



***Conversations 1***

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# Genesis

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies*. For our first issue, we solicited papers discussing Stanley's autobiographical writings. To mirror types of conversations, we asked for both short and long (though we received mostly the latter). In upcoming issues, we will be setting up *threads of conversation* — as certain pieces appearing in this issue seem fit to begin *immediate* conversation with one another. The promise of peering in on such conversations, we hope, will keep readers engaged with our journal more regularly. Whether discussing art criticism or philosophical thinking—Stanley sees *each as the other*, both as human activities, that is, personal activities, which are inherently dialogical. This publication springs from the same view. He writes:

This [...] means, for me, defending the process of criticism, so far as criticism is thought of, as I think of it, as a natural extension of conversation. (And I think of conversation as something within which that remark about conversation is naturally in place. This one too.)<sup>1</sup>

Stanley's latest, *Little Did I Know*, has already produced fine ruminations on the philosophical value of autobiographical writing.<sup>2</sup> The most impressive aspect of the book, however, is Stanley's power of recall. When Stanley says that "so much of what has formed me has been not events but precisely the uneventful, the nothing, the unnoted,"<sup>3</sup> all recalled in extraordinary detail, he is letting us take up or take

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1. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 7.

2. David Kaufmann, "Taking Stock," *Tablet*, October 15 2010, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/47442/taking-stock>. Benjamin Lade, "Little Did I Know," <http://www.ralphmag.org/GN/cavell.html>.

3. Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 61.

into account the possible significance of everything and anything his recall can afford him. What manner of recall is (i.e., where is the methodology, let alone the philosophy in) that? If everything is significant then nothing is. How shall we find our bearings?

To link entries with the time of writing is so to speak a formal consequence, beyond let us say, the allegorical occasion of opening my text with the procedure of catheterization.<sup>4</sup>

Stanley is interested in letting his heart speak under the formal constraints of recording the time of writing. Why certain intuitions should strike on certain days or in a certain order, then, is a question Stanley is inviting us, or someone, to consider. The answer, unknown to him, guarantees his voice a certain authority and sincerity. Perhaps he is encouraging a type of autobiographical *convention*, or some convention of recall, because surely whatever we have before us comes not from an obligation to respect the flow of chronological time but indeed the catheterization of a heart.

The work of a philosopher must be, for Stanley, a labor for the valorization and acknowledgement of human expression, particularly in its verbal form. For him, words have to be intimately charged with life and therefore philosophical thought has to return and be returned to the ordinary. In this sense, all of his philosophical works have direct or indirect autobiographical connections. It is not that when he is thinking philosophically he cannot think beyond his own history. Rather, the meandering affair of thinking and rethinking from his own history, which is also the history of ideas, makes his thought thick and inviting as if it were the starting of a potentially endless dialogue with himself and with us.

We have already seen considerable intellection gather around the monument of Stanley's father. Timothy Gould again raises Stanley's ominous revelation of "paternal hatred." Discovering a father's hatred for a son burns in the imagination, not only Stanley's, but anyone's, Gould's included. Nonetheless, drawing on Stanley's reading of *Hamlet* and, derivatively, Janet Adelman's discussions of maternal

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4. Cavell, *Little*, 62.

fantasies, Chiara Alfano reminds us that we have as much, if not more, evidence to anchor our discussions of Stanley's formative years squarely around his mother, even mother-as-rival, rather than obsessing, like so many Freudians, over the father-as-rival motif. Daniel Wack weighs in on how Stanley's movie-watching habits suffered a catastrophic transformation and how we are now living uncertain, even unbeknownst, as to whether movies can or should provide us with *any* moral instruction. Sebastião Belfort Cerqueira comments not on Stanley's movie-watching habits, but on his chosen methodology in how he talks about films (and art) in general. Jônadas Techio provides us with a useful overview of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, highlighting Stanley's emphasis on the possibility of "soul-blindness," and Tomaz Grušovnik extends a discussion of such blindness to our interaction not with other human minds, but with animal minds.

Stanley says in life, he is better at beginnings than endings. We hope *Conversations*, beginning here, can be the same.

Best wishes to all,  
Sérgio and Amir

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

TIMOTHY GOULD

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?<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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*<sup>3</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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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".<sup>6</sup> 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

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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"<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

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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,<sup>11</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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-

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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.<sup>14</sup>

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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."<sup>15</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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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.<sup>18</sup>

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

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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.<sup>19</sup>

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"<sup>20</sup>). 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

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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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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,”<sup>23</sup> 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!”<sup>24</sup> This passage is discussed by Cavell in *The Claim of Reason*,<sup>25</sup> 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.

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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.

# A Scarred Tympanum

CHIARA ALFANO

[...] 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> This accident left Cavell with “a scarred tympanum.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> In *The Claim of*

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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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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?).<sup>10</sup>

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-

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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.<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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-

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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."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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-

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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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> Like the skeptic, Hamlet withdraws from the world, retreating “into what he imagines as an inviolable core of selfhood that cannot be played

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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.”<sup>29</sup> Hamlet, like a true skeptic, constructs “an absolute barrier between inner and outer.”<sup>30</sup> Like the skeptic philosopher who eschews the ordinary in favor of metaphysics, Hamlet believes that only “magical thinking,” can overcome this barrier.<sup>31</sup> 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’.”<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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”;<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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.”<sup>36</sup> When Adelman

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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.<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup>

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.”<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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*.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> At stake is his desire to affirm individuality and subjectivity as distinct from his mother.<sup>43</sup>

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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."<sup>44</sup> 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."<sup>45</sup> 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."<sup>46</sup> 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."<sup>47</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.”<sup>54</sup> 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.”<sup>55</sup>

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-

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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."<sup>56</sup> 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."<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> 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'."<sup>60</sup> 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."<sup>61</sup> 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."<sup>62</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.”<sup>65</sup> 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.”<sup>66</sup>

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).”<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, his lack of

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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.<sup>69</sup> 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.”<sup>70</sup> 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.”<sup>71</sup> 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.”<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>74</sup> 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.”<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup>

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.”<sup>77</sup> 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].”<sup>78</sup> 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.”<sup>79</sup> All the same, he notes elsewhere that a denial that philosophy is

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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.”<sup>80</sup> 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.”<sup>81</sup>

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).”<sup>82</sup> 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.”<sup>83</sup> They are, in short, what Cavell elsewhere calls a “clai[m] to representativeness, expressed autobiographically.”<sup>84</sup> 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-

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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.”<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> 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.

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85. Cavell, *Little*, 6.

86. *Ibid.*

# Medium and the “End of the Myths”: Transformation of the Imagination in *The World Viewed*

DANIEL WACK

I have mentioned my increasing difficulty over the past several years to get myself to go to new movies. This has to do partly with an anxiousness in my response to new films I have seen (I don't at all mean I think they are bad), but equally with my anxiousness in what I feel to be new audiences for movies (not necessarily new people, but people with new reasons for being there), as though I cannot locate or remain together with my companions among them.

CAVELL, *The World Viewed*

Stanley Cavell opens *The World Viewed* with an autobiographical note about a recent transformation in his own movie-watching habits. Over the course of the 1960s, he has noticed a loss of interest in attending and attending to newly released movies. It is not too strong to say that *The World Viewed* functions as an account of Cavell's personal transformation as a movie-goer, from a passionate and engaged regular attendee into someone who has lost a deep sense of urgency for contemporary Hollywood film. This moment of autobiography functions, as such autobiographical moments do generally in Cavell's work, as a philosophical datum, a fact of contemporary experience that calls for reflection and explanation. Cavell's loss of interest in contemporary movie-watching calls our attention to a general transformation in the relations between Hollywood movies and their audiences that occurred over the course of

the 1960s but continues to have implications more than forty years later for contemporary movies and their audiences.<sup>1</sup>

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell gives an account of this transformation as a transformation in the movies as a medium.<sup>2</sup> More precisely, Cavell marks for us a transformation in the relation movie audiences have to their shared imaginative capacities. Cavell's account of the transformation of the medium does not refer to any particular material or technological changes, but rather identifies it with a movement from an audience that understands itself to share in a set of fantasies to an audience that understands itself to be constituted by individual members, each responsible for her own fantasies.

I argue that Cavell's appeal to his autobiographical experience of disillusion with contemporary movies marks out this transformation in the movies as an artistic medium or, equivalently, in the transformation of the relation movie audiences have to their capacity for imagination. Prior to this transformation, the movies were organized around a problematic that explored a post-Baudelairean promise that the modern world could be made more livable through principled or collective action. After this transformation, popular movies share in a problematic that takes the possibility of action itself to be fantastic. The result of this transformation is that audiences view themselves as self-selected, having grouped themselves based on individual and atomized fantasies, and thus the movies no longer provide a haven from a skeptical worry, intensifying since the Reformation, that we can take ourselves to share a world together.

First, I clarify the role of autobiography in Cavell's philosophical work generally, in which the sensitive appeal to individual experience can serve as a general

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1. The transformation in the nature of the movies Cavell diagnoses in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) marks a change both in the relation audiences have to their imagination and the artistic problematic governing the movies. The importance of this transition in the history of Hollywood has been widely noted but the aspects of it Cavell emphasizes are underappreciated. Standard histories of Hollywood movies often refer to the earlier period as Classic Hollywood and the later period as New Hollywood and I will sometimes adopt those terms to mark the different sides of the transformation Cavell describes. For a standard treatment of this transition see Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

2. The most extensive and insightful treatment of Cavell's work on the relation between philosophy and film in *The World Viewed* is William Rothman and Marian Keane's *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000). Stephen Mulhall has recently taken up Cavell's interest in allowing popular film to challenge philosophical understanding in his *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008), which consist largely in readings of the *Alien* series.

critical claim. Second, I argue that Cavell understands artistic medium in terms of the form of organization given to the audience's imaginative capacities. For Cavell, an artistic medium is a method for achieving particular aesthetic effects and thus a means of organizing an audience's experience in a particular way. Third, I demonstrate that Cavell's autobiographical report of a change in his moviegoing habits articulates a transformation in the medium of the movies because what Cavell describes is a transformation in the relation movie audiences had to their imaginations. Prior to this transformation, audiences shared in a collective fantasy that modern life could be made habitable through collective action and individual style.

After this transformation, audiences increasingly thought of themselves as expressing their individual tastes in watching movies, rather than participating in fantasies shared among neighbors and strangers and across generations. As their self-conception of the relation they had to their imaginations shifted, audiences explored a new imaginative problematic, one that views the possibility for successful action in contemporary life as fantastical. Finally, I show how this transformation in the artistic medium of the movies that Cavell articulates in *The World Viewed* remains central to how contemporary movies audiences are organized, and even more broadly, how contemporary audiences are entertained and informed.

## I.

In the preface to *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes the book as a "metaphysical memoir"; his account of film is simultaneously autobiographical, drawing on his particular experiences at the movies, and a general characterization of the nature of movie-viewing in terms of relations with a world.<sup>3</sup> However, the appeal to the autobiographical in Cavell's work on film is not a rhetorical flourish or personal indulgence. Instead, because Cavell understands an artistic medium to be something that has to be discovered by artists in creating for their audiences, hence something that essentially has a history, Cavell's own experience at the movies has an ineliminable role in the philosophical characterization of the nature of movie watching. Cavell's

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3. Cavell, *World*, xix.

appeal to the autobiographical in his writings on film shares the structure of the appeal he makes to what he calls philosophical data in his philosophical work more generally.<sup>4</sup> This form of argument starts by acknowledging a particular experience and then asks, given the fact of this experience, what must be the case in order that there could be such an experience? The transformation in the experience of movie-going over the course of the 1960s is not a merely personal change in Cavell's own habits; rather, he testifies to a quite general transformation in the nature of the experience.

Cavell's commitment to a philosophical methodology that draws on the autobiographical in order to ground metaphysical claims stems from his understanding of the methodological commitments shared in the ordinary language philosophy of Austin and Wittgenstein. Cavell is especially struck by the insight, operative for both Austin and Wittgenstein, that attentiveness to what a thing is called allows one to better understand what the thing is. Importantly, knowledge of what we call a thing can only be articulated by thinking about what I, as a competent speaker of the language, call the thing.<sup>5</sup> Cavell recognizes that the autobiographical does not simply give access to what is said in language; in principle, insight into what is shared in experience more generally can be gained through sensitive appeal to the autobiographical.<sup>6</sup> That a claim grounded in the autobiographical has a universal scope stands in need of critical confirmation, to be tested by the reader in measuring her own experience against the claim.

Cavell's autobiographical testimony about the change in his moviegoing habits has the same status as Cavell's critical descriptions of particular movies. Those criti-

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4. Cavell raises the question of what counts as data for philosophizing in "Knowing and Acknowledging" (238-41), "The Avoidance of Love" (270-71), and "Music Discomposed" (181). All appear in his *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). In each of these essays, what counts as philosophical data itself appears as a philosophical problem. In his later work, Cavell abandons talk about philosophical data while continuing to thematize the problem of philosophy's starting place. The opening pages of *The Claim of Reason* are the most prominent later example of this line of thinking — see *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 3. In all cases, Cavell's suggestion is that philosophy begins as a response, a response to a particular fact, or experience, or prior bit of philosophizing that calls for explanation and thinking.

5. See, for example, Cavell's discussion of the role of the autobiographical in ordinary language philosophy in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (62-70) and the title essay (11-16) in *Must?*

6. Cavell demonstrates his commitment to expanding this methodological approach to experience more generally early in *The Claim of Reason* by working out its implications in a political register, centered around the problems involved in politically representative speech. See Cavell, *Claim*, 22-25.

cal descriptions are, on the one hand, autobiographical, in that they are reports of Cavell's own experience. On the other hand, the fact that Cavell had this experience of a particular movie is less important than that this particular movie yields this experience, a fact that can be tested by any interested reader.<sup>7</sup> What matters here is the nature of the experience. In one sense, the experience is personal, that is, it must be an individual's. On the other hand, the individual has the (intimate, personal) experience she does because of the nature of the experience. In other words, Cavell's appeal to the autobiographical is based on the metaphysics of experience; just as any claim in language must be articulated, and so articulated by someone, so too any given experience is the exercise of particular capacities, and those capacities must be exercised by someone. Cavell's ability (or the ability of anyone competent to exercise the capacity, for this is the heart of his appeal to the autobiographical) to describe such an exercise correctly can only be tested by readers against their own exercise of those capacities.

Our ability to test Cavell's claims in *The World Viewed* by watching the movies he cites, and so sharing his experience of them, is fundamental to the text's philosophical work. In this way, his generalized appeal to this autobiographical moment of transformation in his movie-going habits brings to mind one of Cavell's philosophical touchstones in Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Early in that essay, Emerson remarks, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men — that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense."<sup>8</sup> It is the nature of human experience that it is necessarily personal and that it is, beyond our willingness to acknowledge it, shared. Of course, that a given experience is, in fact, shared can only be confirmed, in each case, by means of a sensitive articulation on the one hand and, on the other, a willingness to test that articulation against further experience.

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7. A commitment to the shared experience of movies not only pervades Cavell's writings on film but was the touchstone of his pedagogical approach to movies over the course of his teaching career. Through the work of collective memory, the class was able to articulate together their shared experience of the movie. He registers this commitment at various moments in *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), his published version of the course on Moral Reasoning offered for many years to Harvard undergraduates. All of the even-numbered chapters of that text (each addressing a particular movie) register this commitment in offering a short description of the movie's sequences. See especially, the chapter on *Stella Dallas*, in which the work of group memory in the classroom is made explicit (272-73).

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 132.

## II.

Cavell's use of the concept of artistic medium in *The World Viewed* can be difficult to articulate, in part because the concept operates in at least three different registers. It is worth briefly distinguishing these three registers before turning to the particular implications of Cavell's account:

1) There is a common use of artistic medium to refer to the technological or material substrate out which works of art are made. This is not the primary way in which Cavell talks about medium in *The World Viewed*. Cavell never invokes this conception of medium in isolation in order to determine the appropriate artistic effects based on an *a priori* analysis of the substrate, as is often the case with other medium theorists.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the appeal to the material basis of the medium operates in conjunction with, and analytically secondary to, at least one of the other registers; if an artistic aim is specified, the material basis of the work of art can be analyzed as a method for achieving that aim.

2) Medium is used to refer, not to film in general, but to the movies. This is the primary use Cavell has for 'medium' in *The World Viewed*. On this use, movies, documentaries, animation, and television are distinguished as different mediums, not because they necessarily have distinct material or technological bases but because they have distinct aesthetic aims that organize their audiences quite differently. Further, a medium's underlying problematic, that is to say, its aesthetic aims and the possibilities determined by those aims, can shift. The history of the medium is then the history of these related problematics. The problematic in a given artistic medium can change without there being a corresponding shift in the underlying material or technology that are put to work in achieving different aesthetic aims. Such a transformation in the nature of movies occurred in the United States by the end of the 1960s; Cavell's experience of it gave rise to *The World Viewed*. This analysis of the transformation in the nature of the movies remains an underappreciated aspect of Cavell's work on film generally, and that text in particular.

3) In order to mark out the particular possibilities that constitute the medium

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9. Rudolf Arnheim, in his *Film as Art*, offers a paradigmatic instance of this type of analysis of film and its material basis in order to prescribe the appropriate aesthetic effects. See Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957).

of the movies, Cavell distinguishes between a medium and its media. Because the medium is a means or method for achieving a general aesthetic aim, the media of the medium are particular capacities for achieving related effects that can be isolated within the medium. When thinking about the media of the movies, Cavell has in mind elements such as genres, stars, and character types.<sup>10</sup> Such media are distinct, if related, artistic possibilities available for exploration and development within a given medium. When a medium transforms, its transformation is constituted by a large number of these media disappearing and different ones emerging. In marking the transformation in the medium of the movies as he does in *The World Viewed*, Cavell is describing the disappearance of a number of related media — types of stars and genres that were artistic possibilities to be explored by Classic Hollywood — the emergence of different media — new types of stars and stories to be explored.

In order to clarify both the shape of Cavell's understanding of how an artistic medium can transform independently of any merely material or technological basis and the role of the autobiographical in his account of the movies as a medium, it is helpful to contrast Cavell's work on film with an example from the history of painting.<sup>11</sup> Michael Fried has pointed out that in France at the end of the 1860s and beginning of the 1870s, painting underwent a radical change.<sup>12</sup> In the work of Monet and his contemporaries, the aim of painting was no longer, as it had been for at least a century previously, to engage the audience's moral imagination in beholding a mo-

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10. In Cavell's later work on film, he invokes what is arguably a fourth register for talk about artistic medium: namely, genre-as-medium. See his discussion of this concept in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), and "The Fact of Television". In my view however, this approach to genre is best thought of as a refinement of his earlier distinction between a medium and its media, in that it develops an account of how one of the movies' media — genre — functions as a set of artistic possibilities to explore.

11. This is not to say that technological changes do not play a role in the type of medium transformation Cavell and Fried both describe. The Impressionists drew on new developments in pigments and in new techniques for painting outside of the studio; the transformation in the relation between movie audiences and their imaginations coincided with the increasing competition between movies and television. But these technological developments receive aesthetic significance when they are put to use for achieving an artistic aim. They themselves do not determine on their own their artistic implications.

12. Fried's account of this transformation of French painting, while developed over the course of three works covering the history of French painting from Greuze and Chardin through Manet, first emerged in conversation with Cavell during the 1960s. It is certainly no accident that these conversations gave rise to both Fried's history of French painting and Cavell's *The World Viewed*. These approaches to the history of art share an understanding of artistic medium that is not tied to mere material conditions but instead is grounded in characterizing problematics that in turn dictate the distinct logics of the discovery and exploration of the medium.

ment in which the character of a person or action is revealed. Rather, for Monet and the Impressionists, the aim of painting is to engage the audience in a visual experience that captures a moment of play between light and shadow on particular surfaces.

One thing to note about this transformation is that it occurred without any determinative changes in the material or technological basis of painting — both Manet and Monet used oil paint on canvas, for example. Instead, the problematic that had driven developments in French painting up through Manet — the problematic involved in imaginatively apprehending a moment revelatory of character in action — had exhausted itself or, at any rate, worked itself out. At that point, a new problematic — one having to do with the nature of visual experience rather than one centered on the moral imagination — was discovered and began to drive developments in painting. It would be a mistake to think that this transition in French painting from Manet to Monet could be adequately described as the move from one genre of painting to another. Such a description would treat the change in question as a mere transition in types of painting. Instead what is at stake in this change is the nature of painting itself — what its aims should be, what counts as good or serious instances of it, and so on. Describing the change in question as a move from one dominant genre of painting to another presumes that what counts as painting is held constant. But the transformation precisely places into question the nature of the artistic medium: that is to say, what painting is and aims to do has itself changed. On this understanding of medium, the aesthetic effects aimed for in the work of art structure the medium; the medium is a particular means for achieving a given aesthetic aim.<sup>13</sup>

This transformation in the nature of painting not only serves as a model for understanding Cavell's account of the movie as an artistic medium but also offers a con-

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13. Talk of artistic medium is a way of indicating the relation between a capacity to achieve certain artistic effects and the material basis of the work of art. There are two ways of developing this relation, however. The first is to isolate the material basis of works of art and, through analysis of the material, identify the effects proper to such material. Rudolf Arnheim's approach to questions of medium, in his *Film as Art* for example, works on this model. The second is to identify a particular set of aesthetic effects and then to ask how different material bases structure such effects differently. This latter approach is developed by Gotthold Lessing in his *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward A. McCormick (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), in which he begins with a particular aesthetic effect — namely, the depiction of bodies in action — and then distinguishes painting and poetry as different methods, that is, different spatio-temporal forms of organization capable of achieving such an effect. Cavell's approach to questions of medium inherits Lessing's basic orientation to them; that is, he identifies a set of aesthetic effects and asks himself what the material basis for them is and how this material basis structures them, rather than first identifying a material basis and asking himself what its appropriate effects are.

trast that allows us to begin to locate the role of the autobiographical in *The World Viewed*. In articulating the transformation in French painting from a problematic grounded in the moral imagination to a problematic located in the nature of visual experience, there is no need to appeal to a personal experience because the logics of both problematics have already been fully developed. Fried's articulation of the transformation of French painting occurred a full century after it took place. Not only had the problematic governing the painting up through Manet's work been fully exhausted but the subsequent problematic, the one grounded in the nature of the visual experience, had itself developed, culminating in the high modernist explorations of the mid-twentieth century. By the time Fried's work on this transformation between Manet and the Impressionists began, a new problematic had emerged — one governing the logics of the pop, minimalist, and conceptual movements. Cavell's work on film, on the other hand, appeared during the transformation he articulates. That transformation was still underway and the artistic problematic characteristic of New Hollywood was still nascent. For this reason, Cavell's autobiographical testimony regarding his own alienation from the contemporary experience of movie-going was the only means of articulating this contemporary transformation; he gives voice to the loss of the problematic that has come to an end even though the new problematic has not yet fully emerged.

Cavell understands medium as the nexus of a set of artistic possibilities to be discovered and developed:

[T]he aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not givens. You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic properties of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some, than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint or by looking some over. You have to think about painting, and paintings: you have to think about motion pictures.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the aesthetic possibilities of a medium requires experiencing and critically engaging with the history of the medium, grappling with prior instances of the medium and recognizing what effects were previously aimed at. New works in the

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14. Cavell, *World*, 31.

medium develop in the context of such a critical understanding. In identifying the medium in terms of the artistic possibilities that can be discovered and developed, Cavell understands the medium to be a method for achieving particular artistic effects: “A medium is something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, he resists a view of medium in which the capacities for particular artistic effects are to be located in and hence determined by the physical material out of which works of art are made. Rather, the capacities in question can only be located, on Cavell’s account, in the relationship between artists and their audiences. A medium “provides, one might say, particular ways to get through to someone, to make sense.”<sup>16</sup> These artistic possibilities are capacities for aesthetic effects that are shared by audiences; a medium is a general method discovered and developed by artists for organizing audiences in specific ways and thereby achieving particular artistic aims. In aiming for particular effects, the audience is organized around a specific problematic in which the possibilities for achieving those effects are worked out. In identifying the movies as a form of organization for the imagination, Cavell underscores the role of movie viewing in exercising the moral imagination, determining the moral nature of the world on view and the kinds of actions possible within such a world.

### III.

In order to mark the transformation in the medium of the movies at stake in *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes the course of two related historical developments that together prepare for this transformation from one problematic and set of aesthetic aims to another. These two historical developments, both of which predate the emergence of film technology, can be understood as structural conditions of the imagination; that is, these developments are changes in how we conceive our own relation to our world, and so which fantasies and fears typify these ways of living.<sup>17</sup> The

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15. Cavell, *World*, 32.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Our imaginative capacities do not stand in strict contrast, as it were, with how things really are. Instead, our ability to imagine how the world is — its character, what kinds of things are possible in it, and so on — allows us to make sense of the world and to develop ways of living in it.

first historical development, which I will call the post-Reformation worry, is characterized by the withdrawal of God as guarantor of our connection to the world, which means that the individual feels increasingly responsible for her own connection to the world. One's own subjectivity can seem like a barrier to one's ability to share a world with others. The second, more recent, development, which I will call the post-Baudelaire promise, is a shared understanding of the nature of the *modern* world, in which the world can be made habitable and allow for private happiness through shared work and stylish gesture. In *The World Viewed*, Cavell claims that the best movies of Classic Hollywood fulfill this post-Baudelaire promise, allowing audiences to see ways of making the modern world livable. The movies are well-situated to deliver upon this promise of private happiness insofar as the movies put a shared world into view in a way that feels unmediated by our individual subjectivities. I will show that the transformation that Cavell is only in position to gesture towards is a transformation in the movie audience to the movies and to each other; this transformation makes the movies no longer able to deliver upon the post-Baudelaire promise. Instead, a different problematic, what I will call action as fantasy, structures the aesthetic aims of the movies of the New Hollywood.

Cavell identifies the first historical development as emerging early in the modern West with the Protestant Reformation. God either continuously retreats from one's experience or becomes an increasingly intimate aspect of a given individual's own subjective experience.<sup>18</sup> In either case, individuals sensed themselves as isolated within their selves, detached from the rest of the world and trapped in their own subjectivities:

At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation. The route

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18. Descartes' skeptical arguments in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) provide a paradigm case of the shape of this post-Reformation worry. The initial work of the skeptical voice in the *Meditations* is to convince me that I can only know my own consciousness. From there, I then must generate proof of God's existence, which will in turn serve to guarantee that my consciousness is not misled and is generally correct in its perceptions of the world and others. If the proof of God's existence seems less compelling than the initial skeptical arguments however, I seem to be trapped in my consciousness without any guarantee that anything outside of my subjectivity can be known.

to conviction in reality was through the acknowledgment of that endless presence of self.<sup>19</sup>

The individual's connection to the world around her comes to feel increasingly and intensively mediated by her own self-consciousness. Thus, the individual starts to lose her grip on the possibility that she shares a world with others in any meaningful sense.

On Cavell's view, this imaginative condition — that people felt evermore trapped inside their own individual consciousnesses, without any clear guarantee that their worlds were shared, possessed together — allows us to understand why the movies should have become so immediately popular. The technological developments that made possible moving photography did not create a need to establish an unmediated relation with the world; rather, these technological developments arose in response to this long-standing and intensifying need to have a relation to a world not mediated by one's own consciousness.<sup>20</sup> People were ready for the movies because the movies project worlds for audiences to share, experience together, automatically. We can share the world of the movie inasmuch as we are not able to act in it but act in projecting it together.

The post-Baudelaire promise is that shared work directed toward good ends can succeed in improving the world and that the stylish individual — Baudelaire's *flâneur* — is able to find a form of private happiness surrounded by others. Cavell refers to this shared understanding as “the myths.” Cavell locates these myths about the nature of modern life in Baudelaire's analysis of the work of the magazine illustrator Constantin Guys in “The Painter of Modern Life.” Baudelaire identifies the value in

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19. Cavell, *World*, 22.

20. This is the upshot of Cavell's critique of Bazin's account of the relation between painting and photography. On Bazin's view, painting turned to abstraction and away from representation in response to the development of photography; photography was mechanically, and so perfectly, able to fulfill a need for representing the world that painting could only ever imperfectly achieve. For Cavell, this way of describing the relation between the emergence of photography and the development of European painting misidentifies the needs driving those developments. On his account, photography did not replace or supersede painting. Instead developments in each field arose as differing, contrasting responses to our desire to guarantee our relation to the world: “One could accordingly say that photography was never in competition with painting. What happened was that at some point the quest for visual reality, or the ‘memory of the present’ (as Baudelaire put it), split apart. To maintain conviction in our connection with reality, to maintain our presentness, painting accepts the recession of the world. Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.” (*World*, 23).

Guys' work as a commitment to capturing the immediacy and vibrancy of modern experience. Cavell argues that the categories of modern experience Baudelaire finds catalogued in Guys' work have been the natural subjects for the movies:

Read as an anticipation of film, Baudelaire's little book seems to me, in dozens of its terms, insights, and turns of phrase, to take on the power it must have had for him. Let me simply recall the titles of his chapters, pondering them against our knowledge of cinema: Fashion, The Man of the World, Crowds, The Child, War-Sketches, Poms and Ceremonies, The Military Man, The Dandy, Cosmetics, Women and Courtesans, Carriages. Here are stores of cinematic obsession.<sup>21</sup>

These modern obsessions presented themselves as persistent and rich topics for cinematic exploration. For Cavell, these myths, articulated by Baudelaire decades prior to the emergence of the apparatus of motion pictures, offered a shared vision of modern life and presented a shared mode of response to the challenges and opportunities understood as characterizing the modern world.

These stores for cinematic obsession eventually, on Cavell's account, were depleted or exhausted. His autobiographical report of the changes in his moviegoing habits tracks this general dissolution of a shared imaginative understanding of the nature of the modern world and the aptness of particular gestures as responses to that world, what Cavell calls "the end of the myths". The shared understanding of the character of the modern world as a world that can become habitable through collective action and individual gesture came to end. This shift is not merely a feature of Cavell's experience, but a shift in how we understood a modern world to be inhabitable. For example, Cavell claims it is no longer possible to share in the belief that a man who is quiet in the face of the bustle of the modern crowd is harboring deep spiritual fires, has lashed himself to an original creed or a personal principle, and cannot be moved by the temptations and violent threats that continually buffet him:

We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that men doing the work of the world together are working for the world's good, or that if they are working for

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21. Cavell, *World*, 43.

the world's harm they can be stopped [...]. We no longer grant, or take it for granted that stylish dumb women are as interesting as stylish intelligent ones; we don't even think they look alike [...]. We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that a man who expresses no feeling has fires banked within him; or, if we do grant him depth, we are likely not to endow him with a commitment to his own originality, but to suppose him banking destructive feeling.<sup>22</sup>

The disappearance of these shared convictions, shared modes of understanding and responding to modern life, is the end of a specific set of possibilities with the artistic medium of the movie. From the point of the view of the content of the myths that disappeared, we can describe this transformation as a transformation in the imaginative understanding of the nature of the modern world. Cavell himself, in *The World Viewed*, only asserts the fact of this dissolution of shared fantasy and indicates the lines along which the dissolution took place.<sup>23</sup> This dissolution of the shared fantasy of making modern life livable means that the movies' ability to provide a haven from and response to the intensifying sense that individuals are trapped in their own subjectivities has waned.

One way to describe what has changed is in terms of the transformation in the underlying problematic that governs the stories that movies are able to tell; from this point of view, the post-Baudelaire promise of finding ways to live happily in the modern world was replaced by a new problematic, in which successful healthy action is, in different ways, seen to be a fantasy. After this transformation, if the movie shows characters successfully develop their own agency, then either the world of the movie or the characters in it are explicitly fantastic. Alternatively, the world of the movie can seem more or less realistic, but at the cost of the protagonist's conception of her agency revealing itself as a fantasy and thus subject to disillusion.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Cavell, *World*, 60-67.

23. Certainly part of the dissolution of these shared myths is that the implicit racial and gender privilege encoded in them came under intense pressure. That is, it came to seem that what had been shared was a vision of the ability of certain white and male gestures to make the modern world inhabitable. Thus, in retrospect, the question of the extent to which the myths had in fact been shared by all members of the audience was thrown in relief.

24. This paper is not the place to develop an account of this later problematic in a way that would parallel Cavell's account of the early in *The World Viewed*. Instead, I choose to emphasize the formal nature of the transformation in the relation between movie audiences and the imagination. I will note that this later problematic has two generic strains that are worth acknowledging briefly in order to indicate the nature of the transformation at the level of the content of the imagination. On the

But we can also approach the problem from the point of view of the formal relation between the movies and their audiences. From this formal point of view, the content of the shared myths, and the fantasies that replaced them is not our immediate concern. Instead, what matters is that the myths were in fact shared. Prior to 1960, movies were screened as part of a program that ran on a continuous loop. Audiences arrived at any point, watched the program for as much or as little as they wanted, and left when they wanted. Beginning in 1960 and accelerating throughout the decade, the way in which audience organized themselves shifted.<sup>25</sup> No longer slipping into an ongoing program, catching it as they will, audiences began to arrive at movies together at set times, as if it was theater, as Cavell puts it.

This change may appear to be a minor shift in viewing patterns. In fact, it is a major transformation of the audience's relation to its own imagination. Prior to this transformation, audience members could, and often did, simply decide to go to the pictures, without any further decision about which movie they were going to see. Once movies were screened at set times, this was no longer possible. Instead, individual audience members had to decide which movie, of all those being screened, to attend. Such a decision requires a transformation of self-understanding. In particular, one chooses what to screen based on one's own self-conception of one's individual tastes:

Now that there is an audience, a claim is made upon my privacy; so it matters to me that our responses to the film are not really shared. At the same time that the mere fact of an audience makes this claim upon me, it feels as if the

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one hand, there is the development of movies that are action spectacles; in these, a protagonist is able to act successfully inasmuch as the audience is aware of and embraces the fantastic nature of both the world on view and the protagonist who is able to navigate that world and save it. The original *Star Wars* is a paradigm case of this fantasy about the possibility of action, but a myriad of action movies in the 1980s further explored the possibilities for successful action in similar ways. The other strand of this problematic is the development of movies that are imagined to be set in a real world, inhabited by real people who behave in recognizably human ways. In these New Hollywood movies of the 1970s, the audience comes to understand that attempts to act are, in the real world, frustrated, disappointed, or delusional. Here — in movies like *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) — the possibility of successful agency is a fantasy about which the movies' characters are disillusioned.

25. Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was the first American movie to screen at set times. This functioned as a way to market the picture and emphasize the importance of seeing the movie from the beginning. It continued to be a marketing angle for particular movies in the early 1960s. *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), for example, had a poster that insisted that audiences could not miss the first five minutes of the movie.

old casualness of moviegoing has been replaced by a casualness of movie-viewing, which I interpret as an inability to tolerate our own fantasies, let alone those of others.<sup>26</sup>

The new form of audience for the movies constitutes a new relation to a shared set of fantasies, in which individual audience members no longer recognize the fantasies in which they participate in viewing the movies as shared, but rather as expressions of individual tastes. Further, not only do individual audience members think of themselves as exercising their imaginations at the movies in order to express their individual tastes, but they are also anxious about taking too seriously the content of the fantasies, about acknowledging the depths at which these ideas and emotions matter. In downplaying the importance of these fantasies and thinking of them as expressions of individual tastes, audience members limit the extent to which they share in their responses to the movies they watch and spare themselves from having to reflect on the nature of the fantasies explored in movie-viewing.

Prior to this transformation, audience members could think of themselves as participating in a shared set of fantasies, ones that belonged generally to a community.<sup>27</sup> Being able to duck into the theater at any point in the program loop encouraged this sense that the myths being explored on screen were, in some sense, communal, at any rate, that they did not depend on individual and private acts of the imagination. One could be anonymous in the dark of the theater while still participating in a shared, hence public, imaginative act, apprehending the character of the world viewed: “When moviegoing was casual and we entered at no matter what point in the proceedings [...], we took our fantasies and companions and anonymity inside and left with them intact.”<sup>28</sup> Because the fantasies on view in the movies were general and widely shared, one need not feel that one’s private fantasies were implicated or exhausted in one’s movie-viewing.

Perhaps most importantly, the myths on view for all to see at the movies were understood as shared across generational lines. The myths — this post-Baudelaire

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26. Cavell, *World*, 11.

27. One need not have felt oneself to share in this joint act of imagination, perhaps for reasons of gender or racial exclusion. What remains important to the point at issue here is that the imaginative act that such a person felt estranged from was taken to be shared by others, just not oneself. In this sense, these myths were shared, even though many understood themselves to be excluded.

28. Cavell, *World*, 11.

promise — had been, prior to this transformation, in principle, heritable; audience members understood themselves to participate in a set of fantasies shared with their parents and with their children.<sup>29</sup> The end of the myths in particular meant the end of the heritability of a fantasy, shared across generations, about the livability of the modern world.<sup>30</sup> That these myths were maintained across and by multiple generations simultaneously meant that they were something that one could grow into and take on for oneself and so learn to live in them and through them. Rather than understanding these myths as already reflective of one's own subjectivity and tastes, one could discover oneself in the appreciation of them.

For audiences that have decided which movie to see when, their relation to the capacity for imagination is different. These later audiences are necessarily self-selecting, sorting themselves based on each individual's evaluation of her own taste, her subjective desires and pleasures. The importance of the emergence of an American market for European and art films is an example of this fragmentation of audiences based on self-selection according to individual tastes. This act of self-selection, individuation, and demographic fragmentation is crucial because an individual audience member no longer understand herself to be primarily participating in a collective fantasy structure, one shared with friends, with neighbors, with family members young and old, and with strangers who happen to be into the theater at the same time. Instead, an audience member understands herself to be participating a fantasy structure that is, in the first instance, fundamentally her own, and the extent to which it is shared, it happens to be shared by people like her, those who happen to share her (individual and subjective) tastes. Audiences that self-select based on individual judgments of taste no longer understand themselves to be participating together in shared myths, but to be only contingently sharing one's own fantasies with other individuals who happen to have similar taste.

In marking out this autobiographical disinterest in habitual movie-going, Cavell thus allows us to understand this post-Baudelaire promise, the shared imaginative

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29. At stake in the heritability of these fantasies across generations is the question of with whom one imagines to share both one's world and one's way of understanding the world.

30. It was certainly no coincidence that the fragmentation of the audience, and the commercial crisis of Hollywood movie production in the 1960s, initially centered itself along generational divisions. For production companies, this meant looking for projects that would appeal to the "youth market." That such a search could happen at all already indicated a radical transformation in the organization of audiences.

understanding of the nature of the modern world and the range of gestures that allow it to be habitable, as an interlude within the ongoing post-Reformation worry of an ever intensifying subjective connection to the world. As in the case of painting between Manet and Monet, one may say that the medium of the movies transformed, resulting in a different problematic governing the development of the medium. For Hollywood in the classic era, the governing problematic explores how to make the modern world inhabitable; the underlying aim is to imagine how to live a modern life. After the transformation in the nature of the movies that Cavell delineates, the underlying aesthetic aim had shifted to one in which the possibility of successful agency reveals itself, more or less, as fantastical. On this side of the transformation, imagining ourselves in a world in which we would be capable of acting so as to make the world more livable, more humane seems like an escape from the (imagined) realities of our world or a form of self-delusion.

Cavell's autobiographical confession of disillusionment marks this loss of an experience that was communally shared, hence not conceived in terms of merely subjective responses. In this sense, *The World Viewed* serves as an elegy for a shared way of life with movies that, by the end of the 1960s, had been transformed.

#### IV.

We can identify at least three ways in which this transformation of the audience's relation to its imagination continues to shape contemporary experience. First, movie audiences continue to organize by self-selecting according to the individual's view of her own taste and, relatedly, the problematic under which effective agency is imagined as fantasy remains dominant. Second, this self-sorting audience has made possible increasingly individualized experiences with personal screens. Third, the self-selection of the audience has underwritten a proliferation of commercial and political strategies that consist in segmenting a population or a market in terms of demographic, economic, and taste considerations and then crafting appeals to those distinct segments based on the individual member's sense of herself as individual.

That Hollywood movies remain expressive of contemporary worries about the possibilities for healthy and constructive action in the modern world can be con-

firmed by attending both to Hollywood's big action spectacles and smaller scale dramatic and comedic fare. The recent proliferation of superhero movies indicates the extent to which an explicitly fantasy world and a fantastic protagonist are necessary conditions for contemporary audiences to apprehend successful action that improves the world and makes it more livable. Only such fantastic figures or an explicitly fantastic world can give the violence underlying the ability to act the moral worth it needs. Even contemporary movie comedies, in which the protagonists overcome their difficulties and achieve a kind of success, generally depend on a moment of disillusionment and facing up to the realities of contemporary life in order achieve something more modest than originally dreamed.<sup>31</sup>

The fracturing of a self-selecting audience continues to reinforce production and distribution strategies based around appeal to particular demographic slices of the overall population. Moreover, the emergence of a self-selecting audience is not just a constitutive fact of contemporary movie-viewing experiences. Such a self-selecting audience plays a crucial role in the proliferation of individualized screen technologies. Individuals increasingly tailor their own viewing experiences to personal screens, and then share collective screening experiences based on a mutual understanding of shared idiosyncratic tastes. It is now a fact of contemporary imagination that we collectively imagine ourselves to be individuated as audience members, only weakly and contingently related to each other by coincidence of taste.

In addition to the proliferation of personal screening technologies, the transformation of the audience's imaginative capacities from understood as shared to understood as individualized and reflective of personal tastes also has facilitated a more general view of how contemporary social relations are organized. As members of both a viewing public and a polity, we take ourselves to be a population individuated along demographic lines. The population consists in distinct segments along a variety of axes, typically racial, gender, class, and age. Members of the population are individuated according to the intersection of these various demographic axes. Such strategies depend on individual members of the population at large understanding themselves to be essentially individuated and more or less contingently related to other members

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31. Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012), to cite a quite current example, depicts a protagonist whose fantasies about her own potential inhibit her ability to become fully adult and must be punctured so that she can learn to take care of herself.

of the population depending on which demographic axes are under consideration. The self-conception of oneself as atomistic contributes to the difficulty of understanding one's interests as shared in common.

Cavell's appeal to the autobiographical at key moments in *The World Viewed* serves to delineate, not a personal change in his own moviegoing habits, but rather a critical shift in the ways in which movie audiences in the United States relate to their imagination. Prior to this transformation, audiences understood the fantasies exercised in movie-viewing to be communal and cross-generational; after the transformation, audiences conceived of the fantasies exercised in movie-viewing to be the responsibility of individuals and reflective of individuals' tastes. Such a transformation in the structure of the audience and its imagination gave rise to a new problematic about the possibilities of agency that makes possible the development of the movies in new directions. Broadly speaking, prior to the transformation Cavell indicates, the movies were governed by a problematic that explored the possibilities of modern life being made habitable. After the transformation, that problematic was replaced by one in which the possibility of successful agency has itself explicitly come to seem to be only a fantasy. That we take ourselves to be expressing our individual fantasies in moviegoing and our related contemporary screen experiences means that we are increasingly less willing to acknowledge the extent to which these fantasies about the limited possibilities of effective agency are broadly and deeply shared and less able to think clearly about why they are so shared.<sup>32</sup>

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32. I would like to thank the following people, each of whom crucially helped shape my thinking about the issues in this paper: Stanley Cavell, Jim Conant, Zed Adams, Marc Djaballah, Jay Elliott, Eric Ratzel, and especially Erica Holberg. Only through my ongoing conversations with each of them about both the history of the movies and Cavell's work in particular could I have developed the account offered here.

# Stanley's Taste:

## On the Inseparability of Art, Life, and Criticism

SEBASTIÃO BELFORT CERQUEIRA

Stanley Cavell closes *Contesting Tears* with a chapter titled “Stella’s Taste: Reading *Stella Dallas*”, devoted to the 1937 movie, directed by King Vidor, which Cavell compares to the other movies he has studied in the book and finds “to be the most harrowing of the four melodramas to view again and again.”<sup>1</sup> Cavell’s reading of this movie is organized against what he calls the generally “accepted view” of the film where there are two key interpretive moments: in one, Stella, the protagonist, on vacation with her teenage daughter, Laurel, at a fancy hotel, tries to impress Laurel’s new friends by dressing up and ends up making a fool of herself, in a spectacle of bad taste; Stella then finds out what people thought of her and realizes she has embarrassed Laurel, eventually deciding to drive her daughter away from her, towards her father (Stella’s now ex-husband); this takes us to the second key moment: the final scene, where Stella anonymously watches her daughter’s wedding from the sidewalk, through a window, and walks away, which is generally seen as confirming Stella’s sacrifice, representing the dissolution of motherhood — hence, of her identity.

“My thought is that the pressure of this interpretation is excessive”<sup>2</sup> are Cavell’s words about the “accepted view” and he easily points out how enough proof exists to make such a reading inadequate. His main argument reiterates the fact that Stella knows exactly the effect particular clothes will have on people: in different scenes she is shown to be an expert in judging the appropriateness of clothes, which is incompatible with the idea that, in the hotel scene described above, she somehow is not aware of what Laurel’s friends will think of her. Cavell claims that Stella’s plan to alienate her daughter is already underway, that Stella is consciously putting on an

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1. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1996), 200.

2. *Ibid.*, 201.

act, having already realized that Laurel wishes for different things than she does and will need to be pushed away in order to find them. The final scene would then show us a Stella not sacrificing her identity but further stating it, having let her child marry into the world she wanted but that was simply not to Stella's taste.

This interpretation is overall more convincing than the "accepted view," and manages to account for more elements of the movie and comes closer to a general coherence. However, in wanting to contradict the traditional interpretation of a pathetic Stella with a consciously deliberating one, Cavell too has laid an excessive interpretative pressure on the movie.

One scene that Cavell doesn't analyze raises serious problems for his interpretation (i.e., that Stella is trying to push her daughter away). Immediately after being humiliated by her mother, Laurel starts packing, wanting to go away. Stella tries to stop her and accuses her of being spoiled and not letting her mother have any fun. How are we to read this as a *continuation* of Stella's rejection of her daughter? If Stella is indeed aware that she is driving her daughter away, pleading with her to stay would be strangely sadistic and of no use to her plan. Besides, even if we concede that Stella is acting when she dresses up and we put that scene side by side with the one that comes later (where she is generally recognized to be acting [in her house, pretending to be in love with a man her daughter hates]), there is nothing in the hotel room scene that can compare to the sort of cheap vaudeville these other two "acting sequences" evoke.

Why should Cavell, an impressively acute critic, who says that "any reading of a film must [...] account for the frames of the film being what they are, in the order they are in,"<sup>3</sup> feel the need to leave a particular collection of frames out of his reading of *Stella Dallas*? My point is not to claim that Cavell is misreading the plot or the characters in this movie, but to propose instead that the movie has definite incongruities in terms of plot and character psychology and, so, calls for a different type of reading.

In several passages from *Contesting Tears*, Cavell associates the group of melodramas he reads to the comedies he studied in *Pursuits of Happiness* and states

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3. "What Becomes of Thinking on Film?: Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan," in *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), 6.

that he is “questioning the idea of film, especially the Hollywood film, as a homogeneous, and transparently popular art.”<sup>4</sup> This is partly an answer to why his reading of *Stella Dallas* glosses over incongruities in the movie’s plot and characters — because it is part of Cavell’s project to consecrate Hollywood productions as serious art. Another part of the answer has to do with Cavell stressing the continuity between the type of philosophy he relates to and the movies he values: “my effort to preserve that philosophy, or rather to show that it is preserved [...] in works of lasting public power — world-famous [...] films.”<sup>5</sup>

All these explanations, from the inclusion of *Stella Dallas* in a larger line of movies to the effort of showing a particular type of philosophy at work in those movies, are cases of broader, previous convictions or agendas determining the reading of one particular object — *of theory overcoming criticism*, if you will. Not only do I think this is happening in “Stella’s Taste: Reading *Stella Dallas*,” I also believe such an overcoming of criticism by theory is inherent in Cavell’s own conception of criticism.

I trust Cavell to mean the following reflections apply to criticism in general, not just of movies; but it is still amid his writings on film that I find his concept of criticism more interestingly discussed, namely in the introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness*. Early on in this text, Cavell underlines the continuity between art and life that makes criticism necessarily subjective and personal: “to take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one’s experience of the object, so that to examine and defend my interest in these films is to examine and defend my interest in my own experience.”<sup>6</sup> My suggestion is precisely that the idea of “defending” is not innocent in this formulation, pointing to a confirmatory tendency that is characteristic of the author’s conception of criticism.

Cavell writes we ought to be “guided by our experience but not dictated to by it,”<sup>7</sup> but his own description of the process of criticism lets us see that this balance is hardly attainable. While telling us of “checking one’s experience” as “the sense at the same time of consulting one’s experience and of subjecting it to examination,” with

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4. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 197.

5. *Ibid.*, 220.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

7. *Ibid.*, 10.

the purpose of “learning neither to impose your experience on the world nor to have it imposed upon by the world,”<sup>8</sup> the author admits there is a “philosophical catch.”

The catch, Cavell says, is that you already need to trust your experience in order to check it, something he doesn’t explain in too much detail, but that I take to mean that, if you want to test your experience with the object as reference, you have to start by trusting that the experience somehow is of that object, that its characteristics depend on the object and are not just random idiosyncratic impressions. This is in tune with what Cavell says about our trust in our experience being “expressed as a willingness to find words for it”: finding words for an experience means you believe there is something to be described and a right way to do it, that you have given it a meaning that excludes other meanings, one necessarily determined by your own ideas and taste, by who you are.

Put simply, in Cavell’s model, once you try to check your experience through criticism, you must start by trusting that your experience is of the object, which means, as we have seen, that you believe there are reasons (in the object) for your experience being what it is. Your examination of the object hence becomes looking for those reasons, a practice determined by the will to confirm your experience (defend it), which leaves little space for revising it and changing your mind, so that criticism becomes particularly prone to being absorbed by previous ideas and theory.

Cavell’s reading of *Stella Dallas* in light of remarriage comedies represents one such case, and, I believe, Cavell finds it harrowing to view precisely for this reason. In passages where he says “[i]n subjecting these films to the same burden of interpretation that I expect any text to carry that I value as highly,”<sup>9</sup> Cavell associates liking a movie with being able to interpret it deeply, though it isn’t clear whether he likes a movie because he can interpret it or the other way around. It doesn’t seem too far-fetched to suggest that he in fact finds *Stella Dallas* “harrowing” precisely because he has imposed his experience on the world and has, in the end, failed to interpret the film satisfactorily.

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8. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 12.

9. Cavell, *Contesting*, 15.

# Seeing Souls: Wittgenstein and Cavell on the “Problem of Other Minds”

JÔNADAS TECHIO

The human body is the best picture of the human soul.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*

[...] not to believe there is such a thing as the human soul is not to know what the human body is [...]

CAVELL, *The Claim of Reason*

## Introduction

The so-called “Part I” of *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*) contains many claims concerning the grammar of psychological predicates, and particularly about the conditions for ascribing them to others. The following are some of the most well-known (and also most representative) among such claims: (i) “only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious”;<sup>1</sup> (ii) “An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria.”<sup>2</sup> The content of these and other kindred remarks has led a great number of readers to ascribe some kind of “externalistic”<sup>3</sup> account to the author of the *Investigations*.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), §281.

2. *Ibid.*, §580.

3. I mean this in a very broad sense, so as to cover many different attempts of including in the analysis of the *content* of (presumably “inner”) mental states some features of the subject’s larger. (“external”) environment, such as her behavior, her community’s standards, the constitution of the objects with which she relates, etc.

Now, “externalism” comes in many flavors. One can, for instance, think of a reductionist or eliminativist version: in this case, the suggestion would be to *replace*, in the philosophical analysis of our psychological predicates, any reference to (supposedly) troublesome “inner” entities (private mental contents or experiences, souls, etc.) for a reference to ontologically “well-behaved” ones, such as movements of our bodies in space. Although some of the earlier attempts to present (later) Wittgenstein’s stance might have burdened him with such a view,<sup>4</sup> there is now a broad consensus about its exegetical incorrectness; the reason for mentioning it is that I want to compare it to a much more widespread interpretation, according to which the cumulative effect of Wittgenstein’s remarks would be to remind the reader that our practices of ascribing mental states is, *as a matter of fact*, based on “external criteria,” contrary to what one is tempted to think when guided by certain (distorted) philosophical *pictures* of the relationship between inner and outer, mind and body.

From this perspective, the (Wittgensteinian) criticism would focus exclusively on the influence of those pictures, leaving intact, so to speak, the very category of the “mental” or “inner”; the way out of philosophical confusion is not to eliminate or reduce that to any other category, but rather to understand its distinctive grammar, separating it from false analogies that it naturally gives rise. That result, in turn, could serve as evidence to extract from the *Investigations* a kind of grammatical refutation of skepticism concerning other minds, which would be seen as a position based on a confused picture of the “inner” as *hidden* and *inaccessible*. “Nothing is hidden”<sup>5</sup> — this would be the motto of that reading.<sup>6</sup>

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4. I am thinking particularly of Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), but he was surely not alone.

5. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §435.

6. The main contention of the reading I have in mind was expressed by Jack Temkin this way: “Wittgenstein has *solved*, or at least provided the conceptual machinery required to solve, the epistemological problem of other minds. He has done this, the received view continues, with his concept of criteria” — “Wittgenstein on Criteria and Other Minds,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28:4 (1990): 561. The main exponent of that “received reading” is Norman Malcolm — see esp. “Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations,” *The Philosophical Review* 63:4: 530-59; “Knowledge of Other Minds,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 55:23 (1958): 969-78; and *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays 1978–1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) — but perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say, again with Temkin, that it is ‘almost universally held by those writing on Wittgenstein and the problem of other minds’ (ibid.). In particular, I think it is fair to ascribe it to Peter Hacker’s influential interpretation, well synthesized in the claim that criteria are “logically good evidence, which is, in certain circumstances, *de-feasible*. But if not defeated, the criteria confer certainty” — *Wittgenstein on Human Nature* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 38. So, for example, “to see another writhing and groaning after being injured is to know ‘directly’ that he is in pain — it is not an inference from the fact that he has a prescription for analgesics” (ibid., 41); or again: “when one observes someone writhing in agony, one does not infer that

My goal in this paper will be to pave the way for an alternative view of Wittgenstein's remarks concerning psychological predicates, one which is inspired by Stanley Cavell's seminal interpretation of the *Investigations*. I shall do that first by offering a close reading of a number of key passages, aimed at highlighting some under-appreciated connections between what Wittgenstein has to say about human behavior and the human soul in *PI* I and his later treatment of those topics in the discussion about aspect-seeing in *PI* II (sections 1-2). The second half of the paper offers two lines of argument: the claim that Cavell would be willing to run with the idea of continuous aspect-perception in the context of other minds (3); and the claim that Peter Strawson's argument about freedom and resentment might be criticised from this Cavellian-Wittgensteinian position (4). By calling attention to these connections I hope to contribute to an understanding of that distinctive Wittgensteinian claim which serves as my first epigraph – one that is incompatible with the “externalistic” motto that “nothing is hidden.”

## 1. The Problem of Other Minds in *PI* I

At the beginning of *PI*, Wittgenstein raises a question which (come to think of it) seems to underlie quite a big deal of what goes on under the label of “philosophy of mind,” namely: “What gives us *so much as the idea* that beings, things, can feel?”<sup>7</sup> As it often happens with Wittgenstein's writings, I believe that question was carefully crafted in order to elicit certain sorts of philosophical responses from the readers; in this particular instance, the intended responses would give vent to a sense of astonishment, on the one hand, and to a kind of anxiety or restlessness, on the other.

The first response would come from the realization of a remarkable (although normally unnoticed) feature of our linguistic practices – namely, that we *do* ascribe feelings (or, more generally, psychological predicates) to *mere things*, i.e., mere bunches of matter, which as such are not intrinsically different from other such

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he is in pain from his movements – one sees that he is suffering. *Pain*-behaviour is a criterion of being in pain, as *joyous* behaviour is a criterion of being joyful” (ibid., 43).

7. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

bunches — stones, plants, tables, computers, etc.<sup>8</sup> As to the second kind of response elicited by Wittgenstein’s question — i.e., anxiety or restlessness — perhaps the best way to express it is by means of some further questions, such as these: If *this* is how our ascriptions of psychological predicates work, how can they be justified? On which grounds? Are we not being victims of a systematic and universal illusion — call it animism? Again, should we not give up those psychological descriptions in favor of some more “objective” or “scientific” — say physicalistic — ones?

Those are only a few examples of the kinds of skeptical doubts which one would naturally face when trying to understand the logic of our psychological ascriptions *from a particular perspective* (more on this in a moment).

Having prompted those doubts by means of his initial question, Wittgenstein immediately offers a pair of hypothetical answers, as if to be tested:

Is it that my education has led me to it [i.e., “the idea that beings, things, can feel”] by drawing my attention to feelings in myself, and now I transfer the idea to objects outside myself? That I recognize that there is something there (in me) which I can call ‘pain’ without getting into conflict with other people’s usage?<sup>9</sup>

What we have in this passage is the raw material for what is known in philosophy as the “argument by analogy” for the ascription of “inner” (psychological) states to “external objects” (such as other persons). Now a very common charge raised against that argument is that it is question-begging, in that the correlation between mind and behavior that it assumes is precisely what needs to be *proved*. However common, that is not a charge Wittgenstein himself will consider in this context. Rather, what he seems to be aiming at is an idea — or, more precisely, a *picture*<sup>10</sup> — which not only underpins the whole argument, but also (and more importantly) prompts the initial question which puts it in motion, namely the picture of the *privacy of the mental*,

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8. There are, of course, lots of *extrinsic* differences among living and non-living things, such as the degree of organizational complexity and behavior, and we shall soon explore them at some length. Right now I will only advance that those differences, far from quenching our astonishment, are rather apt to increase it: after all, how could such subtleties account for a (supposedly) *absolute* metaphysical difference between living and non-living beings?

9. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

10. See esp. *ibid.*, §115 (and its surroundings) and *ibid.*, II.§xi for the precise, quasi-technical use of this term.

which is indeed a central target of this region of the *PI*. (Wittgenstein has hinted at it at least as early as in: “In what sense are my sensations *private*? — Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.”<sup>11</sup>).

Now that picture is apt to present itself very naturally when we think about the difficulties we sometimes face in understanding what happens to others around us, be it because they are unable to express their true feelings, or because they intentionally hide them from us. Moreover, each of us has probably experienced that same (in)capacity in one’s own case. Fixation on those (real, N.B.) difficulties can make it seem as if all well-succeeded interpersonal communication were a matter of mere chance, as if there was a metaphysical *and* epistemological gulf between myself and my own (private) experiences, on the one hand, and other (so-called) “people” and their (so-called) “experiences,” on the other.<sup>12</sup>

For some philosophical sensibilities that possibility would be relatively easy to dismiss: the fact that our communication *works* (in general) would be more than enough for practical purposes. Yet Wittgenstein characteristically does not take such an easy way out of a philosophical difficulty. What he does instead is to press it further, drawing attention to some possible consequences of the picture under analysis which would affect much more directly our relations with others — if only we gave it the attention it deserves. One such consequence is brought to the fore again through a pair of questions: “Are we perhaps over-hasty in our assumption that the smile of a baby is not pretence? — And on what experience is our assumption based?”<sup>13</sup> Given the lack of an unassailable (“intra-experiential”) ground implied by the latter question, the insistence on the need to “make assumptions” — i.e., to *infer* from one’s own case how things really are with others (see the argument above) — would ultimately lead to doubt whether (other) people really have *minds* at all: “If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word ‘pain’ means — must I not say *that* of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?”<sup>14</sup> The lesson here seems to be: I cannot (or *should* not) generalize so irresponsibly. This is the core of the problem of other minds.

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11. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §246.

12. That is precisely the sort of description a solipsist would use to formulate his position. Wittgenstein himself has put that description in a solipsist’s mouth in the *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 59.

13. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §249.

14. *Ibid.*, §293.

## 2. Outward Criteria, and Their Limits

Now does Wittgenstein have an answer to that problem in *PI*, and, if so, what is it? I assume most readers would want to answer ‘yes’ to the first part of my question; as to its second part, if I am allowed to set the details aside, I take it that the traditional answer would go roughly as follows: (i) as it happens with most, if not all of the issues dealt with by philosophers, skepticism about other minds is just another instance of a *pseudo*-problem, a “disease of the intellect”<sup>15</sup> which Wittgenstein wants to cure by means of grammatical or logical elucidation; (ii) now the *general* strategy he employs to that end is basically that of turning our attention away from a set of pictures underlying the formulation of those (so-called) questions, ultimately showing their emptiness or senselessness; finally, (iii) in the particular case under analysis, that result would be achieved by a battery of methodological devices designed to emphasize the internal or criterial relation between *overt* behavior and the sensations or states of mind it expresses.<sup>16</sup>

A very clear example of that strategy would be offered immediately after the passage analyzed above (“What gives us *so much as the idea...*”), where Wittgenstein claims that:

I do not transfer my idea to stones, plants, and so on.

Couldn’t I imagine having frightful pains and, while they were going on, turning to stone. Indeed, how do I know, if I shut my eyes, whether I have not turned into a stone? — And if that has happened, in what sense will *the stone* have pains? In what sense will they be ascribable to the stone? Why indeed should the pain have a bearer at all?!

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15. See P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, revised edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 215.

16. This is not the only kind of therapeutic device he employs to that end. Another well known strategy is the deconstruction of the model of sensations as *private entities* — see esp. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §293-94, the passages presenting the thought-experiment of the “beetle in the box”; the point of that strategy, as the traditional reading would have it, is quite simple: if sensations are construed as private *somethings*, i.e., as entities which are accessible only by the ones who *have* them, they become as useless in our language-game(s) — as the (supposed) “thing” named by the word “beetle” in the case imagined by Wittgenstein. That is precisely the situation of the defender of the “argument from analogy” who accepts the picture of privacy, including the model of sensations as private *entities*, but insists on doing that “irresponsible generalization,” ascribing sensations thus construed to other persons.

And can one say of the stone that it has a soul [*Seele*], and *that* is what has the pain? What has a soul [*Seele*], or pain, to do with a stone?<sup>17</sup>

Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains.<sup>18</sup>

To most readers convinced of the general view I presented above the moral of the latter passage has seemed very clear: the reason why we do not transfer our idea to stones, plants, etc., is that these things do not behave like a human being. Behaving like a human being, therefore, is a *necessary* condition for the ascription of pains — or, more generally, “souls” — to things. But is it also a *sufficient* condition? If it were, then we would be automatically justified, even compelled, to ascribe sensations or souls to beings such as androids or replicants.<sup>19</sup> — Well, are we not?

Apparently the Wittgensteinian answer would be: yes, we are. Take, for example, the following passage:

Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. — One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number! — And now look at a wriggling fly, and at once these difficulties vanish, and pain seems able to get a *foothold* here, where before everything was, so to speak, too *smooth* for it.<sup>20</sup>

The final part of this passage seems to license a reasoning along these lines: well, if one can ascribe sensations such as pains even to *flies*, what about beings as complex as androids or replicants? Do we have any reason to deny that those beings have souls which would not amount to a reason to deny the same of our *paradigmatic* cases, i.e., (other) human beings?

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17. I have here decided to keep Anscombe’s original choice of the word “soul” to translate “seele,” instead of Hacker and Schulte’s “mind.” The latter justify their change in the Preface to the new edition, claiming that in §283 “what is at issue is *mind*, not *soul*, and the problems of mind and body, not of the soul and the body” (xiv). I simply do not share their sense of obviousness about this point; in fact, I take it that this might be yet another symptom of a reading which does not pay due attention to the connections between Wittgenstein’s treatment of the conditions to ascribe psychological predicates in this context and in Part II.

18. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

19. A replicant is a (fictional) bioengineered being created in the universe of the movie *Blade Runner* (1982).

20. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §284.

Here we arrive at an interesting point about the conditions for ascribing souls to things: even in hypothetical scenarios where the behavioral criteria indicated above are fully met — think of *Blade Runner* (1982) — one can still avoid treating the things which display that behavior *as* human. In fact — and this is the most important point — apparently one can avoid treating even human beings *as* human, if only at a great practical cost. This is what I gather from passages such as the following:

But can't I imagine that the people around me are automata, lack consciousness, even though they behave in the same way as usual? — If I imagine it now — alone in my room — I see people with fixed looks (as in a trance) going about their business — the idea is perhaps a little uncanny. But just try to hang on to this idea in the midst of your ordinary intercourse with others — in the street, say! Say to yourself, for example: "The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism." And you will either find these words becoming quite empty; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort.

Seeing a living human being as an automaton is analogous to seeing one figure as a limiting case or variant of another; the cross-pieces of a window as a swastika, for example.<sup>21</sup>

In analyzing this passage I would like to emphasize three points: (i) it offers an *explicit* parallel between the experience of seeing aspects in figures and the experience of seeing aspects of living beings (i.e., seeing them *as* automatons / *as* humans); (ii) it also indicates that the change in our perception depends on a larger context (the change is easier "alone in my room," but more difficult "in the street," in the midst of my "ordinary intercourse" with others); (iii) finally, it shows that this change comes, if at all, only at a great cost — that of risking emptiness, or the production of "uncanny feelings."

I will have more to say about points (i) and (ii) below. Right now I would like to highlight a connection between the last point and a rather more familiar Wittgen-

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21. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

steinian contention — namely, that our perception of living beings as “ensouled” is a matter of *attitude*, not *opinion* or *belief*. That contention is expressed in passages such as the following (among many others):

(1) Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead is not the same. All our reactions are different.<sup>22</sup>

(2) “I can only *believe* that someone else is in pain, but I *know* it if I am.” [...] Just try — in a real case — to doubt someone else’s fear or pain.<sup>23</sup>

(3) “I believe that he is suffering.” — Do I also *believe* that he isn’t an automaton? [...] Suppose I say of a friend: “He isn’t an automaton.” — What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a *human being* who meets him in ordinary circumstances? What information *could* it give him? (At the very most, that this man always behaves like a human being, and not occasionally like a machine.) “I believe that he is not an automaton,” just like that, so far makes no sense. My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §284.

23. *Ibid.*, §303.

24. *Ibid.*, II.§iv (§§20-22, in Hacker and Schulte’s edn.). Appearances notwithstanding, I do not think Wittgenstein’s purpose in these and related passages is to draw a quasi-technical distinction between “attitude” on the one hand, and “belief” or “opinion” on the other — in that sense I agree with Peter Winch, “Eine Einstellung zur Seele,” *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* LXXXI (1980-81): 1-16. What Wittgenstein is willing to criticize is a *certain understanding* of the (supposed) “belief” or “opinion” — namely one whereby (i) to take human beings *as such* and (ii) to believe that a *particular human being* is, e.g., suffering would be, so to speak, at the same level. To take (or to avoid taking) a human being as a being that has a “soul” is a much more fundamental attitude, in the sense that it is a condition of possibility so that, on particular occasions in a language-game, one can be certain *or* in doubt about whether the other is suffering or not. In other words: if, at any particular time, one has good reasons to question whether the other is human or an automaton, then, on that particular occasion, it would not make sense to argue over whether, say, the other is *really* suffering, or is simply *faking* it. We would lack the background against which that kind of “empirical” doubt could arise. Descartes, in a famous passage of *Meditations*, argues that it is strictly incorrect to say that *we see* men through the window, because what we do is in fact a *judgment* — we judge, that is, that those spectra we see through the window are real men. I think that statement perfectly exemplifies the kind of opinion against which Wittgenstein is arguing in passages as these. To respond to other human beings as beings endowed with “souls,” and not as “mere automatons,” is not to make a kind of *inference* from observation of something more “basic” or “immediate,” such as the perception of the behavior of certain “spectra or fictitious men who move only by springs.” The logical priority is being inverted on the Cartesian analysis. — Only against the background of certain *attitudes* we take relatively to the world and others (empirical) doubt *and* certainty can arise. (I shall here postpone the question whether one can really and legitimately have doubts other than those.)

The emphasis conveyed by these passages on our attitudes or reactions (as opposed to opinions or beliefs) brings to the fore a central aspect of Stanley Cavell's thinking about the "problem of other minds" — namely, that 'the problem' is not a matter of (mere) *knowledge*, but rather of *acknowledgment*. Cavell introduces the latter concept in "Knowing and Acknowledging" as follows: "your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer — I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what '(your or his) being in pain' means."<sup>25</sup> Whence the conclusion that "the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him."<sup>26</sup>

These formulations are meant to emphasize that we — that is, each of us — have an active role and an irreducible (although all-too-easily evadable) *responsibility* in adopting a certain attitude in the face of others. This, I take it, is an important first step toward explaining why, even when *all* the behavioral criteria for the ascription of "humanity" are met, one can still avoid adopting that 'attitude towards a soul' of which Wittgenstein speaks, treating those living beings instead as mere automata. Cavell calls that possibility "soul-blindness."<sup>27</sup> In the next section I shall try to clarify our understanding of that possibility presenting a more detailed comparison with the case of aspect perception.

### 3. Aspect Perception and the Problem of Other Minds

In part IV of *The Claim of Reason* Cavell sums up his reading of *PI* II §xi as follows:

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25. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 263. As Mulhall clarifies: 'acknowledgement is not something other than knowledge but an inflection of it — a way of emphasizing the fact that another's pain makes a claim upon me' (1996: 47).

26. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 389.

27. See *ibid.*, 378ff. Cavell intends that notion to be parallel to Wittgenstein's notions of "aspect-" and "meaning-blindness." The first is introduced in *PI*, II. §xi as follows: "Could there be human beings lacking the ability to see something *as something* — and what would that be like? What sort of consequences would it have? — Would this defect be comparable to colour-blindness, or to not having absolute pitch? — We will call it 'aspect-blindness'" (*PI*, §xi/257). Roughly: an aspect-blind person is one who cannot experience the switch between two or more aspects of an ambiguous picture; similarly, a meaning-blind person is one who would be unable to experience the switch between two or more meanings of a word, such as the German "Bank" (*ibid.*, §xi/262-63).

To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the *Investigations* is that this is not a matter of “mere knowing.” I have to read the physiognomy, and see the creature according to my reading, and treat it according to my seeing. The human body is the best picture of the human soul — not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Now, if knowing other minds really involves interpreting — or better: reading<sup>29</sup> — a physiognomy, and thus *seeing* a human body *in a certain way*, then of course it must be possible *not* to do so. That attestation might lead one to conclude that there is, after all, a perfect parallel between the experience of seeing aspects in ambiguous pictures and the experience of seeing aspects in human (or, more generally, animated) bodies, in that in both cases one can fail to see the ‘thing’ in question *as X* (as a rabbit, as an animated / ensouled / human being, etc). An important concern of Cavell in the final part of *The Claim of Reason* (and also in more recent writings<sup>30</sup>) is to explore the limits of that parallel, thus aiming at identifying the real difficulty underlying the “problem of other minds” (the real obstacle to our acknowledgment of others).

I suggested above that it is natural, or, in any case, not wholly unnatural for us to express a discomfort with (what we take as) the limits of our knowledge of other minds as if it were a result of their being hidden, unaccessible by our naked eye. In *PI*, Wittgenstein characterizes that feeling — “I can’t know what is going on in him” — as “above all, a *picture*,” which is further identified as “the convincing expression of a conviction.”<sup>31</sup> Taking that description as his starting point, Cavell invites us to de-

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28. Cavell, *Claim*, 356.

29. Mulhall has criticized Cavell’s use of the word “interpreting” in this context on the grounds of its misleading connotations — as if aspects were less immediately presented to us than the objects perceived see Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990), 79ff. Espen Hammer defends Cavell against that criticism, to my mind convincingly, by indicating that the latter’s usage of the notion of *interpretation* must be itself interpreted in a different light, given Cavell’s explicitly stated view that “my relation to the other’s soul is as immediate as to an object of sight” (*Claim*, 368) — see Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 70-72.

30. See his essays “Companionable Thinking,” in Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) and “The Touch of Words” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81-98.

31. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi.

velop Wittgenstein's thinking a step further, by asking what exactly is the conviction at stake — “What does the picture of internality, or of unreachable hiddenness, express?”<sup>32</sup> His own answer is “[t]hat the body is a veil, or a blind, a dead end. [...] The myth of the body as a veil expresses our sense that there is something we cannot see, not merely something we cannot know.”<sup>33</sup>

Implicit in Cavell's analysis at this point<sup>34</sup> is the suggestion that the human body can actually be *seen as* a veil by some particular other human being, in certain particular contexts — that this is a *real*, however uncommon and uncanny possibility in our lived experience, and not merely a ‘philosophical invention’ devised to put forward skeptical arguments. Yet by entering that suggestion he does not mean to imply that when one raises skeptical doubts concerning other minds one is (or should be) actually *seeing* others *as* automatons. Not at all; yet, calling attention to that fact will not impress our skeptical philosopher, who is already impressed by the sheer *possibility* of that kind of “aspect-change,” which in his/her view brings to the fore the fragility or groundlessness of his/her ordinary attitude toward the other, thus (and understandably) prompting anxiety.<sup>35</sup> Now it was just that kind of anxiety that Wittgenstein was tempting the reader to experiment in *PI*<sup>36</sup> and he did that precisely by facilitating or precipitating a series of aspect-changes — “what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and

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32. Cavell, *Claim*, 368.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Explicit elsewhere — e.g., in his reading of *Othello* at the end of *Claim*.

35. As Cavell says in another context “The anxiety lies not just in the fact that my understanding *has* limits, but that I must *draw* them, on apparently no more ground than my own.” (*Claim*, 115). To have to draw those limits in the case of our relation to one another is what Cavell calls our ‘exposure’ — “To accept my exposure in the case of others seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be.” (*Claim*, 439; see also 432, 435). A further projection of that useful concept has been recently provided by Cora Diamond, thus extending its application to the case of our relation with non-human animals: “Our ‘exposure’ in the case of animals lies in there being nothing but our own responsibility, our own making the best of it. We are not, here too, in what we might take to be the ‘ideal’ position. We want to be able to see that, given what animals are, and given also our properties, what we are like (given our ‘marks and features’ and theirs), there are general principles that establish the moral significance of their suffering compared to ours, of their needs compared to ours, and we could then see what treatment of them was and what was not morally justified. We would be *given* the presence or absence of moral community (or thus-and-such degree or kind of moral community) with animals. But we are exposed — that is, we are thrown into finding something we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise. There is here only what we make of our exposure, and it leaves us endless room for double-dealing and deceit.” (In Cavell et. al., *Animal*, 72). The reason for calling attention to that passage here is to register another discussion that I believe could be clarified by means of an exploration of its connections with Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect-seeing.

36. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

other objects”<sup>37</sup> — first by comparing animated beings with inanimate ones (stones, plants), and then back again (recall that “wriggling fly”<sup>38</sup>).

Now can we really take in the suggestion that human beings are somewhat analogous to ambiguous pictures? Cavell himself reminds us of Wittgenstein’s claim that “One doesn’t ‘take’ what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery,”<sup>39</sup> and asks accordingly if it would not go “against the Wittgensteinian grain to say, for example, that I see a person as angry who just is obviously angry, with no two ways about it?”<sup>40</sup> The objection raised by this question brings to the fore the need to distinguish more precisely between two different manifestations of the phenomenon of aspect perception which interest Wittgenstein in *PI*,<sup>41</sup> namely the *dawning* of aspects and *continuous* aspect perception. As Mulhall explains:

The former is a very specific visual experience with characteristic forms of verbal expression (or *Äusserungen*); the latter is an attitude whose presence is sometimes revealed in an individual’s susceptibility to aspect-dawning experiences, but which also finds expression in a variety of other fine shades of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. This attitude is certainly not a continuous sequence of aspect-dawning experiences — not a continuous trying or aiming at something; and neither is it a matter of taking something to be the thing it is — a turn of phrase which implies the availability of an alternative way of taking it, which is precisely what the attitude of continuous seeing as is defined as excluding.<sup>42</sup>

In sum: continuous aspect perception is “a further species of our ‘regarding-as’ response to pictures”<sup>43</sup> — one might say it is our *default response*<sup>44</sup> to them; the experience of aspect-*dawning*, on the contrary, is an exception which proves the rule.

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37. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi.

38. *Ibid.*, §284.

39. *Ibid.*, II.§xi/123.

40. Cavell, *Claim*, 370.

41. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi.

42. Mulhall, “Seeing Aspects,” in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 264-65.

43. Mulhall, “The Work of Wittgenstein’s Words: A Reply to Baz,” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 265.

44. Mulhall says that “our general relation to pictures is one of continuous aspect perception” (see *ibid.*), meaning (I take it) that this is the kind of relation that we *normally* (i.e., *except in*

With that distinction in hand we can formulate more precisely the analogy between the possibility of “aspect-change” involved in our experience of other (living) bodies and the experience of seeing aspects more generally. Clearly, we (that is, most of us, most of the time) do not (ordinarily) *take* that we know as human beings *for* human beings, as it would happen in an experience of aspect-dawning. (Human beings are not, *in this sense*, analogous to ambiguous pictures.<sup>45</sup>) Yet, as *PI* illustrates,<sup>46</sup> in very special circumstances we can stop (avoid, fail) to see human beings as such, and this would be analogous to the (similarly uncanny) experience of making familiar words lose their meanings after much repetition.<sup>47</sup> What that (exceptional) possibility of aspect-change shows, therefore, is that we *continuously see* human beings *as* human, and *in this sense* one can say (as Wittgenstein did) that “[s]eeing a living human being as an automaton is analogous to seeing one figure as a limiting case or variant of another.”<sup>48</sup>

With that point in mind, let us finally turn to the question of what can be the obstacle preventing one to see the human body *as* a “picture of the human soul.” As Cavell was possibly the first to state clearly, what prevents one of seeing a given aspect in an ambiguous figure is precisely another aspect of it. Now I think that point, together with Wittgenstein’s claim that “what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other ob-

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*extraordinary contexts* — such as those of aspect-dawning) take to them. One of the main tenets of Mulhall’s analysis is to show that the paradoxicalness involved in the experience of aspect-dawning stems precisely from that general tendency: we take it entirely for granted that pictures depict something or someone, and relate to them as we do to the thing/person depicted, “to the point at which we naturally transfer responses appropriate to what is depicted to their depictions” (ibid.); thus, “when it suddenly dawns on us that this particular picture-rabbit is also a picture-duck, when we express our experience quite as if it registers the picture-rabbit’s actually becoming a picture-duck, our sense that everything about it has changed (despite our knowledge that nothing has changed) can be seen as an unusually extreme expression of our general tendency to regard a picture of a rabbit as being as different from a picture of a duck as a rabbit is from a duck” (ibid).

45. In this sense, too, one might say with Gould that: “It makes no sense for me to think of myself as deciding — in each case of a possible ‘other,’ as the other presents itself to my capacity for apprehension — whether or not the other’s words (and gestures and actions) are ‘expressive’ of something, call it a mind or a soul.” — “An Allegory of Affinities: On Seeing a World of Aspects in a Universe of Things,” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74. And yet, as I shall soon try to show (apparently *contra* Gould), that does not imply that soul-blindness is not a *real possibility* for beings like us.

46. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

47. What Wittgenstein seems to be aiming at by reminding us of that possibility is just how remarkable is the fact that words (normally) *have* meanings, as it were on their own faces; that seems to be the effect of the language-game of *PI*, §1, where some (extra) degree of *mechanization* is employed in the description precisely in order to remind us of what is going on in our ordinary life with words. (I am here echoing a point made by Steven Affeldt in his contribution to *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*.)

48. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

jects,”<sup>49</sup> might help us get a clearer understanding of the issues under analysis. One implication I would like to emphasize is that changing the background against which one looks at something (a picture, a living body) can help one to see a previously hidden aspect of it, precisely by helping one to make different connections between it and other objects. At least figuratively, that is precisely what Wittgenstein tries to do when dealing with philosophical pictures, such as the one of the body as a veil. This is what happens when he, in Cavell’s words, reinterprets or replaces that “myth,” keeping some fragments of the original picture — namely, the idea that the soul is something that can, at least in principle, *be seen* — while attempting to shift the location of the “block” to our vision. The expected result is to show that the body does not *hide* the mind, but rather *expresses* or *depicts* it. It is in the (human) body that the (human) ensouled aspect can be seen, if only one draws the right connections. By the same token:

The block to my vision of the other is not the other’s body but my incapacity or unwillingness to interpret or to judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other. The mythology according to which the body is a picture implies that the soul may be hidden not because the body essentially conceals it but because it essentially reveals it. The soul may be invisible to us the way something absolutely present may be invisible to us. [...] We may say that the rabbit-aspect is hidden from us when we fail to see it. But what hides it is then obviously not the picture (that reveals it), but our (prior) way of taking it, namely in its duck-aspect. What hides one aspect is another aspect, something at the same level. So we might say: What hides the mind is not the body but the mind itself — his his, or mine his, and contrariwise.<sup>50</sup>

Recall once again that passage about seeing others as automatons.<sup>51</sup> There Wittgenstein distinguishes two contexts: in the first we are invited to imagine ourselves “alone

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49. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi/247.

50. Cavell, *Claim*, 368-69.

51. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

in our rooms,” and in the second “in the midst of our ordinary intercourse with others.” Now suppose we agree with Wittgenstein’s judgment to the effect that in the latter context it would be much more difficult to imagine others as automatons. Why would that be so? Is it not the reason that in the second context the *ensouled* (animated) aspect of the bodies we perceive would be, so to speak, on display in such a (live) situation?

Notice, however, that even under such circumstances the *possibility* of seeing others as automatons remains open; what that indicates is that whether or not an aspect will be hidden depends not *only* on the context or background against which the perceived object stands, but also on something about the person who is looking at it — it has to do with the connections she draws, or fails to draw. Now, when the skeptic about other minds presents her problem as one of *knowledge* — as if what we needed was more *evidence* of some kind, something that (*per impossibile*) would allow us to go *beyond* the other’s (mere) body, or maybe *through* it, thus reaching a “naked soul” — what she is tacitly repressing or avoiding is precisely the burden of trying to *draw* those connections. A metaphysical puzzle thus arises from the sublimation of a practical or existential difficulty.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. Soul-blindness (or: “Living Our Skepticism”)

I hope the preceding considerations are enough to suggest that *discrete* occurrences of soul-blindness are real (if uncommon and uncanny) possibilities for beings like us. A further question that might be raised is whether one can make sense of the possibility of *systematical* soul-blindness. I take it that Cavell’s answer to that question would also be positive, much against the grain of widespread analytical dogmatism, including orthodox Wittgensteinianism; only the cost of that attitude would be higher: instead of “uncanny feelings,” the result would be the brutalization of the individuals suffering that “blindness,” which is precisely the stuff of tragedy.<sup>53</sup>

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52. “In making the knowledge of others a metaphysical difficulty, philosophers deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another’s gaze, or bear of it. Doubtless such denials are part of the motive which sustains metaphysical difficulties.” (Cavell, *Claim*, 90).

53. A striking illustration that comes to mind is the way John Merrick (John Hurt) is treated in the David Lynch’s movie *The Elephant Man* (1980) by some of the main characters, particularly by the manager of a Victorian freak show called Bytes (Freddie Jones).

In order to understand the radicalism of Cavell's proposal I would like to compare it briefly with the well-known (and, I take it, representative) account offered by Peter Strawson in his essay "Freedom and Resentment."<sup>54</sup> The argument presented in that essay is framed by the dispute between Determinists and Libertarians on the issue of free-will. It might, accordingly, seem very distant from the topics examined above. But in order to see the connections that are relevant for our purposes I propose to set the "frame" of the argument aside, looking directly at the center of the picture. What we then find is an investigation of the conditions of human action grounded on the analysis of some particular instances of interpersonal relations and attitudes — most notably those of gratitude, resentment, and forgiveness. One of the central features Strawson highlights about those attitudes is that they are apt to be radically modified according to the way the actions that bring them about are qualified<sup>55</sup>. Those modifications can be brought about in a large number of (very common) situations in our human relationships; but there are also some less common situations where our ordinary reactions would not only be modified but rather altogether suppressed.

This would happen, for instance, in those cases where one might be willing to describe an agent who performed an action that harmed oneself by using phrases such as: "He wasn't himself," "He has been under very great strain recently," "He's only a child," "He's a hopeless schizophrenic," "His mind has been systematically perverted," "That's purely compulsive behaviour on his part," etc.<sup>56</sup> By drawing our attention to the sort of excuses expressed by those phrases, Strawson wants to make us aware of situations in which someone's actions would invite us "to suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes toward the agent," seeing him "in a different light from the light in which we should normally view one who has acted as he has acted."<sup>57</sup>

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54. P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-28.

55. The following case illustrates this point: "If someone treads on my hand accidentally, while trying to help me, the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence or with a malevolent wish to injure me. But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind and degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first. If someone's actions help me to some benefit I desire, then I am benefited in any case; but if he intended them so to benefit me because of his general goodwill toward me, I shall reasonably feel a gratitude which I should not feel at all if the benefit was an incidental consequence, unintended or even regretted by him, of some plan of action with a different aim." (ibid., 6).

56. Ibid., 8.

57. Ibid., 9.

With a view to simplify the analysis of such cases, Strawson presents (what he himself describes as) “crude dichotomies”<sup>58</sup> separating the kinds of attitudes that we can have in relation to other human beings. For our present purposes the most important such dichotomy is that which distinguishes “the attitude (or range of attitudes) of involvement or participation in a human relationship,” on the one hand, and the “objective” or “detached” attitude (or range of attitudes), on the other hand.<sup>59</sup> About the latter sort of attitude Strawson has the following to say:

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided [...].<sup>60</sup>

Usually, there is no problem about adopting such an attitude — on the contrary, as Strawson himself acknowledges, we can sometimes use it “as a resource,” e.g., “as a refuge [...] from the strains of involvement; or as an aid to policy; or simply out of intellectual curiosity.”<sup>61</sup> A problem would appear, however, if that attitude took complete precedence over that of involvement or participation in human relationships — if, i.e., we systematically stopped seeing others (and ourselves) as *persons*, as *human beings*, and started seeing them (ourselves) as mere “objects of social policy,” or “mechanisms.” The problem posed by such an extreme change is, in short, that it would require a radical change in our normal inter-personal relationships, and with them our very human nature; and the price of such change, as Strawson has it in another context, “would be higher than we are willing, or able, to pay.”<sup>62</sup>

Now I take it that Cavell would sharply disagree from that view, insisting that where knowledge of “other minds” is concerned I cannot *but* “live my skepticism,”<sup>63</sup>

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58. Strawson, *Freedom*, 9.

59. See Strawson, *Freedom*, 9.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, 10.

62. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 34. Strawson also describes that change as one which “does not seem to be something of which human beings would be capable, even if some general truth were a theoretical ground for it” (*Freedom*, 12). The main candidate to such a ground examined (and dismissed) by Strawson in this paper is, of course, the “theoretical conviction of the truth of determinism” (*ibid.*, 14).

63. Cavell, *Claim*, 437.

in that I simply cannot *wait* for (absolute) certainty or (complete) justification in order to act,<sup>64</sup> and yet I also cannot allow myself to become “accommodated” with my doubts since “the surmise that I have not acknowledged about others, hence about myself, the thing there is to acknowledge, that each of us is human, is not, first of all, the recognition of a universal human condition, but first of all a surmise about myself.”<sup>65</sup> As a consequence, being “accommodated” or “permitting myself distraction” from my limitations concerning *acknowledgement* would amount to compromising my own integrity as human being.<sup>66</sup>

But what is precisely the alternative (to accommodation, i.e.) concerning doubts about “other minds”? What does it mean to ‘live my skepticism’ in this case? It means, first and foremost, to recognize — and, if one is to avoid tragedy, to accept — one’s *real separateness* from others — the fact, i.e., that there is no ‘metaphysical shortcut’ to other’s minds, or souls, or “inner lives” — thus realizing that it is always *up to me* to acknowledge the humanity in the other, and (thus) in myself. Of course acknowledgement might not be forthcoming, and *that* might incline one to think (or to fantasize) that this is because “the inner” is metaphysically and / or epistemologically hidden, perhaps hidden by the other’s body, by the human body as such. As I hope the considerations above shall suffice to suggest, Cavell would not exactly deny that in those cases the inner *is* hidden — surely Desdemona’s faithfulness *is* hidden from Othello, in a limited but very real sense; yet, as we saw, he would (following Wittgenstein) disagree as to the *source* of one’s blindness, placing it on the side of the perceiver, internalizing it, making it one’s own responsibility.

Part of what I am trying to get at here is that, *pace* Strawson — for whom “in order for self-conscious thought and experience to be possible, we must take it, or *believe*, that we have knowledge of external physical objects or other minds”<sup>67</sup> — it is *not*, or not *simply*, knowledge or (ordinary) belief or (natural) inclination that *really* matters wherever the “ascription” of “human status” is concerned. Recall Cavell’s say-

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64. In fact, to *wait* for that kind of justification is one of the possible causes of *tragedy*; that is precisely Othello’s problem: no “evidence” of Desdemona’s faithfulness is really lacking, yet acknowledgement is not forthcoming; that is the horror of his situation. This is what Ted Cohen calls “the true currency of skepticism” — “Some Philosophy, in Two Parts,” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays on Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), 394. (Thanks to Paulo Faria for reminding me of that paper.)

65. Cavell, *Claim*, 438.

66. See *ibid.*

67. Strawson, *Skepticism*, 21.

ing: “the alternative to my acknowledgement of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him.”<sup>68</sup> What might be lacking when acknowledgement is not forthcoming is attunement — and again this is not, or not simply, a matter of belief or natural inclination, but rather something that, as Anthony Rudd has said: “may depend on one’s willingness to be attuned; or to acknowledge one’s attunement or to acknowledge the other.”<sup>69</sup> One might say: where acknowledgement (or its denial) is concerned, knowledge or belief come always too late — notwithstanding our self-indulgent rationalizations to the contrary.

(Let me try to be clear about one point: I really think we should grant to Strawson that there would be something rather unwelcome or even untenable involved in the generalized adoption an “objective” or “detached” attitude toward others — many of us would certainly prefer not to *live* in a world where that attitude became standard; yet that is very different from saying that such change would be “practically impossible,” or unnatural, or inhuman. And let us not go astray about the latter qualification: granted, we often do describe attitudes that we would rather not see other human beings taking as “inhuman”; yet, as Cavell correctly reminds us, “only a human being can behave inhumanly.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, we cannot *but* acknowledge that such — outrageous — acts and attitudes are as human as any other — if, i.e., we are sincere in our assessment, and do not try to repress our knowledge about which possibilities are open to beings like us.<sup>71</sup>)

Having stated those shortcomings in Strawson’s position, I can try to explain what I take to be wrong with the kind of response to skepticism that his work illustrates — i.e., one of quick disposal, and refusal to pay attention to what Cavell would call its

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68. Strawson, *Claim*, 21.

69. Anthony Rudd, *Expressing the World: Skepticism, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger* (London: Open Court, 2003), 155.

70. Cavell, *Claim*, 438.

71. Again, this is a point that Cavell himself made clear in a passage where he comments on the nature of slavery and Nazism: “The anxiety in the image of slavery — not confined to it, but most openly dramatized by it — is that it really is a way in which certain human beings can treat certain others whom they know, or all but know, to be human beings. Rather than admit this we say that the ones do not regard the others as human beings at all. (To understand Nazism, whatever that will mean, will be to understand it as a human possibility; monstrous, unforgiveable, but not therefore the conduct of monsters. Monsters are not unforgivable, and not forgivable. We do not bear the right internal relation to them for forgiveness to apply.) To admit that the slaveowner regards the slave as a kind of human being bases slavery on nothing more than some indefinite claim of difference, some inexpressible ground of exclusion of others from existence in our realm of justice. It is too close to something we might at any time discover.” (*Claim*, 377-78).

truth.<sup>72</sup> Sticking with the case of skepticism about “other minds”: does not the fact that it is *possible* to abandon completely the non-detached attitude toward (some) others show that the ground for acknowledgement is as weak (or as strong) as our capacities to take (or relinquish) interest on others and on ourselves — on that which is shared by us — hence that it is (only) human after all? And does not that realization show that some instability, hence some doubt, hence the possibility of skepticism, are so to speak *internal* or *intrinsic* to our (finite) epistemic condition? Yet, if our attitudes — both detached and non-detached — toward others are not grounded in anything beyond ourselves, then the burden and the responsibility for creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, hence a community, lies at least partially on me, on each of us.

Now *that* kind of burden can understandably make one anxious, and that anxiety might well incline one to avoid the real issue, by denying or repressing it — as Strawson the “Humean naturalist” seems inclined to do — or else by sublimating or rationalizing it — preferring, as Cavell would say, to transfigure “a metaphysical finitude into an intellectual lack,”<sup>73</sup> which is precisely what I take (some versions of) skepticism as doing. (And yet notice that, as I see this dispute, a skeptic would have a clear advantage against his/her dismissive opponents, in that the former would at least recognize that there is a real difficulty, and one that simply cannot be solved by acquiring more *knowledge* — since there is no reason to suppose that we know something that the skeptic ignores — let alone by simply adducing our ordinary beliefs, or natural facts about us, or by describing our conceptual scheme.)

The upshot is that, contrary to what Strawson (as well as many Wittgensteinians) seems to suggest, personhood and humanity are not just “predicates” that one “ascribes” or refrain to “ascribe” to others based on the evidence at one’s disposal, but rather something that one *acknowledges* or *refuses to acknowledge*.<sup>74</sup> Human souls

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72. Epitomized in the claim that “the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing” (*Claim*, 241).

73. Cavell, *Must We?*, 263.

74. And as Mulhall says: the humanity “of all human beings is in the hands of their fellows; their accession to human status involves their being acknowledged as human by others. They can fulfil all the criteria, but they cannot force an acknowledgement from those around them.” I quote from a paper originally published on the Internet: “Picturing the Human (Body and Soul): A Reading of *Blade Runner*.” Online, [http://brmovie.com/Analysis/Picturing\\_the\\_Human.htm](http://brmovie.com/Analysis/Picturing_the_Human.htm). The paper underwent important changes and was published as a section of *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008). The revised version of the passage quoted above is on page 35 of that book. The film *Bicentennial Man* (1999), which is based on a novella of the same name by Isaac Asimov, provides another good case

are there to be *seen* — all it takes is to keep our eyes (and minds) open to them. Yet, the very fact that we *can* fail to do so shows something important about our condition — something we should not try to repress in our philosophizing, nor elsewhere.<sup>75</sup>

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(besides *Blade Runner*) to reflect on these issues. That robot (?) adapts it(?)self to various criteria to become a person — including the criterion of being mortal — and yet that right is denied him. Why is that so? I do not have an answer to that question, as I am not “essentialist” enough to provide one.

75. I would like to thank Paulo Faria and the participants in the Colloquium “Una nueva forma de ver: Wittgenstein y el pensamiento del siglo XXI” (held in Lima in 2010) for the helpful suggestions made to previous drafts of this paper.

# Un Poète Maudit:

## Stanley Cavell and the Environmental Debate

TOMAŽ GRUŠOVNIK

O Lady! we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone does the nature live:  
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!  
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,  
Than that inanimate cold world allowed  
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,  
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth,  
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
Enveloping the Earth —  
And from the soul itself must there be sent  
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,  
Of all sweet sounds the life the element!

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *Dejection: An Ode*

Images of landscapes and encounters with the natural world feature prominently throughout Stanley Cavell's texts — so much so that Coleridge's romantic visions of the natural environment (the cold, icy region through which the Mariner's ship drifts) represent one of the cornerstones of Cavell's understanding of "romanticism as working out a crisis of knowledge,"<sup>1</sup> and "skepticism [as] what romantic writers are locked in struggle against."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, skepticism as an interpretation of "metaphysical finitude" as "an intellectual lack"<sup>3</sup> is seen by Cavell as something that has to be overcome

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1. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1988), 52.

2. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

3. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 263.

(and not, say, refuted); and this overcoming, at least when it comes to the external world skepticism, is envisioned as the “acceptance” of the world, or even as “the idea of a romance with the world.”<sup>4</sup> The “world” romantic writers have in mind is, of course, the natural world, for we should “Let Nature be [our] teacher.”<sup>5</sup> It seems, then, that overcoming of skepticism is inextricably bound up with accepting the natural world and its “gift of life.”<sup>6</sup>

However, if accepting the world could be a right step towards the overcoming of skepticism, then failing to do so may mean something close to Othello’s killing of Desdemona, or the Mariner’s killing of the albatross: by refusing to accept the world, we might find this world dead at our hands, and the consequences of skeptical doubts could lead to “the death of nature.”<sup>7</sup> This point, explored in the first part of present essay, might seem obvious to readers of Cavell; however, as I try to show in the last part of the paper, the idea that the human attitude towards the natural world is characterized by the human condition, by the fact that the modern subject may avoid acknowledging, or accepting, the other (be it other human being, or other forms of life, or nature, or external world as such), is largely obnubilated in contemporary literature on environmental ethics. The reason for this negligence might be seen in something Cora Diamond, following Cavell, calls “deflection”, a specific intellectual maneuver often present in academic mode of philosophical discussion, where encountered difficulty of reality is transformed into discussion of a moral issue,<sup>8</sup> where “philosophy in the academic mode [...] avoids what is really at issue in its engagements with skepticism.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the most important consequences for environmental ethical debate that follows from this analysis is its undermining of the idea largely present in environmental philosophy: the idea that humans should try to merge with the natural world in the sense of Arne Naess’s concept of Self-realization which is understood “as a

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4. Russell Brian Goodman, *American Philosophy and the American Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

5. And “quit [y]our books,” as Wordsworth advises us in *The Tables Turned*, for they are “dull and endless strife.”

6. Cavell, *Quest*, 61.

7. *Ibid.*, 60.

8. Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, ed. Cary Wolfe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 59.

9. John McDowell, “Comment on Stanley Cavell’s ‘Companionable Thinking’,” in *ibid.*, 138.

term for the widening and deepening of your self so that it embraces all life forms.”<sup>10</sup> I’m arguing that such desires can be seen as analogous to the Mariner’s, or Othello’s, desire, and that their consequences can be similarly tragic for humans as well as the natural world.

## I. Lost Souls

When talking about Cavell and environmental thought one would, perhaps, first think of his essay that appeared as a part of *Philosophy and Animal Life*, a collection of papers written by various authors as a response to Cora Diamond’s text “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” reprinted in the collection. The reason why the “Companionable Thinking” essay might first spring to mind is because of its engagement with, broadly speaking, animal ethics and the question of vegetarianism, and thus with issues that seemingly resemble the environmental problematic. However, as John McDowell points out, “Cavell’s response does not do justice to the wonderful way Diamond has found to cast light on Cavellian themes.”<sup>11</sup> Thus when one considers Cavell’s frequent references to nature and nature metaphors in authors like Coleridge, a somewhat different platform begins to offer itself for construction, or reconstruction, of Cavellian environmental thought, based on texts that at a first glance do not seem connected with the environmental problematic at all.

I already pointed out that specific natural vistas play an important role in understanding skepticism lived by a romantic hero. Indeed, Cavell starts his Berkeley lecture “Texts of Recovery”, the lecture in which he talks about *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* in connection with Kantian philosophy at some length, with a curious interpretation of the Mariner’s excursion into the icy southern ocean:

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10. Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” in *The Ecology of Wisdom. Writings by Arne Naess*, ed. Alan Drengson and Bill Devall (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), 92.

11. McDowell, “Comment,” 128. McDowell thinks that Cavell misses crucial point in Diamond’s paper: “The role of Coetzee’s Costello in Diamond’s paper is not to raise the question whether Costello’s unhinging perception is a perception of how things indeed are — that is, whether meat eating is what she thinks she sees it to be [...]. The role of Coetzee’s Costello for Diamond is rather to provide an analogue for the unhinging perceptions of separation and finitude that, according to Cavell himself, constitute the real point of philosophical skepticism” (137-38). I agree with McDowell on this point.

In particular, when Coleridge's "prose gloss" beside the poem speaks of the Mariner's ship drifting across the line and of its being guided back toward the line, I took the line in question to be (among other things, no doubt) the line implied in the *Critique* "below" which or "beyond" which knowledge cannot penetrate.<sup>12</sup>

The "line," according to Coleridge's gloss, delineates the region of "good wind and fair weather" from "[t]he land of ice, and of fearful sounds where no living thing was to be seen," and with this romantic move the Kantian abstract distinction becomes clothed in vivid environmental imagery. In Cavell's interpretation, this crossing of the line is, in fact, more fundamental than the actual Mariner's act of killing the albatross which can be seen as derivative of the transgression, a consequence of the overstepping of boundaries of sensible human knowledge. With his understanding of romantic writers as authors that are "locked in struggle against skepticism,"<sup>13</sup> and in understanding their project as stemming from dissatisfaction with philosophical (Kantian) skepticism,<sup>14</sup> Cavell also claims that for Coleridge the region beyond the line *can* be experienced, but that this region has a "definite, call it a frozen, structure."<sup>15</sup> However, the question as of why precisely the Mariner actually pierces the albatross with the arrow persists.

In tracking the motive of this "perverse" (and thus seemingly unmotivated) killing, Cavell turns to his well-explored idea of the modern subject's effort to *deny* burdensome pieces of knowledge, the effort to repress the uncanny fact of one's existence. This idea, the idea that links his writings to psychoanalytic explorations, underlies several Cavellian interpretations of Shakespeare, Coleridge, and many other authors which Cavell finds challenging. In *The Rhyme* the motive is thus seen in "the

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12. Cavell, *Quest*, 50.

13. Cavell, *Disowning*, 8.

14. When it comes to Kantian "victory" over skepticism, Cavell says that "one will sometimes feel, Thanks for nothing" (*Quest*, 53). This is because Kantian philosophy leaves the *Ding-an-sich* unknown, and unknowable. Romanticism thus expresses "a disappointment with the Kantian settlement with skepticism" and tries to reclaim "a human relationship to things, *things in themselves*" — Joshua Wilner, "Communicating With Objects. Romanticism, Skepticism, and 'The Specter of Animism' in Cavell and Wordsworth," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (London: Continuum, 2011), 153. And so the abovementioned "clothing" of abstract philosophical distinction in natural imagery can, perhaps, be understood as a romantic (more "humane") redefinition of the issue.

15. Cavell, *Quest*, 50.

denial of some claim upon him [the Mariner],”<sup>16</sup> and the moral of the poem is understood — somewhat analogously to *King Lear* — as the ability of letting “yourself *be loved* by all things both great and small.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense the killing of the bird can be thought of as “the human denial of the conditions of humanity,”<sup>18</sup> as the act resulting from a desire:

[A]t once to silence the bird’s claim upon him [the Mariner] [is] to establish a connection with it closer, as it were, than his caring for it: a connection beyond the force of his human responsibilities, whether conventional or personal, either of which can seem arbitrary. In dreaming his solution, to pierce it with his arrow, he split off the knowledge that the consequences of his act would be the death of nature, this piece of nature.<sup>19</sup>

This desire brings the Mariner close to Othello and his torments, for Othello is a tragic hero that kills in order to stave off knowledge regarding his human finite existence. As Cavell sees the play, Othello’s sacrifice, his killing of Desdemona, is a consequence of Othello’s inability to “forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain’s captain.”<sup>20</sup>

Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial. According to me further, his professions of skepticism over her faithfulness are a cover story for a deeper conviction; a terrible doubt covering yet more terrible certainty, an unstable certainty. But then this is what I have throughout kept arriving at as

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16. Cavell, *Quest*, 56.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 57. It is worth noting here that for Cavell there is nothing more human than trying to surpass one’s humanity: “Cavell’s oft-repeated point [is] that there is in fact nothing more human than the desire to transcend the human (to become, even, somehow inhuman or post-human” — Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, “Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, ed. Eldridge and Rhie (London: Continuum, 2011), 5.

19. *Ibid.*, 60.

20. Cavell, *Disowning*, 136.

the cause of skepticism — the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle.<sup>21</sup>

But there is more to Othello's and the Mariner's likeness than just their common desire to remove the object — or, for that matter, the independent, separate *subject* — that heralds their ontological incompleteness: both, the play as well as the poem, are relevant for Cavell in his discussion of the issue of *animism*. While talking about *Othello*, Cavell finds a curious connection between doubt, jealousy, and animism. If jealousy makes “the object of suspicion uncomfortably animate”, then “the shift of philosophical balance seems [...] to uncover the animism, so to speak, in the philosophical idea of doubt itself.”<sup>22</sup> But if Othello has to demand a “de-animation” of Desdemona, “imagining her incapable of response” by turning her into *stone*, then romanticism demands “a certain animation of the material object,”<sup>23</sup> or perhaps its re-animation.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Cavell sees *The Rime* as one of the attempts of “bringing the world back, as to life,”<sup>25</sup> and thus animism finally proves to be of central importance in understanding Coleridge's poem as well.

However, this reclaiming of the world from the hands of Kantian philosophy (which left it dead and alien to us by limiting our experience to appearances, thereby denying us access to the thing-in-itself, and thus to meaningfulness and value), or its re-animation, cannot happen through, say, an external intervention: “For an intellect such as Coleridge's, for which objects are now dead, they will not be enlivened by an infusion of some kind of animation from outside.”<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, as Russell B. Goodman notes, “[t]he solution Coleridge offers in the poem is not an external influx

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21. Cavell, *Disowning*, 138.

22. *Ibid.*, 7. The idea of animism latently present in philosophical doubt stems from the fact that philosophers put the world (say an object they investigate, like Descartes' wax) in the position of a speaker: “In turning the concept of belief to name our immediate or absolute relation to the world, say our absolute intimacy, a relation no human other *could* either confirm or compromise, the philosopher turns the world into, or puts it in the position of, a speaker, lodging its claims upon us, claims to which, as it turns out, the philosopher cannot listen” (*ibid.*, 7-8).

23. Cf. Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.

24. Perhaps “re-animation” is a word more appropriate here, since romanticism actually wants to bring “the world *back* to life” (Cavell, *Disowning*, 8, my emphasis). In other words, the philosopher couldn't have killed the thing-in-itself if it hadn't been alive first. In this sense the romantic project can be understood as a specific “undoing” of philosophy.

25. Cavell, *Quest*, 53.

26. *Ibid.*, 54.

of grace but an outflow from the heart of the Mariner.”<sup>27</sup> This last observation is crucial: for if this is a sound description of state of affairs, then it must follow that without this outflow from the Mariner’s heart the world will be dead; the Mariner himself will then be death to it. Indeed, without light, glory, and fair luminous cloud issuing from our souls, the world will be inanimate and cold, as Coleridge will say in his other great poem, the *Dejection*.

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of these observations which offer us an understanding of why the Mariner’s ocean froze, and why Desdemona was turned into stone by Othello. But what I want to draw attention to next is the fact that whereas Desdemona is turned into stone metaphorically in Shakespeare’s play, the natural world was turned to stone more literally in modern period of Western history. In fact, I’m arguing that, for instance, Cartesian treatment of animals can be seen as structurally similar to Othello’s turning of Desdemona into stone, and the Mariner’s seemingly frivolous killing of the albatross. This last observation is based on the fact that Descartes denies the existence of animal souls — which is actually somewhat unusual for his time<sup>28</sup> — without providing any clear, observable reasons as to why animals, compared to humans, should be *so* different. Here is what he says about the distinction between humans and animals:

And the same may be observed in animals. For although they lack reason, and perhaps even thought, all the movements of the spirits and of the gland which produce passions in us are nevertheless present in them too, though in them they serve to maintain and strengthen only the movements of the nerves and the muscles which usually accompany the passions and not, as in us, the passions themselves.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, it seems that what Cavell says about the distinction between body and soul can easily be said also about the distinction between animals and humans in Descartes: “the one [is] characterized in opposition to the other, each essentially what the

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27. Goodman, *American*, 12.

28. See Harrison’s superb paper on “The Virtues of Animals in Seventeenth-Century Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59:3 (1998): 463-84.

29. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 348.

other is not.”<sup>30</sup> Cartesian distinction between animals and humans, then, turns on nothing but — as Irigarayan scholars would call it — “pure negation.” The reason for Descartes’s denial thus has to be meta-*physical*. In fact, it seems that it is foremost existential. For in the *Discourse* Descartes says that imagining “beasts” having soul is an offence which is second only to denying the existence of God, for if their nature is the same as ours, then “after this present life we have nothing to fear or to hope for any more than flies and ants.”<sup>31</sup> And so Descartes has to deny the existence of animal souls in order to save the eternal existence of his own; he has to, so to speak, kill them, turn them into soulless matter, in order to rescue meaningfulness of his own existence.

Now, if one bears in mind the interconnection of doubt and jealousy, then one could venture a hypothesis that Cartesian denial of animal consciousness exhibits a special form of envy; of envy that cannot bear the fact of separate (animal) existence, on a par with Othello’s jealousy, and the Mariner’s “perversity.” I’m bracketing the adjective “animal”, for it is well known that Descartes doesn’t stop here: indeed, after animal souls came all other souls, including human, and thus Cartesian doubt finally starts to envelop everything except for itself — the doubting subject. Or, as Harrison has observed:

Somewhat ironically, the Cartesian doctrine of the beast-machine was eventually to lead to the postulation of the man-machine — an entity in which mechanical operations were deemed sufficient to explain the phenomena of consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

It is curious, though, that one would have to deny somebody’s soul in order to save his own in the first place; for Descartes could have embraced something like a Pythagorean doctrine, or something like *apocatastasis*, universal salvation, where everything would be animated and, for that matter, also redeemed. This, again, leads one to venture a conclusion that the death of Cartesian nature stems not from

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30. Cavell, *Disowning*, 127.

31. Descartes, *Passions*, 141.

32. Harrison, “Virtues,” 484. Although we may actually say that the *reverse* is true, and that the non-existence of animal souls is in fact a consequence of doubt in — or jealousy of — all souls, separate from the mediating subject, be they human or animal.

its misfortune, or some sort of its malady, a lack, but from Descartes's own soul. Or, as Emerson will put it in the final chapter of his *Nature*, alluding to the common phrase: "The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye."<sup>33</sup>

While one cannot simply generalize and take the Cartesian doctrine of nature-machine as being representative of modern Western attitudes towards the natural world *in toto*, it still holds true that the idea of the universe as more or less finely tuned clockwork predominate in western science (Newton), economics, and politics ("green capitalism", for instance). But leaving this debate aside, I would next like to briefly expose another Cavellian idea, the idea that links the Mariner to the poet. What I have in mind is the idea of a "fear of inexpressiveness", according to which the Mariner can be seen as the *poète maudit*, a radical "incommunicado," whose suffering cannot be communicated to others and who seems to dwell in a state of radical incomprehensibility. Cavell connects this fear with the human effort to escape the human, and he does this by exposing a desire that underlies the fantasy of Wittgenstein's "private language", i.e., the desire that the connection between my knowledge of things and things themselves should occur outside language games, without my concession to the ways we talk, or "apart from my agreements."<sup>34</sup> For Cavell, "the dissatisfaction with one's human powers of expression produces a sense that words, to reveal the world, must carry more deeply than our agreements or attunements in criteria will negotiate."<sup>35</sup> He goes on to say that

[h]ow we first deprive words of their communal possession and then magically and fearfully attempt by ourselves to overcome this deprivation of ourselves by ourselves, is a way of telling the story of skepticism I tell in *The Claim of Reason*.<sup>36</sup>

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33. It is true, of course, that at the end Descartes manages to save the souls of other human beings by invoking God. However, animals are never redeemed, and nature remains an automaton; even with God on stage, some of the initial Cartesian "jealousy" still remains. One could say that even the existence of a supreme omnipotent and benevolent being is incapable of rescuing such tiny beings as flies and ants from eternal darkness.

34. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 352.

35. Cavell, *Quest*, 60.

36. *Ibid.*

But what is of special importance is the fact that by refusing my concession to public criteria of language I also deny my connection with community, my “natural” social bond. In this light, then, the Mariner’s affinity with not only the poet, but also an advocate of private language, becomes explicit. Indeed, the interconnection between the act of the acceptance of “the Earth” and the corresponding — if one may call it so — “speech act,” a “voice” sent out from the soul, is nowhere more apparent than in one of the most dramatic parts of Coleridge’s *Dejection*, the ode that deals precisely with the problem of inexpressiveness, cited at the beginning of this essay. What the ode can thus be understood as conveying is, among other things, the sense that it is up to my own soul to issue forth a ray of light and a voice which envelops the earth and gives birth to the soul. The light and voice thus seem to be not only coterminous (in the way the natural social bond and the language are), but also up to me. However, if the light and voice depend on me, then their *absence* must depend on me as well. This seems to be a crucial remark, and I will try to briefly revisit it in the next section.

## II. Murderous Love

“Could our relation with the world be as murderous as Othello’s is with Desdemona?” asks Russell B. Goodman in his monograph on *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition*, and, few pages on, answers affirmatively that if “Romanticism [...] is correct, we live a kind of skepticism not just concerning other minds but also concerning the world.”<sup>37</sup> While this answer brings to the fore the question of (a)symmetry between other-minds skepticism and external-world skepticism, an issue often present in Cavellian debate (and an issue I’m leaving aside here for the sake of brevity), it also points to the fact that the “acceptance” of the world — analogous to the “acknowledgment” of other minds — is “our problem in a deep sense”, and thus “[t]he responsibility is ours, and the solution is an act or an attitude of our own.”<sup>38</sup>

Goodman finds one of the most interesting, and appropriate, answers to the problem of the relationship of self and world in Wordsworth’s idea of marriage with

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37. Goodman, *American*, 10, 13.

38. *Ibid.*, 13.

the world in his *Recluse*, where both partners remain separate while wedded: “This structure, so common in Romantic writing, expresses the closeness of the mind-world relationship, the ‘fitness’ of the partners for each other. But it acknowledges their separateness as well.”<sup>39</sup>

A similar idea, albeit coming from an altogether different tradition, is present also in Luce Irigaray’s late writings, where natural beings (in her case the animals) are to be respected as *others* to humans if a proper relationship between humans and the natural world is to be achieved:

These familiars of our existence [the animals] inhabit another world, a world that I do not know [...]. To make them simple objects of study is not appropriate anymore than to make them partners of the universe they do not share.<sup>40</sup>

The final point I want to make in this essay, the point that ties Cavellian observations to the debate in environmental ethics, is that by neglecting the fact of the separate existence of the natural world and all the beings it harbors, we end up either in tragic denial and impoverishment of non-human life (like Descartes), or in fanatic “love” towards the natural world which reduces it to an anthropomorphic terrain, presumably suited for human redemption. This later is, quite explicitly, the case in Arne Naess’s philosophy, the philosophy of “Deep Ecology,” a highly influential strand in environmentalism.

For Naess, as we have seen in the introductory passage of the present essay, the final goal of human striving should be something like enveloping “all life forms” by one’s Self. According to Naess, this process, also called “Self-realization,” should be motivated by nothing else but “egoism,” although an “extended” version of it, which covers interests of all beings and thus aligns my desires with those of others. Critics like Rosi Braidotti and Val Plumwood were fast to point out that such a maneuver doesn’t really take us far; on the contrary, it shows itself to be in conflict with what environmental ethics should, in the first place, be about:

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39. Goodman, *American*, 15.

40. Luce Irigaray, “Animal Compassion,” in *Animal Philosophy*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (London: Continuum, 2008), 195.

The problem with this position is that in spite of and in flagrant contradiction to its explicitly stated aims, deep ecology promotes full-scale humanization of the environment. Naess's deep ecology does not question the structures of possessive egoism and self-interest, but merely expands them to include non-human interests. What we end up with, therefore, is a quantitative expansion of liberal individualism, but individualism nonetheless. The human dimension here equates with the most classical anthropocentrism.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Plumwood argues that dominant forms of deep ecology

choose for their core concept of analysis the notion of identification, understood as an individual psychic act, yielding a theory which emphasizes transformation and ignores social structure [...]. A similarly apolitical understanding is given to its core concept of ecological selfhood [...]. The result is a psychology of incorporation, not a psychology of mutuality.<sup>42</sup>

However, what one could add to these criticisms from Cavellian perspective is a reflection on the motive of such a process: if Othello and the Mariner kill their respected objects heralding their separate, finite existence, then the attempts to merge with the natural world exhibits similar jealousy on a part of a seemingly benevolent, and presumably non-violent, environmentalist. Even though it may seem that Deep Ecology's attempts are analogous to the Mariner's reanimation of the world — since both acknowledge the existence of animated beings — the underlying logic of the Mariner's romanticism and Naess's "Self-realization" is substantially different: whereas the first contemplates the water-snakes in their element as they are, the second wants to incorporate the existence of separate beings. This Naessian inclination, then, corresponds precisely with the attitude that triggered the Mariner's tragedy.

The difference between the romance with the world and an attempt at the unification of the self and world can also result in differing emotions: in the romantic metaphor of the Albatross falling from the Mariner's neck one can sense a relief, a

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41. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Cambridge: Polity), 116.

42. Val Plumwood, "The Ecopolitics Debate and the Politics of Nature," in *Ecological Feminism*, ed. Karren J. Warren (London: Routledge, 1994), 71.

feeling of ease and gratitude (“The self same moment I could pray”), whereas the desire to unify with the universe seems to exhibit certain restlessness, perhaps even craving. In this light the process of “self-realization” can be seen as entailing specific violence that tries to erase separateness of other creatures and, consequently, the fact of our own finite existence, by clothing this bothersome emotion in love and redemptive lingo. Thus what on the surface appears as a hand, offered to the cosmos, ends up as a proclamation, declaring: “L’univers, c’est moi!”<sup>43</sup>

Attempts to come as close as possible to the unspoiled nature have not only shabby theoretical consequences; they can also result in quite grave interventions in the natural world. A practical example that has to do with wildlife watching provides a good illustration, which is, tellingly, connected with popular religious discourse, the discourse that seemingly resembles Wordsworth’s in his abovementioned *Recluse* (where “Paradise and groves Elysian” become, when one is “wedded to his goodly universe”, “a simple produce of the common day”); however, in reality this discourse couldn’t be further away from the poet’s sentiment, because in the poet the universe is not appropriated in such an aggressive manner as here, where seeing “wild” gorillas

was an unforgettable moment. Somehow the gorilla symbolized what is left of the wilderness, of a world belonging to the animals, free and unbridled by men and materialism. To see the greatest of the great apes at close range was to see a glimpse of Eden, of the world as it once was, without computers or condominiums, schedules and the draining sense of time.<sup>44</sup>

For what McClary actually describes are “tourist gorillas”, and Bruner comments that “[i]n both Zaire and Rwanda gorilla tourism has become such a successful multimillion dollar enterprise that efforts to expand it include domesticating additional gorilla

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43. Cavell at a certain point talks explicitly about the violence towards the earth and dominance of it (in connection with Heidegger's idea), which he sees as “a competing response to, or consequence of, skepticism” (*Quest*, 172). He also says that “the loss of presentness (to and of the world) is something that the violence of skepticism deepens exactly in its desperation to correct it” (*ibid.*, 173-74). These claims — now from a somewhat different angle — again enable us to see the violence at work in, say, the idea of “Self-realization” which tries to accomplish precisely what Cavell describes: closing the gap between us and the world.

44. Janice McIlvaine McClary, quoted in Edward Bruner, *Culture on Tour* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 37.

groups.”<sup>45</sup> One could argue that such aggression may, perhaps, be present in common, popular, “tourist” attitudes, but that professional environmentalism, even though it might exhibit some degree of latent violent sentiment in theory, does not translate those sentiments to practice. Unfortunately, this would be wrong: Murray Bookchin, a social ecologist, thus described what David Foreman, co-founder of the radical environmental movement Earth First!, shared with Bill Devall, a renowned ecosopher and advocate of Deep Ecology:

Foreman, who exuberantly expressed his commitment to deep ecology, frankly informed Devall that “When I tell people that the worst thing we could do in Ethiopia is to give aid — the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve — they think this is monstrous.”<sup>46</sup>

The underlying motive of “murderous love” towards the natural world, exhibited in Deep Ecology literature, and described above as some form of jealousy of nature’s separate existence, is, however, largely absent from the consciousness of certain environmental philosophers. The reason for this absence can be seen in something similar to Cora Diamond’s “deflection”. Drawing from Cavell, Diamond talks about deflection in connection with Coetzee’s lectures in the following way:

[H]ere I simply want the notion of deflection, for describing what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.<sup>47</sup>

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45. *Ibid.*, 38.

46. Murray Bookchin, “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” in *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy*, ed. Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 284. If we leave aside the fact that human population in Ethiopia often starved because the food produced there was transported to Europe (Ethiopia being referred to as “breadbasket of Europe”), one could, again, argue, that in this case the aggression is turned toward people, not nature; But this move seems to be in flagrant contradiction with the underlying assumption of Deep Ecology: that humans are a part of nature in the same way all other creatures are (biocentrism) — for if this were not so, then the process of Self-realization could not even begin, yet alone extend itself all over the cosmos.

47. Diamond, “Difficulty,” 57.

To put the point briefly, “deflection” occurs because the problem we encounter represents such a trauma in our ordinary way of life that it threatens to “shoulder us out of life”. And so one approach of dealing with this trauma is to start talking about it in terms of academic moral discourse, in terms of what is, or seems to be, right and wrong. In this way the traumatic fact becomes, so to speak, tamed. Applied to environmental philosophy, “deflection” would then mean transforming lived difficulty (say our awareness of pollution, of human impact on the natural world) into a discourse about “biocentrism”, redemptive “Self-realization” (and “natural balance”, as we have seen above in Foreman). Such transpositions, however, do not only remove what is most bothersome, they also obscure their own motives and with them also the motive of our unabashed “love” towards the universe.

### **Conclusion: A Stone vs. a *Stone***

What I want to do in concluding this essay is to touch upon a difficulty I kept arriving at while thinking about Cavellian philosophy and the debate in environmental ethics. It is the difficulty connected with “accepting” the world versus “acknowledging” other minds. Let me describe the difficulty in the following manner, without referring to (a)symmetries between external-world and other-minds skepticism(s): if one — like Othello — fails to acknowledge another soul, then one risks turning that soul to stone; but imagine failing to accept the world... what happens? Does then one turn, say, *a stone* to — a stone? What would *that* mean?

The difficulty, of course, arises because of the fact that in “accepting” the external world we are dealing, at least in part, with inanimate entities, with objects like fields, watersheds, mountains, rocks. But inanimate matter, like automata and stones, serves precisely to define the spot in the intellectual matrix where other *animate* beings end up if we fail to acknowledge them. The difference between what is alive and what isn’t plays a crucial role in defining the fate of unacknowledged minds. In other words, the difference between things and beings is “*the difference!*”<sup>48</sup> Or, as Wittgenstein put it somewhat differently: “Could anyone imagine a stone’s having

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48. Cavell, *Claim*, 468 (exclamation mark and italics appear in the original).

consciousness? And if anyone can do so — why should that not merely prove that such image-mongery is of no interest to us?”<sup>49</sup>

An intuition of how to tackle this riddle — how to make sense of “accepting” the world in these terms — came to me, perhaps unsurprisingly, while rereading Emerson’s *Nature*. There, in his chapter on “Idealism”, Emerson says that “the poet animates nature with his own thoughts,”<sup>50</sup> and that thereby he “invests dust and stones with humanity.”<sup>51</sup> It was in this moment that I started toying with a thought that “accepting” the existence of a, say, stone does not entail accepting the existence of its “soul” (whatever that might be; in whatever form), but rather accepting its existence *outside* a soul; that is, accepting its existence as independent from a consciousness (or independent from *my* consciousness). Now, in this sense a stone is not “invested with humanity” in the sense Adam is in-spired by God, from outside. Rather, a stone’s “soul” turns out to be, perhaps paradoxically, its existence independent of my soul. It’s “soul” is its separate, real existence, the fact of its “being there.”

What was just said seems to be at odds with what we read in Emerson. Indeed, in order to reconcile these views one first has to see that “investing nature with humanity” first and foremost means “accepting” its existence. But what, then, has this to do with “humanity”? The answer lies, I believe, precisely in accepting, or rejecting, this existence. And so, paradoxically again, the fact of independent existence of an inanimate other nonetheless depends on *me*, on my human (in)ability to accept this fact. If nothing else, then these thoughts offer us insight into the nature of romantic “animism”, for this animism is, of course, not a return to some prehistoric state of mind, but “the claim, that the world’s life and meaning, not only its spatiotemporal and causal structure, are made possible by humanity. Unlike the latter structures, which we have no choice but to encounter because of the automatic operation of our sensibility and understanding, the animation of the world is understood as under our control, subject in some sense to our will.”<sup>52</sup>

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49. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), §390.

50. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 43.

51. *Ibid.*, 42.

52. Goodman, *American*, 13.



»when Silence returns, there will also be a language«  
Hölderlin, *Celebration of Peace*

## CALL FOR PAPERS

Institute for Philosophical Studies, University of Primorska (Koper, Slovenia)  
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(Gozd Martuljek, Slovenia, May 15–18, 2014)

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Throughout history, sages, philosophers and theologians have searched for the proper measure to secure what in a most intimate sense could be described as »peace«. In search for this measure, and for a proper self-affection which could enable and host its enigmatic revelation, sometimes they were close to silence and wonder(s) of its ecstasy, sometimes they were relentlessly in search for the foundation – as formulated in the languages or discourses of Being, different hierarchies, or varied (but essentially identical) Gods. Theologians and philosophers too often regressed into dissent, conflict, even war. But within the ancient cosmologies there still was a distant, yet present sense of a nativity of peace, of a closeness to this ecstasy, which later was revealed only to rare poets, philosophers and theologians – among them Hölderlin, Heidegger, and in our times especially Irigaray and Caputo. In their works they all are in a search for new measure, for a different ontology, and somehow they all already have been thinking towards peace. Their thinking and poetry (or, poetic language) are thus sensitive to the cosmic order and nature's elements, and towards other traditions and cultures as well. Based on respect for nature, for sexual difference, for future revelations and incarnations of Gods and Goddesses, and in a new spiritual sense co-breathing with heavenly, atmospheric and natural creatures, they all – with newly invented gestures – are thus celebrating peace. With this conference, we would like to enliven different languages and measures, as present in philosophies of the ancient world, as well as in modern thinking and the poetry of peace.

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