito and Standish, *Education*, 147.

39. Cavell, *Disowning*, 13.

40. *Ibid.*, 13.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 189.

43. Although in Cavell’s work skepticism is conceived of as a largely male affair, it is important to bear in mind that this association is not essential. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare’s male tragic heroes,

The crux of the dumb-show as primal scene is Hamlet's, is the skeptic's, anxiety about who he is. At its heart is thus, in Cavell's words, "the origin of the individual" and the question of "how he or anyone lets himself be born as the one he is."⁴⁴ The skeptic's anxieties, albeit projected onto the maternal body, are, as is so pithily put elsewhere, about himself: "I am the philosophical problem. I am."⁴⁵ Towards the end of the Hamlet essay, the ear-detail in the dumb-show is in fact no longer primarily understood to symbolize the sexual act. Instead, Cavell focuses on the abstract content of the primal scene. He notes that for Freud the primal scene, or "phylogenetic inheritance," is transmitted from parent to child by way of the ear: "the family sounds or sayings, the spoken or secret discourses, going on prior to the subject's arrival, within which he must take his way."⁴⁶ Cavell continues: "I hope you will be struck by the fit of this account with the fact that Hamlet's fantasy of the dumb-show takes up something he heard from his ancestor's ghost and that features the mortal vulnerability of the ear."⁴⁷ The mortal vulnerability of the ear here speaks to a precarious sense of self, to the self's inability to conceive of itself as separate, distinct and mortal.

Just as Cavell hoped we would hear the resonances between Freud's understanding of the auricular mechanism of phylogenetic inheritance and the function of the ear in the dumb-show, I hope that you "will be struck by the fit" of Cavell's account of the "mortal vulnerability of the ear" in *Hamlet*, his transposition of skepticism to the ear in, amongst other places, *The Claim of Reason* and the stories of his scarred tympanum. Before the invention of sulpha drugs, the treatment of said damaged ear consisted of the use of "heavy tweezers with elongated jaws to clamp upon increasing sizes of hard rubber tubes, or tight rolls of cotton, and force them into

becoming, so to speak, effigies of skepticism in *Disowning Knowledge*, have a bearing on Cavell's figurative choice. The skeptical condition is however not gender-specific, but affects us in as much as we are human. The maternal origin is, in this sense, merely emblematic of our birth into the human condition; women are as much prone to skepticism as men are. In *Little Did I Know* and *A Pitch of Philosophy* Cavell also dwells on his complex relationship with his father. These narratives, just like the stories about his mother, do not describe gender-specific complexities, say of father-son, or mother-son dynamics, but our common human experience of separateness. For a compelling reading of Cavell's assertion in *Little Did I Know* that "We see our fathers naked, we men" see Yi-Ping Ong, "Of Voice and Vulnerability: Experience as Inexperience in Cavell's *Little Did I Know*," *MLN* 126:5 (2011): 969.

44. Cavell, *Disowning*, 187.

45. Cavell, *Claim*, 83.

46. Cavell, *Disowning*, 189.

47. *Ibid.*

[the] ear canal.”⁴⁸ Pain, the incommunicability of our own pain and the inaccessibility of the pain of others, is a central motif in philosophy’s wrestling with skepticism. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, looking back on his life, Cavell’s links the first stirrings of the his skeptical impulse to the excruciating treatments of his ear:

[T]he primitiveness and painfulness of the early medical treatments of my ear [...] determined a general attempt to learn a distance from my body and so attempts to undo that learning, and which will mould the common male doubt, at certain stages, that one specifically will bear up under torture.⁴⁹

The ear’s “mortal vulnerability” registers the skeptical impulse — to distance oneself from one’s body and hence one’s humanity — literally as well as figuratively. The scarred tympanum literally initiates the child to the human skeptical condition because it marks the child’s first conscious experience of pain and thus the first recognition that it is separate from its mother.⁵⁰ Just as in Hamlet’s fabulated account of the ear-poisoning, it stands for the issue of inheritance, that is, for how we assert our subjectivity as our own and as distinct from our parents’. In *Little Did I Know* and *A Pitch of Philosophy*, the struggle for individuation is registered not merely in the account of Cavell’s scarred tympanum but also in the related narrative strand of perfect pitch: his recognition that unlike his mother he did not possess this magical faculty and his subsequent decision to trade musical for philosophical vocation.

Perfect Pitch

Cavell suggests that “the story of [his] ear as an organ of my body” inflects “certain questions of ear that run through [his] life,” questions also including “the realities

48. Cavell, *Little*, 33.

49. Cavell, *Pitch*, 30.

50. As philosopher and psychoanalyst Marcia Cavell notes, the realisation that we can hide our pain or that “even when it is not hidden others may be indifferent to it, and that even when they care, they cannot remove pain from the child as they can a scratchy sweater” is part of the child’s cognitive and emotional development: his beginning to understand himself as separate from his mother, in short as a subject. See Marcia Cavell, *The Psychoanalytic Mind: From Freud to Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 110.

and fantasies of perfect pitch.”⁵¹ Despite conceding, a mere breath later, that he has not yet “fathomed” the interrelations between his au(ral)tobiographical narratives, this is the closest Cavell comes to stating the importance of the story of his scarred tympanum for his philosophy. The trauma of his left ear is, in fact, Cavell writes in *Little Did I Know*, “inextricable from the trauma of leaving music” and thus also impossible to separate from his turn to philosophy and, most importantly, to his pitch of philosophy.⁵² Indeed, in the “pages that record fragments of [his] life,” the questions of ear that run through his work (and life) grow ever more urgent to become “questions of the detections of voice,” the detection of a certain kind of philosophical voice and the right — not to mention the necessity — to take that voice.⁵³ Put differently, the story of the scarred tympanum tells of how he becomes “his kind of writer.”

In order to begin to fathom how the story of his scarred tympanum colors the story of his perfect philosophical pitch we must turn once again to the account of his car accident. The car accident that left Cavell with a damaged left ear happened close to the house on Atlanta Avenue he shared with his parents, his maternal grandmother and his mother’s brothers. Although the accident happened when they were still living in the house on Atlanta Avenue, Cavell notes that he only became aware of the gravity of the damage to his left ear “after we moved to the north side.”⁵⁴ The move away from the first family home he had ever known would prove no less dramatic than the accident and its consequences. In the autobiography the two traumatic events are in fact merged. Cavell speaks of this “move on turning seven years old” as a move away “from a house of continuous interest and talk and music to a set of moves and apartments in which [he] was largely abandoned to silence and to occasional strangers.”⁵⁵

The move thus meant a removal from his mother’s musical and gregarious family to a life where he was either left alone or left alone with his parents’ difficult relationship. The account of his life spanning from this move to his leaving for college is pervaded by a deep sense of gratitude towards his parents, as well as by an acute experience of separateness. This feeling is mainly understood as a function of his par-

51. Cavell, *Pitch*, 30.

52. Cavell, *Little*, 4.

53. Cavell, *Pitch*, 30.

54. Cavell, *Little*, 33.

55. *Ibid.*, 97.

ent's lack of attunement, what is also called "their despair of harmony."⁵⁶ This musically tainted image is not coincidental; their differences are in point of fact viewed as a profound and unbridgeable difference of ear: what she was able to hear in music — "the glad unsayability of her knowledge of the utter expressiveness of music" — thus stands in marked contrast to what he could not but wishes he could hear, "his wild love of the eloquence he would never have."⁵⁷ It seems to me that the deferred realisation of the gravity of the damage to his left tympanum until after the move suggest that his auricular scar also speaks of his parents' difference of ear and the crisis of vocation it precipitated.⁵⁸

Cavell's mother, Fannie Segal, was an "extraordinary" musician and vignettes proclaiming her talent and the pleasure she took in music are present throughout the autobiographical work.⁵⁹ Her talent was, Cavell writes, "natural" and "attested in the assured fire with which she played, for example, the *Liszt Sixth* and *Thirteenth Hungarian Rhapsodies*, the closing pages of Chopin First and Fourth Ballades, or the Shultz-Elver arrangement of the 'Blue Danube'."⁶⁰ What secured Fannie Segal's name as the best and most sought-after piano player in Atlanta more than anything else was "her uncanny ability to sightread."⁶¹ Akin to this talent, was her "capacity to put aside any interference, as of her own will, and to let the body be moved, unmechanically, by the mind of those racing notes."⁶² In *A Pitch of Philosophy* this "lapse of distance — say that she was the music then and there; there was nothing beyond her to read into" is captured "by an image of a certain mood that caused her to play the piano for herself" in a "room darkened below the level at

56. Cavell, *Pitch*, 21.

57. *Ibid.*, 21.

58. Joan Richardson, whose reading of the philosophical significance of Cavell's autobiographical accounts of perfect pitch runs in many ways parallel to mine, also points to the link between Cavell's struggle for individuation and his choice to seek a vocation that was not his mother's. Although we both argue for the importance of psychoanalysis for Cavell's philosophy, my account differs from Richardson's in that a reading of Cavell with Adelman (and vice versa) allows me to suggest that in his meditation on skepticism psychoanalytical and philosophical concerns are quite inseparable. See Richardson, "Thinking in Cavell: The Transcendentalist Strain," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, ed. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 207.

59. Cavell, *Pitch*, 17

60. *Ibid.*, 18.

61. *Ibid.*, 18.

62. *Ibid.*, 30.

which reading was possible.”⁶³ Like for his father, for Cavell, his mother’s talent was a source of wonder and inspiration on the one hand and envy and desperation on the other.⁶⁴ Indeed, until he picked up the clarinet on which he could approximate his mother’s sight-reading ability “music making [...] was essentially a separate land from which [his] mother would intermittently bring back news.”⁶⁵ And even when music became something he could share with her, she could not share it with him, just as she could not share it with her husband: “Most of the time I felt I knew in which world my mother thought I took my bearings. But when she took refuge in hers, there seemed no further room.”⁶⁶

In *Little Did I Know*, Cavell draws a striking parallel between his sense of isolation as a child and Hamlet’s experience: “(So much of my adolescence was spent — perhaps much of adolescence means — hiding [because harboring?] knowledge of my elders. Like Hamlet).”⁶⁷ While the affectionate nature of Cavell’s references to his mother could not be more removed from Hamlet’s treatment of his, the autobiographical comparison to Hamlet points to a similarity between their roles in the narratives of their sons’ lives. In Adelman’s and Cavell’s readings of Hamlet, Gertrude is the maternal origin Hamlet can and cannot, wants and does not want to detach himself from. Although a loving and supporting, rather than a destructive, presence in the autobiographical work, Fannie Segal is, like Gertrude for Hamlet, the point of reference on which Cavell’s struggle for individuation hinges. In the autobiographical work, we thus re-encounter the question of the subject’s individuation — for Cavell the crux of the strange detail of King Hamlet’s poisoning through the ear — in the auricular trope of perfect pitch.

Perfect, or absolute, pitch is the ability to recognize the pitch of a note or produce any given note. The fact that Cavell’s mother and one of her brothers possessed this ability, whilst he did not, was “a source of anguished perplexity,” because it also meant that their vocation — a life of music, was not to be his.⁶⁸ Indeed, his lack of

63. *Ibid.*, 18-19. Whether the portraits of Fannie Segal playing the piano are also in the background when Cavell likens female vocal or musical expressiveness to acknowledgment is perhaps unascertainable. The prospect is, however, intriguing and Richardson’s line of inquiry is very promising. See Richardson, “Thinking,” 206 and “Opera and the Lease of Voice” in Cavell, *Pitch*.

64. Cavell, *Pitch*, 21.

65. Cavell, *Little*, 221.

66. Cavell, *Pitch*, 19.

67. Cavell, *Little*, 10.

68. Cavell, *Pitch*, 21.

perfect pitch became “one of the reasons [he] would eventually give myself for withdrawing from music,” and moving towards a life of philosophy.⁶⁹ Although he could not share his mother’s perfect pitch, Cavell felt that “there must be something [he] was meant to do that required an equivalent of the enigmatic faculty of perfect pitch.”⁷⁰ Just as for Hamlet, the issue for Cavell was “not to prove that this further life was better than another, but to prove that it was mine, that I was born to it, that I was born.”⁷¹ Vocation is, in this sense, not only a question of what to do but also of who to be; it describes the process of becoming — and accepting — who one already is. The account of a perfect pitch sought and found thus tells of the birth of his philosophical vocation also in terms of the acceptance of his birth and of what birth entails for all of us.

An Abstraction of Autobiography

That Cavell’s autobiographical account of the childhood accident which left him with a scarred tympanum is key to his philosophical project becomes perhaps nowhere clearer than in his “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*.” Here Cavell brings into focus the “remarkable fact of the presence of the figure of the child in Wittgenstein’s thoughts, announced with its opening quotation from Augustine.”⁷² Not unlike autobiography or auricular narratives, the figure of a child seems, on first impression, to sit uncomfortably within a philosophical text. Yet, that “the subject of beginnings,” the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but also the beginning of philosophy, should immediately be on Cavell’s mind as he turns “to work on certain autobiographical materials,” materials furthermore containing the figure of himself as a child, is not fortuitous.⁷³ It is in fact pivotal for Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s philosophical projects that the *Philosophical Investigations* should begin by taking us back to the beginning of a philosopher’s life, to his childhood. Cavell, for one, is “convinced that Wittgenstein, in incorporating Augustine’s

69. Cavell, *Pitch*, 21.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Cavell, *Little*, 284.

72. Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 167.

73. *Ibid.*, 126-27.

words as his initiating topics, incorporated as well (or finds that he has incorporated, in the work making up *Philosophical Investigations*) the autobiographical as essential to the work of philosophy, or say recognizes the fate of philosophy to be linked with the necessity of confession.”⁷⁴ The significance of the Investigations’ incipit for Cavell’s philosophical project lies in its elevation of a confessional or autobiographical to a philosophical, even the philosophical, mode. Augustine the child’s presence, however, marks not only the autobiographical element of philosophy; its presence reminds us of why Wittgenstein and Cavell turned, of the very reason why anyone should turn, to philosophy. What strikes Cavell about the child Augustine as seen through the saint’s eyes, through Wittgenstein’s and finally through his own, is the “permanence in [its] isolation, the absoluteness in its initial incapacity to make itself known, in its absolute reliance on its elders’ recognition of its attempts at expression, that is, on their recognition of the grip of its needs.”⁷⁵ The child’s separateness, the fact that it is at the mercy of its elder’s willingness to attune to its needs, epitomizes both philosophy’s high stakes and the lure of skepticism.⁷⁶

We cannot speak of Cavell’s damaged left ear and how its scarred tympanum listens to autobiography as philosophy without also speaking of psychoanalysis and philosophy. Cavell’s path from music to philosophy would, indeed, cross psychoanalysis. At Julliard, the “disintegration of [his] ambition to compose music” was in fact accompanied by a habit of “reading Freud ten or twelve hours a day.”⁷⁷ Much later in life Cavell would enter “psychoanalytic therapy” twice, “both times with a lingering, more or less implicit, idea that [he] might seek a path into practicing clinical work [himself].”⁷⁸ The reasons Cavell gives for his weariness in equating the two disciplines explain why his pitch was to be of philosophy and not psychoanalysis. He is keen to discourage us from concluding that “[his] attraction to philosophy was as to an intellectual region from which [he] might avert or provide reparation for scenes of inner devastation.”⁷⁹ All the same, he notes elsewhere that a denial that philosophy is

74. Cavell, *Philosophical*, 177.

75. *Ibid.*, 170.

76. How differently children learn language to what Augustine suggests is also important for Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein and thus for his philosophy as a whole.

77. Cavell, *Little*, 185.

78. *Ibid.*, 185.

79. *Ibid.*, 21.

psychoanalysis implies that they are “sufficiently similar to warrant distinguishing.”⁸⁰ As a matter of fact, what he wants of philosophy is what he found in Freud, “a security of being known, accepted back into the human race,” perhaps even something akin to “leading the soul to the light.”⁸¹

A little earlier, I cautioned that what would concern me here is not Cavell’s life *an sich*. What interests me, instead, is how, like the ordinary language philosopher that he is, in claiming to talk about his own life philosophically, Cavell also makes a claim for the philosophical significance of our lives; put differently, the autobiographies are philosophically significant because they tell of his life and through that of life. Cavell’s autobiography is able to express something about our shared human condition — separateness, and the struggle for acknowledgment and individuation — for the same reason that “so much of what [Wittgenstein] shows to be true of his consciousness is true of ours (of mine).”⁸² Like all of our words, the words with which we describe our lives, discover our forms of life and for Cavell an intrinsic part of our forms life is our common separateness. Far from being navel-gazing, the autobiographical narrative of his scarred tympanum seeks to speak to the existential human predicament of separateness. Cavell chooses philosophy over psychoanalysis, because what concerns him is not merely his own soul or his trauma, but the trauma of being human and of being thus separate. In his autobiography he therefore tries to grapple not only with his wounds, but with wounds common to all. He also chooses philosophy over psychoanalysis because he believes, together with Wittgenstein, that only philosophy can provide an efficacious therapy for our condition.

The story of the scarred tympanum and related auricular narrative or thematic strands register not autobiography but “an abstraction of autobiography.”⁸³ They are, in short, what Cavell elsewhere calls a “clai[m] to representativeness, expressed autobiographically.”⁸⁴ In writing his autobiographies and in following his pitch of philosophy he seeks, like Wittgenstein and Austin and before them Emerson and Thoreau, to write “the autobiography of a species; if not of humanity as a whole, then rep-

80. Cavell, *Pitch*, 4.

81. Cavell, *Little*, 234.

82. Cavell, *Claim*, 20.

83. Cavell, *Little*, 6.

84. Cavell, *Pitch*, 8.

representative of anyone who finds himself or herself in it.”⁸⁵ As the resonances between the stories of his scarred tympanum and the realities and fantasies of perfect pitch suggest, the “abstraction of autobiography” also describes the existential issues that his philosophy sets out to address.⁸⁶ Cavell’s autobiographies more than any other part of his work, therefore, reveal the therapeutic ambition of Cavell’s philosophical project. By speaking about himself, he also speaks about us; and in seeking to heal his scarred tympanum — to acknowledge his separateness — he invites us to begin attending to ours.

85. Cavell, *Little*, 6.

86. *Ibid.*